Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16th and 17th Centuries): the Church of Santi Severino e Sossio

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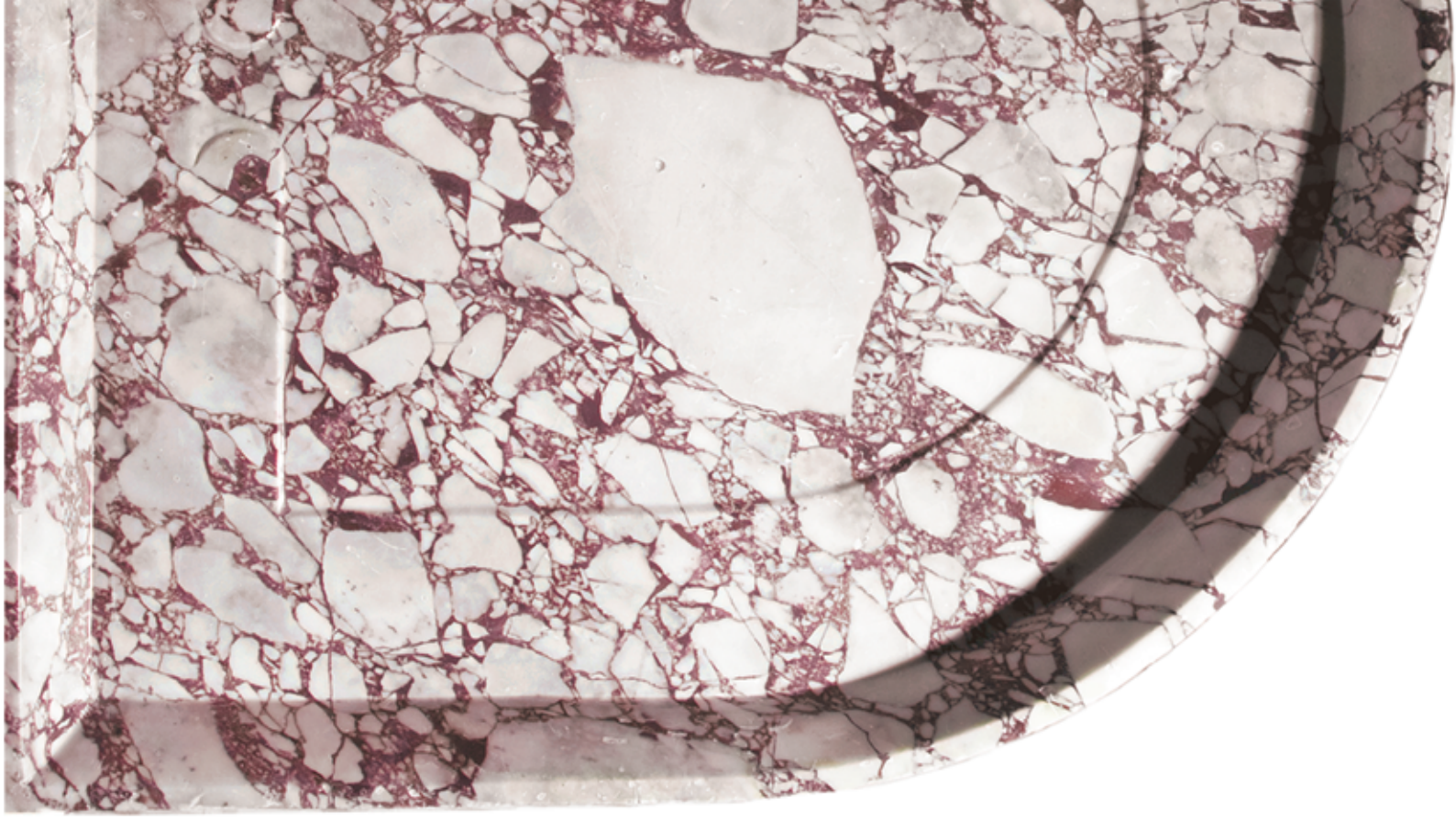

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COLOURED MARBLES IN NEAPOLITAN PAVEMENTS (16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES): THE CHURCH OF *SANTI SEVERINO E SOSSIO*

