

Hispano Moresque tiles in Genoa

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Genoa, january 2002

examples of Hispano Moresque tiles in Genoa

1. Introduction

Many art treasures are hidden inside the thick walls of ancient palaces in Genoa. Oil paintings, stucco decorations, frescoes, statues, fountains, marble portals show the wealth and taste of the noble families who build it. Among those treasures the ceramic tiles decorating wainscots on monumental staircases attracted my attention. These tiles come from a foreign, exotic culture, Islamic art, but feel oddly at home here, with their rich glazes blue and orange and green still shining after 5 centuries. I was curious to find out how those tiles, called in Genoa "**laggioni**" (derived from the Arab word "*al zuleija*", becoming "**azulejo**" in Spanish,) came here, and why they were appreciated by the Genoese aristocrats of the XVI century. In Italy the *laggioni* were used only in Genoa, and the city has a wide collection of many different models, both in Museums and in historical palaces. It's amazing the fact that *laggioni* survived wars and destructions. Maybe because ceramic tiles, even 5 centuries old, were not considered antiques of great value.

Only Seville, among other Mediterranean towns, has a treasure of tiles superior to Genoa, but this is due to the fact that the tiles were made in Seville.

2. Genoese in Sevilla

The presence of *laggioni* in Genoa derives from the economical and political partnership linking the Republic of Genoa with Spain in XVI century. Merchants from the noble families of Genoa had established their commercial bases in Seville since XII century, when the town was still under Muslim rule. When Sevilla was reconquered by the Catholic King Fernando III in 1250 the Genoese obtained a colony of their own, with their own church, and the privilege of being ruled by a consul elected among them.. When the New World was discovered the business-oriented Genoese seized the opportunity and lend the Spanish King money to finance the voyages of Columbus and other explorers. The discovery of the New World transformed Sevilla into the gate where all the riches coming from the American colonies entered Spain. One of the prominent Genoese, Francesco Pinelli – his name hispanized in Francisco de Pinelos- was appointed by the King as chief of the *Casa de Contratación*, a custom house where all goods, imported and exported from the colonies, had to transit and pay custom duties. The Pinelli family lived in their palace in Genoa and in the Casa de Pinelos in Sevilla, both of them still existing. Needless to say, both houses have *laggioni* decorations.

3. Arab Civilization in Spain

The makers of the *laggioni* were Arab craftsmen, descending from the Arabs who conquered Andalusia (al-Andalus is an Arab word, meaning the land where the sun sets) in the VIII century a.d. According to many historians, the time of the Arab rule over Spain was a splendid one. The refined culture of the East: Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria met the remains of the Roman, classic culture, creating a new, armonic and wealthy civilization. While Europe was living the dark medieval times of war and poverty, in Andalusia flourished a civilisation that, ensuring equal rights and religious freedom to all, Muslims, Christians and Jews, attained great results in art, architecture, science, philosophy. All the remaining works from the ancient Greek, such as Aristoteles, Plato, Thales, Pitagoras were translated into Arab and studied by Arab scholars like Ibn-Sina

(Avicenna). All sciences: medicine, astronomy, geometry reached a point of development that was centuries ahead of the Christian world. From this period, that lasted 7 centuries, remain in Spain some great monuments, among them the Alhambra palace in Granada (Fig.1).and the Great Mosque in Cordoba.

Politically, Al Andalus was united under the rule of the Omayyad Abd ar-Rahman I, the only surviving member of the Omayyad dynasty, who in 756 proclaimed himself Emir of Córdoba. His successors were Abd ar-Rahman the II and Abd ar-Rahman the III who died in 961, then the Muslim Andalusia, lacking a strong ruler to keep it united split into many little kingdoms, (*Taifas*) who fought between them and were one by one reconquered by the Christians. The last surviving Muslim state was the kingdom of Granada, who surrendered pacifically to the Catholic kings Fernando and Isabel in 1492.

Boabdil, the king of Granada, before going to exile in Morocco, signed a treaty with the Spanish Kings that granted religious freedom to all Muslims. However this treaty was not respected, and few years later, by a Royal edict, all non-Christians had to either join Christianity or leave the country. Many migrated, the ones that stayed and converted to Christianity were called “*Moriscos*” the Muslims and “*Marranos*”the Jews. Both names had a contemptuous meaning, expressing the mistrust of the Christians about the sincerity of their conversion. The presence of the Moriscos was tolerated in Spain because of their precious scientific knowledge, artistic capacities and skills.

3. Islamic style

The Alhambra Palace, built in Granada between 13 and 14 century is a showcase of the perfection attained by the Islamic Art of the period. All parts of the palace, including the gardens, though realized in different times, are in harmony with each other. The goal of the Islamic artist is to evoke the beauty of the world created by God; for this purpose all surfaces: ceiling, walls, floors, carpets, vases, and all materials: clay, plaster, wood, metal, silk, wool are used to illustrate the perfection of the Creation.

Islamic geometric wall decorations are inspired by the star. In Islamic iconography the star symbolizes equal radiation in all directions from a central point. All regular stars - whether they have 6, 8, 10, 12, or 16 points - are created by a division of a circle into equal parts. The center of the star is center of the circle from which it came, and its points touch the circumference of the circle. The rays of a star reach out in all directions, making the star a symbol for the spread of Islam.

