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## **“Re-flowering flowers”: the hope of an eternal blooming since Roman times\***

### **Abstract**

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“Re-flowering flowers”, i.e., the metamorphic artistic representations of plants in which one flower gives birth to other ones, are often detectable in the phytoiconography of the Greek-Roman art. Through an extensive analysis of archaeological artworks in the Euro-Mediterranean and West-Asian area, we found the diffusion of this motif starting from the Hellenistic period (IV century B.C.). The metamorphic flowers motif became a dominant element in triumphal arches, and later also in coffered ceilings, forming the so-called “rosettes”. The identification of the single plant elements of these compositions can be carried out both on pottery (among which the best examples come from the Apulian and Greek vases) and on carved structures, where colours are no longer present. We analyzed in detail the botanical compositions of the scrolls of the *Ara Pacis* and in the triumphal Arches of *Titus* and *Septimius Severus* in Rome (Italy). The results enhanced the representation of a relevant floristic richness with some recurrent flowers, such as those of *Lilium*, *Anemone*, *Silene*, *Stellaria*, *Anthemis*, *Calendula*, *Scabiosa*, *Asphodelus*, *Nuphar*, *Carlina* and *Laurus*, but also fruits, shoots, bulbs and floral buds. This motif seems linked to the leading thread of the metamorphosis in the Hellenistic culture and the revived Pythagorean theories of the Augustan age. The continuous transformation of an element into another suggests a spatial translation of temporal concepts: the absence of an end; death as a prelude to a new life. We should better understand the meanings of natural elements in the ancient artistic representations since they were not used only as a mere decorative motif but were part of a widely shared symbolic language.

*Key words:* flowers representation; plant iconography; phytoiconology; plant symbolism; Roman archaeology.

### **Introduction**

Analyzing art representations in the Greek-Roman culture, spread in western cultures for hundreds of years, we can highlight the presence of “Re-flowering Flowers” (RF), i.e., metamorphic plant images in which one flower gives birth to another one, in sequence

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(Fig. 1). Such scheme is widely recurrent in scrolls and the so-called “rosettes” (Ramage & Ramage 2008), and these iconographic elements had a great fortune from ancient times until nowadays, as they were used in the coffered ceiling of aristocratic palaces, in churches and “classic” architectonic elements (Fig. 2). We can even assume that this type of decoration, highly diffused from Augustan times in the Euro-Mediterranean area, seems to be even more ancient (Vandi 2002).

The archaeological literature neglects these representations in their constitutive polymorphic and metamorphic structure, even in the case of Pompeii, where some attention was given to plant representations in paintings (Comes 1879; Jashemski & al. 2002; Ciarallo 2004, 2006; Caneva 2014). In fact, a description of the composite elements of floristic representations was carried out rarely, such as in the case of the *Ara Pacis* freezes (Caneva 2010), and in other archaeological remains in Rome (Caneva & al. 2014; Kumbaric & Caneva 2014). Despite the absence of specific studies, the ceilings of triumphal arches of Roman Emperors seem to represent a relevant source of examples for understanding the structure and composition of the RF motif.

Moreover, often the floristic parts have been considered only as a decorative motif. It seems contradictory with the knowledge that- in ancient cultures- the representation of an image was the bearer of a message, which needed to be read in relation to its provenience and context to be fully understood (Zanker 1989; Pensabene 2011). For the ancient Roman culture, as for other ancient civilizations, the importance of giving a symbolic meaning to the subject of representations, is clearly underlined by *Vitruvius* in his famous treaty on Architecture (*De Architectura*, Book I, 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph): “*the architect must possess a good knowledge of history, which permits him to explain to the eventual interlocutors the symbolical meaning with which he often embellishes his buildings*”. The primary role of nature in such a means of communication was evident from the literary texts of *Horatius* (*Odes*), *Gaius Plinius Secundum* (*Naturalis Historia*), *Virgilius* (*Bucolicae*), and *Ovidius* (*Metamorphosis*), as well as from an in-depth iconographic analysis of archaeological remains (Caneva 2010; Caneva & al. 2014; Kumbaric & al. 2014; Kumbaric & Caneva 2014). In fact, all the ancient civilizations were in close contact with the natural world, and

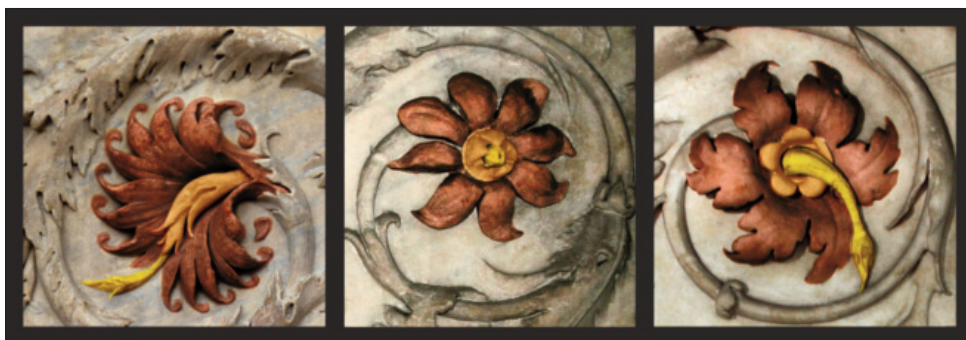


Fig. 1. Examples of “Re-flowering flowers”, i.e., images in which one flower sprouts from another one, in a sequence of two, three or four elements (from the *Ara Pacis* scrolls, Caneva 2010).

