

MOSAIC DECORATION IN BYZANTINE RAVENNA

OVERVIEW

In the Byzantine period, a building's interior decoration often took the form of mosaic "paintings." Whereas in antiquity, walls were usually decorated with less-expensive painted scenes, the Byzantine aesthetic favored the more sumptuous, glittering effect of mosaic decoration. Some of the finest surviving Byzantine mosaics are preserved in the Italian city of Ravenna, which was one of the most important Italian cities through the Early Byzantine period.

Mosaics were not a Byzantine invention. In fact, some of the most famous surviving mosaics are from ancient Greece and Rome. For example, take a look at The Alexander Mosaic, also known as The Battle of Issus, featured below.



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Most often, however, mosaic decoration in the classical world was reserved for floor surfaces. It was the Byzantines who celebrated the possibilities of the mosaic technique and began to use it on wall surfaces as a sort of painting in stone. Unlike traditional wall paintings, mosaics could create a glittering, shimmering effect that lent itself to a heightened sense of spirituality.

TECHNIQUE

The mosaic technique was more expensive than traditional wall painting, but its effects were so desirable as to make it worth the cost. Further, technological advances (lighter-weight tesserae and a new cement recipe) made wall mosaics easier than they had been in the preceding centuries, when floor mosaics were favored.¹ The imagery befitted Byzantine culture, which emphasized the power of a sole emperor and the authority of one true religion. The

¹ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art*, 7th ed. (Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 303.



Byzantines purposefully sought the sumptuous in the design of their Christian churches.

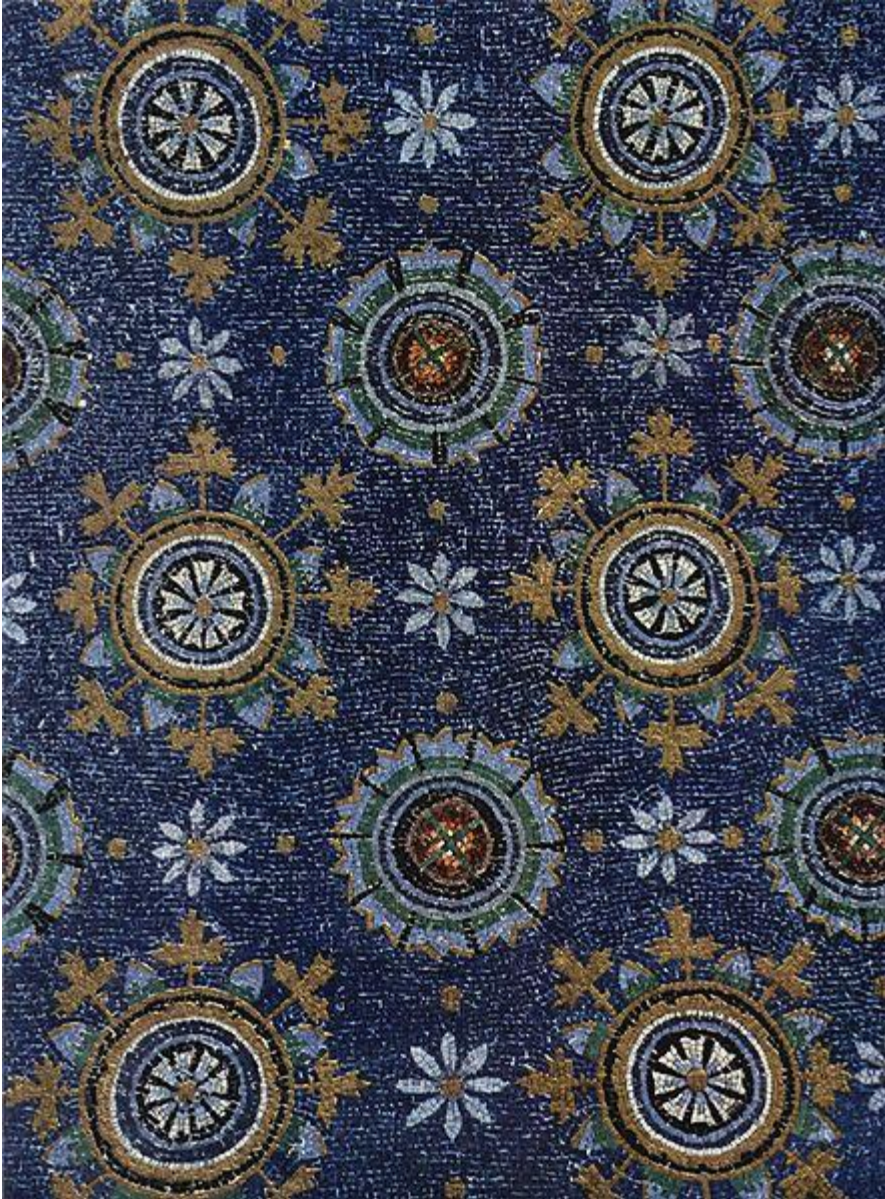
Mosaic technique involved fitting together small pieces of stone and glass (tesserae). When set together, the stone pieces create a paint-like effect in which different colors meld into one another to create shadows and a sense of depth. Mosaic decoration, however, has the added benefit that stone and glass reflect the light in a way that paint cannot. Moreover, the Byzantines often placed gold backing behind the clear glass tesserae such that the mosaics would appear to emit a mysterious light of their own. This play of light added a sense of drama and spiritualism to the images that suited the symbolism and magic inherent in the Byzantine religious ceremony.

THE MAUSOLEUM OF GALLA PLACIDIA, RAVENNA, 425 (Please view the following relevant images of this building: Exterior, Vault Mosaics, Good Shepherd Lunette.)