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Abstract

The church of Santi Severino e Sossio (Naples) preserves a series of pavements showing the development of this architectural element between the 16th and 17th centuries. The pavement of the nave (late 16th century) is based on a square grid of white and grey marble with different coloured marble slabs in geometric shapes (Broccatello, Africano, Breccia corallina, Fior di pesco, Giallo antico, Portasanta, Verde antico). The pavement of the chancel (late 17th century) shows a simple pattern of black and white marble; the pavement of the high altar (late 17th century) shows a recurrent fantastic pattern based on floral figures and using a few coloured marbles; the pavement of the choir (late 17th century) contains a square grid based on the contrast between white and grey marble. Two different techniques were used: shaped slabs fitted together on a mortar bedding ("*opus sectile*") or an inlay of coloured pieces in a carved monochrome background ("commesso alla fiorentina").

Keywords
coloured marble, pavement, Naples

Introduction

An important architectural renovation of Naples started since the second quarter of the 16th century under the Spanish rule of the viceroy Pedro da Toledo. During the Counter-Refomation period, wealthy religious orders promoted the construction and restoration of churches and monasteries. This architectural renovation was led by several architects from Tuscany, such as Giovanni Antonio Dosio and Jacopo Lazzari. A specific aspect of their architecture was the use of coloured marble decorations, pavings and veneers. An example of the trend of coloured marble paving is present in the church of "Santi Severino e Sossio". This church pertains to one of the oldest, biggest and richest monasteries of Naples held by the Benedictines; the building was transformed in 1835 into the seat of the Archivo di Stato. The church was built in different phases (1490-1571): the nave without aisles is flanked by seven chapels each side, the transept with two altars at the ends is surmounted by a dome, the high altar is surrounded by a balustrade and the huge choir is flanked by one chapel for each side. The high altar area, planned by Cosimo Fanzago, was made in 1635-41 and the pavement was completed in 1697 (PANE 1939; CANTONE 2002).

Methods of study

Recent conservation works on the church allowed a close examination of the whole pavements on the basis of a macroscopic survey. The marbles were compared to those reported in present-day literature (BORGHINI 1989; DOLCI, NISTA 1992; GNOLI 1988; LAZZARINI 2004; LAZZARINI 2007; MIELSCH 1985; NAPOLEONE 2001; PENSABENE, BRUNO 1998; PRICE 2007).

Description of the pavements

*Nave – The pavement features a grid, (rectangular slabs of white, black veined or grey marble) forming five longitudinal parts, each divided in several sections filled with a wide range of geometrical patterns made of coloured marbles (Figs. 1, 2).

Normally each section contains nine smaller panels arranged in three rows: the central panel is a tombstone made of a white marble slab carrying an inscription dedicated to the buried personage. Some sections show a basic pattern including rectangular coloured marble slabs surrounded by white marble set as "*opus sectile*". Other sections present heraldic emblems sculpted in bas-relief at the four corners and the side panels with coloured marble are often inlaid in a white marble support. Other sections again show the central tombstone surrounded by coloured marble slabs with geometric shapes (circle, square, rectangle, triangle, rhomb) inlaid on large white marble slabs. Finally, some sections display