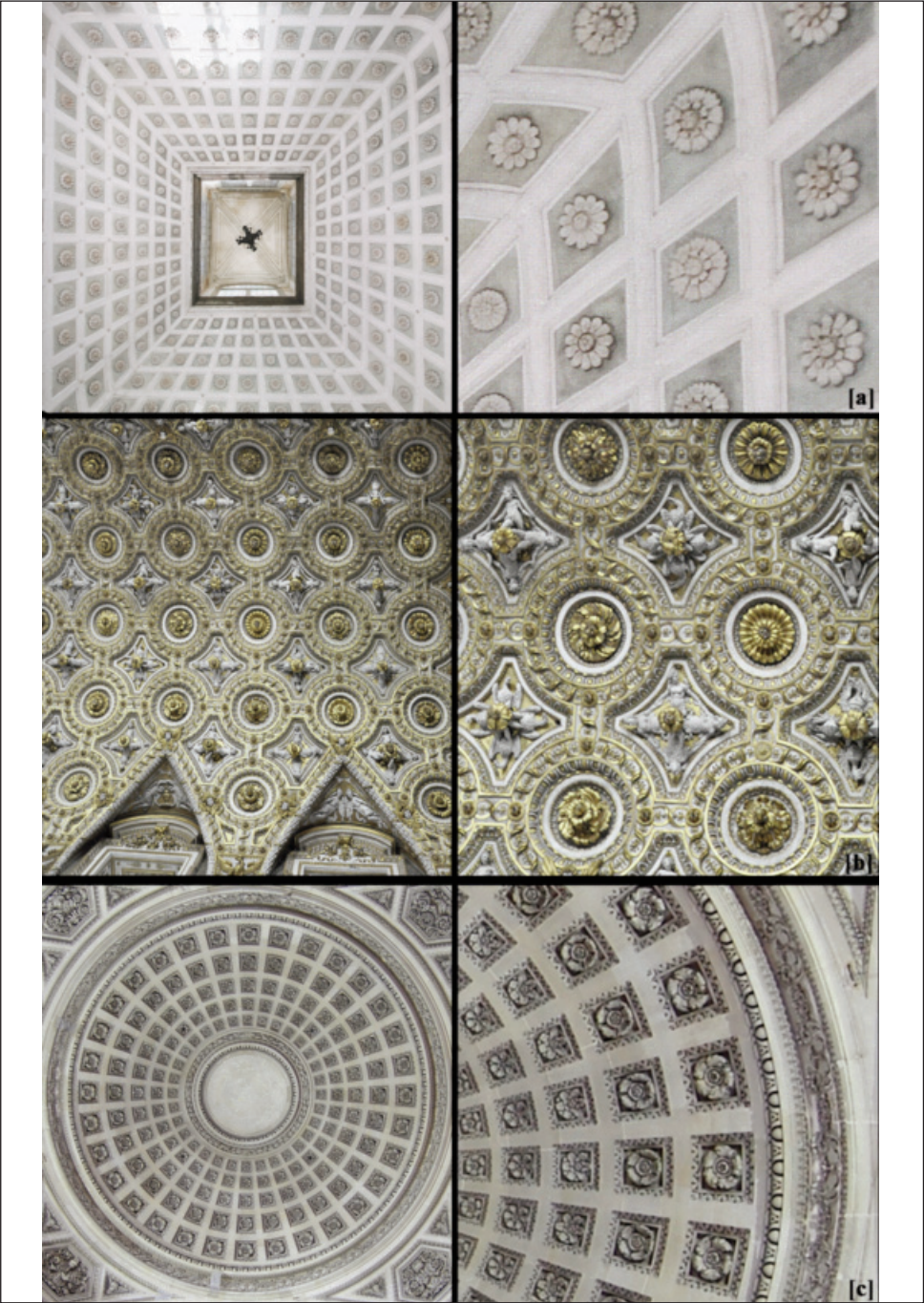


Fig. 2. The RF motif in the coffered ceiling of aristocratic palaces, in churches and in the “classic” architectonic elements: (a) Grimani Palace, Venice; (b) Quirinale Palace, Rome; (c) Pantheon, Paris.

recurrently explained natural phenomena as deity expressions affecting humans (Vandi 2002), and we should better understand the meanings of natural elements in the ancient artistic representations, to better comprehend their culture.

Considering the importance of explaining this recurrent motif, which was insufficiently analyzed, this study aims to define: i) its origin, ii) its symbolical meaning and iii) the variants of the RF motif, taking into consideration a wide range of examples, including some examples of ceilings of triumphal Roman arches. So, in this work, we will discuss its origin and diffusion, the scheme of composition in some relevant monuments and its symbolical and cultural meanings.

