Geometric patterns in the decorations of Vietri ceramics

1. Introduction

Extremely versatile material and rich in expressive potential, ceramics – born with man – as well as in the plastic arts find a wide use in architecture over the centuries, becoming, from the most ancient times, an indispensable decorative element for the realization of pavings and wall tilings. Regardless of the geometric nature of the surface to be decorated – in some cases two-dimensional, in others three-dimensional – it should be noted that the ceramic art applied to architecture necessarily faces with the modulation of the composition’s minimum unit, the tile in most cases.

In fact, the single element must be conceived to be able to constitute a final spatial figurative structure: first of all, it is necessary to interweave its form, by resorting to the sequence of one or more modular geometric figures, which follow one another in a flat grid so as to cover the entire surface. Secondly, we need to think about the decoration’s drawing which, especially with reference to glazed majolica, contributes to the organic nature of the final composition. Indeed, the decorating surface becomes the plan on which to give free rein to the artistic creativity: here, the ceramist, for example, can tell a story thanks to iconic representations developed on the entire structure. Playing with the combination of the graphic patterns of the elementary module ensures that the decorative detailing, with intricate but harmonious at the same time, are of great visual impact, thanks also to the interweaving of shapes and colors that give unity to the final image. The abstraction of geometric forms, sometimes associated with figurative elements, that are also composed according to a rigorous mathematical structure (Chiarenza 2017), therefore generates precious and suggestive decorations from which the abovementioned decorative potential emerges with great evidence.

The nineteenth-century majolica tiles of Vietri production, inspired by the most famous Neapolitan2, are a splendid example (Donacone 1998; Solina 2002).

The paper focuses on these ones, with the aim of graphically tracing the drawing’s structure that composes, and unveiling the nature of the geometric transformations that, as in textile art, plays on the modularity of the elementary patterns of variable shape, are widely used for the coating of predominantly planar walls, surfaces, elements such as roof tiles in “scales” or cuneiform blocks, with a curved surface, are more often used to decorate three-dimensional structures such as domes, spires, cups, etc.

1. If the tiles, of variable shape, are widely used for the coating of predominantly planar wall surfaces, elements such as roof tiles in “scales” or cuneiform blocks, with a curved surface, are more often used to decorate three-dimensional structures such as domes, spires, cups, etc.

2. The term riagiole, from which it derives riggiole, is used for the first time in Naples where, in 1450, Alfonso d’Aragona imported from Spain ceramic art inspired by Islam. The term refers to majolica terracotta tiles coated with stanniferous enamels (based on tin oxides, lead and silica sands which guaranteed, after firing, a glazed effect), then colored with the addition of mineral powders. The figurative asserzione of the Neapolitan riggiole takes on its own identity, that comes from the fusion of geometric and anticlassic motifs derived from Hispanic-Moorish art, with a repertoire of clear suggestive decorations.

1. Se le piastrelle, di forma variabile, trovano ampio impiego per il rivestimento di superfici murarie prevalentemente piane, elementi quali entrambe a “scaletta” o cuneiformi, con superficie curva, vengono più spesso utilizzati per decorare strutture tridimensionali quali cupole, guglie, cuspidi e così via.

2. Il termine riagiole, dal quale riggiole, viene usato per la prima volta a Napoli dove, nel 1450, Alfonso d’Aragona importò dalla Spagna l’arte ceramica di ispirazione islamica. Il termine si riferisce, nello specifico, alle mattonelle di terracotta maiolicate: ossia piastrelle rivestite con smalti stanniferi (a base di ossidi di stagno, piombo e sabbie silicee che garantiscono, dopo la cottura, il colore, un effetto invernato), poi colorate con l’aggiunta di polveri minerali. L’asserzione figurativa delle riggiole napoletane assume, ben presto, una propria identità che nasce dalla fusione dei motivi geometrici e anticlassici desunti dall’arte ispanico-maorita, con un repertorio di chiaro ispirazione.
form, from which the overall decoration origi-
nates. Starting therefore from the graphic in-
vestigation of the ornamental motif of single
tiles, the possible final aggregations are ana-
lyzed, studying the iteration of the base module
due to different compositional laws, so as
to highlight the genesis of the geometric lay-
outs that draw the warping.

