

## RETRIEVAL OF A RENAISSANCE CERAMIC WALL DECORATION FROM A BUILDING IN THE HISTORICAL CENTRE OF UDINE

FRANCO BOCCHIERI

Superintendent for the Environmental Architectonic Archaeological Artistic and Historical  
Heritage of Friuli - Venezia Giulia

During the restoration of Palazzo Ottelio (1995-'96), the seat of the "J. Tomadini" Music Conservatory of Udine, owned by the City Administration, the Superintendence for Environmental Architectonic Archaeological Artistic and Historical Heritage of Friuli - Venezia Giulia was able to carry out a cross-disciplinary study on both the history of the building, on the basis of documents kept in the archives, and the site where it stands, through archaeological diggings. An assessment of the potential of an archaeological dig prior to any architectural restoration of a highly valuable historical building was thus possible. This dig led to the retrieval of a high number of ceramic and glass objects, as well as manufactures in different materials. Of particular interest is an elaborate *corpus* of graffito ceramic tiles, almost all in fragments, which could be dated around 1500 a.d. The study of the finds proved that the original function of the tiles was interior wall decoration. Indeed, the tiles have holes for the nails which were used to fix them to the walls, and their association with architectonic structures for civilian dwellings is certain.

Considering the rarity of surviving graffito ceramic tiles dating back to this period, the significance of the Udine discovery can be appreciated. Indeed, it casts new life on interior decoration in the Veneto – Friuli area, allowing to lay the foundations for the study of a sector of the history of architecture and interior decoration which was badly documented due to the very bad deterioration caused by time to the local artistic heritage.

The main nucleus of the tiles also includes a fragment with the signature of the ceramist who owned the workshop, "Maestro To[...]" (maybe Tommaso, whose presence is documented in Udine during that period). The iconographic themes, all profane by design, were inspired by the sophisticated *imagerie* of ceramic decoration (both graffito and maiolica decoration) which was typical of the Italian centre-north area in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, with significant similarities with the Ferrara and Padua production of the time. The *corpus* was the main topic of a publication (including a catalogue of the most significant pieces and introductory essays on the study of the different historical, artistic, and technical aspects related to the tiles) published by

the Superintendence and edited by Paolo Casadio, Gianna Malisani, and Serena Vitri, inserted in the series "Relazioni" directed by Franco Bocchieri (March 2000).

Thanks to the hypotheses brought forward during such study, it can be stated that the tiles must have been used to decorate highly refined small areas, such as small studies. Their decorative repertory recalls not only maiolica tiles, more widely used, but also ceiling panels and inlaid tablets designed for dwellings of high standing.

The tiles were probably made in Udine and ordered by a noble family (perhaps the Filittini, owners of various buildings in the historical centre at the time), as seems confirmed by the presence of numerous coats of arms which can be traced back not only to the Filittini, but also to the most well-known families in Udine during the Renaissance.

The palace is located on the south bank of the "Zardin Grande" (now Piazza Primo Maggio), which is a depression east of the Castle hill – in ancient times it was a lake, therefore a place to be filled in with debris, starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century up to the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century.

According to what can be reconstructed from documentary research, the palace is situated at the north-eastern border of an area that in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century was formed by lands and houses belonging to important families from Udine, such as the Renoldi family (whose house must have been right in front of the Church of S. Antonio), the Ettoreo family (whose property must have occupied the corner of the area bordering on S. Antonio road and vicolo Porta, between the Renoldi house and the Ottelio palace), the Soldanieri family and the Ugolini family. All of these properties were reunified at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to build the Archbishopric Seminary (1601).

The palace bordered on the loggia in its north end, on the public road close to the mill (Porta vicolo, also defined "dal Mulin des stuis" vicolo) in its east end, whereas the south façade led into the garden, which is still documented in the prints by Spinelli (1704) and by Gironcoli (1727) as an Italian-style garden. Underneath, the presence of an earlier fresco layer, contemporary with the paintings decorating the south façade of the building was confirmed. The two large man figures can be referred to the time of the Dolfin reform (i.e. 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) for the clear mannerist features they show and for their vacuous look, which recalls the art of the time.

