Portuguese art: Portuguese Azulejos

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Introduction

Azulejo is the Portuguese word to describe a square ceramic plaque with decorations and glaze on one side. Azulejos have transcended their utilitarian decorative function in Portugal to become one of the most expressive art forms of Portuguese culture. They exist in vast quantities throughout the country as well as in the Portuguese empire including Brazil, Africa and India*.

Although azulejos do not originate from Portugal their extensive uninterrupted use for over five centuries, covering large surface areas on both the inside and outside of buildings, mean they have become representative of developments in Portuguese art for the last 500 years. Azulejos show influence from numerous cultures, from the first Moorish style designs to the European plant and animal themes of the Gothic and Renaissance and inspiration from the fabrics of India and the Orient. However it is the distinctly Portuguese tile production of the 17th century golden period that sees the true development of azulejos in Portugal, a tradition that was reawakened, in a modern manner, in the urban development of the 1950s.

Chapter 1: Traditions and Influences 1400-1600

The Islamic Tradition

Azulejos were introduced to Portugal by Spanish Moorish invaders early in the 15th century, who had in turn adopted the craft from the Persians. The Arabic heritage of the tiles is unmistakable; the word ‘azulejos’ comes from the Arabic word for ‘polished stone’. The majority of tiles from the early centuries have Moorish designs which have interlocking, curvilinear, lace-like and looping designs, or have geometric or floral motifs. Portugal retained a Moorish taste for completely covering wall and floor surfaces with decorations in the tradition of horror vacui (fear of empty spaces). The centre of Hispano-Moresque tile making at this time was Seville., where tiles continued to created in the archaic techniques of cuerda seca (dry string) and Cuenca until the 16th century*.

The first examples of azulejos in Portugal can be seen to have been imported from Seville by King Manuel I who used the tiles to decorate the floor and walls of the Arab room at his palace at Sintra in 1503*. These tiles consisted of the cuerda seca mentioned above and a Moorish tradition in the form of panel tile mosaic called azulejos alicatados.

The patterns on the tiles are those of Spanish Muslims called Mudejar and consist of simple glazed tiles in one colour decorated in geometric patterns. The tiles are similar to those found in the 14th Century Alhambra Palace in Granada. The pattern of the azulejos is not, unlike much of Moorish design, designed to create horror vacui but instead emphasize the architecture by creating an optical illusion, giving the feel that the blocks are stacked diagonally*.

View of the Arab Room, Sintra National Palace, c. 1500. photograph: Carlos Monteiro (DDF-IPM)

Azulejos quickly grew in popularity and by the late 15th century were used in large quantities to cover walls and floors. With the capture of Ceuta (North Africa) the Portuguese adopted the azulejos techniques themselves but continued to heavily rely on foreign imports until the mid 16th century.

The Italian and Flemish Influence

By the 16th century Portugal was receiving influences from other European tile makers. The Italians had developed the majolica technique which saw paint directly applied on to the tiles, making it possible to depict a more complex range of designs such as figurative themes and historical stories*. These techniques had also spread to Flanders where motifs developed in the Flemish Mannerist style. By mid-century the Italian and Flemish potters moved to Portugal to fulfil the demand for tiles. Gradually Portuguese craftsmen adopted the majolica technique and production was established. The earliest of these artists include Marçal de Matos and Francisco de Matos (thought to be his nephew and pupil) whose workshop drew its inspiration from the iconography and style of the Italian and Flemish Renaissance and Baroque paintings*.

Some of the earliest and most monumental compositions of this period include *Susanna and the Elders* (1565), in Quinta da Bacalhoa, Azeitão, as well as the *Adoration of the Shepperds* in the National Museum of Azulejos in Lisbon by Marçal de Matos.

Panel depicting Our Lady of Life, Marçal de Matos,c. 1580, MNAz inv. no. 138 Museu Nacional do Azulejos

The Miracle of St. Roque (in the Church of S. Roque, Lisbon) is the first dated Portuguese azulejo composition (1584) by Francisco de Matos.

São Roque Church, Francisco de Matos, Lisbon, 1584.

The adoption of the majolica techniques led to the creation of polychrome tin-glazed tile ("enxaquetado rico") panels with Renaissance-inspired forms but by artists with little academic training. Most of the azulejos illustrate allegorical or mythological and biblical scenes, or hunting scenes, and the workshops accumulated veritable libraries of engravings that they re-used for the different orders. The Church in particular ordered small individual panels depicting saints, religious emblems and narrative scenes. The nobility commissioned more secular works to decorate the new palaces built during Portugal's independence from Spain in 1640. One of the most important collections of these during this period is found at The Palace of the Marquises of Fronteira in Lisbon* *.

The Gallery of the Arts", Fronteira Palace, Lisbon, c. 1670.

Renaissance inspired tiles can be seen in the Church of S. Roque, Lisbon

The Muse Thalia,,c. 1670, MNA inv. 6914. photograph: José Pessoa (DDF-IPM)

Hispano-Flemish Mannerist styles (Azulejo Maneirista) also developed such as in such as in the Capela de Sto. Amaro, Lisbon.

