

MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE, SINAI

THE CONSERVATION OF THE
**MOSAIC OF THE
TRANSFIGURATION**

Roberto Nardi - Chiara Zizola

This booklet has been edited by
CCA, Centro di Conservazione Archeologica - Rome
in Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian and Spanish.

Income from the distribution of this booklet will go into a fund for the
conservation of the works of art preserved in the Monastery of Saint Catherine.

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2. *The mountain peaks in the Sinai peninsula.*



3. The Monastery of St. Catherine from the path descending from Mt. Sinai.

FOREWORD BY
HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP DAMIANOS OF SINAI

The apse mosaic in the Holy Monastery of Sinai is one of the most profound depictions of the revelations of God to man. At the highest registers one sees the holy Prophet Moses, at the Burning Bush, and receiving the Law. Below, the apse itself is dominated by a depiction of the Holy Transfiguration of Christ, when His face shone as the sun, and His garments became white and glistening. The holy Prophets Moses and Elias appeared speaking with Him, while His three foremost Apostles Peter, James, and John, were overcome by the vision. This depiction is itself surrounded by portraits of additional prophets and apostles. The mosaic thus unites both the Old and New Testaments. It confronts the viewer with the goal of the spiritual life, which is the vision of the uncreated Light of the Godhead, and by grace, to grow into the very likeness of God (*theosis*). Constructed early in the second half of the sixth century, the mosaic is a rare example of the pre-iconoclastic art of Constantinople. It has inspired monks and pilgrims for over fourteen centuries, and continues to inspire all who behold it.

The mosaic is remarkably well preserved. This is due, in large measure, to the interventions carried out by Monk Samuel in 1847, and further interventions and cleaning carried out under the direction of Ernest Hawkins in 1959-1960. But a careful examination made by Roberto Nardi two years ago revealed that the mosaic is in a fragile state, requiring extensive consolidation. An ambitious conservation program has been put into effect, based on the highest principles, and employing the cautious use of completely traditional materials.

This program has been made possible through the extreme generosity of His Highness the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. The project has received the full support of Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt. It is being implemented by Roberto Nardi, Director of the Centro di Conservazione Archeologica in Rome, and his dedicated staff of experienced mosaic conservators. The mosaic consolidation is the first phase of a comprehensive plan that will include the restoration of the roof of the basilica and the elimination of the rising damp which is affecting the walls.

May God abundantly bless all who have made this project possible. May it ensure that this incomparable mosaic will continue to inspire all who behold it for many centuries to come, presenting to the viewer the vision of our eternal aspiration, which is the Kingdom of God.



ARCHBISHOP DAMIANOS OF SINAI
AND THE HOLY COUNCIL OF THE FATHERS

A handwritten signature in cursive script, which appears to read "Damianos of Sinai". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the printed name.



4. The Monastery of St. Catherine.



5. The basilica, the bell tower, and the minaret of the mosque inside the Monastery of St. Catherine.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is being published to accompany the current conservation treatment of the mosaic of the Transfiguration, which is located in the apse of the basilica at the Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai. It is the very nature of mosaics - as is true of other types of cultural heritage - that they do not enjoy eternal life; on the contrary, they are fragile and call for care and attention. This vulnerability can be seen in the thousands of monuments throughout the world that we see in a desperate condition, or that have been lost forever.

Alarmed by clear signs of the decay of the mosaic, the monastic community of Saint Catherine's initiated a conservation program, and asked the Centro di Conservazione Archeologica of Rome (CCA) to undertake the work. The conservation program, started in November 2005, will be a long and delicate one, and it will be completed in the 2007.

The publication of this booklet, together with other initiatives for visitor information, are the fruit of a characteristic of conservation: it is a public activity, aimed at improving the enjoyment, safety, and condition of our heritage, so that visitors and the faithful can benefit from it today and also pass it on to posterity.



6. An internal view of the church of the Monastery of St. Catherine.

This concept led the Monastery and the CCA to implement some initiatives to inform the public about what is going on behind the scaffolding that will hide the Transfiguration during the work. A full-size image of the mosaic has been installed in the apse of the church; information points have been set up along the access route to the monastery, where visitors can watch videos of the work in progress; and, this booklet has been printed.