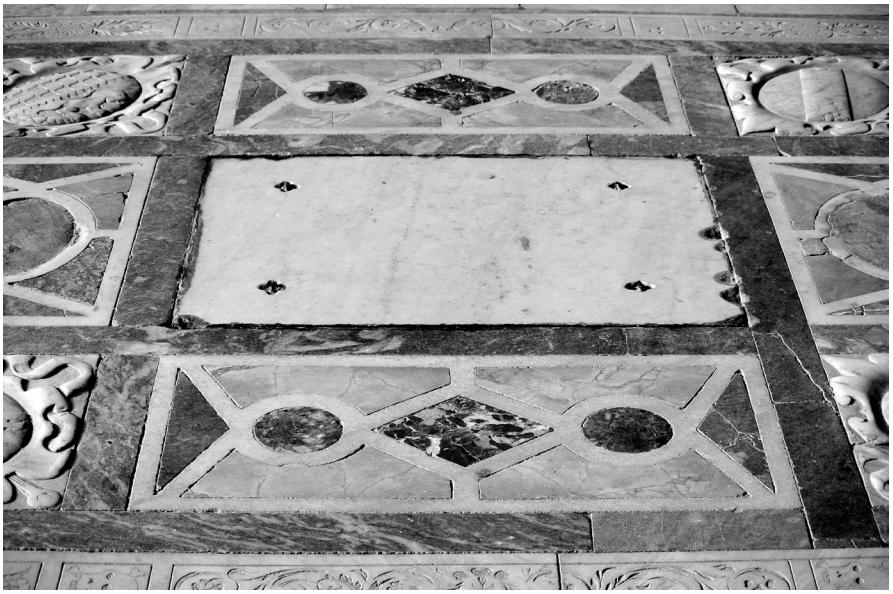

Fig. 1.
Pavement of the nave:
a simple geometric pattern

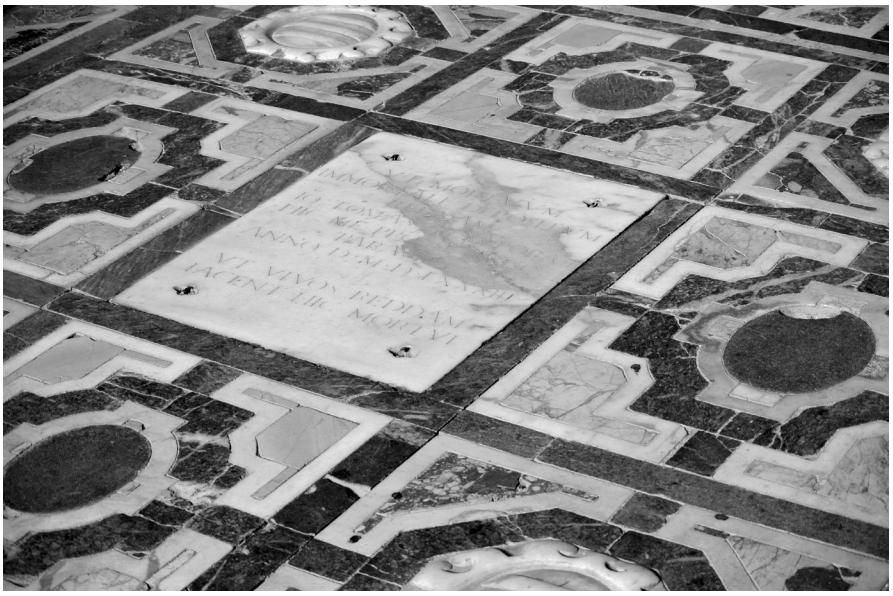

Fig. 2.
Pavement of the nave:
a more complicated
geometric pattern

a rich decoration based on a more complicated patterns of coloured marble slabs, including lobate shapes and curvilinear contours, inlaid on white marble slabs.

The marbles identified are: Africano, Alabastro listato, Breccia corallina, Broccatello, Fior di Pesco, Giallo antico, Portasanta, Verde antico, Apuanian marbles (white, grey, veined); Giallo di Siena, Libeccio, Portoro and some variegated limestones from the southern Apennines.

*Chancel - The whole pavement is made of black limestone and white marble in alternating trapezia (Fig. 3). The center is occupied by a tombstone framed by a grid of grey marble with rectangular or oval shaped coloured marble slabs; four white marble slabs with coats of arms carved in bas-relief are placed in the corners. The area near the balustrade of the high altar is made of a square grid of black limestone slabs (elongated hexagon), the squares contain in alternation four triangles of grey and white marble or a quadrilobate floral pattern made of Broccatello.

*High altar - The polygonal stairs leading to the balustrade, encompassing the high altar area, show different patterns. The first and the second stair are made of white marble slabs simply marked by a rectangular band of Broccatello and by halberd elements (Rosso di Contorrana or serpentine) marking the centre and the corners of each stair. The third stair shows a coiled and twisted pattern made of white, green (serpentine), yellow (Giallo di Siena) and red (Rosso di Contorrana) marbles on a black limestone background (Fig. 4).

