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The Cosmic and Earthly Message of Sauro Ballardini's Mosaics : Rescue and restoration of the mosaic “Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe” and searching for new perspectives for historical mosaics in the Czech Republic

ANNOTATION

The article reviews the life and work of the Italian mosaicist Sauro Ballardini (1925–2010), who from the early 1960s to 1981 worked at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts as a teacher and devoted himself to monumental mosaics. His opus musivum remains an integral part of the history of this art technique in Bohemia, as well as remarkable conjunction of contemporary requirements placed on public art commissions and the personal contribution of an artist of Italian origin and training. The authors present a range of Ballardini's mosaics preserved in the Czech Republic and deal in more detail with the author's largest glass realization in the country, the mosaic called *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* (1980) in the Central Telecommunication Building in Žižkov. The circumstances of its creation are described, as well as the fate of the work in recent years, endangered by the planned demolition of the building. Thanks to a private initiative by supporters of Opus musivum, the mosaic was transferred in 2019 with the prospect of future re-exhibition. The salvaged work underwent restoration in 2019–2021. The article thus also includes a brief description of the restoration processes, and summarises the results of the material analysis of glass tesserae, grout, and underlying concrete slabs.

SUMMARY

Interest in the opus musivum of the Italian artist and academic painter Sauro Ballardini in the territory of the former Czechoslovakia, its rescue and restoration have become an important chapter of Czech-Italian cultural cooperation over the past eight years, among Italian art historians and artists, especially from the Liceo artistico “Nervi-Severini” institute in Ravenna, and restorers from registered association Art & Craft MOZAIKA z. s. In 2014 arose the efforts to preserve Ballardini's mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* and his other artworks in Prague. Czech-Italian cooperation was consolidated at the symposium *MOSAICO tra demolizione e restauro e... nella Repubblica Ceca* on November 22, 2014 in Ravenna (KRACÍK ŠTORKÁNOVÁ 2014).

Sauro Ballardini is finally receiving consistent scholarly attention thanks to the rediscovery of his works. So far, the most extensive text about his work in the context of the Italian mosaic tradition, interwar art and the political upheavals of the 20th century was published in a monothematic issue of the journal *Zprávy památkové péče* (BALLARDINI/BALLARDINI 2017) by authors from the artist's family circle – his son Andrea Louis Ballardini and granddaughter Laura Ballardini.

Sauro Ballardini (* September 7, 1925, Faenza, Emilia-Romagna, Italy) came from a family with a republican tradition. As a result of his historical and life experiences as an artist and educator committed to the left he lived through the stormy periods of almost the entire 20th century. He travelled around European countries, including socialist Czechoslovakia (1957–1981), before settling down again in his native region, in Bologna, where he died on November 21, 2010. In the Czech lands he created five large-scale opera musiva realized between 1970 and 1981 in public spaces and in the interior of buildings; in addition, a number of bozettas, sketches and designs of never-realized opera musiva.

The gifted Sauro first attended the Scuola di Disegno “Tommaso Minardi” art school in Faenza, from where he got to the Academy of Fine Arts in Ravenna (Accademia di Belle Arti di Ravenna) at the age of just seventeen (1942) thanks to winning an art competition. Here he studied with Renato Signorini (1908–1999), the famous founder of the modern mosaic school, who for a whole year introduced him to the mosaic technique, which has a thousand-year tradition in Ravenna. However, the events of the war did not favour peaceful study. In 1943, Ballardini enlisted in

the army of fascist Italy, but switched to the side of the anti-fascist communist resistance and joined the ranks of partisans in the defence of Faenza and Bologna (BALLARDINI/BALLARDINI 2017, 317; see also *sine* 2011; RENZI 2011).

After the war, due to the heated internal political situation, he went to Yugoslavia, where he was imprisoned during a split between Stalin and Josip Tito (1948). He was released only in the mid-1950s (after Stalin's death). Instead of returning to Italy, he went to Czechoslovakia. Ballardini was granted political asylum in Prague and was subsequently admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts (AVU). He was thus able to complete the studies he had begun in Italy and in 1960 he graduated from the monumental painting studio of prof. Vladimír Sychra (1903–1963). Ballardini, thanks to his talent, training and the Italian tradition of synthesizing art and architecture, naturally inclined to create monumental works for architecture. At AVU, where he remained as a teacher, he introduced experimental techniques for architectural works – for example, concrete reliefs and sand blasted sgraffito (Fig. 2). He also strove to establish a special mosaic studio where the traditions of Czech and Italian mosaics would intersect (KRACÍK ŠTORKÁNOVÁ/HEMELÍK 2019).

