



Jane Fawcett

Historic Floors.

Their History and Conservation

Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998

Reviewed by Kim Williams

The Great Pavement of Westminster Abbey, a thirteenth century masterpiece designed by Cosmati artists for Henry III, has recently received new attention, not least because it is finally available for public viewing after having been hidden under a carpet for the last 70 years. A recent conference jointly sponsored by the Courtauld Institute and Westminster Abbey focused attention on diverse aspects of both the Great Pavement and the smaller Cosmatesque pavement around the shrine of Edward the Confessor, which was likewise covered until last year. The admiration that both of these pavements have engendered, in contrast with the small esteem in which they were held by previous generations (Queen Mary saw in the pavement only a menace to her heels!), has happily renewed interest in the larger issue of decorated pavements in architecture. Throughout the history of architecture, the floor surface has served as a great medium for expression, architects using what is in effect the largest unbroken surface of the building as a canvas on which to play out their designs. The first decorated pavements were the pebble pavements of ancient Olinthus, Pella and Rhodes; pebbles gave way to flat stones of uniform size forming patterns, *opus tessellatum*, that we more commonly call mosaics. Succeeding ages developed new techniques, *opus Alexandrinum*, *opus sectile*, *intaglio*, *scagliola*, but the aim was the same: to decorate the floor surface in a meaningful way. Here, of course, is the key: floor designs were not only beautiful, but meaningful. In sacred architecture, particularly, the floor designs teemed with symbolism, proportion, color, geometry, all geared to imbue the pavements with meaning. For as Jane Fawcett writes in *Historic Floors. Their History and Conservation*, quoting William Burges, "A great cathedral must have been an encyclopedia of all the knowledge of the time..." In pacing with our measured steps an ancient sanctuary pavement, therefore, we are in reality paging through an encyclopedia, literally walking through history. But in order to understand what we are seeing, we must first understand the language. As Plato had written over the entry to his academy, "let know one enter here who does not know Geometry", for the language of pavements is largely mathematical.

Historic Floors is an excellent reference for many a discipline that risks not being brought to the attention of those who might enjoy it the most, for it is a book that would seem written only for preservationists. In fact, the book is so well put together that scholars of architecture

history as well as those looking at the application of mathematical ideas in architecture will find it particularly useful. The illustrations alone will make this hard to surpass as a sourcebook. Beautiful color photographs are juxtaposed with surveyed drawings of existing pavements, rectified photographs of large pavements present the designs without the unwelcome perspective distortion that photographs usually display. Scale drawings of whole pavement plans as well as paving details illustrate the designs with great clarity. There are other features that make this book an exceedingly useful reference for further study. For one, techniques of measurement are accurately and thoroughly described in the chapter contributed by Ross W.A. Dallas. The chapter contributed by Robert Skingle contains useful information for those wishing to photographically record pavements. An excellent glossary and a comprehensive reading list add to the book's usefulness.

Attempts are made at placing individual pavements and motifs in a broad historical perspective, but this is the aspect of the book that this reviewer found the least satisfactory. Concerning the "fictive cube" pattern, an arrangement of trapezoids resembling a three-dimensional cube, Ms. Fawcett writes that "it was used as early as 1566", when it is actually one of the most ancient of paving designs and is found in mosaic pavements of the second century BC on. Of the circular pattern in the Queen's House by Inigo Jones, known as a "rosette", it is written that the pattern was "already famous in Italy in the sixteenth century". Again, the rosette was a common mosaic pattern, with a most notable example from Pompeii on display in the Museo Nazionale di Archeologia in Naples. The intention here, surely, was to provide a larger cultural context for English pavements. It is unfortunate, however, that the contexts provided were not more precise.

It was, of course, beyond the scope of this book to delve deeply into individual geometries such as the geometric construction of the quincunx patterns that appear in the Westminster Abbey pavements, nor was their space to probe the symbolism of the pavements. When referring to Richard Foster's study of the Westminster Abbey pavement, *Patterns of Thought: The Hidden Meaning of the Great Pavement of Westminster Abbey*, does Tim Tatton-Brown, who also participated in the Courtauld Institute-Westminster Abbey conference on those pavements, indicate diffidence about "hidden meaning"? I hope not, for if we don't discuss the nature of the meaning of the pavements, there is no hope of deciphering the encyclopedia of the cathedrals.

References

RICHARD FOSTER, *Patterns of Thought: The Hidden Meaning of the Great Pavement of Westminster Abbey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).

JOHN SHARP. "Cosmati Pavements at Westminster Abbey", *The Nexus Network Journal*, vol. 1.

KIM WILLIAMS, *Italian Pavements: Patterns in Space* (Houston: Anchorage Press, 1998).