DECEMBER: Cross-roses and rose crosses

December is a quiet and dark month for plants in the Northern temperate zone and so we turn to some ornamental and symbolic forms of the rose flower. Of all flowers, the rose has been adapted most widely and universally to contribute to symbolism and decoration. We choose some fine examples from early Christian architecture.

The motif of incorporating a rose into the sign of the cross, or of adding a cross to the image of a rose, has been used widely in the later Mediterranean antiquity. However, its use as a symbolic decoration reached a peak in some of the early churches of the Byzantine Empire, which embraced most lands around the Mediterranean Sea in the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

The cross-rose motif can be seen to take several forms: cross-roses with rose flowers in a frontal view divided symmetrically into four parts by a cross (Fig. 1, left), and as four combined young rose flowers in the angles of a cross, usually presented in lateral view (Fig. 1, middle and right). Before they became adopted by the Christian church they were used in ornamental floor mosaics, and on walls and ceilings throughout the late Roman Empire. Examples can be found in Antioch, Cyprus, Tunisia, and Algeria. In the early centuries of the Christian church the cross symbol was avoided because it was associated with crucifixion and death (Murray and Murray, 2004). However, as noted in an earlier article of this series (October), the rose was to become associated with the Virgin Mary and by the 5th century AD cross-roses and rose crosses had been adopted by the Christians.

The incorporation of the rose flower, as a sign of the birth of Christ, into a symbol with the cross, a sign of His death, mixed with the beauty and symmetry of each may explain the prevalence of this motif. Other ideas have been put forward, such as those of Kandeler (2006) who considered that cross-roses were an apotropaion (protection symbol). An old, pre-Christian example of a cross-rose can be seen in a floor mosaic from Pergamum, originating from the 2nd century BC (Fig. 2, October of this series). In the middle of a garland with naturalistic double roses, rose buds and foliage, there is a cross-rose with a dark centre – almost like a foreign element. This conspicuous sign presumably was to complement the fullness of life of the garland with an apotropaion, i.e. with a protective function.

Fig. 1. Simplified forms of a cross-rose (left), a stylized form of a single tetramerous rose flower with a cross; and two types of rose crosses: middle: more similar to a cross-rose; right: the composition of four young, half-opened rose flowers in side view is more pronounced (Ullrich). See also Fig. 2.
Cross-roses were particularly appreciated as symbolic ornaments by the Byzantine imperial court. When, in the 5th century, St Mary’s church in Thessaloniki was constructed, certain arcade arches were decorated with mosaics of cross-roses together with lotus flowers, lilies, and ears of grain. In other cases a combination of cross-roses with rose crosses created a rhythmic pictorial, yet symbolic design feature in the floor mosaics as found at St Pantaleon in Cilicia (Turkey; Fig. 2) (Budde, 1987).

Such designs incorporating cross-roses are elaborated further in Ravenna, as at the tomb of Galla Placidia (5th century). In San Vitale, San Apollinare Nuovo, and in San Apollinare in Classe (Ravenna), mosaics from the middle of the 6th century AD show figures with a background characterized by roses and lilies. In San Vitale, apart from the figure mosaics that cover all the walls of the interior, cross-roses appear in many ornamental bands and in the arches in the choir of the church combined with symmetric pairs of horns of plenty (Fig. 3). These cross-roses show a rather complex design, dark crosses and forks at the end of the arms (forked crosses).

Whether used as an ornament or as a symbol it is clear that the rose and cross were images used creatively, sometimes reduced to minimalist symmetry, other times elaborated. It is interesting to reflect on how well these motifs still work as metaphors in the diversity of modern life.

Fig. 2. Mosaic floor with three-pointed forked cross-roses (round fields) and various forms of rose crosses (interspaces). St Pantaleon, Aphrodisias, Cilicia, 4th century AD (Budde, 1987).

Fig. 3. Cross-roses with forked crosses combined with horns of plenty. S. Vitale, Ravenna, mosaic on a band-shaped arch, early 6th century AD (Kandeler).

References