The booklet is available in Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian and Spanish. It gives the history of the mosaic and its conservation treatment, and permits one to appreciate the magnificence of the mosaic through new photographs. Visitors will be able to receive a souvenir of their visit and understand how much the monks do every day for the protection of the immense heritage in their care.

CCA offered this publication in order to produce a fund for the conservation of the works of art preserved in the Monastery of Saint Catherine.

THE MONASTERY AND ITS WORKS OF ART

The Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai is a place where one is immersed in a sense of time. Fifteen centuries of history have elapsed, and each age has left its mark, creating a stratigraphy that is manifest before our eyes.

The sacredness of the place, the dramatic natural environment, the splendor of the treasures of sacred art preserved there, and the impressive architecture make this site unique on earth.

All of this is the result of the uninterrupted presence of the monastic community and the doctrine of peace and tolerance that it has always practiced. Due to these two factors, the monastery has enjoyed constant care and protection in an environment marked by good relations with the local populace and the Islamic world.

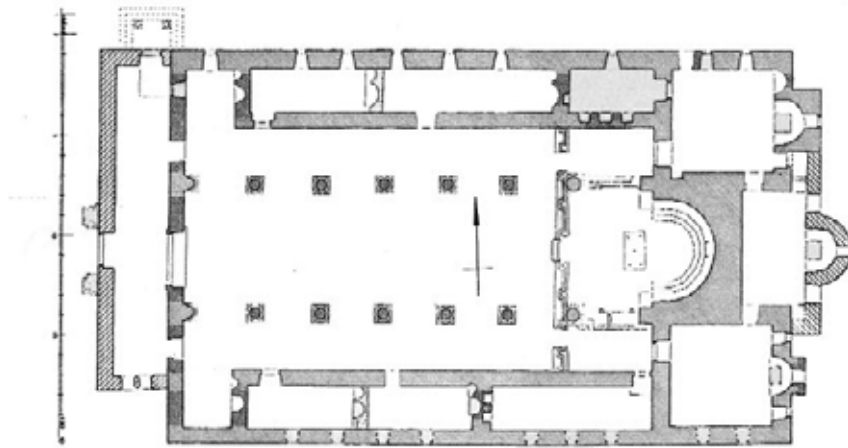
Despite the monks' attention, some of these treasures - partly because of their size or position, such as the structures of the church - now show serious signs of deterioration.

This is the case of the mosaic of the Transfiguration of Christ, a jewel of the early Byzantine art which has reached us basically intact. Due to water infiltration, cracks in the walls caused by earthquakes, and centuries of the use of candles and oil lamps, the mosaic's condition is compromised and has alarmed conservators and restorers for some time.

The mosaic had already drawn the attention of a wise monk in the mid-nineteenth century, Father Samuel, who carried out a restoration treatment that ensured the mosaic another century of survival.

Another temporary rescue intervention was implemented a hundred years later by an American team; at the end of a short campaign, they urgently recommended a treatment that would resolve the causes at the root of the mosaic's deterioration.

Fifty years have passed since that appeal, and today - thanks to the determination of His Eminence, Archbishop Damianos, and all the monks - the Centro di Conservazione Archeologica di Roma (CCA) has been given the great honor and the enormous responsibility of taking care of this extraordinary mosaic.



7. The planimetry of the church of St. Catherine.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND DESCRIPTION OF THE MOSAIC

The Monastery of Saint Catherine rests in the Sinai peninsula, at the foot of the mountain peaks associated with Moses' receiving the Ten Commandments.

The extraordinary monastic complex was erected at the command of the Emperor Justinian, who ruled AD 527-565, on the site venerated as the place where Moses spoke with God in the Burning Bush, and where a small church had been built as early as the fourth century.