2. The riggiola of Neapolitan tradition in Vietri ceramics

In the context of the great wealth of forms and
models by the ancient Vietri ceramic tradition,
a significant role is occupied by the production
of the so-called riggiola, hand-decorated ma-
jolica tiles which, starting from the eighteenth
century, have been increasingly used in civil or
religious building for the execution of floors
or walls. The flourishing of this type of decorated
tiles certainly has Naples as its driving force.
Here, in fact, since the mid-fifteenth century,
we find the first productions on the Valencian
import examples, spread thanks to the mer-
chant routes dictated by the links between the
Aragonese Crown and Southern Italy.

In the eighteenth century, therefore, along-
side the best-known Neapolitan riggiola, sig-
nificant production also became established in
Vietri sul Mare, which gradually became a
renowned center for the development and ex-
port of such products.

In this period the Vietri ceramics free them-
selves from the figurative models of the most
famous Neapolitan tradition, reaching an au-
tonomously expressive expression (Tortolani 2016).
While maintaining a common matrix, draw-
ings and colours become increasingly distin-
guishing from the manufacturers of the Nea-
politan factories. In particular, the inclusion
of the brown tones, due to the use of manganese,
after seems a trademark of the Amalfi coast’s
industries, adding argiles of towns, of noble
coats of arms or heraldic, symbols, which blend
with vegetal themes and geometric designs
of grand elegance.

3. This type of processing is taken from a Neapolitan
faenza, the Campagna factory, which indicated on
the back of some tiles the precise reference to the use of this
squaring system traditionally used in Vietri sul Mare.

Nella grande ricchezza di forme e modelli
espressi dalla antica tradizione ceramica viet-
resi si affrancano dai modelli figurativi della produzione
di cosiddette riggiele, matto-
ne maiolicate decorate a mano che, a partire dal
settimo secolo, trovano un sempre più largo
uso nel campo dell’edilizia civile o religi-
osa per l’esecuzione di pavimenti o rivestimenti.
La fioritura di tale tipo di piastrelle decorative
ha certamente come centro propulsivo Napoli,
ove già dalla metà del XV secolo, si attestano
le prime produzioni sugli esempi di impor-
tazione Valenziana, diffusasi grazie alle rotte
flottanti che trascinano le grandi legami della corona ar-
agonesi con l'Italia meridionale.

Nel Settecento dunque, accanto alla più nota riggiele napoletana, va affermandosi una signi-
ficativa produzione anche a Vietri sul Mare
che diviene progressivamente centro rinomato
di sviluppo e esportazione di piastrelle mai-
olicate. In questo periodo la ceramica vietrese
si affianca dai modelli figurativi della più fa-
mosa tradizione napoletana, raggiungendo una espressività artistica autonoma
(Tortolani 2016). Può mantenendo una matrice comune,
disegni e colori diversi possono stesurare più distin-
gue manufatti dai loro coevi con base
napoletana, che si rivolge al piccolo centro
costiero nel tentativo di trovare una soluzione
ta alla propria crisi. Le riggiele prodotte a Vie-
tri sul Mare diventano quindi per i maestri
faenzeri napoletani un modello da studiare,
ninnanzitutto per quanto attiene agli aspetti tec-
nologici. Le miscele alla base della lavorazio-
ne, produzioni di manifatture di riferimento
di centro costiero amalfitano. Sebbene si tratti di
una produzione più contenuta rispetto a quel-
a napoletana, che in pieno Settecento trova
enorme consenso in tutto il bacino del Mediterr-
eno, flette un nuovo marchio di fabbrica
e raggiunge una certa notorietà all’estero.

Anche il cromatismo degli smalti vietrese si di-
stingue in questa epoca dai modelli originari na-
poletani: d’è una novità si accostano i giudizi
negli esempi salernitani del 1870 che sotto-
lineano “la vivacità dell’azzurro e del nero”
di quelle produzioni dei fratelli Tajani e “il
color porfido bellissimo, vagamente joema”
phalized ‘the liveliness of the blue and black’ of the tiles produced by the Tajani brothers and ‘the beautiful porphyry colour, vulgarly jasper’ which excelled in the production of Antonio Punzi. In fact, some of the colours of the Vietri palette [...]. are of a vividness not found in Naples. The yellows, ranging from gold to burnt, and the reds, which border on violet and purples. The yellows, ranging from gold to burnt, palette [...

3. Iterazione modulare negli impianti decorativi pavimentali ceramicì: relazione tra ripetizione e spazio

In the artistic production between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, floor decorations based on ceramic tiles can be traced basically to two types of compositions. One of these is called ‘panel’: generally, it contains compositions closed within a frame, and in which the single unit (tile) is a unique piece of an overall image. The compositional scheme that could be laid in place without resorting to a specific drawing, except for a decorative project. However, it should respond to an evident productive economy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, actually, these productions were used: in this case, in fact, the visible surface could be either the upper or lower one, or mimic different architectural functions.