The pavement around the altar contains some recurring quite octagonal panels with a curvilinear frame made of white marble and Bardiglio including a narrow

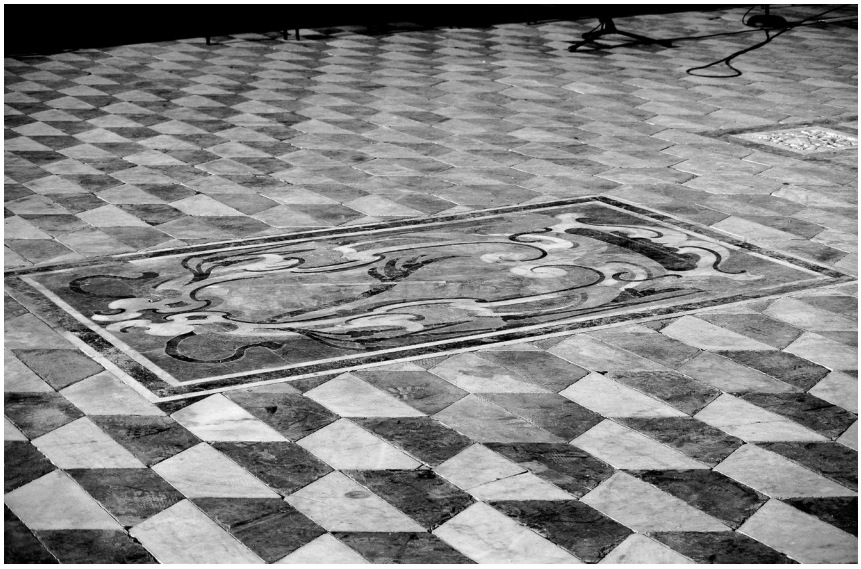

Fig. 3.
Pavement of the chancel
with black and white slabs

Fig. 4.
Detail of the decoration
of the stair to the high altar

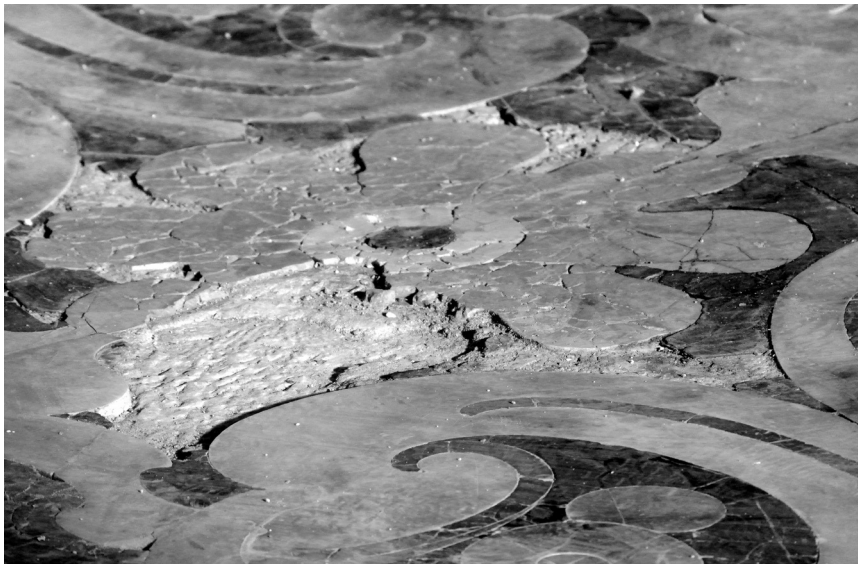

Fig. 5.
Pavement of the high altar:
some decay phenomena involve
the marble slabs

strip of Rosso di Contorrana on one side only, in order to give the effect of a third dimension. The central part of each panel is based on a complicated pattern of flowers mainly made of Giallo di Siena, Rosso di Contorrana, white marble and black limestone (Fig. 5).

*Choir - The simple pattern includes a grid of rectanguar slab made of grey marble; the grid is filled by alternating square panels with two different motifs: one is made of four triangles (two made of grey marble and two made of white nee) in opposite position; the second one is made of Broccatello quadrilobate flowers set on a white marble background (Fig. 6).

Marble provenance

Marbles employed in the pavement were either expressly quarried as first use or taken from ancient buildings and reused. Those used for the first time were Broccatello (Spain), Giallo di Siena (Tuscany), Libeccio (Sicily), Portoro (Liguria), Rosso di Contorrana (Sicily), Apuanian marbles (white, grey, veined) and black limestone directly supplied for this purpose. In the second group are marbles derived from Roman architecture: Alabastro listato (Latium, Italy); Africano, Breccia corallina (Turkey); Fior di pesco, Portasanta, Verde antico (Greece); Alabaster (Egypt), Giallo antico (Tunisia). Coloured marbles were used in the Roman buildings of "Neapolis" and surrounding towns such as "Cumae", "Puteoli" and "Capua"., and then were extensively reused in the Middle Ages and later. Broccatello was employed in Roman times, but in this case the marble came directly from the Tortosa quarries (ÀLVAREZ *et al.* 2009).