Within the fortified walls one finds the basilica, built by the architect Stephanus of Aila, as indicated by an inscription on one of the wooden beams of the ceiling. The building measures 19.7 x 39 meters and is divided into three naves, separated by two rows of stone columns, with six columns in each row. Adjoining the north and south aisles are a series of chapels and the sacristy; to the west is a wide narthex, while at the east end is the chapel of the Burning Bush.

The basilica retains a good part of its sixth-century decorations. Among these is the wall mosaic depicting the Transfiguration of Christ, which covers the apse and the arch above it.

This mosaic is one of the most important artifacts of early Byzantine art. It was probably carried out at the same time as another in the church that once existed on the peak of Mount Sinai; that one is now lost.

The mosaic of the Transfiguration of Christ covers a surface of forty-six square meters, and was made with great artistic and technical skill, using noble and refined materials, such as tesserae with gold or silver leaf and glass pastes.

The figure of Christ is enclosed in a blue mandorla at the center of the apse. The prophets Moses and Elias are depicted at the sides of Christ against a background of gold tesserae; beneath them are the Apostles John and James on their knees, and Peter prostrated at the feet of Christ.

The apse mosaic is surrounded by thirty-one medallions with portraits of prophets, apostles, and evangelists, and a shield with a cross. A long inscription at the base gives the names of donors.

On the arch above the apse are two flying angels who converge towards the Lamb. Above the angels are two scenes: on the left, Moses removes his sandals before the Burning Bush, and on the right, Moses receives the Ten Commandments. Two medallions depicting John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary are present beneath the angels.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE OF EXECUTION

The supporting structure of the mosaic of the Transfiguration has not been substantially modified in the course of its long existence, and no part of the work was ever reconstructed with tesserae. What the pilgrim and tourist see in the apse area is a complex and costly system of covering the architectural surfaces, which are com-

pletely original and built long ago in the sixth century. One often pauses just to admire and appreciate the artistic aspects of the work, not noticing the merely technical aspects. Yet, the latter can provide many useful interpretative insights.

How was the mosaic constructed? With what materials? How were they made and incorporated in the work?

The raw materials - the tesserae

More than half a million small tesserae were used to cover the forty-six square meter surface of the apse area and the triumphal arch of the church, an average of 11,700 pieces per square meter. The tesserae are mostly glass paste, cut into cubes that average five to seven millimeters on each side. Natural stone was used only for the flesh tones, with delicate gradations ranging from rosy-white to bright pink and orange. Compared to stone, the glass paste tesserae were a precious material because they had to be made by hand.



8. The mosaic of the Transfiguration with the apse and the arch.



9. *The manufacturing of glass in a sixteenth century representation. (Agricola 1556)*

Given their lightness, glass paste tesserae were particularly suited to cover vaulted surfaces without weighing down the structure. The great variety of colors and the brilliance coming from light refraction made glass tesserae an ideal artistic medium for transforming architecture into evanescent surfaces where the space is filled with expanses of color and luminosity. It is a space that changes with every variation in the ambient lighting.

The palette of glass paste tesserae includes more than thirty colors with a wide range of tones: varying shades of green, blue, turquoise, violet, red, yellow, brown, black, gray, and white are skillfully used in creating the larger than life size figures of Elias, Moses, John, James, and Peter, which stand out against the gold background of the apse, and the bust portraits of the apostles and prophets; blues, grays, and whites, mixed with gold, silver, and shades of yellow, make up the diaphanous effect of the garments of Christ

and the angels converging at the center of the arch towards the Lamb.

Silver tesserae illuminate the background of the medallions depicting the Virgin and John the Baptist, and small quantities are used in the decorative floral borders to produce cool highlights at the tips of the petals. Tesserae in dark transparent glass, cut into thin rectangles, outline hands and feet, eyes and small details of the figures, imitating the strokes of a brush and lending great expression to their faces and gestures.

To obtain colored glass tesserae, silica was mixed with so-called "melting" materials composed of alkalis. To this were added stabilizing materials, such as calcium or magnesium carbonates. The coloring materials (various metal oxides such as copper, iron, and lead) were added during the fusion phase.

