

# The Tropical Aquarium: a case of polychrome decoration in the architecture of the early 1900s

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## ABSTRACT

The study involved the analysis of the polychrome ceramic decoration of the Tropical Aquarium, a building located inside the *Mostra d'Oltremare* in Naples. The ornamentation was created by the majolica factory *Ceramica di Posillipo*, and specifically by Paolo Ricci, an eclectic artist of the 1900s. The use of stereoscopic photogrammetry allowed to survey the work as a whole, identifying the main colours used while also preserving the three-dimensionality of the relief figures. The study focused on the definition of the work's stylistic and chromatic features, aiming at the preservation of its decorative setup.

**KEYWORDS** Ornament, Ceramic Tiles, *Mostra d'Oltremare*

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## 1. Introduction

Colour has always been a characterizing and fundamental element in architecture, be it used for decoration or for different purposes. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the rationalist movement, the purity of shapes and geometries was preferred to the use of colour and decorations. In many cases, in fact, these assume a more marginal role, sometimes going so far as to be completely excluded from architecture. Such a style also caught on in Italy, where its canons sometimes underwent different influences, linked to the cultural and traditional context. In Naples, for example, at the *Mostra d'Oltremare* exhibition center, polychrome ceramic wall tiles are used, both indoors and outdoors. The study focused on the analysis of the decoration on the vestibule of one of the exhibition buildings, i.e. the Tropical Aquarium. Its design was entrusted to architect Carlo Cocchia, while the polychrome majolica decoration was created by Paolo Ricci of the *Ceramica di Posillipo* factory. The three-dimensional decoration was reconstructed using stereoscopic digital photogrammetry and subsequently analyzed in order to define the main hues and stylistic features typical of the abovementioned building.



Fig. 1. View of the main front of Tropical Aquarium. The building currently hosts the Boccioni art school.

## 2. A look into the life of Paolo Ricci

An eclectic author of Apulian origin, Paolo Ricci was born in Barletta in 1908 and moved to Naples to study in 1918. Here, in addition to developing a Marxist, antifascist view, he came into contact with the thriving Neapolitan artistic scene of the time, meeting Vincenzo Gemito first in 1923, and then Luigi Crisconio in 1927. In 1929, he approached the Circumvisionist group, without becoming directly involved in it. Here, he met Carlo Cocchia, with whom he collaborated on the *Mostra di Oltremare e del Lavoro*

*Italiano nel Mondo* for the creation of the work at hand. Also in 1929, along with Guglielmo Peirce and Carlo Bernari, he wrote the manifesto of the *Unione Distruttivisti Attivisti* (UDA), thus coming into contact with the avant-gardes. Between 1930 and 1931, during a period in Paris, he delved into themes and connections with contemporary artists such as Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Ossip Zadkine, Le Corbusier and others. Over the years, he exhibited at the first Rome Quadriennale (1931) in many editions of the *Sindacali Campane*. In 1938, he began working with the majolica factory *Ceramiche di Posillipo*, founded the previous year by patron Giuseppina De Feo, engineer Paolo Marone and sculptor Antonio De Val. The factory became a meeting point for Neapolitan artists of the time such as Carlo Cocchia, Edoardo Giordano, Aniello Antonio Mascolo and others. Also noteworthy is Ricci's communist and anti-fascist political ideology, which led him to be arrested on two different occasions (1932, 1943), and his relationship with contemporary intellectuals who used to gather at Villa Lucia, including Benedetto Croce, Alfonso Gatto and many others. Foreign artists and authors of international caliber were also frequently hosted in the villa, such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Nicolás Guillén, Pablo Neruda and others. At the end of the Second World War, Ricci began writing for several newspapers, including *La Voce* and *L'Unità*, and took part in several international exhibitions: the Venice Biennale (1948, 1950, 1952), the Rome Quadriennale (1948, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1965); he also exhibited in Prague in 1949 and in Berlin in 1951. In the post-war period, he further collaborated with architects Carlo Cocchia and Luigi Cosenza. Ricci died in 1986, after a long and artistic career and a copious critical and literary production.

## 3. The *Mostra d'Oltremare*: birth and decline

Commissioned by Mussolini in 1936 and provided for in the 1936-39 General Urban Development Plan (PRG) written by Luigi Piccinato, the fairground of the *Mostra delle Terre Italiane di Oltremare* was born in 1937 to host the *Esposizione Tematica Universale*. In particular, the first triennial exhibition revolved on the celebration of the regime's colonial policy. Contemporary to the Neapolitan fairgrounds is the *Parco dell'Esposizione Universale di Roma*, later named EUR, in whose project Piccinato himself was involved.

Over a million square meters were planned for the creation of the Naples compound and construction was completed in just sixteen months. Part of the surface allotted in the PRG remains unused, but was nevertheless reserved for future developments. In fact, the area was supposed to host the exhibition *Lavoro*

*degli Italiani d'Oltremare*. Various architects of the Naples region participated in the design of the pavilions, including Carlo Cocchia, who oversaw the Restaurant-Pool complex and the well-known *Fontana dell'Esedra*, in addition to the building under examination. The exhibition was inaugurated in 1940 and closed after only one month following Italy's entry into the war. The damage caused by the bombing was considerable and a rebuilding of the compound was necessary in the early 1950s. In 1952, the first *Mostra Triennale del Lavoro Italiano nel Mondo* was inaugurated and the *Mostra d'Oltremare* had a new image that united two souls, one more rationalist and one more traditional.

It is currently in a state of total neglect.