In Prague, Ballardini met his future wife, Jeannine Saillant, the French daughter of Louis André Saillant (1910–1974), long-time general secretary of the World Federation of Trade Unions (SOF/WFTU). He and his family stayed in Prague until 1981 and did not leave the AVU during the entire time. His colleagues and friends included painters František Jiroudek (1914–1991) and Oldřich Oplť (1919–2001), art historian Jiří Kotlík (1920–1996) and others.

Sauro Ballardini's first attempt in the field of mosaic work, still during his student years at AVU, in 1958, was the design of a monumental mosaic called *Strage di Marcinelle* (Fig. 5), which he later elaborated in another version of larger dimensions (Fig. 6). The subject was the mining accident at the Bois du Cazier mine in the Belgian town of Marcinelle on August 8, 1956.

Ballardini's first mosaic realized in the Czech lands was the stone mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* (completed in 1974) for the Sokolovská metro station (today Florenc; Fig. 8), on which he collaborated with a colleague from AVU, figurative painter Oldřich Oplť. The famous battle of the Second World War (March 8 and 9, 1943) was the inspiration for the fourteen-meter-long and two-and-a-half-meter-high horizontal composition of a stylized antique frieze with a dynamic composition of fleeing figures. The mosaic with unique form of small panels is also exceptional in being the only stone mosaic realized by Sauro Ballardini; his other mosaics were made from glass tesserae. In September 2020, during the planned reconstruction of the Florenc station vestibule, the investor approached restorers from the Art & Craft MOZAIKA association to create a plan for the transfer of parts or possibly the entire mosaic, including conservation.

Ballardini's next opportunity for mosaic work came in 1974, when he was approached to design a mosaic for the Faculty Hospital in Motol. He grasped the prescribed theme of *Elevation to Health* in a form that is too reminiscent of sacred work with a wide range of colours. None of the variants presented by him (Figs. 16, 18) was implemented, and Martin Sladký's design, more muted in colour and compositionally more balanced, won in 1977. This was followed by an unrealized sports-themed mosaic design for the Evžen Rošický Stadium in Prague (1976), also in collaboration with Oldřich Oplť (Fig. 19). In 1979, Ballardini was commissioned to develop conceptual sketches for the artistic embellishment of the building of the District Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Mělník, namely a mosaic on the theme of *February 1948*. In the end, two variants were created based on one original (Fig. 21–23), the second of which went to the exhibition in the museum of the National Security Service (SNB) established in the building of the former school in Komenského Street in Terezín (today the Ghetto Museum).

An exceptional mosaic was performed by Ballardini for the entrance vestibule of the headquarters of the World Trade Union Federation in the premises of the Central Dispatch of the Transit Gas Pipeline (Transgas). Ballardini made a mosaic of coloured glass tesserae, based on a motif by Pablo Picasso – a drawing of a flower composed of human hands. In 1955, Picasso donated this drawing to the World Trade Union Federation for the cover of the picture book *Das Lied der Ströme* (*The Song of the Rivers*, published in Berlin 1957, POZNER/IVENS 1957; Fig. 24, 25).

Before returning to his native Italy in 1980, Sauro Ballardini parted with the Czech lands with his masterpiece *Man Conquering the New Horizons of the Universe* (Fig. 26), reaching approx. 4 × 9 m and placed in the entrance hall of the Central Telecommunication Building (ÚTB) No. 268, Olšanská 6, in Prague 3 in Žižkov, built in the years 1972–1979 as a completely unique achievement in its time, not only in its scope, but also in its technological complexity.

Ballardini has been working on his largest Czech mosaic since 1976, when he prepared a proposal for the competition of the Czech Art Fund (ČFVU). He undertook the realization personally, in cooperation with colleagues from AVU and with the help of his son Andrea Louis. Coloured mosaic glass in the form of chipped tesserae of rich and lively colour and unusual format was ordered from the workshop of the Centre for Arts and Crafts; only the gold tesserae, which were not produced in the Czech Republic, were ordered from Italy. The whole composition has a

very strong effect. The structure of the surface and the alternating contrast of solid lines with moderate, softly toned colour areas enhance the dynamism of the work.