The fusion of the mix took place in two stages, inside wood-fired furnaces. The first phase occurred at about 800°C, obtaining a glassy mass called the "frit." When cooled, it was then broken up and put back into the furnace in special containers of refractory clay - crucibles - for the complete fusion.

The fusion process, at temperatures of 1000-1200°C, took place over the course of a few days. The finely ground coloring substances were then added to the molten mass, which was subsequently allowed to cool down to 900°C. The paste obtained was pressed between two marble surfaces in order to produce glass slabs measuring from one to two centimeters in thickness, generally rounded, called plates. Placed in the cooling compartment of the furnace, the plates were gradually brought to room temperature and became solid.

For tesserae with metallic leaf (gold and silver), three other phases of manufacture followed.

These tesserae are composed of metallic leaf sandwiched between two layers of glass. Metallic leaf was obtained in antiquity by beating the metal between membranes. In the first phase, sheets of transparent colored glass were made, five to seven millimeters in thickness; the leaf was placed on these, and then the entire surface was covered by another transparent glass sheet (*cartellina*), which was very thin, no more than one millimeter in thickness, which acted to protect the metal. Prepared in this way, the sheets were then put into the furnace until the molten upper sheet enveloped the metal and adhered perfectly to the glass underneath.

The base sheets were composed of transparent glass of various colors, making it possible to create gold or silver tesserae of many tonalities; they varied from warm tones obtained with transparent red, yellow, or brown glass to the cooler tones of green or blue glass. Tesserae of the size and shape desired were cut from the plates with a hammer and edged anvil.

It was common practice to obtain the sheets from the nearest glass workshops and to cut the tesserae directly at the site, in the size and shape required by the iconographic program and the artist's stylistic requirements.

Preparing the surfaces for the mosaic

The surfaces of the apse area, constructed with granite blocks, were prepared for applying the tesserae with two layers of mortar made from lime and marble dust.



10. Furnace used to produce glass in a sixteenth century representation. (Agricola 1556).



11. The gold and silver leaf tesserae are inserted at an inclination of forty-five degrees.

The components of the first layer were slightly rougher than those of the second layer where the tesserae were to be laid. The principal function of this first layer was to fill the spaces between the blocks in the wall and to form an even preparatory surface for the plaster of the setting bed.

The second layer was composed of the same elements but more finely ground. This layer was spread in sections corresponding to how much work a mosaicist could do in the course of a day. It was painted when wet in broad strokes with natural pigments which suggested the colors of the tesserae that would then be applied to make up the images.

Laying the tesserae

The tesserae were applied by hand, one by one, following the underlying preparatory drawing.

The inclination of the tesserae and the way they are set are stylistic characteristics that are very significant in this particular form of artistic production. Light and its refraction are key elements in the formal language of a Byzantine mosaic, where it is employed to give the material a wide variety of desired optical effects. Working with the natural light available, the mosaicists knew how to use the gold and silver leaf tesserae to act as mirrors to refract and amplify the light. In the triumphal arch, for instance, which is close to the central and side windows, the tesserae are inserted at an inclination of forty-five degrees, in regular distanced rows. In this way, the natural light was deflected downward, toward the observer.

DETERIORATION OF THE MOSAIC

In the course of its long life, the mosaic of the Transfiguration was subject to events that threatened its survival. Some of these were sudden and violent, such as earthquakes, while others were slow and steady, such as the infiltration of rainwater or the deposit of dust and oily substances produced by smoke.

Some of these events affected the structure on which the mosaic is applied, and thus the whole fabric of the work; others affected only the outside surface and the aesthetic appearance.

This is not to say that one of these forms of deterioration is less important than the other: all compromise the stability and legibility of the work and call for conservation. There are priorities that determine the treatment program, so conservation begins with operations of consolidation, and ends with aesthetic considerations.

To better understand the deterioration of the Transfiguration mosaic, it is best to start with damage that could be defined as structural, such as mortar becoming detached from the wall. When the church is shaken by an earthquake, it becomes a solid in motion. Due to this, some of the blocks in the wall can shift, and even a slight shift is enough to cause cracks and breaks that affect the wall surface. This has occurred in the past and has caused highly dangerous detachments of the mosaic.

