

A Cosmatesque architectural fragment inlaid with a trelliswork design
Italy, Gaeta, Cathedral of Sant'Erasmus and San Marciano
First quarter 13th century, reusing ancient stone



67.5 x 20 x 6.5 cm; a single panel of delicately veined grey-white stone consistent with Proconnesian marble, inset with red porphyry (perfido rosso), green porphyry (marmor lecdaemon), rosso antico, and cut glass tesserae.

Provenance

Probably made as part of a liturgical screen for the cathedral of Sant'Erasmus and San Marciano, Gaeta, Lazio;

Likely removed from the cathedral and reinstalled at the church of Santa Lucia in or shortly after 1648, when the cathedral's interior was renovated;

Private collection, Italy;

Collection of Ogden Smith, London, by c. 1960

This slender architectural panel is decorated with a wide band of purplish red porphyry, green serpentine, and turquoise tesserae inlaid in a complex pattern of stars and trellis work. The design turns a sharp corner near the top of the slab and disappears off of its left-hand edge above a series of leaf and tongue mouldings carved in low relief. The combination of these features tells us we are looking at a fragment of a much larger object, and yet its neatly finished edges also show that whatever it comes from was carefully constructed from a series of blocks that must have slotted into place alongside one another.

Cosmati work, 'Sectilia' ornament, and ancient stone – use and reuse in the Medieval world

The panel's inlaid decoration conforms to a style of ornament often described as Cosmati work, a name given to inlaid geometric 'sectilia' stonework typical of the architecture of Early Medieval Italy, and especially of Rome and its surroundings (figs. 1-3). The name derives from the *Cosmati*, the leading family workshop of marble craftsmen in Rome, famous for their

creation of richly coloured mosaic stonework, most notably perhaps in Westminster Abbey in London, for which they designed a vast pavement erected in the abbey in 1268 and surviving there to this day. The practice of inlaying glass and stone tesserae into white marble panels in this way, although reaching its zenith under the directorship of the Cosmati, had already been established in the Byzantine Empire for at least five centuries, and by the twelfth century many marble pavements and panels of 'Opus Sectile' and 'Opus Alexandrinum' as it is called, had been used to decorate prestigious churches and religious foundations, both across Italy and further afield. Central to these objects was the reuse of ancient stones, particularly red and green porphyries, which are commonly found on Opus Sectile in the form of discs since they were made by slicing down columns scavenged and reclaimed from the dilapidated sites of ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt. The *Mons Porphyrites*, the only known source of purple porphyry in the world, is located near Hurghada in eastern Egypt. Knowledge of its location was lost following the Fall of Rome and it was only rediscovered in the 1820s, meaning that for the whole of the Medieval period any use of porphyry as a sculptural material by European craftsmen depended on their salvaging it from ancient sites.

Context, Localisation and Dating

The excellent preservation of our panel's carved and inlaid details indicates that it must never have been used as part of a floor program, but was instead intended to decorate a piece of liturgical furniture such as an ambo or chancel screen, a shaped dividing wall usually made from stone or wood popular in Italian church architecture during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and used to separate the chancel from the rest of the church. Careful study of its proportions, its carved leaf and tongue mouldings, and the design of the stone inlays, reveals a perfect match with a group of similarly proportioned and decorated panels now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, purchased by the Stewart Gardners on a visit to Italy in 1897 (figs. 4-6). Scholars believe that the Boston panels were originally created during the first quarter of the thirteenth century (some authors give the figurative imagery to an earlier program), for the cathedral of Gaeta, a town 80 miles south-east of Rome, but that they were removed during the cathedral's Baroque-era refurbishment in the late 1640s and reinstalled at Santa Lucia shortly thereafter. Following this, Santa Lucia's interior was completely renovated and the ambo of which our fragment and the Boston panels all formed a part was reinstalled in another location in the church before the dispersal of its various components at the end of the nineteenth century. Photographs taken of the church of Santa Lucia in the nineteenth century show further sections of the present relief installed behind the two altars of the church's north and south aisles (Fig. 7). It is clear from this evidence and the group of larger, figurative panels in Boston (fig. 5) that a series of moulded and inlaid border panels framed at least eight square central reliefs (incorporating both inlaid and carved imagery) in a gridwork arrangement. This form of panelled composition can still be seen in the chancel barriers of San Cesareo in Rome and Santa Maria at Civita Castellana, two of the more significant constructions of this type.