## Methods

The analysis of the RF motif started from an extensive bibliographic research, looking at different type of architectural, ceramic and jewellery artifacts, mainly from the Hellenistic period in the Euro-Mediterranean area, but also from the Assyrian and Babylonian area (Kleiner 2012). It was useful to analyse both the origin of the motif and its diffusion over time and in different regions. The bibliographic analysis was associated with field research carried out in Rome (Roman *Forum*, Colosseum valley, Imperial *Fori*, Trajan Markets and *Ara Pacis*), to point out how widely this kind of motif was employed and how differently it was realized. We used the collected images together with the results of the bibliographical analysis, to produce a database, which was used to select three outstanding examples of RF representations, which are described here with their historical background and iconographic structure. Following the idea of carrying out a visual “break down” of elements that are in successive transformation, which was suggested for the *Ara Pacis* scrolls (Caneva 2010), we carried out a botanical analysis identifying the “various elementary components”. Specifically, we identified various plant parts (calyx, corolla, stamens, pistils, fruits, bulbs, leaves and derived structures), through the comparison with flora and botanic atlases of reference (Pignatti 1982; <http://dryades.units.it/floritaly>). The meaning of this motif was finally hypothesized considering the previously cited ancient textbooks of *Plinius*, *Virgilius*, *Vitruvius* and *Ovidius*.

### *The analyzed monuments*

The *Ara Pacis* was conceived as an altar dedicated to the peace, which was built (from 13 B.C. to 9 B.C.) to celebrate *Augustus*’s return from his victorious expedition in Gaul and Spain (Fig. 3a). Marking the end of the external rebellions and internal struggles that started with *Julius Caesar*’s murder in 44 B.C., it was an augural tribute for a new peaceful age of Roman dominance coincident with the Empire’s founding (La Rocca 1983; Zanker 1990; Castriota 1995; Cohon 2002). The botanical scrolls are here widely carved in the six panels of the lower parts of the external faces, below the representations of the scenes of the Roman origin and of the finally reached prosperity (four panels), as well as below the two panels representing the parade that was welcoming *Augustus* at his return. This monument can be considered the most relevant example of an extensive use of plant representations for iconographic and symbolic purposes (Caneva 2010).

The arches of *Titus* and *Septimius Severus* in Rome are other earlier and highly representative monuments that include such iconographic motif. The origin of such architectural



al element (the arch) was possibly related to the *propylaea* of the Hellenistic cities, to the *tetrapylia* of the columnnade streets and elements of *Alexandria* and *Pergamum*. However, the arch seems also to be related to the Etruscan-Italian door of the city, but the first time the word *arcus* appears in a document (of the Decurion assembly in Pisa) was during the Augustan age, when it was referred to the building of the arch of *Caius* and *Lucius Caesar* (4 A.D.) (La Rocca & al. 2008).

The arch of *Titus* (Fig. 3b) was realized in 81 A.D., as an honorific monument built by the Domitian emperor on the *via Sacra*, to reinforce the community consensus on the Flavian dynasty, commemorating the victories of his brother *Titus*, as a deed of *pietas* (De Maria 1988). It celebrates the *bellum judaicum* and the conquest of Jerusalem in the 71 A.D., and it represents *Titus*'s triumphal return, with the booty of the temple of Jerusalem, a four-horse chariot, crowned by a personification of Victory, and *Titus*'s deification being carried to heaven by an eagle. Other representations in the arch celebrate *Honos* and *Virtus*, Rome and the *Genius* of the Roman people (Torelli & al. 2008).

The arch of *Septimius Severus* (Fig. 3c) was built in the Roman *Forum*, and it was dedicated by the Senate in 203 A.D. to celebrate the *Princeps Virtutis* and his sons *Caracalla* and *Geta*, winning the wars against *Parthia*. The historic relieves, located on the smaller fornix, imitates the triumphal pictures and the friezes of the columns as well. The narration starts from the bottom to the top, showing the salient moments of the war of Mesopotamia (Torelli & al. 2008). The decoration of the arch exhibits a polysemy of meanings. Looking at the archivolt, we can see the Victories carrying trophies, while underneath there are the *Putti* of seasons representing the *aeternitas* of the imperial power. Moreover, the fluvial deities in the smaller fornix symbolize the territorial extension of the Empire, and the arch is rich of images carrying messages connected to peace, prosperity, power and the Emperor (De Maria 1988).

## Results

### *The origin and diffusion of the RF motif*

Our bibliographical analysis and field surveys showed as, in ancient times, the *RF* motif was adopted in different architectural elements in ancient Greece and Macedonia, and in the wide *Magna Grecia* area (Tab. 1). Moreover, this motif was not confined only to a fixed context, but it was diffused in a wide artistic production. Examples are present on marble reliefs, in gold necklaces, on mosaic pavements and pottery vases. On pottery, significant examples come from the Apulian and Greek vases where the use of still-visible colour makes easier the analysis of the single elements of composition. In this case, such as on marble friezes or in mosaics, the *RF* motif includes compositions that start from a central *Acanthus* and end in a flower. In the vault of the arch and ceilings the representation is not connected with other plant elements, and this type of execution is close to examples of the motif in jewellery (e.g., Diadem of Verghina, Taranto necklace) (Becatti 1965).

Considering that the most ancient monuments where the *RF* motif is detectable, such as the Temples of *Saturnus*, *Castor* and *Pollux*, and *Apollo Sosianus*, were widely modified during the centuries with the addition of new elements, the most likely origin of such motif seems to be the “red-figure vases” from ancient *Apulia*. The chronology of



Fig. 3. The analyzed monuments: a) *Ara Pacis*; b) *Arch of Titus*; c) *Arch of Septimius Severus*.

Table 1. A Chronological bibliographic database of RF motifs in the earlier stages of their use.

