

Pier Francesco Sciuto / Le disuguaglianze nell'arte



by **Marco Lazzarato**

After *Patternland* (2022), his first book devoted to patterns from a mathematical perspective, Pier Francesco Sciuto returns to the subject with a new publication with an enigmatic title: *Le disuguaglianze nell'arte*. The subtitle, *Interpretazione matematica di simboli e arte musiva romana*, offers a few more clues, but does not answer the fundamental question. That is, why it was written and to whom it was addressed. In order to understand the meaning and value of Sciuto's work, it is necessary to place it in its proper context. For if it is true that the book deals with the mathematical analysis of the symbols and motifs of roman mosaic floors, it is also true that the interlocutors to whom it is addressed belong neither to the world of mathematics nor to that of archaeology, but to that of decoration. An obsolete term whose true meaning should be clarified at once: decoration is the art that deals with the decoration of artifacts.

Without examining what art is (a discourse that would take us very far), let us look at the other key word, also obsolete, found in the above definition: decorum. It refers to the need for a person or thing to be appropriate (i.e., suitable, relevant, consonant) to the circumstances. In fact, the opposite of decorum is not, as is commonly believed, that which is ugly, but that which is unseemly, inappropriate. The purpose of decoration, then, is not "beautifying" but giving decorum to what would otherwise be unseemly. "Beauty," understood as the aesthetic quality inherent in the object or person, may participate in this action, but it is not an essential part of

it. For example, we can go to the premiere of La Scala Theater in Milan in an ugly black suit bought in a department store, but not in bermuda shorts and a flowered shirt, even if they are signed by a great fashion designer. Similarly, on a summer beach, it is inappropriate to walk towards the umbrellas in a tuxedo, no matter how "nice" such a suit may be considered.

Now, the question is, why are artifacts "unseemly" and thus in need of an art to attend to their decorum? For the same reason that seats in a theater are endowed with a different civic function than those in a beach bar, even though the proper function (i.e., that which pertains to comfort, sturdiness, functionality...) remains the same. Every artifact, "from the spoon to the city" (to quote the slogan coined by Ernesto Nathan Rogers in 1952), is born to fulfill a precise function, but this does not determine its final form. Any object, if it fulfills only the function that makes it necessary, can only be "naked". As long as it remains within the walls of the home, the problem does not arise, but to be welcomed into society, it must wear "appropriate" clothing. Imagine visiting a museum of ceramics. If the *raison d'être* of a bowl was solely to contain food (i.e., its proper function), then it would be reasonable for that museum to display one and only one bowl, virtually unchanged from prehistory to the present. But we know very well that this is not the case.

The sampler that decoration uses to realize its achievements is ornamentation, the purpose of which is precisely "beautifying". And "beautifying" not in a general sense, but according to the canons of ornamentation proper to the social group with which one interacts. Ornamentation always derives from an idea of embellishment, which can be achieved through an addition, an enrichment, a superimposition, a covering, through signs of various kinds. This idea, in turn, underlies the principle of decorum, which is proper to a particular social group. The resulting paradox is well illustrated in Adolf Loos' famous essay *Ornament and Crime*. That is, what in the eyes of a primitive population such as the Papua New Guineans is magnificent bodily adornment, achieved through appropriate tattoos, is to the refined European of the 20th century an unseemly sign of cultural inferiority. Net of these cultural variables, over time the art of decoration has stabilized its operative subject matter, ornamentation, by building a repertoire of exemplary models selected by virtue of their success.

Thus we have a general primary need, decorum, which is addressed by a specific art, decoration, which makes use of a specialized set of instruments, the ornamental repertoire. The latter consists of a catalogue of models serving as prototypes from which applicable solutions can be worked out on a case-by-case basis. Until the middle of the last century, there were numerous manuals that made such models available to all those who needed

them, that is, craftsmen, artists, and designers of various skills. Here we come to the point: Sciuto's is a book of patterns. But to be called such, a pattern book must have precise characteristics.

First, the patterns presented must be canonical from a general cultural-historical point of view, but that is not enough. They must also be canonical from an executive point of view: that is, they must be model bases, archetypes of the ornamental family to which they belong. There is no doubt that Sciuto's timely survey of the geometric motifs of roman mosaic pavements fulfills the first requirement, that of being a reliable cultural-historical source. It should also be remembered that ornamentation is a vast field, and a book collecting its patterns must address a very specific artistic and professional audience. From textiles to stained glass, from wrought iron to marble processing, etc., all productive sectors need ornament, but no ornament is good for everything.