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The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is one of the earliest Byzantine buildings in Ravenna. The small mausoleum is a dome-covered Greek cross plan. While the exterior is plain, the interior is extensively decorated in elaborate mosaics. These mosaics create a truly spiritual space—a world removed from the ordinary. The vaulting is covered with floral motifs and stars that stand out against a blue background, even seeming to sparkle with their own mystical light.

Good Shepherd Lunette

The most famous mosaic “painting” or scene in the building is the Good Shepherd in the lunette over the north doorway. The blue background from the vaulting continues into the background of this scene, suggesting a continuity of space—and implying that the scene takes place within the spiritual realm. The spiritual nature of this image is further emphasized by the fact that the main figure (Christ) is clothed in gold, holds a cross, and bears a halo. Christ here is depicted in the tradition of the “Good Shepherd,” an iconographic holdover from antiquity wherein the image of a shepherd tending to his sheep evokes charity and goodness. This imagery was particularly useful in the early days of Christianity, as Christ was likened to a sacrificial lamb because Christians believe that His death was a sacrifice for all of humanity.



This image is characteristically Byzantine: it is a wall mosaic with extensive use of gold. That said, its style is firmly rooted in the Classical past. Notice the careful attention to creating the illusion of three-dimensional space. Christ sits upon a rock, his knees realistically projecting forward into space. Likewise, his flock populates a realistic space that seems to recede into the background. Even the blue sky behind the scene suggests a real, knowable space.

In sum, this is an excellent example of early Byzantine mosaic “painting.” The technique and fundamental details would be preserved by later Byzantine artists, but the style is clearly rooted in the Classical world from which it has emerged. In only a few short years, Byzantine mosaics would make a stylistic leap wherein the illusion of three-dimensional space would be sacrificed in favor of a greater degree of symbolism.

SAN VITALE, RAVENNA, 547 (Please view the following relevant images of this building: Exterior, Interior View, Justinian Mosaic, Theodora Mosaic.)



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San Vitale is the most celebrated Byzantine church in Ravenna. As with the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, San Vitale's plain exterior is contrasted with a vividly decorated interior in which mosaics coat virtually every surface. There is extensive use of gold in these mosaics, suffusing the space with a sense of otherworldly grandeur. Further, all of the decorative images, from vines to flowers to lambs, carry Christian symbolism of Christ and salvation. There is no question that this is a special, even magical, space.

As in all Christian churches, the apse serves as the center of religious service as well as the artistic focal point of the building. In the semi-vault of the apse, Christ is depicted as an emperor (indicated by his purple robes) seated upon the globe of the earth. He is surrounded by angels, the church's founder, and Saint Vitalis, for whom the church is named. The scene combines realistic natural details such as grass and flowers with otherworldly details (i.e. the gold background), suggesting a kind of heavenly paradise.

The two images on the flanking walls of the apse are the most famous: the "Justinian Mosaic" to the left, and the "Theodora Mosaic" to the right.

Justinian Mosaic & Theodora Mosaic

The two scenes flanking the apse show the royal Byzantine court, which appears to occupy the same otherworldly space as does Christ. It is as though Christ and the royal court are involved in a religious ceremony in a reality parallel to the ceremonies taking place in San Vitale.

The emperor Justinian is depicted to the left with his retinue of attendants and religious figures. Many of them have highly individualized facial features, seeming very much like portrait heads. But beyond these detailed visages, all traces of realism seem to vanish. For example, notice the space that these figures occupy. Justinian stands in the center, wearing a purple robe, and is distinguished by his halo and crown. The figure holding a cross to his right seems to stand *behind* Justinian if you look at the relationship between their robes, since Justinian's robe falls in front of the man's right arm. However, the feet of the cross-bearing man seem to be planted *in front of* Justinian's. This spatial ambiguity results in a physically impossible space. Further, the feet of all of the figures in this scene appear to float against a flat background. The image lacks defined space; rather than a knowable, three-dimensional, area (such as the one depicted in the Good Shepherd Lunette at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia -- please view both images to see the comparison), the artist at San Vitale emphasizes the *unreality* of the world Justinian occupies with Christ. Where Christ in the Good Shepherd Lunette occupies a space that the viewer might imagine himself occupying, Justinian and his retinue stand in an ethereal gold haze. The Christian faith emphasizes that its believers must believe in a realm that cannot be known or seen. This art conveys a similar message, in that the beautiful gold background and ambiguous definition of three-dimensional space effectively communicate the unknowable and un-seeable world of heaven to the viewer.

The Theodora Mosaic stands directly across from the Justinian Mosaic on the right side of the apse. Just as in the Justinian Mosaic, Theodora (Justinian's



wife) processes through a vague gold space with her retinue. Like Justinian, she is identified by her purple robe, gold halo, and crown. She and her female attendants process through their gold background towards Christ above the apse. As with Justinian, she has been removed from reality and placed with Christ and her husband in an unreal, eternal world.

APSE MOSAIC, SANT'APOLLINARE IN CLASSE, RAVENNA, 549 (Please view this image of the Apse Mosaic.)



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Sant'Apollinare in Classe is another important church in Ravenna, dating to around the same time as San Vitale. As in San Vitale, the apse is finely decorated in an ethereal style. In the hemisphere above the apse, the viewer finds a mosaic of Saint Apollinaris standing in gesture of prayer. The details around him suggest that this is no ordinary space, but rather an impossibly perfect heaven: there is an assembly of natural elements—plants, trees, sheep—but all of these elements are precisely and starkly laid out, rather than organically grouped together as they would be in the natural world. Moreover, the telltale gold background removes this scene from the earthly world. The image is rife with Christian symbolism, from the large cross in the star-studded, blue sky to the six sheep on either side of Saint Apollinaris (sheep were symbolic of Christ's twelve disciples). All of these details suggest the spiritualism and majesty of Byzantine Christendom.