4. Diverso il caso, invece, dei partiti decorativi a motivi in cui erano usati elementi marmorei, la cui superficie a vista poteva essere indistinguibilmente quella superiore o inferiore.

3. Modular iteration in ceramic floor decorations and modularity in textile art: relationship between repetition and space

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be emphasized that the flat elements, as well as ceramic tiles with decorated surfaces, cannot be rotated. The artisans could have recourse to provisions that exploit only two rotation angles and rotation isometries, according to the geometry of the element to be composed (almost exclusively square in shape).

The surface's drawing of the *riggido* then assumed a key role. In fact, the tile could be considered as a unitary element, obtained from the composition of graphic modules and this allowed to exploit different types of flat symmetries. In this way, it was possible to determine textures that, reiterating the structural motifs, generated harmonious ornaments, an integral part of the architectural space (Day 1953). More specifically, the tile's decoration can be considered as an element composed by the aggregation of two or more primary cells (or modules) that give rise to what can mathematically be defined as a translational unit. The modules, in many cases, are structured on asymmetrical motifs that, reflected — according to a horizontal, vertical or diagonal axis — or more rarely translated, generate the tile's drawing. This one, then, shifted in one or more directions, or rotated, creates a continuous pattern that covers the entire flat surface to be decorated without leaving empty spaces (Washburn 1986). Therefore, if the composition of the tile's drawing, starting from the basic motif, can exploit all four rigid movements in the plane (translation, rotation, reflection and glide-reflection), in reiterating the unit the composition can resort, as mentioned, to the translation or rotation (figs. 3, 4, 5).

Generally, the drawings of the translational unit, when not identified with the module itself, are invariant with respect to translations or groups of them: for example, respect to reflection, according to orthogonal axes, or to rotation according to 90° angles. Analysing the decorations from a graphical point of view, it can be seen that the ordering paths are always geometric. The pattern, however, can be traced back to four types: motifs starting from elementary geometric shapes (triangle, square, circle, etc.); floral or phyromorphic decorations; ornaments based on the geometric stylization of floral and phytomorphic motifs; mixed decorations that link two of the three previous types together. Even the decorative inspirations of the artisans are varied and not easily traceable, often recalling very different cultural matrices. Among the many sources it is possible, in fact, to identify clear influences of the Greek–Roman mosaic art, certainly derived from the figural repertoires emerged from the archaeological excavations of Pompeii that, although characterizing in greater measure the Neapolitan's _riggido_ production, find significant mentions also in the Vietri production, probably to resume a genre at that time of success (Romito 2001, pp. 8–9). There are also reinterpretations of Romanesque and Islamic motifs, or drawings inspired by the imitation of Turkish and Persian fabrics (Mosca 1908), as well as the inevitable Islamic motifs.

In this regard, Matilde Romito underlines *"the deeply Oriental character of some tiles, often of extreme elegance and refinement (as for example in the villa Rufolo in Ravello). The eight-pointed star, and more widely the central motifs, radial or stellar, echo ancient Islamic–inspired decorations, whose chronological and geographical diffusion demonstrate their wide success and not only in the floor coverings"* (Romito 2001, p. 7).

In general, Vietri tiles, thanks to the wide variety of decorations and development, even on the basis of more famous styles, a series of graphic solutions that make them functional to the iteration logic on the plane. Among the numerous examples made and documented, great fortune were those based on the square tile's subdivision into two square units, one quadruple of the other, and two rectangles along two sides, variously decorated and generally invariant with respect to the diagonal reflection; or those with bi- and geometric motifs, with internal division into squares and rectangles. The last one is a very simple tile: but the elementary drawing and chromatic essentality are counterpointed by the decorative complexity, deriving from the various combination possibilities of the translational unit, that highlights in some cases rhombuses, in other squares, alternating with the more classic hourglass motifs. Typical are also the modular

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Stefano Chiarenza, Barbara Messina – Geometric patterns in the decorations of Vietri ceramics

The technique of tile's composition is, then, often determined by the geometric properties and the structural construction. Other compositions were based on the identical units' repetition through translation. This in particular attention was paid to the drawing in order for the translational unit not to be a closed element in itself, it was studied in such a way as to continue, without any interruption, in the next tile (fig. 6). The repetition's effect, although limited in the possible combinations, was strongly increased by the chromatism. From the simple colour—black and white or blue and white, to the glazes' brilliant colours, appliquéd by brush in a vast chromatic range (red, yellow, greens and blues in all their gradations), generally on a white background, the reiteration of tiles could emphasize hidden symmetries, accentuate or sometimes even nullify some.