The decoration of the south façade is very different; it was planned according to a design which is evocative of examples from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, such as the façade of the "palazzo dipinto" (painted palace) in the Spilimbergo Castle, for the use of cornices and panels in false marble and clipei. However, other elements, such as the wide rectangular space with a double height, which originally depicted one single big scene (perhaps a *Fetonte's Fall*), or the beautiful monochrome heads designed to serve as *termini* at the sides of windows can suggest that there was a façade decorative structure, which is characteristic of the third or fourth decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Veduta di Udine* (view of Udine) kept in the City Museums, which was attributed to Carlevarijs, but was actually painted by another artist shortly after 1650, shows that the west end of the palace was all frescoed, and the top part was decorated with a cornice held by dentils, some of which can still be seen on the west side of the palace, under a tympanum frescoed with the painting of two big male figures lying down.

Thus, it can be assumed as an hypothesis that the tiles might have decorated a building existing on that site before the Dolfin reform, dating back to the period before the 1511 earthquake – indeed, the earthquake might have led to major restoration-works in the Udine buildings.

Moreover, the retrieval of at least two tiles fragments in the palace masonry might indicate that the palace was completely reconstructed after the removal of the tiles, or that a pre-existing building was radically refurbished. Furthermore, some of the tiles fragments retrieved showed traces of lime mortar even on the decorated side and on the cuts, which could be evidence of their reuse as aggregate for the building of walls. Therefore, there might have been an intermediate stage between the removal of the tiles from their original position and the moment of their use as aggregate for the Ottelio palace.

The latter consideration might lead to a different hypothesis, i.e. the idea that the filling material for the Ottelio palace, including the tiles, might have come from the demolition of a building in the city historical centre whose rubble was taken to the “Zardin Grande” and then directed to the Ottelio palace.

Such hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that at the time piazza Primo Maggio had the function of a waste disposal area, as was mentioned earlier, and by the retrieval of a few tiles decorated with coats of arms belonging to some of the most influential families in Udine.

The *ceramic corpus* is formed by some 1,800 tiles fragments (in some cases entire tiles) made with the technique of graffito ceramic (put under a framework and scratched under glaze) which is typical of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the tiles are square (grouped according to the different dimensions), with autonomous structure decoration. There are some extended hexagon tiles, and a few monochrome ones with various shapes (rectangular, triangular, and squared ones). There is a significant proportion of rectangular tiles, used as frames or edgings, and cross-shaped elements with raised bosses.

A common feature in all of the tiles groups is the presence of holes. In the majority of the square tiles there are three holes, located between the central square and the edge. In other cases, especially in the thinner ones, there is a single hole, placed at the centre of the tile. In the hexagon ones, in the rectangular edging ones, and in the larger squared ones there are two holes.

The holes were used to fix nails, some of which were found still in their place. They are ancient – made nails, whose length varies between 4 and 4.5 centimetres. The holes are definitely original, since they show inside colour and glaze runs, which sometimes cover the back of the tiles as well. It can be assumed that the nail pinning was used to allow the pieces to better adhere to the walls. To this respect, it is interesting to note that on one of the square tiles there is a plaque, with a maxim (“Ancuo se paga domano no”), on the sides of which two lateral holes are portrayed - almost like a *trompe - l’oeil* depicting a tile- in- the- tile, according to the example of the decorations in classical plaques. This can perhaps prove that such decorations were common. Assuming that the tiles were applied to an internal wall and fixed with nails, it must be noted that the non perimeter walls in buildings of the time might have been built with a wood structure made of vertical small beams and horizontal boarding or by a wood rack-like structure, then usually covered with plaster. In the living rooms, in most cases the walls were totally covered with wood double walls or simply coated with wood panels on the lower area; such panels were called *spalliere* (backboards), and they had both aesthetic and functional purposes.