As a model, Ballardini chose a motif from a golden plaque that has been floating through space since 1972 to this day on the side of the American Pioneer 10 probe (and since 1973 on the identical Pioneer 11 probe) as humanity's message to other civilizations (Fig. 34).

Since the entire premises of the ÚTB in Žižkov are now probably doomed, an agreement was concluded between the investor and the Art & Craft MOZAIKA association about the removal and deposition of the mosaic at the expense of the association and subsequent restoration. A suitable publicly accessible space in Prague is currently being looked for where the mosaic could be exhibited. The article presents the efforts of the restorers from the first examinations, then the discovery of the mosaic hidden behind a plasterboard partition with the assistance of witnesses-workers of the ÚTB (Fig. 36, 37), followed by the detection and documentation of its condition. The overall composition was surveyed in detail and detailed photo documentation was pursued of the structure and partial damage (mechanical damage, broken tesserae). After securing with protective layers, the removal followed and transfer of the mosaic to the depository. This was completed in a single day, March 31, 2019. The removed background panels gave remarkable testimony to Ballardini's authentic style in the form of synopses of preparatory background drawings sketched in black directly on the surface of the concrete slabs (Fig. 43).

A sensitive intervention, i.e. the transfer of the mosaic onto new, better-manipulated aerolam boards, required a number of sub-analyses. First of all, it was a material survey of all the important components of the mosaic, i.e. eighteen selected glass tesserae, dark grey mortar bed and the material of reinforced concrete base plates (Tables 1–4; Figs. 45, 46).

As part of the restoration, transferring the mosaic to new base panels was chosen, to ensure maximum cohesion of the mosaic layers and also – compared to concrete slabs – significantly easier and safer handling (Fig. 47). For this purpose, an *aerolam* material developed for use in the aviation industry was found to be suitable (Alustep 500 from the Italian company CEL Components, s. r. l.). For adequate adhesion to the new aerolam plate, it was necessary to remove the original, excessively high cement layer from the reverse side. Places supplemented with new material (tesserae) were colour unified by retouching with glaze watercolours. The gold tesserae damaged by falling off the cartellina and degradation of the gold foil were restored using the cold gilding technique.

In the spring of 2021, the last work on the restoration and transfer of the mosaic to a new base was completed. After the completion of all the panels, the mosaic was transferred to the depository of the Czech-Italian Eleutheria Foundation, which intends to make it part of the new museum of Czechoslovak art of the second half of the 20th century in Prague.

Fig. 1. Sauro Ballardini as a student in Ravenna (unknown photographer, 1942; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 2. Sauro Ballardini performs sand blasted sgraffito in the AVU studios (photo J. Josefík, 1963; copied from JOSEFÍK 1963).

Fig. 3. Renato Guttuso with Sauro Ballardini in Prague, although undated, probably on the occasion of the exhibition of his paintings from 1931–1971 in the Valdštejnská jízdárna, organized by the National Gallery from January 23 to March 4, 1973 (unknown photographer, undated, about 1973; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 4. Terni (Umbria). Sauro Ballardini, Andrea Louis Ballardini, 1997: mosaic (3 × 2 m) in the chapel of the women's correctional facility in Terni. Winning project in the competition of the Italian Ministry of Public Works (unknown photographer, 2015; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 5. Sauro Ballardini with cardboard for an unrealized mosaic *Mining accident in Marcinelle* at the Prague AVU (unknown photographer, 1958; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 6. Sauro Ballardini with the cardboard of the second draft of the unrealized mosaic *Mining accident in Marcinelle* (unknown photographer, 1958; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 7. Oldřich Oplít and Sauro Ballardini, 1974: mosaic *Battle of Sokolov*, vestibule of Sokolovská metro station (Florenc), route C, condition in 1974 (archive DP Prague, copied from ŠKORPIL 1990, 23).

Fig. 8. Prague 8-Karlín, metro station Florenc. Oldřich Oplít and Sauro Ballardini, 1974: mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* (photo I. Bárta, 2020; archive Art & Craft MOZAIKA, z. s.).