Imagine the Transfiguration mosaic in its vault constructed of granite blocks. Over these blocks, a first layer of mortar was spread, and then a second, thinner layer over that, after which the tesserae were set into it. Earthquakes, water infiltration, and the natural aging of the mortar slowly produced detachments between the various layers that make up the mosaic as a whole - detachments that progressively increased until they became real crisis points under the weight of the tesserae. An example of one of these areas close to collapse has been found near the central figure of Christ. In this area, the mosaic is detached from its support structure for more than ten centimeters, which is an enormous amount when considering the possibility of the "bursting" of a mosaic. Indeed, this type of problem is one of the major challenges the conservators are facing in their treatment, and it was precisely this situation that meant the current treatment could not be postponed.

In addition to the structural problems described above, there are also those affecting the mosaic surface. Among these are the thousands of tesserae detached from the setting bed and still in place only because the disintegrating bed still holds them, although they are ready to fall; or the thousands of lacunae (gaps) generated by tesserae that have already fallen. Then there are the layers of lampblack produced by centuries of the use of oil lamps and candles, the deposits of dust stirred up by the thousands of faithful who visit the church every day, and the re-painting done in the nineteenth century and in the mid-twentieth century during the two previous restoration treatments.



12. A cleaning test showing the missing original tesserae. These areas were filled with white painted gypsum during past restorations.

PAST RESTORATIONS

Given the detachment problems described above, which were already a concern to the monks in the nineteenth century, the mosaic has had at least two other restoration and consolidation treatments. Thanks to them, significant areas of the tessellatum were saved from disappearing forever, above all, the figure of Christ and the angel to the right in the triumphal arch.

The first restoration known to us took place in 1847. It was carried out by the Russian monk Samuel, at the time of Archbishop Constantinos of Byzantium. This intervention is commemorated on two inscribed marble tablets inserted on either side of the apse mosaic of the chapel of the Burning Bush, where the monk also worked on the small mosaic on a gold ground that is to be found there.

At that time, the mosaic already had serious detachment problems in the entire central area, especially at the areas of the semicircular apse comprising the upper part of the figure of Christ, and on the triumphal arch, near the two windows. The entire area coincides with the area that is currently in a critical state. To consolidate the areas close to collapse, the monk used a technique practiced as early as the seventeenth century for the consolidation of wall paintings, inserting iron rods about twenty centimeters long through the thickness of the plaster to support the detached areas.

Moreover, the monk carried out a meticulous work of integrating the thousands of tesserae that had been lost over the centuries, using a gypsum-based matrix in place of the glass tesserae and painting it to imitate the mosaic. The work was performed

with precision and great artistic sensitivity. Indeed, he took care to fill every empty space and make his integrations invisible, imitating the exact color of the original tesserae with his paintbrush. After the treatment, the monk applied a protective layer of natural resins over the entire mosaic, to enhance the tones of the tesserae and make the surface more brilliant.

The other documented treatment was carried out in 1959 by an American expedition supported by Princeton and Michigan Universities, under the direction of the restorer Ernest Hawkins, who was noted for having restored the mosaics of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. This was more of a rescue operation to re-consolidate the apse area and anchor the mosaic to the structure before it collapsed altogether.

The consolidation was effected by injecting plaster inside the detached areas through holes made by extracting a tile and drilling into the plaster with a hand drill. In the area depicting Christ, fifty-six holes were drilled; in seven of these, small copper pins were inserted into the plaster, and they were then secured to the underlying granite wall and bedded in a mixture of plaster and casein. At the completion of the treatment, the tiles that had been removed were put back and the metal rods applied by the monk Samuel were removed.

The thick blackened layers that covered the mosaic were partially cleaned. The smoke from the lamps that are used to light the church, together with the alteration of the coating layer applied by monk Samuel, had covered the mosaic with a thick black greasy layer that obscured the surface to the point that it was impossible to fully see the images.

