Paloma Pajares-Ayuela

*Cosmatesque Ornament: Flat Polychrome
Geometric Patterns in Architecture*

London and New York: W.W. Norton, 2001

Reviewed by Kim Williams

Paloma Pajares-Ayuela's richly illustrated study of the late medieval type of architectural ornament known as Cosmatesque is a welcome addition to the literature on this subject. The previous rigorous study dedicated to this genre was that of Dorothy Glass in 1984, which was limited to designs of pavements, so Pajares-Ayuela's work comprises not only an elaboration but an extension as well.

It may be that so few studies are dedicated to the Cosmati in part because they defy easy categorization. Sometimes they are mentioned in works about mosaics, and though their work shares with mosaics the use of tiling and the ornamentation of surfaces, the techniques used by the Cosmati and their artistic intentions are distinct from that of the mosaicists. Cosmati are sometimes included in works about stonework, but their use of carved stone for portals, church facades, etc., can again be distinguished from other types of stonework by the use of incrustated or inlaid tiling. Pajares-Ayuela herself lists the multitude of roles undertaken by the Cosmati: architect, interior decorator, builder, curator, restorer, sculptor, engraver, lime and marble worker, mosaicist, warehouseman, and exporter of materials (p. 58). It is easy to see why they defy categorization!

But as a scholar who has worked with the Cosmati for some time, I suspect the reason that they are not studied to a greater extent is that the complexity of their work itself. The difficult question of distinguishing what is original to the Cosmati from the myriad alterations that have been wrought by the ravages of time and restoration, the many branches of the family tree, and the many small regional differences in technique and pattern, make studying the Cosmati a daunting task. The thoughtful scholar faces the choice of whether to try to make valid generalizations about the oeuvre of the Cosmati as a whole, or to focus his or her attention on only one aspect of the subject, as Glass did with pavements. Pajares-Ayuela has attempted a middle road, trying to balance a consideration of Cosmatesque ornament as a genre with detailed analysis.

In the first chapter, Pajares-Ayuela discusses both what distinguishes as well as connects the Cosmati genre to other similar types of tiled decoration. In the second chapter she undertakes a piece-by-piece morphological analysis of Roman medieval churches in order to explain the working context of the Cosmati and exhibit the typical elements constructed or decorated by them. While this chapter is successful in demonstrating the remarkable range of Cosmatesque work, I feel that some difficulties arise. In discussing morphology, Pajares-Ayuela implies a distinction between a "Cosmatesque church" and the typical medieval church. This implication is reinforced by statements such as, "The facade of a Cosmatesque church is a wall crowned with the symmetrical slopes of the gabled roof" (p. 72) and "The Cosmati situated the [episcopal throne] at the back of the apse of the central nave..." (p. 97). But this reviewer finds statements such as these misleading. The Cosmati were completely of their time, accepting the medieval church as they found it rather than giving birth to new forms or new arrangements: most medieval churches have

gabled facades, and most bishop's thrones are placed in the back of the central apse, regardless of whether the Cosmati worked there. No, it isn't form that distinguishes Cosmati work, it is their treatment of form, and especially their breakdown of surface into ornamental bands and rectangles that is remarkable, and when treating these aspects, Pajares-Ayuela is on firmer ground. Chapter three deals with antecedents in local and Byzantine tiling, and here the large compendium of geometric patterns used by the Cosmati becomes clear. Chapter five is a detailed explanation of the symbolism inherent in one of the principle motives of the Cosmati, the quincunx.

Chapters four and six are really the heart of the book; the author delves into her most detailed analyses and makes the material her own. Pajares-Ayuela has adopted a most personal vocabulary for explaining what she sees in the patterns. Fortunately for the reader she begins chapter four with a glossary so that her meanings are clear. Unfortunately, some of these definitions are very difficult to understand without small figures to illustrate them; this difficulty is repeated in chapter six when patterns in the pavement of San Clemente are described. This makes clear why such a heavily illustrated book as this is needed for the Cosmati: theirs is above all a visual art. One interesting aspect of the Cosmati that Pajares-Ayuela makes clear is how such apparent geometric rigor is actually very flexible, now expanding, now contracting, now turning a corner in order to fit the surface that must be decorated. Undoubtedly this flexibility is what led to the proliferation of the Cosmati style. Her outline of the grand hierarchy of the elements of Cosmatesque pavements (p. 154 ff.) shows a good understanding of them, and here she shows her mastery in understanding the proportions inherent in Cosmatesque geometry as well. Pajares-Ayuela's examination focuses on Cosmatesque designs as a style rather than a historical movement. This allows her to include pavements such as the Sistine Chapel, which was not laid by the Cosmati but is Cosmatesque in style.

There are some aspects of the book that are very pleasurable that perhaps the author didn't intend but that nevertheless contribute to its splendor. In her study of the Cosmati, Pajares-Ayuela joins a tradition of scholars who used their considerable graphic skills in the service of research. The author's own splendid watercolors of the pavement of the *schola cantorum* of San Clemente are a feast for the eye, whetting the appetite for more. She generously includes as illustrations many of the other tempera paintings of the Cosmati by Andrea Terzi, delicate graphite drawings by Guglielmo Matthiae and pen-and-ink drawings by A. Petrignani. It is easy to see that many have been so attracted by the Cosmati that they have spent many a patient hour study, recording, sketching, measuring, in order to capture the essence of Cosmatesque decoration. Photographs of Cosmatesque decoration are informative, but drawings seem best to express its soul. It is heartening to know even in our harried, overworked, underpaid, modern world, thoughtful scholars such as Pajares-Ayuela still take the time to linger over a watercolor in order to understand a subject.

About the Reviewer

Kim Williams is editor-in-chief of the *Nexus Network Journal*. She is the author of *Italian Pavements: Patterns in Space* (Houston: Anchorage Press, 1997).