

Conservation of the mosaics of the Church of the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai

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The Monastery of Saint Catherine is situated in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, at the foot of the mountainous expanse that culminates in the sacred summit where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

The extraordinary building was erected by the Emperor Justinian (527-565) on the venerated site where Moses spoke with God in the Burning Bush, and where a small church had already been built in the 4th century.

Through the centuries, the monastery has not suffered any substantial acts of destruction and has continued to be a destination for pilgrims and a place of worship. This continuous presence of a monastic community has permitted the preservation of the ancient structure and the formation of a collection of an extraordinary number of historical, artistic and cultural documents.

Inside the fortified wall that surrounds the monastery, there stands the basilica, built by the architect Stefanos of Aila, as recorded by the inscription on the original wooden beams of the roof. The basilica retains most of its original decoration, including the mid-6th century wall mosaic representing the Transfiguration of Christ. This mosaic covers the apse and the triumphal arch above it. This is one of the most important examples of Early Byzantine art that survive practically intact to this day.

The mosaic decoration is of high artistic and technical skill, and great iconographic interest. Noble and refined materials, such as gold leaf tesserae and glass paste tesserae of a rich tonal variety were used to create luminous and voluminous effects.



In the centre of the apse stands Christ in a turquoise mandorla, against a golden background. Moses and Elijah stand on either side of Christ, while the Apostles John and James are kneeling beneath them, and Peter is prostrate under the mandorla. In the lower part of the apse, an inscription records the names of the donors. Thirty-one medallions with busts of the prophets, evangelists and apostles surround the scene. On the triumphal arch there is a panel with Moses and the Burning Bush and another of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

The deterioration of the mosaic concerns mainly the preparatory layers: the surface is affected by loss of adhesion between the preparatory strata and the masonry support. In particular, the area of the figure of Christ is badly detached and bulging. The entire surface has become darker because of deposits of dust and smoke, which have dulled the bright colours of the tesserae.

Two restoration campaigns, one in 1847 the other in 1959, are known to have been carried out: the first by the Russian monk Samuel; the second by an American team, sponsored by the Universities of Michigan and Princeton.

During February 2001, the Centro di Conservazione Archeologica (CCA) of Rome carried out a cognitive investigation into the state of conservation of the mosaic surface, on behalf of The Getty Conservation Institute. A technical project was prepared, submitted to His Eminence Archbishop Damianos and to the Department of Antiquities of Egypt, and approved. Thanks to the generosity of His Highness, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani the conservation project started in 2005 with the full support of Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt. It is being implemented by the CCA under the direction of Roberto Nardi. The intervention involves the consolidation and cleaning of the mosaic, the treatment of the lacunae and the protection of surfaces.



A Scientific Committee for supervising the conservation work has been appointed. It consists of Prof. Gael de Guichen, Architect Petros Koufopoulos, Engineer Costas Zambas and Prof. Demetrios Michaelides. The Committee met on site in 2005 and, recently, at the end of March 2007.

Some initiatives were taken which aim to inform the public and the professionals on the themes of the conservation programme: a full-scale colour reproduction of the mosaic has been placed in front of the apse, hiding the scaffolding. Three cameras have been installed at the work-site and the work being carried is transmitted live on four monitors placed at different points in the Monastery which are accessible to the public. A booklet giving general information on the mosaic conservation programme has been edited by the CCA in Arabic, Greek, English, French, German, Italian,

Russian and Spanish. It is sold at the Monastery and the profits go to a fund towards the maintenance of the church.

Conservation work on the apse will be completed in December 2007.