Object	Date	Originated from	Located in	Part of	Place/ City
Temple of <i>Saturnus</i>	V cent. B.C. (restored in 42 B.C. and 283 A.D.)	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Temple of <i>Castor and Pollux</i>	V cent. B.C. (restored in 117 and 73 B.C. and 6 A.D.)	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Temple of <i>Apollo Sosianus</i>	V cent. B.C. (restored in 353 and 117 and 34 B.C.)	<i>Campus Martius</i>	<i>Campus Martius</i>	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Gold Necklace	IV cent. B.C.	<i>Apulia</i>	British Museum	whole	London, England
The golden larnax	366 B.C.	Tomb of Philip II (Macedonia)	Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai	whole	Verghina, Greece
Drape with Acantino decoration	366 B.C.	Tomb of Philip II (Macedonia)	Salonika Museum	whole	Thessaloniki, Greece
Diadem	366 B.C.	Tomb of Philip II (Macedonia)	Salonika Museum	whole	Thessaloniki, Greece
Krater with a mythological scene	350 B.C. (Bari painter)	<i>Apulia</i>	British Museum	krater neck	London, England
Krater with the funeral of <i>Patroclus</i>	340 B.C. ( <i>Darius</i> painter)	<i>Apulia</i>	British Museum	krater neck	London, England
Krater with a <i>naiskos</i> scene	325 B.C. (Baltimore painter)	<i>Apulia</i>	British Museum	krater neck	London, England
Mosaic with a hunting scene	316 B.C.	<i>Pella</i>	Pella Museum	edge	Pella, Greece
Tomb of <i>Lucius Scipio Barbatus</i>	280 B.C.	Sepulchre of the <i>Scipio</i> family	Vatican Museum	metope	Rome, Italy
Two marble reliefs	270 B.C.	<i>Pergamum</i> , Sanctuary of <i>Demeter</i>	Istanbul Museum	whole	Istanbul, Turkey
Mosaic	Eumen II age (197-160 B.C.)	<i>Pergamum</i>	Berlin Museum	edge	Berlin, Germany
Tombs of <i>Larthia</i>	150-130 B.C.	Chiusi	Archaeological Museum	metope	Florence, Italy

Table 1. continued.

Tombs of <i>Thanunia Seianti</i>	150-130 B.C.	Chiusi	British Museum, London	metope	London, England
<i>Basilica Julia</i>	1 cent. B.C.	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Frieze and coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
<i>Forum Julium</i>	46 B.C.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
<i>Venus genitrix</i> temple	46 B.C.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Marble <i>plutei</i> relief	First Augustan age (31 B.C.-10 B.C.)	<i>Horti Sallustiani</i>	Museum of Montemartini central	whole	Rome, Italy
<i>Ara Pacis</i>	9 B.C.	<i>Campus Martius</i>	<i>Campus Martius</i>	frieze	Rome, Italy
<i>Forum of Augustus</i>	2 B.C.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Temple of <i>Mars Ultor</i>	2 B.C.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	capitel	Rome, Italy
Arch of <i>Titus</i>	81 A.D.	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	coffered ceiling of the vault	Rome, Italy
<i>Forum of Nerva</i>	97 A.D.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Trajan's Market	100-110 A.D.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	coffered ceiling	Rome, Italy
Trajan's <i>Forum</i>	112 A.D.	Imperial <i>Forum</i>	Museum of Trajan markets	frieze with cupids	Rome, Italy
Temple of <i>Antoninus and Faustina</i>	141 A.D.	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	external frieze	Rome, Italy
Arch of <i>Septimus Severus</i>	203 A.D.	Roman <i>Forum</i>	Roman <i>Forum</i>	coffered ceiling of the vault	Rome, Italy

Apulian vases is connected to the period in which Taranto (*Taras*) reached its heights, being a forced waypoint for the commercial routes that connected Greece to Italy, through the Adriatic Sea (Cerchiai & al. 2002).

The most used shapes for the Apulian vases were the “volute-krater” and the *pseudo-panathenaic amphorae*, due to their monumental dimension. In the Apulian vases, the



recurrent motifs of the Greek culture were re-elaborated, as the Greek influence bloomed in the Apulian region (Becatti 1965). The subjects of these vases were taken from drama, tragedy and mythology (Trendal 1989). Here, all the floristic elements show the image of double or triple flowers connected with the previous one from the central part (Boardman 1966). Flowers and plants moved from the centre to the side and motifs of RF are usually placed in the lower register (Fig. 4). In the upper register, there are floristic elements, even though they are depicted in a static way (Todisco 2012).