#### 4. Analysis of the work

The present study focuses on the analysis of the decoration placed on the vestibule of the Tropical Aquarium. Designed by Carlo Cocchia, the facility was built in 1938 as a complement to the *Villa Comunale's* aquarium. The volume is regular and square, in line with the dictates of the rationalist movement. The anonymity of the building is interrupted by a polychrome representation in ceramic tiles placed on the main elevation (8.10m high and 10.75m wide). The covering was manufactured by the *Ceramiche di Posillipo* factory, but the design and construction were carried out by Paolo Ricci, a friend and colleague of Carlo Cocchia. The composition depicts a marine scene, portraying real and fantastic figures, including seahorses, fishes, mermaids and tritons. These representations are typical of *Ceramiche di Posillipo* in particular, and of the Campanian tradition in general.

##### 4.1. Working methodology

In order to best define the formal and stylistic peculiarities of the work in question, a photogrammetric survey was carried out. The digital stereoscopic photogrammetry process has allowed us to obtain a three-dimensional result, both in terms of point cloud and structured mesh, and to keep the colourimetric information intact. The 3D model was used to build orthophotos, so that the metric information of the complex could also be preserved. Thus, it was possible to best define the colours used and stylistic features.

##### 4.2. Colourimetric features

The dynamism of the scene is created by the alternation between flat drawings and three-dimensional figures realized through the *mezzotondo* technique. However,

the most important aspect of the work is undoubtedly the use of colour. In fact, while the building appears as a white polyhedron, the vestibule is completely detached from the rest by way of its polychromy. At a first analysis of the work, it can be seen that five colours were used: blue, yellow and red, white and copper green. If the choice of the first four shades of color may depend on an influence that Ricci had during a contact with the authors of *De Stijl*, the green copper is a distinctive sign of *Ceramiche di Posillipo*, as can be seen in other works by the same factory, and of Campanian tradition in general. It should be added, however, that the color shades used are many, unlike Neoplasticism where the use of color was limited to a single shade.



*Fig. 2. Colourimetric features. On the left, the orthophoto of the façade, obtained by digital photogrammetry. On the right, the main color tones used within the composition.*

##### 4.3. Composition of the work

The composition in its entirety is depicted on 25 x 25 cm tiles forming an orthogonal grid. Leaving out the three-dimensional figures, the grid thus formed makes it possible to detect the prevalent colours and their function in the scene: while white mainly functions as foundation on which the other colours rest or mix, copper green is used to define the work's outline. The three-dimensional figures do not respect such regularity in the single tile, as the figures' plasticity does not allow the definition of all



Fig. 3. Composition of the work. On the top, the orthophoto of the façade without the three-dimensional figures; On the center, the orthophoto of the façade only with the three-dimensional figures. On the bottom, the orthophoto of the façade of the building.

the pieces within the predetermined measure. If, however, the figures are added to the pre-established study grid, it can be seen that a good number of them are in copper green. This color is not therefore relegated to being the mere frame of the work, but has the function of expressing the dynamism and complexity of the whole facade. One should also dwell on Ricci's stylistic choice. The style of the flat tiles is typical of the *Ceramiche di Posillipo* factory, while the three-dimensional figures conform to the modern movements and artistic groups of the time. During his trip to Paris, Ricci was probably influenced by contemporary authors such as Pablo Picasso or Ossip Zadkine (think, for example, of the stylized figures reminding of a Cubist and abstract fashion). Finally, one must consider the importance of Naples as a cultural and innovative center in the first half of the 1900s. Among the artists who visited the city in the first half of the century is also David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was a guest at Villa Lucia. Siqueiros was an exponent of Mexican Muralism, a movement within which some analogies with the work in question can be found. These include the use of primary colours, main figures in relief, compact walls without openings. Consider for example the mural "*El pueblo a la universidad, la universidad al pueblo*" (1952 - 1956) by Siqueiros himself, on the facade of the Rectorate of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City: the building was declared "artistic monument of the nation" in 2005.



Fig. 4. View of the work of David Alfaro Siqueiros "*El pueblo a la universidad, la universidad al pueblo*" (1952 - 1956) (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

## 5. Conclusions

Paolo Ricci's Tropical Aquarium is a masterpiece in its complexity and originality. First of all, the work intends to detach itself from the rationalist movement: the ornament is not superfluous but an integral part of the building, being a representation of the function of the building itself. Secondly, the complex loses its anonymity through the juxtaposition of a polychrome ceramic decoration, typical of the Campanian tradition, on the vestibule. Such a design choice infused new life to the material: from captive and reclude within the walls, it breaks out free and becomes the center of the work itself. This solution was also used later by Paolo Solieri in Vietri sul Mare for the design of the Solimene factory: the front of it is in fact covered with circular modular elements in orange and copper green, as used by Ricci in the Tropical Aquarium. The artist designed a work of extraordinary beauty using polychrome ceramics, creating a decorated prospectus that at the same time breaks with the traditional stylistic canons for the representation of two-dimensional and three-dimensional figures. The Tropical Aquarium's current state of conservation of is precarious, as can be seen from the loss of material and the discontinuities in the composition. Due to its uniqueness and peculiarity,

Paolo Ricci's work should be safeguarded, protected and valorized before it is irreversibly lost.

### Conflict of interest declaration

The author declares that there is no actual or potential conflict of interest including financial, personal or other relationships with other people or organizations within three years of beginning the submitted work that could inappropriately influence or be perceived to influence his work.

### Funding source declaration

The author declares that he is a PhD student with a fellowship at University of Naples Federico II.

### Short biography of the author

**Carlo Giannattasio** - PhD student with a fellowship at University of Naples Federico II. He graduated in Architectural Engineering at University of Salerno, Italy, and in Architecture at Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina.



*Fig. 5. View of the main front of the Solimene factory in Vietri sul Mare, designed by Paolo Solieri.*

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