Fig. 9. Prague 7-Bubeneč, No. 1110, Komsomolská, today Jana Zajíce 27. Sauro Ballardini cutting stones on anvil chisel, in the background cardboard for the mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* in a ratio of 1 : 1 (unknown photographer, undated, between 1972–1974; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 10. Prague 7-Bubeneč, No. 1110, Komsomolská, today Jana Zajíce 27. Sauro Ballardini and Oldřich Oplít in the process of composing the stone mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* in the AVU studios (unknown photographer, undated, between 1972–1974; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 11. Prague 7-Bubeneč, No. 1110, Komsomolská, today Jana Zajíce 27. Modelletto of the stone mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* in the AVU studio (unknown photographer, undated, between 1972–1974; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 12. Graphic diagram of individual parts of the *Battle of Sokolov* mosaic. Parts that were originally supposed to be transferred are marked in **yellow**. The updated intention of the transfer, which will take place in 2023, is marked in **orange** (edited by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2020; archive Art & Craft MOZAIKA, z. s.).

Fig. 13. Prague 8-Karlín, Florenc metro station. *Battle of Sokolov* mosaic, examination process. Visible is the cement "bun" holding the mosaic from the back (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2020).

Fig. 14. Prague 8-Karlín, Florenc metro station. Detail of the *Battle of Sokolov* mosaic. Clear degradation – salt efflorescence (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2020).

Fig. 15. Prague 8-Karlín, Florenc metro station. Signature of the stone mosaic *Battle of Sokolov* (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2020).

Fig. 16. Sauro Ballardini, 1974: mosaic design (collage) for the University Hospital in Motol, not realized (SA Ballardini).

Fig. 17. Prague 5-Motol, No. 84, V Úvalu 1, Faculty Hospital in Motol, pavilion 2 – directorate. Martin Sladký, 1977: mosaic *Rising to health*, also called the *Fall of Icarus* (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2016).

Fig. 18. Sauro Ballardini, 1974: variant design (collage) for the Faculty Hospital in Motol, not realized (SA Ballardini).

Fig. 19. Sauro Ballardini, about 1976: mosaic proposal for Evžen Rošický stadium with a sports theme using the collage technique, not realized, undated (SA Ballardini).

Fig. 20. Prague 6-Břevnov, No. 2120, Diskařská 3, Evžen Rošický stadium, ground floor of building B2. Jiřina Adamcová, 1978: detail of the right part of the *Sports* mosaic composition (*Joy of movement*; photo O. Surový, 2019).

Fig. 21. Mělník, No. 105, Tyršova. Sauro Ballardini, 1980: glass mosaic *February 1948* for District Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Mělník, perhaps destroyed (unknown author, undated, around 1980; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 22. Terezín, No. 148, Komenského, Ghetto Museum in Terezín. Sauro Ballardini, 1980: glass mosaic *February 1948* in the former SNB Terezín museum, probably destroyed (slide, unknown author, December 1990; archive of the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PM 5075).

Fig. 23. Terezín, No. 148, Komenského, Ghetto Museum in Terezín. Sauro Ballardini, 1980: *February 1948* (unknown author, January 1991; Terezín Memorial archive, inv. no. PM 5117).

Fig. 24. Prague 2-Vinohrady, No. 365, Vinohradská 10, former headquarters of the World Trade Union Federation. Sauro Ballardini, 1980: glass mosaic based on a drawing by Pablo Picasso, glass enamel, 350 × 350 cm (photo by P. Karous, 2017).

Fig. 25. Glass mosaic design for the SOF building on the cover of the book *Das Lied der Ströme (The Song of the Rivers)*, POZNER/IVENS 1957), original by Pablo Picasso, 1955 (SA Ballardini).

Fig. 26. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, Central Telecommunications Building shortly after completion (copied from <<https://www.zizkovskelisty.cz/uvodni-strana/telekom-zmizi-z-mapy-zizkova-po-43-letech>>).

Fig. 27. Sauro Ballardini, 1980: mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* (photo I. Bárta, 2019; Art & Craft MOZAIKA archive, z. s.).