The use of ceramics not only as an aesthetic, but also as a functional element is documented also in the words of Vasari about the little study of Piero of Cosimo de’ Medici in the *Vita* (Life) of Luca della Robbia: “... and the magnificent Piero of Cosimo de’ Medici, among the first ones who arranged things in coloured earth for Luca, ordered that the whole sail vault of a study in a building built by his father Cosimo be decorated with various patterns, and the same for the

floor, which was a unique thing, *very useful for the summer*". The walls might have been covered with ceramic elements (in this case fixed to them with nails) to increase heat insulation for the living rooms. The laying plaster on the back, which can still be noted on some tiles, has variable thickness - in some cases it is very thin, in other cases it is thicker, in order to level any irregularity of each piece, or level off pieces with different thickness. Within each group the thickness of the tiles can range from few millimetres to half a centimetre, and such gap is due to the hand production of the pieces (even though the craftsman used moulds) and to the difficulty to check the stages of the drying and baking of the manufactures. The different thickness of the pieces was found also in the production of tiles for floors: any irregularity was levelled off when they were laid.

The remaining plasters found behind the tiles fall into two categories: one is lime-based, the other one is made of very fine opus signinum. This may mean that they were laid at different times, or rather in two different places. It is important to note that the most superficial layer of the plaster shows in some cases the marks of a wood fibre, which was probably in contact with the plaster itself. Moreover, the thickness of the tiles, ranging from 1 and 2.5 centimetres, can be used to differentiate the different groups of the *corpus* retrieved with, as is the case with the dimensions of the sides. For a few tiles, the laying mortar in between tiles is slightly lower compared to the level of the painted surface. Such mortar allowed the adjustment of the various pieces presenting border irregularities, while the back of the pieces never shows scratches or grooves. The absence of such elements in the majority of the Udine finds is compensated by the pinning, which was suitable for the vertical (and probably also ceiling) laying of the tiles. A particular function must have been performed by the extended hexagon tiles, which are decorated with scrolls maxims or elegant plant-like decorations created taking advantage of the contrast between the white of the engobe surface and the colour of the bisque underneath. The reconstruction of the inscription pattern followed by the retrieved tiles can only be an hypothesis, based on the one hand on iconographic elements and on the studies on surviving Renaissance ceramic tiles, while on the other on the direct observation of the retrieved manufactures.

Therefore, it can be stated that the tiles were applied to walls in different environments, or to independent architectonic elements, such as parts of walls, parts of wood ceilings, or to single architectonic elements, such as pillars, windowsills, door frames, niches, fireplace frames. The considerations made by ceramic art scholars about the frailty of this material and the difficulties and costs of production leads to hypothesise a limited use of ceramics in architecture. However, the habit of having a different wall decoration in each area of the house, and of distinguishing with different edgings the single architectonic elements, which can be noted for example in the fresco decoration of the internal rooms, might have been an inspiration model for any ceramic decoration as well. If the original structure of the rooms of surviving buildings dating back to the end of the XV – beginning of the XVI century is taken into consideration, according to a recent study carried out on the Udine historical centre, it can be noted that in city dwellings which still retain the gothic age structure, the long walls of the rooms have both fireplaces (normally two) and niches, which could be used either to store objects or as sinks. Therefore, on the long walls of such rooms (the short ones normally have windows) architectonic elements were inserted, and they could be enhanced with different decorative patterns. The comparison with remaining floor areas in Italy gives rise to the hypothesis that there was an autonomous composition pattern for each individual group in the *corpus* of our tiles, or at least it is an encouragement to look for a possible connection between the different groups. The largest

group, formed by square tiles with a 16 cm side, with an autonomous structure decoration characterised by an edging with green leaves creating a frame around a variety of patterns (reproduced in some cases in a series), such as coats of arms, portraits, or real and imaginary animals, might have been laid following a pattern based on a repeated tile with a random positioning of the decoration subjects, without following a specific iconographic plan, decorating different parts of the walls.

The comparison with contemporary surviving floors is in order, due to the rain-like distribution of each individual subject which must have characterised the tiles walls in this study, in spite of the fact that the tiles might have a different shape (hexagonal rather than square), as in the case of the Vaselli floor in Bologna.