4. Tile coverings and modularity in textile art

This described modular composition, typical of all ceramic decorative floor installations, presents several possibilities. Often, but not always, the technique of translation is preferred. In fact, the technique of translation is defined by the union of two or more elements of the same type, with a common dependence of translation or rotation. In order to generate a pattern, a simple module can generate effects of extraordinary complexity. In the realization of two-dimensional schemes, the various groups of symmetry are systematically exploited, transforming purely mathematical operations into artistic activity. As Kappraff has noted “nowhere is this tension between artists and their art more evident than with regard to the issue of symmetry” (Kappraff 1991, p. 40). Translation also represents the generative symmetry of repetition in a fabric. The union with one or more of the other flat symmetries allows a total of 17 pattern classes to be generated. As has been noted, the symmetry within a drawing does not describe the parts, but how they module. Above: motif obtained by glide reflection. In the square, mirror of the triangular primary cell and subsequent rotation of the module module around the left upper corner. Below: reflection of the triangular cell along the long side and subsequent translation of the square module in two different directions. Images of the tiles taken from ROMITO 2001, pp. 79, 82. © The authors.

Figure 6

4. Rivestimenti a piastrelle e modularità nell’arte tessile

L’iterazione modulare appena descritta, tipica di tutti gli ispiranti decorativi pavimentali, nasce nel mondo ceramici presenta una singolare comunione con la modularità nell’arte tessile, con particolare riferimento alla stampa piuttosto che alle pitture o alle stampe. Una linearità modulare è possibile rinvenire analogie significative. Come per il disegno tessile, infatti, la composizione di una decorazione in una cornice unitaria (ad esempio di forma quadrata) non è mai dimenticata da quello specifica, ma deve contemplare la possibilità di ripetizione, potenzialmente all’infinito, in tutte le direzioni del piano orizzontale e verticale, orizzontale o diagonale. E’ quindi, una relazione continua tra modulo e spazio. La tecnica della composizione della piastrela è allora del tutto simile, nella stessa tessile, a quella del motivo base nel cosiddetto rapporto continuo o all’infinito, e i problemi che si pongono sono di analoga natura e legati innanzitutto all’omogeneità del disegno. Quest’ultimo, infatti, deve mantenersi sia nella unità di base sia nel pattino complessivo derivante dalla ripetizione dell’unità stessa. Oltre che per il disegno, per il quale occorre evitare, nella reiterazione modulare, la determinazione incontrollata di spazi vuoti o disegni grafico–cromatici che abituano gli spazi grafici dalle diverse dimensioni (ad esempio motivi di più grandi dimensioni tutti su una stessa linea e motivi di piccola dimensione ondulate o difficili da leggere posta anche sul colore, evitando la continuità di uno stesso tono cromatico in orizzontale o in verticale (Flower 1986). Si tratta, in altre parole, di creare composizioni grafiche–cromatiche che abituano gli spazi grafici dalle diverse dimensioni (ad esempio motivi di più grandi dimensioni tutti su una stessa linea e motivi di piccola dimensione ondulate o difficili da leggere posta anche sul colore, evitando la continuità di uno stesso tono cromatico in orizzontale o in verticale (Flower 1986).

Stefano Chiarenza, Barbara Messina – Tracciati geometrici nei decori della ceramica vietrese

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99
are combined and arranged to create a pattern; it, therefore, concerns only one aspect of the graphic layout, or the structure (Washburn, Crowe 1988). In all drawings, the underlying lattice structure of corresponding points that define the unit cells is always recognizable. The use of signs on squared paper is, probably, the most commonly accepted method worldwide. Each square represents a position or a point where a warp and weft thread cross. A black square indicates that one thread passes over the other (Watanen 1921, p. 2) and in particular that a warp thread passes over a weft thread. Instead, an empty square represents a weft thread on a warp thread. The blackening of two or more adjacent squares in a vertical or diagonal direction, determines the geometric characteristics of the structure. In particular, the characteristic of the drawing. These characteristics can be analyzed, defined and classified in a particular group* (Horne 2000, p. 7).

7. Research on plane symmetries has given rise to a vast literature. Among the main studies, significant milestones are published by Weyl (1952), Coxeter (1969), Schwarzenger (1974) and Martin (1982). With regard to textile drawing, the studies of Henry John Woods are very interesting. Between 1935–36 he dealt with flat symmetries in a simple way, specifically addressing textile designs. See WOODS 1935a and 1935b.