Fig. 28. Designs, modelleta and bozzeta of mosaics in Sauro Ballardini's studio. Above, a mosaic on the basis of Pablo Picasso (SOF), in the middle, a mosaic for ÚTB, below, probably a draft of an unrealized mosaic for FN Motol (unknown photographer, undated, around 1979; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 29. Prague 7-Bubeneč, No. 1110, Komsomolská, today Jana Zajíce 27. Sauro Ballardini in the AVU studio working on a cardboard for ÚTB *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* (unknown photographer, undated,

around 1979; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 30. Prague 7-Holešovice, No. 369, Letohradská 3. Snapshot in the courtyard of the mosaic workshop at the Centre for Arts and Crafts (unknown photographer, undated, private archive of Hana Šmatláková).

Fig. 31. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Basic colour samples (photo L. Brücknerová, 2019).

Fig. 32. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Dimensional diagram of panels of four basic sizes – differentiated by colour (prepared by J. Černohorský, 2019).

Fig. 33. Scheme of the panel reinforcement (taken from TESÁŘ/KLOUDA 1988, 93).

Fig. 34. Graphic illustration of the gold plaque with the message of humanity traveling since 1972 and 1973 through space on the Pioneer 10 and 11 probes (available at <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PPlaueLarge.png>> [vide 2022-03-15]).

Fig. 35. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. The situation during the examination of the plasterboard partition covering the mosaic (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2015).

Fig. 36. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. Detail of the examination carried out in 2015 (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2015).

Fig. 37. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. The process of removing the plasterboard front screen (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2019).

Fig. 38. Memorabilia from the property of Václav Procházka, who has close association with the ÚTB building and provided information about the mosaic (undated, photo archive of the authors).

Fig. 39. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. Original situation in the foyer, mosaic at the main entrance (photo by P. Paul, 1980; SA Ballardini).

Fig. 40. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB, mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*.

A – detail of damage and missing tesserae; **B** – detail of the state of the mosaic after removing the plasterboard, signature and year 1980; **C** – the cleaning of the exposed mosaic surface; **D** – making a bandage and fixing the mosaic (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2019).

Fig. 41. Graphic diagram of the construction and anchoring of the mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* (prepared by J. Černohorský, 2019).

Fig. 42. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. Dismantling mosaic panels, Vít Pacovský in front (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2019).

Fig. 43. Prague 3-Žižkov, No. 268, Olšanská 6, ÚTB. Scheme on concrete slabs written into the cement adhesive of the mosaic, synopsis (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2020).

Fig. 44. Samples of glass tessera from the mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe* ready for analysis. On the left, crushed samples are prepared for XRD analysis; on the right, samples intended for casting in epoxy resin are lined up in yellow moulds (photo L. Brücknerová, 2020).

Fig. 45. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Thin sections of fixing materials of the mosaic under the microscope: **a)** mortar bed of the mosaic in a light microscope in reflected light; **b)** coarser-grained mortar (more like concrete) of the underlying panel board in a light microscope in reflected light; **c)** material of the base panel board in the scanning electron microscope with visible aggregate grains; **d)** element maps – concentration distribution of chemical elements on the area corresponding to Fig. **c)**. The different colour of individual aggregate grains indicates their different chemical composition – it is sand made up of different types of minerals (quartz and aluminosilicates). Photo by P. Bauerová, 2020.

Fig. 46. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Graph of the thermal decomposition of the mortar bed of the mosaic. During gradual heating of the sample at known temperatures, thermal transformation or decomposition of individual components of the mortar occurs, which is reflected in the change in the weight of the sample. Depending on the temperature at which the mass fluctuation occurred, individual phases can be identified (edited by P. Bauerová, 2020).

Fig. 47. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Restoration work. **A** – preparation and formatting

of aerolam plates – application of epoxy resins and fraction of marble dust; **B** – restoring the reverse side of the mosaic after sanding off the cement layers; **C** – application of a new cement-based adhesive to the reverse side of the mosaics; **D** – stacking tables and creating new panels in the studio of mosaic restorers; **E** – removing the bandage layers after the completion of the new panels (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, V. Vávra and L. Brücknerová; photos were taken during the restoration process in 2019–2021).

Fig. 48. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Tests of tesserae gilding and applying a protective layer – cartellina (photo by M. Kracík Štorkánová, 2021).

Tab. 1–4. Mosaic *Man Conquering New Horizons of the Universe*. Chemical composition of mosaic tesserae (compiled by authors, 2020).

Translation by Linda Foster