Santo Amaro Chapel, Lisboa, 1670 · 1680. foto: Paulo Cintra e Laura Castro Caldas

The Leopard Hunt, Lisboan, 3rd quarter of the 17th century, Provenance: Quinta de Santo António da Cadriceira, Turcifal, Torres Vedras, MNAz invº 137, Museu Nacional do Azulejos.

In the 17th century the Church of Santa Maria de Marvila in Santarém gained one of the most outstanding tile-based interior decorations in Portugal:

Interior, Marvila church , in Santarem, Portugal

Although creating large monumental ceramic displays became well established in Portugal, it was an expensive method and so repetitive patterns became more common*. By the late 16th century a fashion for chequered azulejos (azulejos enxaquetado) had developed to cover large surfaces, especially in churches and monasteries*. Even though production of the plain coloured tiles, was relatively cheap, the organisation of pattern construction in alternate colours was slow and complex and therefore expensive and short lived. As a result of this, standard pattern and 'easy to apply' tiles began to appear in large quantities. These tiles were put together in rhythmic modules to create powerful diagonal patterns. These patterns were produced with borders and bars around them to help their integration into the architecture of the building*.

Patterned tiles. Interior, Marvila church , in Santarem, Portugal

During the 17th century a large number of framed tile compositions were produced which interwove the Mannerist drawings such as the life of a saint, with representations of roses and camelias (sometimes roses and garlands) these were known as azulejo de tapete. The best examples are to be found in the Igreja do Salvador, Évora, Igreja de S. Quintino, Obral de Monte Agraço, Igreja de S. Vicente, Cuba (Portugal) and the university chapel in Coimbra.

Devotional panel: "Our Lady of Carmo", Coimbra, 1770 · 1780, MNA cat. 6111. photograph: José Pessoa (DDF-IPM

Other friezes that developed in this period included floral vases flanked by birds or dolphins. These were known as ‘albarradas’ and were most likely developed from the Flemish still-life paintings.

The second half of the 17th century saw the introduction of blue and white tiles from the Netherlands. The majority of these were the large tile panels displaying historical scenes imported from the workshops of Jan van Oort and Willem van der Kloet in Amsterdam. Portuguese tile production changed dramatically when King Pedro II stopped all imports of azulejos between 1687 and 1698, allowing local workshops such as Gabriel del Barco to take over production. These blue and white tiles quickly became the fashion and the last major production from Holland was delivered in 1715.

The Dancing Lesson, Holland, Willem van der Kloet (1707). Blue-and-white earthenware Provenance: The Galvão Mexia palace, Lisbon MNAz invº 1680 Museu Nacional do Azulejos.

Oriental and Indian Influences

By the 17th century motifs were inspired by works from the Orient and India. This is particularly seen in azulejos used for altar decoration, which became common up until the 18th century, and which imitated oriental fabrics (calico, chintz). Examples can be found in the Hospital de Sta. Marta, Lisbon, or in the church of Almoster and the Convent of Buçaco.

Between 1650 and 1680 imported Indian printed textiles that displayed Hindu Symbols, flowers, animals and birds became influential, and an azulejo composition, called "aves e ramagens" ('birds and branches'), became fashionable.

Indian patterns, Sintra Palace

Chapter 2: The Golden age of Production

The late 17th century and early 18th century are seen as a golden age in Portuguese tile production with the appearance of the Cycle of Masters (Ciclo dos Mestres). A great demand for Portuguese azulejos had been created both in Portugal and in her colonies, especially Brazil. Mass production of simple repetitive patterns, largely baroque in style, supplanted large one-off orders as churches, monasteries and houses were covered in azulejos designs*.

The Cycle of Masters

By the early 18th century tile painters became seen as artists and often signed their panels. In reaction to the imports from Holland, a creative style of painting with a free and pictorial use of engravings developed. This style of exuberant decoration was introduced by the Spaniard Gabriel del Barco, active in Portugal towards the end of the 17th century, and quickly opened up the market to a host of artists including António Pereira, Manuel dos Santos and the artist identified only by the monogram PMP. Other important work was produced in the workshop of Antonio de Oliveira Bernardes and his son Policarpo de Oliveira Bernardes who were responsible for the most sophisticated figurative Portuguese tiles of this time*.

Mythological Scene, Gabriel del Barco, c. 1695, MNA inv. 900. photograph: José Pessoa (DDF-IPM)

Quinta da Capela, Sintra, António de Oliveira Bernardes, 1st quarter of the XVIII century. photograph: Nicolas Lemonnier

"*Foot Baths", Rua das Amoreiras, Lisbon, António de Oliveira Bernardes, 1st quarter of the XVIII century. photograph: Nicolas Lemonnie*

The continuation of the "Cycle of the Masters" throughout the 18th century can be seen in the work of painters such as Nicolau de Freitas, Teotónio dos Santos and Valentim de Almeida.