A useful comparison about the use of coloured marbles is the pavement of the crypt-like aisled Cappella del Succorpo or Cappella Carafa built in the early 16th century under the chancel of Naples Cathedral. Marbles identified in this chapel are: Africano, Alabaster, Giallo antico, Fior di Pesco, Cipollino, Portasanta, Bardiglio and white (FOLLI 2001).

Setting technique

Techniques used to set the pavement are always the same in spite of the century separating the making of pavements. The first technique involves pieces of marble cut to specific shapes and sizes and fitted together on bedding mortar to make a smooth surface ("*opus sectile*" - Fig. 7); the second involves shaped pieces of coloured marble inserted in larger slabs of white or black marble carved to fit, the bottom of the carved cavity showing traces of a punch and a contour marked by drillwork allowing adhesion between the two slabs in combination with resins ("inlay" - Fig. 8).

The "*opus sectile*" pavement was described by Vitruvius (VITRUVIUS 1914, chap. 7.1) together with the sequence of mortar coats forming the pavement foundation. This Roman technique was then described in 1564 by Giorgio Vasari as a beautiful thing: "The Ancients (…) invented stone pavements diversified with various blending of porphyry, serpentine and granite, with round and square or other divisions, whence they went on to conceive the fabrication of ornamental bands, leafage, and other sort of design and figures" (VASARI 1907, chap. 6). In the Middle Ages and later on the use of coloured marbles lasted in the artisanal tradition of Rome, mainly for the tops of tables or other furniture, thanks to the large availability of material, both from ancient buildings (reuse) and from the huge storage areas that were a legacy of the Roman imperial period.

The term "inlay" connotes the insertion of marble pieces in a depression carved on stone base. This technique is called "commesso alla fiorentina" thanks to the artistic works produced by the "Opificio delle Pietre Dure" since 1588 in Florence. The heritage of the Florentine Opificio was enhanced by the "Real Laboratorio delle pietre dure" in Naples (since 1737) and by the "Real laboratorio de Piedras Duras" in Madrid (1762-1808).

Another particular inlay technique is reported by Vasari with reference to some sectors of the pavement in the Duomo at Siena (14th to 16th centuries) containing human figures: the contour of each figure, drawn by artists such as Pinturicchio or Domenico Beccafumi, was cut in with chisel on white marble slabs and the hollow was filled with black pitch or asphalt (VASARI 1907, chap 30).

Patterns

Coloured marbles arranged in geometric patterns are visible in some Renaissance and Mannerist paintings: i.e. Pietro Pollaiuolo "The Annunciation" (1470) Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (in. 73); Luca Signorelli "The Descent of the Holy Spirit" (1494) Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche; Francesco Botticini "Madonna and Child Enthroned" (late 15th century), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (n.61.235); Giulio Pippi called Giulio Romano "The Circumcision" (early 16th century), Paris, Louvre (inv. 518); Antonio Bazzi called Il Sodoma "The Marriage of Alexander the Great and Roxana" (1517), Rome, Villa Farnesina frescoes; Jacopo Robusti called Tintoretto "The Washing of the Feet" (1548-49), Madrid, Museo del Prado; Paolo Caliari called Veronese "The Wedding at Cana" (1563), Paris, Louvre (inv. 142); Tintoretto "The Last Supper" (1592), Venice, San Giorgio Maggiore.

Geometric patterns are also a specific feature of the contemporary tabletops (late 16th century) created both in Rome and in Florence (GIUSTI 1988; GONZALEZ-PALACIOS 2001, 19-55).