For example, the floral motif that makes a damask fabric sumptuous is repulsive when used to decorate the marble pavement of a square. The fact that this can be done with today's technology does not justify certain obscene contemporary achievements. Therefore, there will be pattern books for weavers, cabinetmakers, marble workers, and so on. In this sense, the geometric motifs chosen by Sciuto are certainly a model for the marble industry and for those who work with wall coverings in general, but precisely because they are abstract, they can also be taken up and reworked in other fields. In fact, the geometric motif represents the base of the ornamental pyramid, a base that lends itself to many elaborations and adapts to different situations.

There is further merit to be given to Sciuto's book. We are coming out of a rationalist era, and we are still suffering from its conditioning. For this reason, a repertoire of geometric ornaments is more in tune with current tastes than, say, a repertoire of floral motifs, which were in vogue in the 1800s but are obsolete today. A pattern book is an operational tool, and for that very reason it must be immediately useful to those who use it. But who are those people today? All those (and there are many) who have to give decorum to surfaces, those surfaces that are the "skin" of any artifact, the first thing you see that qualifies it in terms of decorum. The blank, white surfaces theorized by Adolf Loos and later embraced by architectural Rationalism rested on the crutches of modernist ideology, but when these failed, they turned out to be what they were: dirty and unseemly.

Surface enhancement is a cross-cutting issue, ranging from civil engineering to interior design. Each sector has its own basic solutions, given by the external appearance of the materials. In the case of a piece of furniture, veneers are used in the most appropriate arrangement. In the case of a

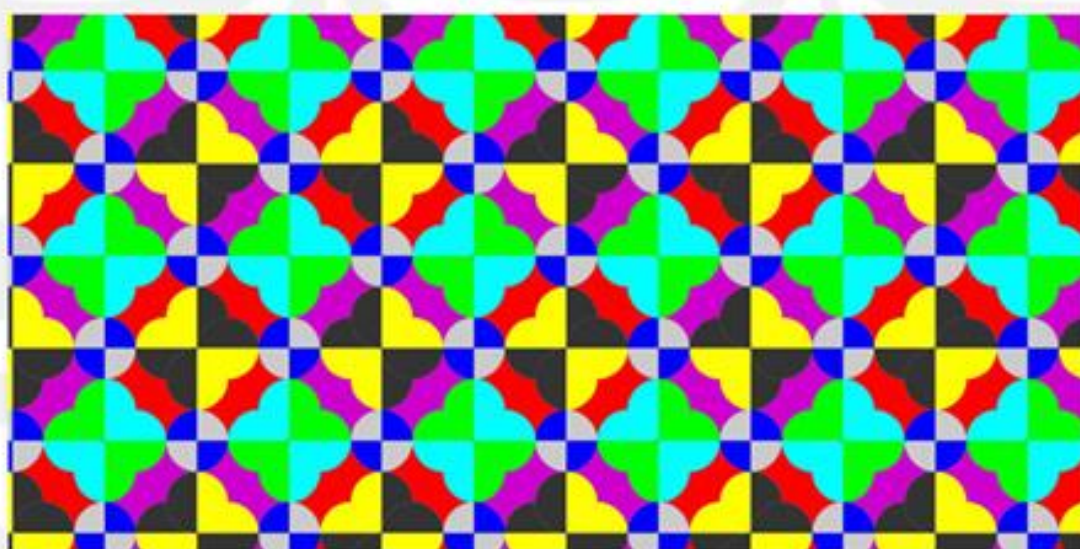
bridge, surfaces will respond to the quality and composition of cementitious materials. However, these solutions have reached their limits. That is, they remain effective as a primary finish, but today there is a need to go further. In what direction? Towards the recovery of a canonical and regular ornamentation, through the invention and creative translation of designs capable of creating the appropriate decorative motifs. And here Sciuto's book goes a step further; through the link given on page 202, the reader can find the mathematical keys to designing such motifs. In other times, the need for this would not have been felt. Today, in the midst of the information technology revolution, this translation option fills a real need.

The book: P.F. Sciuto, *Le disuguaglianze nell'arte. Interpretazione matematica di simboli e arte musiva romana*, Pendragon, Bologna 2024, pp 207, € 30.


Homepage, Detail of the pavement of a Republican-era Roman villa, late 2nd century BC, Risan, Montenegro (Sailko/Wikimedia).
Below, The cover of the book.

PIER FRANCESCO SCIUTO

LE DISUGUAGLIANZE NELL'ARTE



INTERPRETAZIONE MATEMATICA
DI SIMBOLI E ARTE MUSIVA ROMANA

 Pendragon