After having languished in anonymity for a century or more, we can once again be certain that our panel formed one of the screen's intricate border sections, which makes it the first fragment of this dismembered monument to come to light since the Stewart Gardners returned to Boston with their treasured cargo in the 1890s. Moreover, it offers us a rare insight into the ingenuity of medieval stonemasons, and the dazzling geometric designs they were able to produce with precious stones salvaged from ancient sites.

Related Literature

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Fig. 1
Section of Cosmati pavement in the nave of San Gregorio Magno al Celio, Rome.

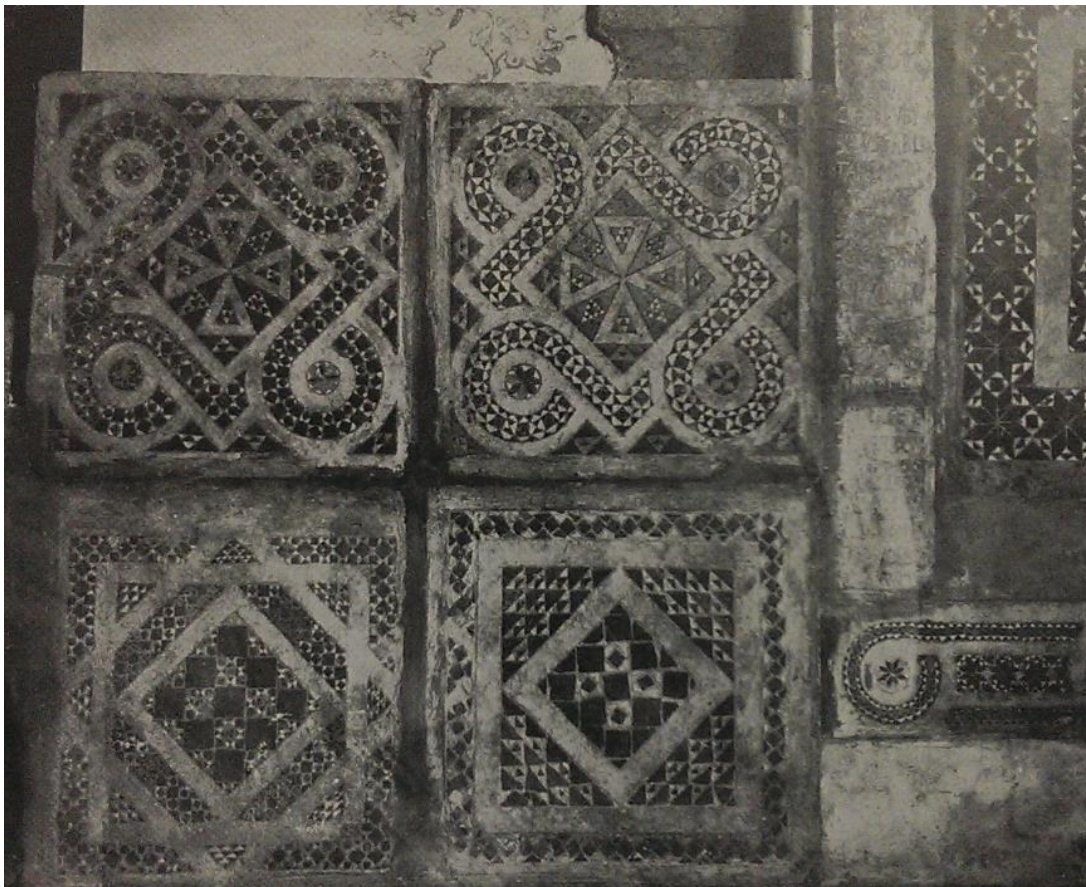


Fig. 2
Panels from a dismantled chancel barrier or liturgical screen showing Cosmatesque inlaid designs
12th century
Anagni Cathedral



Fig. 3
Pulpit with Cosmatesque inlays
12th century
Orvieto, Church of Sant' Andrea



Fig.4
The Boston reliefs visible to the right of the image in the cloistered courtyard at Isabella Stewart Gardner's home,
Fenway Court, later the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
c. 1903
Photograph: Boston Public Library



Fig. 5

Fragments of the ambo of Santa Lucia, Gaeta, showing the three related border sections displayed horizontally at the top of the picture: 1) 22 x 43 cm; 2) 22 x 71 cm; 3) 20 x 47 cm

First quarter 13th century

Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, Inv. S9e8



Fig. 6

Detail of the most closely related of the Boston panels



Fig. 7
 The complete ambo screen mounted on the East wall of the church of Santa Lucia (north aisle)
 Photograph taken c. 1880s