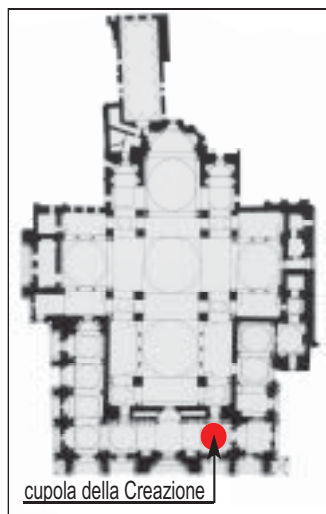


... we are working for...

# Restoration Project ON THE WINGS OF THE ANGELS The Cupola of the Creation Venice, Basilica of San Marco

## The Cupola of the Creation

The cycle of mosaics depicting scenes from the Old Testament, in the Western and Northern sides of the atrium, or narthex, begins with the Cupola of the Creation. For the main part, it is stylistically inspired by miniatures from one of the most ancient Biblical manuscripts handed down to us: the *Cotton Bible* (V-VI Century, Alexandria, Egypt).



In this Cupola, the story of the Creation proceeds through 26 episodes, arranged within 3 concentric bands, which depict the creation of the world, the first human beings, the original sin, the expulsion from the earthly Paradise, as these stories are narrated in *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible. The narration begins from the internal band, with the episode, facing East, in which the dove of the



Holy Spirit spreads its wings and flies above the dark waters of Chaos.



The next scenes proceed counterclockwise showing the first three days of the Creation. First, the separation of light from darkness, followed by the creation of the heavens, and thirdly, the separation



of water from land along with the creation of plants and trees.



From there we go to the median band where, again moving from East, the story continues with the fourth day when, in a sky dotted with stars, the sun and moon appear. Two sections, complementary to each other, are dedicated to the creation of Birds and Fishes, on the fifth day. The keen interest in the depiction of animals is evident in the next panel too, illustrating the sixth day, where the animals are living on the earth and represented in pairs. The next scene showing the creation of man, belongs to the same sixth day.

It is worth noting two elements that characterize both the mosaics and the miniatures from which they derive: the Creator and the angels. The Creator appears in every scene as a young Christ, as the Word of God made flesh, therefore image of the Father and Creator like Him, according to the Gospel of St John.

In each single day of the Creation, from one to six, winged figures are also present. Coming to the seventh day, the day of rest, the scene depicts Christ at its centre, sitting on a throne, surrounded by six angels representing the six days of the Creation. The setting recalls the iconography of an imperial court. To the left, the angel-figure of the seventh day approaches to receive the benediction from the Lord who lays His right hand on the angel's head.

The median band ends with Adam entering the Garden of earthly





Paradise. The story continues in the final band, again starting from the scene on the Eastern side, in which Adam gives the animals their names, a gesture by which he becomes lord of Creation. The episodes unfold, revealing Adam's dream, the creation of Eve, the temptation by the snake, the fall, the consequences of the sin with the expulsion from the Garden of earthly Paradise, and the beginning of the labours that Adam and Eve will have to endure.

Each one of the twenty-six scenes is accompanied by a literary text placed above it, taken from St Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate Bible.

Four splendid cherubs are depicted in the pendentives supporting the cupola, each one with six wings.

### *The restoration project*

The Cupola of the Creation is inscribed into a square with sides about six metres long. It is supported by arches embedded into the pillars of the façade and into the columns along the wall of what is believed to be the old façade of the church.

The arches are connected by spherical triangles (pendentives) that allow the hemisphere of the cupola to rest upon a circular impost. The cupola reaches at its height about three metres from the level of the base, and encloses an area of sixty square metres.

Researchers date the mosaics of the western atrium (narthex) to the first thirty years of the 13th Century, between 1210 and 1235. The



cupola itself dates back about to 1210-1215. That was the magic moment for mosaic work in the basilica, that flourished in the local laboratories following experience and traditions established in Venice by the Byzantine mosaic craftsmen of the previous century.

The mosaics appear substantially intact, but they hide damage undermining and detaching the tiles. During the restoration carried on in the Fifties and the Sixties, a red line was traced to indicate the area that needed intervention; but afterwards the work was given up because of the difficulty to understand if the red perimeter included the area that had been already restored or the original one.

The brackish atmosphere and the increasing absorption of the salty solutions by the bricks in the walls, rising to higher and higher levels due to the frequent flooding of the atrium and the high water phenomenon, have undermined the stability of the mortar holding the mosaic. The cupola presents several areas of detachment, some very serious, and requires a scrupulous diagnosis to accomplish the most timely interventions to bind the mosaic surfaces to the wall that supports them.

The intervention is being carried out by the Mosaics Workshop of the Procuratoria, the only organization that is highly specialized in the restoration of mosaic works for the Basilica of San Marco. The restoration will begin by analysing and evaluating the mosaic surface in relation to the incidence of detachment. These can be divided into four categories: detachment of the wall from the graduated platform; detachment of the graduated platform from the tiles fixing mortar; detachment of the tiles from the fixing mortar; detachment of tiles and fixing mortar from the graduated platform.

This analysis will be followed by the evaluation of the degradation of the mortar holding the mosaic, by the examination of the degraded elements, and by the recommendation of the most appropriate products to stop the degradation. There will be a complete survey of the mosaic surface, spotting the degraded areas, and defining them into different levels of degradation; injections of mixtures suitable to rebuild the mosaic block and make it readhere to the wall; integration of the gaps with new tiles; finally, the cleaning and the photographic documentation at the end of the works.

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