The mosaic's main theme is in fact a geometrical rosette, begins as a star and then extends outwards in interlacing bands, and form a rich extensive network. Several such complete designs can intertwine with one another on one surface, and then they form a shimmering planetarium, in which each line starts from a centre and leads to a centre, a motif that once again strongly evokes the Islamic idea of omnipresent unity.

To compose such designs Islamic artists invented a technique – called “*alicatado*” in Spanish or “*zellij*” in Arab - of cutting ceramic tiles of different colors into small geometric shapes that are mounted on walls like mosaics.(Fig.2)



Fig. 1



. Fig. 2 -

4. From Alicatado to Cuerda Seca

The *alicatado* technique is long and expensive to realize, and very skilled craftsmen are required; instead square tiles, all of the same size, forming a panel to cover the walls will save time and money. To transfer on square tiles the geometric designs of *alicatado* the *cuerda seca* (literally “dry line”) technique was invented.

The lines forming the pattern are traced on unglazed tiles using a mix of grease, powdered clay and manganese oxide. The resulting areas outlined by the lines are filled with colored glazes. In the subsequent firing the *cuerda seca* lines will burn, leaving unglazed borders between the coloured glazes. The lines form a spider web motif and keep the different glazes apart. This proceeding was faster and simpler than *Zellij*. Without necessity of breaking tiles into little pieces to be later assembled, *cuerda seca* tiles reached the same decorative results. The colours used are white, orange, brown, green and blue.

Some of these tiles, although in poor state, are still visible in the stairs of Doria palace in San Matteo square, Genoa. (Fig.3).



Fig. 3

From cuerda seca to cuenca

The *cuerda seca* technique, used since the end of XV Century, was adequate to reproduce Islamic geometric patterns composed of straight lines, like *alicatados* but when the changing tastes in favour of less rigid patterns in the beginning of XVI Century required designs composed of curved lines, inspired by Renaissance motifs, a new technique was developed: the *cuenca* or *arista*, meaning raised borders.

The tile pattern was carved in a wood, metal or plaster mould where the soft clay was pressed by hand. Coming out of the mould, the tile had the engraved lines printed as raised lines (*aristas*). After the first firing, the spaces surrounded by the raised lines, (*cuencas*) were filled with coloured glazes, and fired again. The raised lines prevented the melting glazes to mix together during firing

This technique made the production of decorated tiles faster and cheaper, since no skilled painters were required to fill in the *cuencas*, and each workshop produced a wide variety of patterns. All tiles had a standard size, 13,5x13,5 cm, and 2,5 cm thick. Some tiles had a double size (27x 13,5) and were used for ceilings. The tiles were stacked in the kiln with a tripod clay stand (called *pata de gallo*- cock's foot) between them that left 3 round marks on the glazed surface. Cuenca tiles from Sevilla were exported to the rest of the Mediterranean, some went to England and the Netherlands and even to the American colonies. Majolica painted tiles, introduced in Seville by the Italian Niculoso and the Flemish Andries, replaced *cuenca* tiles in the second half of XVI century.

The majority of the ancient tiles in Genoa are of the *cuenca* type.

5. Styles of the laggioni

The scholars divided the production of *cuenca* tiles into 3 main styles, the first is called geometric style or "*de lacerias*", the geometric patterns are derived from the *alicatados*, see pictures Fig.4, Fig.5, Fig.6, Fig.7, Fig.8,



Fig. 4

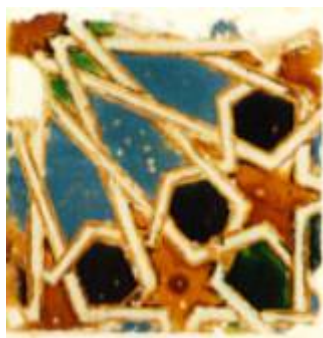


Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig. 7



Fig.8

The second style is called *Isabelino*, from the Queen Isabel of Castille. Here we see elements of the previous geometric style mixed with vegetable motifs, such as flowers and boughs (Fig.9, Fig. 10 and Fig. 11).



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11

The third style, called *Renacentista* was inspired by the *grotesque* motifs derived from the fresco paintings of Domus Aurea, the palace of the Roman emperor Nero, discovered in late XV century in Rome. In these motifs, vegetable, animals and human figures are intertwined in most fantastic ways, and any trace of geometry has vanished.



Fig.12



Fig. 13



Fig.14

The 3 styles coexisted, and sometimes are found together in the same panel, or in the same building. Most likely, the grotesque style was introduced in Seville by the Italian artist [Francesco Niculoso](#) from Pisa, who moved to Seville in the end of XV century. He made both painted tiles and *cuenca* tiles, and he was author of a number of moulds for *cuenca*s. Another contribution of Niculoso to ceramic art in Spain was the introduction of the tile panel, or *retablo*: a composition made of several flat tiles mounted together, painted like a single canvas, regardless of the edges of each tile, like in this "Visitazione" now at Rijkmuseum in Amsterdam(Fig.15).



Fig.15