

Tradition and Innovation in Monolithic Flooring

by Patrizia Zoia

Supervisor: Giovanni Canavesio, Anna Gilibert

The thesis is an in-depth study of certain types of monolithic flooring with particular attention to the traditional architecture of the Veneto and Friuli regions: the venetian-style *terrazzo* and the mosaic. The study begins with the historical roots of Venetian-style flooring, analyses its relationship with ancient mosaic flooring and concludes with its modern-day re-creation via the use of stone materials.

The first chapter is devoted to a brief outline of the history of flooring, from the literal sense of *terra battuta* in ancient Egyptian flooring tradition through the complexity of Roman mosaics to current building solutions and, more specifically, monolithic flooring.



Illustration n° 1: central decoration of the Venetian flooring in the Duchess's bedroom in the Palazzina di Caccia of Stupinigi

Two chapters follow on the criteria for selecting the stone and binding materials for indoor flooring.

The following types of hard flooring were considered:

- *pastellone* - an ancient style of flooring made from ground postsherd;
- Venetian flooring - *terrazzo* limestone;
- Venetian flooring - *terrazzo* cement;
- Venetian flooring - *terrazzo* epoxy;
- mosaic.

The treatment of such types of floor is preceded by a description of the construction system of Venetian architecture since knowledge of the prevailing methods and materials used is indispensable to a full understanding of, and justification of the arguments with regard to, these types of flooring.

In particular, the study develops the subject of *terrazzo*. From 1700 onwards, as a result of emigration of master craftsmen from the Friuli region, this style was widely used not only in Italy but also throughout Europe.

Both type of flooring is described according to the following headings:

- denomination
- characteristics
- historical background
- type of support
- materials (binding and covering)
- construction technique
- decorative motif production methods
- maintenance problems and brief restoration guidelines



Illustration n° 2: floral motif of the Venetian flooring in the dining room in the Castello of Racconigi

Terrazzo limestone flooring is discussed by comparing the writings of early authors, such as G. Curioni, A. Zambonini and A. Castagnola, with the more recent work of A. Crovato and information provided by current flooring contractors who use traditional methods.

Conversely, modern *terrazzo* cement and epoxy flooring is discussed principally by reference to information provided by artisans and firms currently operating in the Veneto, Friuli and Milan areas, whose services were needed to compensate for the scarcity of reference material available.

This firms were selected with the assistance of the offices of the Environment and Cultural Heritage of Venice (*le Soprintendenze ai Beni Ambientali e ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Venezia*). In addition, two major Italian firms in mosaic production and construction were interviewed. These were Bisazza Mosaici SpA from Alte (Vicenza) and Fantini Mosaici from Milan.

Each type of monolithic flooring is illustrated with photographic documentation of examples from the Piemonte region which testify to the use of a mixed technique in which Venetian, mosaic and grit flooring coexist and contribute to the formation of fine examples of great artistic value. In particular, the documented flooring are those which exist in some residences of House of Savoy, including the Castello di Agliè, the Castello di Racconigi, the Palazzina di Caccia di Stupinigi and the Castello della Mandria, and date between 1700 and 1800. A relief model of these to actual scale has been produced in order to represent certain decorative details and dimensions of crushed marble used.



Illustration n° 3: Venetian and mosaic flooring in the Castello Cavour of Santena.

From the 18th century, the Castello di Masino (Turin) provides examples of Venetian flooring, also documented, while the floors of the Castello Cavour di Santena (Turin) reintroduce the mixed technique using Venetian, mosaic and grit floorings.

Fantini Mosaici of Milan provided examples of modern *terrazzo* cement flooring in the form of the Versace shop in Paris and his home in Miami.

Other illustrations of mosaic flooring document examples from the homes of Friulani *terrazzeri* an mosaicists, which were all destroyed by the 1976 earthquake.

Bisazza Mosaici provided photographs of *terrazzo* epoxy floorings from examples of their current production.

In addition, part of the thesis is devoted to analysing the ornamental motifs used in the various construction techniques: their relationship with the overall architectural milieu and their classification in terms of the various types of formal expression used.

Finally, there is an analytical glossary of technical terms and dialectal expressions and a descriptive and illustrated guide to the ancient tools used for each specific purpose.

In conclusion, the thesis illustrates the types of stone available on the market today, such as *anticati*, re-constituted stone and coloured cement tiles, which, although reflecting changes in decorative tastes and new working techniques, are clearly and deliberately rooted in ancient tradition.