The pavement of the cited Cappella del Succorpo, made in the early 16th century, shows geometric patterns

Fig. 6.
Pavement of the choir: a simple pattern based on black and white slabs

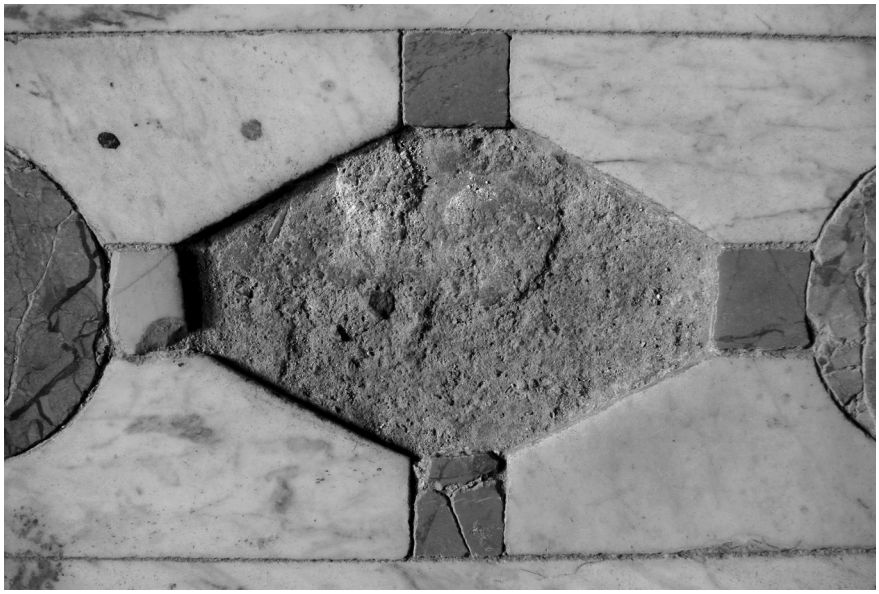

Fig. 7.
Example of "*opus sectile*" technique; the bedding mortar can be seen where one marble slab is missing

Fig. 8.
Example of "inlay" technique; the carved cavity can be seen where one marble slab is missing

based on the square, circle and rhombus using small sized slabs, quite similar to the Cosmati works, diffused in medieval churches of Rome and other towns of Central Italy.

Patterns of the high altar area are typical of Neapolitan Baroque: an outstanding example is the pavements of the nave and the chapels in the church of Certosa di San Martino made according to plans of Cosimo Fanzago (BUGINI, CINQUEGRANA 2015). The pattern of the pavement of the choir is quite similar to the pavement of the choir of the Certosa church (CANTONE 1984).

Dilapidation

The one-time presence of congregations at mass and today that of tourists has exposed parts of the pavement to continuous treading that wears away the material with different intensity according to the different resistance of each stone. The erosion is at a maximum on white marble panels worked in bas-relief and it is also present on the slabs of other marble (i.e. Giallo di Siena) or limestone (i.e. Broccatello). Cracking is a very diffused form of dilapidation: the slabs are often subdivided into small splinters. These splinters can break off, causing a gap in the pavement. Inlay work often shows the loss of small slabs caused by a lack of sealing or by a progressive cracking of the same slab: the result is a void in the supporting stone.

The pavements around the high altar, where visitors do not go, are obviously in better condition than the nave pavement, but some cracks and loss of splinters are visible.

Conclusion

The church of the monastery of Santi Severino e Sossio in Naples contains a series of pavements illustrating the changes occurring in this kind of artefact between the Counter-Reformation and the Baroque (late 16th - late 17th centuries). The older pavement is made by a series of different sections involving geometric patterns of coloured marble (Africano, Alabaster, Breccia corallina, Broccatello, Fior di pesco, Giallo antico, Giallo di Siena, Libeccio, Portasanta, Portoro; Verde antico) in a grid made of marbles from the Apuanian Alps. The Baroque pavements of the chancel and of the choir are based on a simple square pattern made of grey and white triangles. The pavement around the high altar made by Cosimo Fanzago, the most important architect of the Neapolitan Baroque, contains a lower number of coloured marbles (Giallo di Siena, Rosso di Contorrana, Bardiglio, white and black) arranged in complicated patterns based on curvilinear floral motives and surrounded by a frame made of white or grey marble. Two different sources of marble were exploited in both periods: the purchase of marble from quarries in Spain (Tortosa) and Italy (Apuanian Alps, Siena); reuse of marbles already employed in the Roman architecture of "Neapolis" (ancient coloured marble). Two different techniques were employed to set the marble slab: "*opus sectile*" on a mortar bedding and inlay or "commesso alla fiorentina" on a carved marble or limestone background.

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