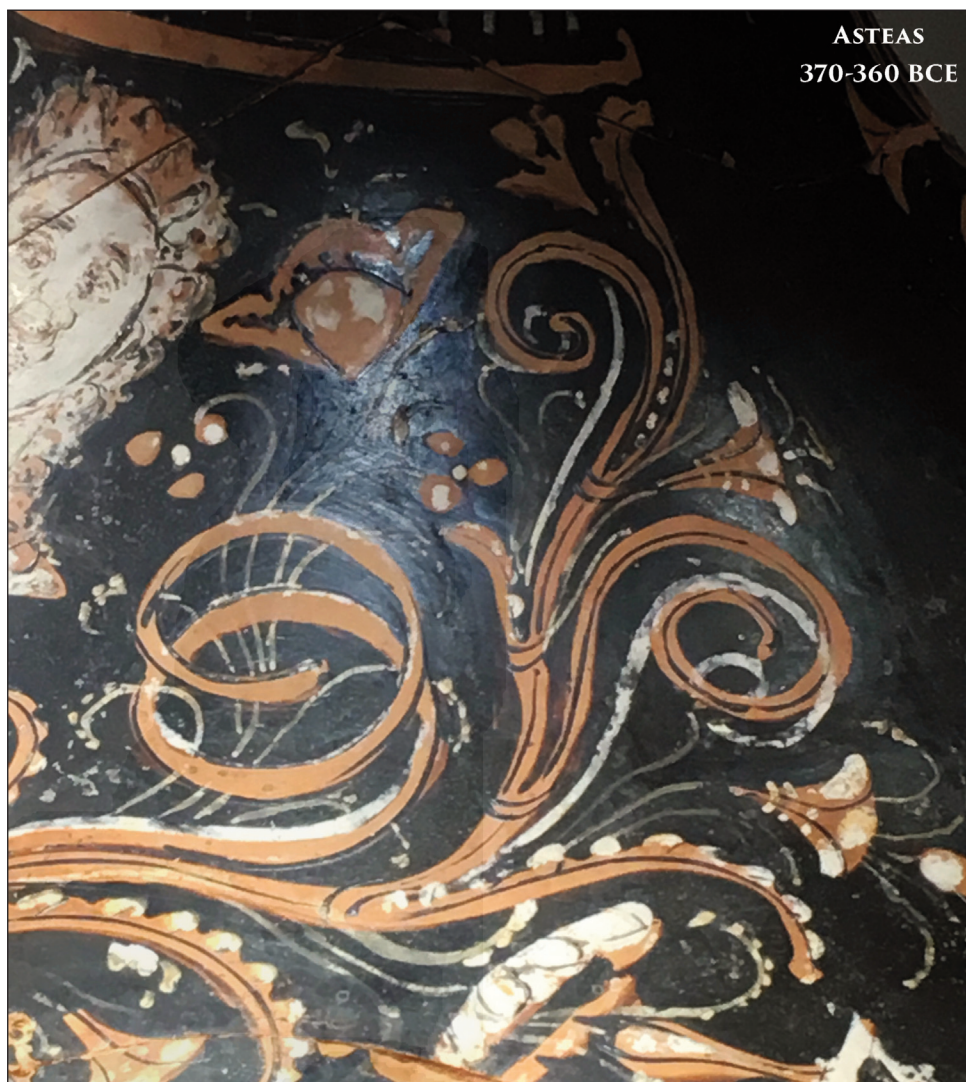


Fig. 4. An Apulian vase (Montesarchio, Archaeological National Museum of Sannio Caudino): Flowers and plants develop from the centre to the side.

A further example of the use of floristic elements is the gold necklace of the second half of IV century B.C., from the grave goods of a tomb from Taranto. The jewel shows a decoration of a triple flower that recalls the floristic elements in the ceramic production. This is a clear demonstration of the motif that switches from different materials (Masiello & Indelicati 2011).

The RF motif was also used in the funeral context like the case of so-called diadem of the princess Meda of Verghina (Macedonia) in one of the three tombs of the Royal *Tumulus* (350 B.C.). There, it was found a gold diadem with a Herculean knot, and a lace embellished with leaves, flowers and petals. It was also discovered a drape with an *acanthus* decoration enriched with flowers and tendrils. In this context, we have a clear archetype of the motif of the re-flowering flowers in both metal and textile materials.

In the earlier Roman context, we also find this motif in the Republican *sarcophagus* of *Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus*, a member of the *Scipio* family that built the *sarcophagus* that was found in the tomb on the *via Appia*. The coffin, carved out in volcanic stone, is modelled on the type of the Greek altar, typical of southern Italy. Here we have a clear example of a mixture of architectural elements of an Ionic temple, provided by the use of volutes on the lid and a Doric temple by the presence of metopes filled with the re-flowering flower elements (Ramage & Ramage 2008). This shows how fast the circulation of art was in the Republican age, where a motif taken far away was re-elaborated and suddenly used in the local art.

A relevant example of the RF motif comes from the stylistic decoration of “*acanthus motif*”, which had a big fortune during the III century B.C. Their first examples are found in the tomb gravestones of Thebe, realized as an imitation of the temple trabeation in which the *acanthus* shoot was placed to fill the space in the architrave, *tympanum* and connecting lines of the *acroterion* (Castriota 1995). In the sanctuary of Demeter (270 B.C.) an elaborate vegetal frieze, carved in marble reliefs, arises from a central *acanthus* that develops axial stems and racemes, generating different plants and RF as deities in miniature (Centanni 2007). This composition, such as that on the *Pergamon* altar, had an important role in the study of the Roman art, also considering their symbolic functions (Castriota 1995). Remarkably the representation of the central *acanthus* seems to have a formal affinity with the *Ara Pacis*, built in honour of *Augustus*.

#### *The botanical analysis of RF in the composition in Roman archaeological monuments*

The recognized plants in the different examples of RF sum up to about 35 species in the three selected monuments, but this number represents only a part of the original floristic richness of such representations. The botanical composition and their approximate recurrence (Fig. 5) are shown in Tab. 2.