Possibly, an alternative laying pattern might have consisted of areas framed by monochrome tiles with primary colours (green, yellow, white). Indeed, such monochrome tiles were retrieved in various shapes, i.e. square, triangle, rectangle, and in different dimensions, to allow their insertion in different spaces. Therefore, the distribution on the walls of a group of monochrome tiles within frames might have taken as an example contemporary wall painting, with a single colour background painting surrounded by a geometric frame. Apart from the more famous examples of this in the Veneto area, such pattern is repeated in the local pictorial production. This can be likened to wall decorations in the second half of the XV century in the Gregoris palace in Pordenone and to a ground floor room in the Valvasone castle, itself in the Pordenone province, designed according to geometric patterns from the Renaissance, even though still pervaded by a chromatic taste of late-gothic origin.

A third interesting hypothesis can be brought forward on the basis of the diffusion of a structural pattern formed by one tile closed by four hexagons, which can be found in examples common in the Spanish – caliphal environment, but also in the interiors of Renaissance Friuli houses. This can be noted, for example, in a page miniated by Giovanni de Cramariis from Spilimbergo, showing a wall decoration which, considering the dimension relations, might have been formed by ceramic elements similar to the Udine manufactures retrieved.

Furthermore, recently in a Udine building in piazza S. Giacomo a fresco which can be dated at the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, portraying a curtain, occupying the long wall of a room, and extended for a height of about two meters, representing a flowery field, closed at the top with a frame on which some make-believe objects lay was retrieved. This shows that even in Udine decorations followed a pattern which was very common in Renaissance architecture in central Italy. The curtain could have been reproduced on ceramic tiles as well. The curtains, the backboard, the wardrobes, the wood panelling decorated with different colours, which is interrupted on the wall at about two – two and a half meters' height, are therefore a reference model for the laying of the hexagon tiles. Indeed, such tiles are characterised the presence of two colours (brown for the bisque and ivory white for the surface engobe), which might be likened to the look of the two-colour wood panelling.

Indeed, the use of a backboard in Renaissance house decoration was very common, in order to protect rooms from cold and humidity. Such boards were also elegantly decorated and carved, therefore ceramic tiles might have been applied on them as well.

However, remaining mediaeval and Renaissance ceramic wall tiles in private houses are very rare. There are no known graffito ceramic tiles still *in situ*. The few graffito tiles known to the public are placed in museum contexts or in private collections. In the case of the Udine tiles, the absence of religious subjects leads to the hypothesis that they were laid in a private environment, in rooms dedicated to play and study. Indeed, documents about the famous little

study rooms in the Renaissance often tell us about the use of ceramic elements. The diffusion of ceramics in these privileged very private places is therefore certain, and it is also supported by the nature of the subjects, inspired by heraldic patterns and the maxims, regarding the interest in enterprises. Thus, the recent discovery in the Udine historical centre, of painted wood ceilings and wall frescos bears witness to the tendency to cover completely internal space, saturating it; this was typical of Udine as well, between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Such model of interior decoration is in line with the patterns present on our tiles. Indeed, most of the tiles show male or female figures inside medallions, plant patterns, coats of arms, imaginary animals, or even, in the most sophisticated cases, fully fledged games scenes.

Therefore, it is not difficult to hypothesise that the tiles must have covered the lower part of the walls of a city palace, whose sophisticated owners were surely familiar with Padua or Ferrara houses of the time, with high cultural significance. Indeed, the portraits illustrated on the Udine tiles show undeniable similarities with the late 15<sup>th</sup> century fresco "Triumph of Venus goddess of love" in the Schifanoia palace in Ferrara. The influence of the Ferrara pictorial school, boasting Cosmé Tura, Francesco Cossa and Baldassarre Estense, can be clearly perceived. This enriches Italian and in particular Udinese art history with another unpublished piece, enhancing once again the specific features of the Italian Renaissance culture of this art rich city, which is still little known in the tourist itineraries in Italy.

## SUMMARY

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Square tile with lapwing

Proposal for the re-assembly of square tiles