Both treatments - 1847 and 1959 - were providential. Most likely, without them the apse part of the mosaic would not have survived until today. Still, this does not



13. Iron rods inserted by monk Samuel in 1847.

mean that the mosaic is not in critical condition, and the recommendations by the American team in the late 'fifties to proceed urgently with further restoration are still as relevant as ever.

Today, at last, after almost fifty years, those recommendations are coming to pass. There will be a systematic and holistic conservation treatment with the objective of removing the causes of the damage that has afflicted the Transfiguration mosaic for centuries, as well as giving the mosaic back to the church, cleaned and protected.

THE CONSERVATION TREATMENT

The treatment now in progress has been planned with an eye to the methodological principles on which modern conservation is founded: complete documentation of the operations performed; consolidation in situ without detaching the mosaic; minimum intervention; compatibility of original materials and restoration products used; recognition and reversibility of the operations carried out; maximum circulation of the information collected during treatment.

From the technical point of view, the main objective of the current treatment is the stabilization of the mosaic and its constituent parts, which are threatened by various forms of decay. An example is the detachment of the tesserae from the support plaster and the detachment of the latter from the masonry beneath. The operations planned for addressing these forms of the aging and weakening of the mosaic are principally consolidation operations.

The conservators inspect the surfaces, point by point, and identify the areas where there are loose tesserae; by lightly tapping the surface, the technicians are able to hear differences in sound in the zones where the plaster is detached, compared to those where the mosaic is solidly anchored to the supporting wall.

Before beginning the consolidation, the detached zones are carefully cleaned by gentle vacuuming, which draws out the dust and rubble produced by the decay of the plaster beneath the tesserae. Then these areas are washed with injections of water and ethyl alcohol. The loose tesserae are made to adhere to the plaster with a mixture of hydraulic lime and acrylic resin in emulsion, a consolidant that is both reversible and stable.

In areas where the plaster is detaching from the wall, the injections of consolidant are deeper, so as to fill the empty places that have formed over the years between the wall and the mosaic.

The technicians make tiny holes with hand drills in places where the plaster has already cracked - a visible sign of the underlying detachment. Through these holes they inject the consolidant into the detached area, which gradually re-attaches to the wall as it is filled.

The greatest danger zone of the entire mosaic is the area with the depiction of Christ, as it is the point where the apse is most concave. In order to proceed with the consolidation safely, a supporting structure has been built: a sort of metal ribcage over the

whole apse mosaic, placed a few centimeters away. This structure allows the conservators to apply supporting braces in the points where the mosaic must be consolidated in depth.

When the consolidation is finished, the mosaic will again be stable and other operations can proceed. These are meant to improve the aesthetic appearance of the mosaic, which is now so dirty and blackened that its colors and the sparkle of the gold and silver tesserae are badly dimmed.

The surfaces will undergo a patient and meticulous cleaning process. Bland chemical solvents, applied to the surfaces with poultices of paper pulp, will allow the conservators to remove the hardened substances that hide the true appearance of the mosaic. The surfaces will be rinsed with distilled water and gone over with soft brushes, paintbrushes, and sponges in order to remove every trace of dirt and the solvents used.

Thousands of tesserae were lost in the past. Most of these dark holes were filled with painted plaster stucco during the restoration done in 1847 by the monk Samuel. During the current treatment, these altered stuccoes will be replaced, and the new lacunae in the tessellatum will be integrated with techniques that can be recognized on close examination while also restoring integrity to the mosaic's original image as a whole.

All the operations are constantly monitored by the conservators, who document every little detail. Through photographs, digital video images, and graphic mapping, every single operation performed is registered in software designed for the occasion and preserved for the future record.

The conservation treatment will be long and delicate, but when it is completed in 2007, it will return the mosaic of the Transfiguration - in all its renewed beauty and solemnity - to the monks, the faithful, and visitors.



14. General view of the conservators at work on the mosaic of the apse.

CATALOGUE OF THE COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS

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16. Diagram showing areas of detachments between the mosaic and the wall in the arch. (Draft)
17. The conservators documenting the state of the mosaic before the intervention
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- 56-58. Medallions with busts of the 16 prophets, the monk Longinus and John the deacon
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