In general, the six external panels of *Ara Pacis* present a very rich flora in their composition, with about 100 species, as previously documented (Caneva 2010). The flora of the scrolls consists of 16 species, with dominance, for the external flowers, of species belonging to *Cardueae*, or the genera *Carlina*, *Lilium*, *Nymphaea*, *Anemone*, *Hedera*, *Anthemis* and *Scabiosa*. In the case of the central elements (the terminals), the most recurrent elements are fruits of *Asphodelus* and *Malva* or buds and shoots of various species (Tab. 2).

Both *Titus* and *Septimius Severus* arches showed, indeed, a rich coffered ceiling, which was built up respectively by 82 and 140 tiles containing the RF motif. Despite the large use



Fig. 5. Botanical details: External elements (a, b, c) from the *Ara Pacis* (scrolls, Caneva 2010) and (d, e) from the *Septimius Severus* Arch; Central elements (Terminals) (f, g, h) from the *Ara Pacis* scrolls (Caneva 2010) and (i, l) from the Arch of *Titus*.



Table 2. Re-flowering Flowers: Botanical elements in the Ara Pacis and Roman triumphal arches.

Scientific names	Features	External elements			Central elements		
		Ara Pacis	Titus Arch	SS Arch	Ara Pacis	Titus Arch	SS Arch
1) <i>Carduea</i>	Capoline leaves, often thorny	***					
2) <i>Carlina</i> cfr. <i>utzka</i>	Capoline leaves with the typical shape	**	*	*			
3) <i>Lilium candidum</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	**	*				
4) <i>Nymphaea</i> sp.	Flowers (morphology and number of elements)	**					
5) <i>Hedera helix</i>	Fruits (morphology of single elements)	**				*	*
6) <i>Lilium</i> sp.	Flowers morphology (or typical bulb structure)	*	*	*			
7) <i>Anemone</i> cfr. <i>apennina</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	*	*	*			
8) <i>Anemone</i> cfr. <i>coronaria</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	*	*	*			
9) <i>Scabiosa</i> sp.	Capoline (morphology of ligulate flowers)	*		**			
10) <i>Narcissus</i> sp.	Flowers (symmetry and shape)	*		*			
11) <i>Helianthemum</i> cfr. <i>nummularium</i>	Flowers (symmetry, margin shape and number of elements)	*					
12) <i>Alchemilla</i> cfr. <i>vulgaris</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	*					
13) <i>Sedum</i> sp.	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	r					
14) <i>Echallium elaterium</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	r					
15) <i>Rosa</i> sp.	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)	r					
16) <i>Anthemis</i> sp.	Capoline morphology with a combination of tubulate and ligulate flowers	*	*	*			
17) <i>Calendula arvensis</i>	Capoline morphology with many ligulate flowers		*	**			
18) <i>Silene</i> sp.	Flowers (symmetry, number of elements, typical petal shape)		**	**			
19) <i>Stellaria</i> cf. <i>media</i>	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)		*	*			
20) <i>Chaerophyllum</i> cfr. <i>temulum</i>	Flowers (symmetry number of elements, typical petal shape)		*	*			

Table 2. continued.

21) <i>Cerastium</i> sp.	Flowers (symmetry and number of elements)			*			
22) <i>Punica granatum</i>	Calyx (typical shape)			r			
23) <i>Asphodelus</i> sp.	flowers and fruits (symmetry, number of elements, typical trimerous shape of the capsule)			**	**	*	*
24) <i>Malva</i> sp.	Fruits (shape of the mericarps)				**		
25) <i>Arum italicum</i>	ripening fruits (transformation of the inflorescence)				**		
26) <i>Nuphar luteum</i>	flower buds (typical shape)				*	*	*
27) <i>Cydonia oblonga</i>	Fruit (pommies with typical shape)				*		
28) <i>Panicum miliaceum</i>	Growing spikelet				*		
29) <i>Asparagus</i> sp.	Shoot (elongate growing stem)				*		
30) Orchids	Pollinodia, with elongate structure				r		
31) <i>Biarum tenuifolium</i>	Acute shoot				*		
32) <i>Tragopogon</i> sp.	Flower buds (typical elongate shape)				r		
33) <i>Petasites</i> sp.	Flower buds showing composite structure				r		
34) <i>Allium sativum</i>	Bulb composed by bulbils				*		
35) <i>Laurus nobilis</i>	Flower buds					**	**

Legend: \*\* = frequent, \* = 2-3 representations; r = rare

of plant elements, especially in the cases of the tiles of the arches, the identification of most flowers to a specific taxonomic detail is now impossible, due to the bad state of conservation or to the insufficient carved details, and thus we can only suppose the genus or the family of the represented plants. As in the *Ara Pacis* case, the flowers of *Carlina*, *Lilium*, *Anemone*, and *Scabiosa* were recurrent in the external elements, but the most frequent were those of *Silene*, *Stellaria*, and *Calendula*, and also of *Chaerophyllum* and *Asphodelus*, which were rare or absent in the Augustan altar. In the case of central elements (the terminals), the most recurrent still resulted the fruits of *Asphodelus* and *Malva*, but also the flower buds of *Laurus nobilis*, which were absent in the *Ara Pacis* scrolls (Tab. 2).

The general structure is built up by external flowers with actinomorphic symmetry and the terminal elements with flower buds or shoots, and its build-up follows three schemes, respectively constituted by two, three, or four levels. In the *Ara Pacis*, a higher floristic richness is represented with a higher number of selected species. In both arches, the external flowers have from 6 to 14 petals, and the most common representation is that with six petals on the external level and a trimer bud on the internal level. The arch of *Septimius Severus* is in a better state of conservation and appears to have a high number of elements. They all have at least three levels



of composition: one external and two internal. Differing from the arch of *Titus*, the composition shows a more elaborate way of execution, and each flower presents a great variety of elements.