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column represents a warp that passes on two or more weft threads. The graphic patterns underlying the definition of a fabric are examples of modular structures conceived with a logic similar to that of the printed design or ceramic decorations, in which the reiteration of a basic module, according to precise mathematical geometric sequences, determines the composition of the pattern read in its entirety. A similarity that allows us to glimpse suggestive formal and figurative analogies (fig. 10).

Therefore, both in the drawing of the textile print and in that of ceramic tiles "the basis of the compositional system is the relationship, that is the geometric–chromatic–formal structure that, appropriately combined in a compositional assembly of adjacent modules and interpenetrating each other is repeated for the entire extension of the fabric" (de Paolis 2012, p. 240) or on the surface to cover. Therefore, the beauty of a pattern is not so much due to the nature of its elements as to the right use of them like a unit in a rhythmic scheme (Horne 2000).

5. Conclusions
In 1856 Owen Jones, in his fascinating text on the Grammar of the Ornament, exploring the design rules of each decoration, assumes, among the general propositions for the structuring of shape and colour in decorative art, the principle according to which "all ornament should be based on a geometrical construction" (Jones 1856, p. 49).

In ceramic tiles this principle always seems to be present, not only in the surface's drawing and colour, but also in the different possibilities of arrangement. We can say, indeed, that the relationship between a basic formal structure and the individuality of stylistic approaches to its decoration is the prerequisite for the construction of drawings that are repeated regularly. The floor decorations in ceramic tiles have therefore constituted a design problem faced by ceramists in an always different way. In the production of ceramic coverings, particular attention was paid to Vietri production of the XVIII and XIX centuries, and to the characteristics of the tile drawings and the decorative apparatuses they generated. Although it is possible to geometrically predetermine all the aggregate rules (based on well-known laws of symmetry and historically classified in crystallography), infinite variations of the drawing's pattern can be imagined. The ceramists not only sought beautiful combinations of shapes, but worked within the system of mathematical constraints of the geometry of the support and the surface, to produce splendid results by adapting to regular repetition. The assumptions on which the ceramic tiles' drawing tests are also shared by the textile art. This, in some way, relates these two artistic forms, as decoration can be traced back to the resolution of similar design problems within a system of common constraints.

5. Conclusioni
Nel 1856 Owen Jones nel suo affascinante testo sulla Grammatica dell’Ornamento, esplorando le regole progettuali di ogni decorazione, assume, tra le proposizioni generali per la strutturazione di forma e colore nell’arte decorativa, il principio secondo cui «ogni ornamento dovrebbe essere basato su una costruzione geometrica» (Jones 1856, p. 49). Nelle piastrelle ceramiche tale principio sembra essere sempre presente, non solo nel disegno e nel colore della superficie ma anche nelle diverse possibilità di disposizione. Si può dunque essere sempre presente, non solo nel disegno e nel colore della superficie ma anche nelle diverse possibilità di disposizione. Sia la relazione tra una struttura formale di base e l’individualità degli approcci stilistici alla sua decorazione sia il presupposto per la costruzione di disegni che si ripetono regolarmente.

Le decorazioni pavimentali in piastrelle ceramiche hanno costituito pertanto un problema di tipo progettuale affrontato dai ceramisti in maniera sempre diversa. Nell’ambito della produzione di rivestimenti ceramici particolarmente attenzione è stata rivolta alla produzione vietrese del XVIII e XIX secolo e alle caratteristiche dei disegni della piastrella e degli apparati decorativi da essi generati.

Sebbene sia possibile predeterminare geometricamente tutte le regole aggregate (basate su ben note leggi di simmetria e classificate storicamente in cristallografia), sono possibili infinite variazioni del disegno dei pattern. I ceramisti non esclusero quindi solo appa rienti combinazioni di forme, ma lavoravano all’interno del sistema di vincoli matematici della geometria del supporto e della superficie, per produrre, adattandosi alla ripetizione regolare, splendidi risultati. I presupposti su cui poggiò il disegno delle piastrelle ceramiche sono condivisi anche dall’arte tessile. Ciò pone in qualche modo in relazione queste due forme artistiche potenziale ricondurre la decorazione alla risoluzione di analoghi problemi progettuali all’interno di un sistema di vincoli comuni.
Stefano Chiarenza, Barbara Messina – Geometric patterns in the decorations of Vietri ceramics

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