### *The symbolic meaning*

In the case of the Apulian vases, the “plant volutes” and the spiralling branches have been associated with the goddess of fecundity (Zanker 1989). In fact, the ceramic production is related to the period in which *Taras* reached its height. The floral spring realized on the neck of the vases is the symbolic representation of this period. The most representative motifs of this production had shoots formed by undulate stems enriched with tendrils encircled in spirals, animated by flowers, corollas, palmettes, and dentate leaves in arabesque volutes; the symbolic representation of the female head in the middle of the floristic elements sets the human representation no longer in a mythological context, but indicating a close relation and fusion with nature (Becatti 1965). The RF motif is presented at the end of the path of the vegetal composition, reflecting the dynamic sense of a process which has no end. The plant decoration is the representation of an eternal blooming that starts with a flower, carrying on in another flower, with the idea of eternal prosperity of the city.

This meaning is evident in the case of monument representations. In fact, the monuments constituted the most relevant elements of a period, and the monuments are the most representative carriers of ideas, and messages of whom decided to build them. A building or its elements are strictly connected with whom committed its construction and with the message that the client wanted to convey. In this way, the single elements that are usually designed as a decorative motif, need to be considered in the same way as the inscriptions or the reliefs.

For the *Ara Pacis* and the monumental arches, the double or triple flower representation is an augural motif that evokes the idea of eternal blooming, in relation to time and its cyclic conception. The use of plant elements is connected with the new *Augustus* political program. In the plant representation, there are also deities' attributes. Specifically, *Dionysus* and *Apollo* specific attributes are represented to celebrate their connection with the Attalid family. In this way, the metonymic presence of the deities in the vegetal frieze of the *Ara Pacis* recalls the *Pergamum's* reliefs and the will of *Augustus* to be accompanied during its new political program and approved in lineage as *Divus filius* (Centanni 2007).

The architecture of the arches changed its purpose giving more emphasis to both political and propagandistic ideas of power, which was carried through inscription (Mazzilli 2016) and symbolic representations. The interior vaults, accompanied by the deification of the emperors, were made by a coffered ceiling, where the metamorphic flowers in the tiles stand as an augural signal reinforcing the idea of prosperity (Torelli & al. 2008). The recurrence of laurel flower buds in the final elements of the arches has a clear augural meaning of victory, in coherence with the aims of the arches themselves.

## **Discussion**

### *The origin and diffusion of the RF motif*

Assyrian and Babylon cultures used the representation of metamorphic elements, which gave rise to chimeric animals and “tree of life” structures. The tree of life has been described in the book of the Genesis and in the Assyrian Babylonian culture as a symbolic representation

of the garden of Eden, the biblical paradise (Murphy & Murphy 2002). However, we cannot find examples in the Western Asian ancient representations, where flowers were used as single elements for their symbolic meanings (e.g., Ishtar Gate, Babylon) (Kleiner 2012).

The origin of the RF motif from the Apulian area can be explained considering the influence of Spartans colonization, occurred during the VII Century B.C., on the autochthonous culture, which created a new culture. As other southern Italian regions (Campania, Calabria and Sicily) of the so-called *Magna Graecia*, Apulia was inhabited by both indigenous and Greek people, and the local artistic production was an elaboration of previous elements merged together with the new ones (Giuliano 1989). The ceramic wares had a key role in this context, and they are considered a means through which the locals assimilated new messages as well as thoughts from Greece (Becatti 1965). First, the ruling class wanted to have the Attic ceramic for auto-representation needs, and then they started to create their ceramics, with a specific structure. Moreover, the ancient city was first ruled by a severe aristocracy that switched to democratic systems after military defeats (Masiello & Indelicati 2011). Moreover, during the time of the Pythagorean *Archytas* (mathematician and philosopher, which assumed a primary role in the city from 367 to 361 B.C.), Taras was open to sciences, arts and intellectuals, as testified by the great production of vases, sculptures, terracottas and jewellery (Trendal 1989).

In ancient civilizations, different aspects of other cultures have merged together and influenced each other, and artworks reflect something of the past that can be repeated or simply adopted with a new message. Considering these aspects, it is necessary to look at the phytomorphic images cautiously, considering all the little elements that compose the representation. Thus, there is a connection between the images presented and their meaning. What is shown through artistic representations is the result of many factors that connect various cultural elements within a community.

Then, from the III and II century B.C., when Romans conquered the Greek world, they started to be in contact with the Hellenic culture, which influenced religion, lifestyle and morality (Zanker 1989). Especially the artistic representations of the Republican period seem to have a relationship with the Greek-Hellenistic tradition, especially during the years of the conquest of Macedonia (146 A.D.) (Hölscher 1987). The members of the senator class were fascinated by the new culture, also renamed with the Latin term *asiatica luxuria* (the Latin noun *luxuria* is related to the abundance and wealth that Romans had seen at the Hellenic court). Moreover, the new noble families started to show their cosmopolitanism as well as their political ambitions. The Republican years acquired a key role in the development of the Roman art, becoming a prelude of the *Augustus* age. In fact, later *Octavianus* kept many aspects of the Republican structure in his political program. This led the emperor to be in contact with the people, an aspect also reflected in art, where we can underline a relationship of offer and return. This event has to be considered as a key moment in the evolution of art since Rome opened the doors to an entirely new world that slowly disclosed its secrets (Hölscher 1987). In the spoils of the war after *Actium's* battle, around 31 B.C., there were not only riches and artworks but also, and most importantly, Egyptian's scientists, whom, heir of the Assyrian and Babylonian at first, then of the Greek culture, transmitted to the Romans their ancient knowledge.

The recurrence of the RF motif in many celebrative monuments, such as temples, basilicas and in the triumphal arches, can be explained considering the origin of the arch itself, and to their symbolic meaning, which will later be discussed.

*The botanical analysis of the RF motif in the Roman archaeological monuments*

The botanical identification seems useful to deepen and to contribute to the understanding of the role and use of the RF motif in the architectural decoration of the past. In fact, several flowers and different plant elements were used to create metamorphic structures, and each one had a specific aim, even if the relevance could be different (for more details, see Caneva 2010).

Among the most significant plant elements, we need to consider especially those located in the central area of the motif, i.e., the terminal part of the blooming process. Then, the carving of *Malva* and *Asphodelus* fruits can then be connected to their use in the ritual offering to the Apollonian ceremonies, giving them the meaning of hope of a return of the golden age (Detienne, 1975). Great value should be given to *Laurus nobilis* flowering buds in the central part of the RF motif in the triumphal arches since they express an Apollonian symbol of victory. The bulb of *Allium sativum* is a propitiatory element, known since antiquity for its therapeutic and magical properties, and Romans, such as other cultures, considered it as one of the most important medicinal plants. *Cydonia oblonga* fruits were dedicated to both *Hera/Juno* and *Aphrodite/Venus*, and they bore the significance of driving away the negative/bad influences. *Arum* and *Biarum* species seem elements linked to the idea of fertility and female divinities of maternity. Analogously, *Panicum miliaceum* was a cereal associated to the idea of fertility and *Ceres/Demeter*.

Dealing with the external flowers, as starting points of the metamorphic process, we have observed a high variety of elements. For example, *Cardueae* and related plants had the iconographic significance of reference to the bitterness of the earth, as emerged from biblical texts, by referring to their thorniness and their ability to thus protect themselves. Lilies constituted an emblem of beauty and fertility; ivy, as an example of the noblest blooming, was a Dionysian reference. Anemones were associated to the myth of *Adonis*' death and the idea of the ephemeral, and *Narcissus* to the idea of beauty, but also death, being a flower associated to the myth of *Narcissus*. Nymphs in general and lotus in particular represented, according to ancient eastern beliefs, the "flower of the sun, of creation and rebirth". *Silene* flowers were associated with the moon, but also with *Silenus*, who in mythology appears as the clumsy tutor of *Bacchus*. Flowers of *Asphodelus* had a different symbolic meaning with respects to their fruits, and according to Greek mythology grew in the Underworld, where "the shadows of heroes" walked, and that thus they were "flowers of the deceased" planted close to tombs. Their presences in the arches probably honour the deaths in the military campaigns, which concurred to the victory.

*The overall symbolic meaning of the RF motif*

In this context, the origin of the RF motif is coherent with one of the fundamental ideas of the Hellenic philosophy of the continuous metamorphosis, in particular in the pre-Socratic naturalism. As expressed by the speculative and deeply metaphysical genius of *Heraclitus*, "to be is to flow" and "everything flows, nothing stays"; "the world would consist of a perennial transformation": each one of us lives in that one develops, in that one continuously renovates. At the same time the becoming of the being is linked with the non-being, however "this death is not a total dying, but a transmutation into something else". The myth of transformation and metamorphosis was already mentioned in the Alexandrine literature, in *Callimachus*', *Eratosthenes*'s, earlier than in *Virgilius*, *Catullus* and *Ovidius*. Starting from the *Pythagoras*'s theory stating the never-ending transformation

in the universe, in *Ovidius's Metamorphosis* is shown a lively nature where everything is changing in one eternal mutation, revealing the deceptiveness of the appearance.

The idea of a continuous metamorphosis of one element into another creates both a physical and ideological interconnection between the elements of nature and such a process of generation creates a sort of *unitary link between all the elements of the creation*, which is quite an important leading thread in the Hellenistic culture and the revived Pythagorean ideas of the Augustan age. The idea that the individual is only an element, a means but not an end, emerges from the observation of this continuous ending and transformation into something else contributes to giving the *idea of a starting point of further growths*. The richness of different plant elements contributes to the idea that nature follows such rules.

RF elements found a very suitable place in the ceiling of the arches, which express the purpose of emphasizing both political and propagandistic ideas of power (Mazzilli 2016). They become symbols of victory, and they find in the symbols of a never-ending flowering a perfect symbiosis.

## Conclusions

The diffusion of the RF motif started during the Hellenistic period (IV Century B.C.). It became a dominant element in triumphal arches, and later also in coffered ceilings, forming the so-called “rosettes”. Through the analysis of specific artworks and monuments, such vases, jewellery, marble reliefs and the Roman arches, we were able to confirm the symbolic value of nature, and its great diversity of plant elements. The floristic elements were often considered only as a decorative motif, neglecting the symbolic language linked to the primary role nature had in the ancient culture. It symbolically expresses the hope on an “eternal blooming” even if today its original meaning is lost.

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