The Joanine Style

The production of tiles during in this period falls under the reign of King João V (1706-1750) and as such is called the Joanine style. This was a period of great tile production and witnessed the creation of the largest number of historical panels constructed in Portugal. The majority of tiles

were reproduced with motifs like ‘albarradas’ (vases of flowers) and simplified scenes. The decoration of the surrounding frames became increasingly important at this point. While commissions from the church continued to demand religious themes, secular orders began to employ more Baroque style mythological, hunting and war scenes alongside those of daily court life*. A particular form of ‘welcoming figures’ (figura de convite) that were specific only to Portugal developed during this time. The cut out life sized panels of tiles were placed in the entrances of palaces, displaying figures of palace staff such as footmen, halberdiers, noblemen and elegant ladies. An example of this can be seen at Palacio da Mitra*.

"Welcoming" figures, Staircase, Archiepiscopal Palace, Santo Antão do Tojal, c. 1730.photograph: Nicolas Lemonnier

The Rococo

By the middle of the 18th century Portuguese society bore a taste for the French Rococo. These panels were smaller and more delicately executed, baring a preference for organic forms such as the irregular shell*. These panels were largely inspired by the pastoral and pictorial scenes of the French painter Antoine Watteau. Examples of this can be seen at the façade and the gardens of the Palace of the Dukes de Mesquitela in Carnide (Lisbon) and the " sp. Corredor das Mangas" in the Queluz National Palace*.

Palace of the Counts of Mesquitela, Lisbon, 3rd quarter of the XVIII century.photograph: Nicolas Lemonnier

The Pombaline Style

The rebuilding of Lisbon after the Great Earthquake in 1755 gave rise to a new style called the Pombaline style so named after the leader in this construction, the Marquis of Pombal*. The bare and functional architecture, which developed in the hasty reconstruction of the city, required the decoration of ancient tile patterns to liven it up. It became popular to place small devotional panels on the sides of these buildings as protection from future disaster*.

Neoclassicism

The Neoclassicism which grew up in response to this style in Portuguese architecture, was also evident in Portuguese tile production. This was heavily influenced by the work of Robert and James Adams and was especially prevalent in the work of Real Fábrica de Louça in the Rato area of Lisbon*. Along with the master-designer Sebastião Inácio de Almeida and the painter Francisco de Paula e Oliveira, Real Fábrica de Louça became an important manufacturer of the characteristic so-called 'Rato' tiles*. Ceramic tiles became reminiscent of fresco paintings with unadorned white backgrounds playing host to a variety of themes. These were very popular with the new bourgeois class who preferred scenes that depicted their social successes and the elegant figures of the period.

Historical panel, José Berardo Foundation, Funchal, c. 1805. photograph: Carlos Monteiro DDF/IPM

Azulejos Facades

The French invasions (1807-1811) and social changes which characterised the first half of the 19th century meant that development of decorative tiles went through a period of stagnation during this time. The second half of the century found a new use for Portuguese tiles as Brazilian immigrants introduced the Brazilian trend of decorating the façades of their houses with azulejos*. These generally comprised of the less expensive type of standard-pattern tile produced in Lisbon, found in the factories, Viúva Lamego, Sacavém, Constância and Roseira, and those of Oporto and Gaia (Massarelos and Devezas)*. These factories used new semi-industrial techniques such as the transfer print method of production onto blue-and-white or polychrome azulejos. Towards the end of the century this developed into a different type of transfer printing which used cream ware blanks*. Stylistic differences occurred in the production of tiles. In the north tiles were characterised by a taste for volume and prominent relief, displaying contrasts between light and shade, while the tiles of the south remained more traditional in their patterns with smooth and flat patterns*.

Flowering vase Lisbon, Luís António Ferreira, "Ferreira das Tabuletas" (Ferreira of the Signs)

c. 1860 Provenance: For the garden of a rich Galician merchant living at Rua Nova da Trindade, Lisbon

MNAz inv° 5930. Museu Nacional do Azulejos.

The work of Manuel Joaquim de Jesús and Luis Ferreira continued the non-industrialised, hand-painted designs into the 19th century. The work of Luis Ferreira can be seen on the facade of his Lisbon factory, which is covered with allegorical scenes and the panels, known as "Ferreira das Tabuletas". This display flower vases, trees, and allegorical figures in the trompe-l'oeil technique and reflect the wave of Romanticism that swept Portuguese society at this time*.

Façade of the Viúva Lamego Factory, Lisbon, Ferreira das Tabuletas, 1865.photograph: Paulo Cintra and Laura Castro Caldas

Azulejo Façade, Largo Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, Lisbon, Ferreira das Tabuletas, 1864.photograph: Nicolas Lemonnier

These large scale compositions were continued in the work of Jorge Colaço (1868-1942) seen in Lisbon's Sacavém and Lusitânia Factories.

"Adamastor", Buçaco Palace Hotel, Jorge Colaço, the Sacavém Factory, 1907. *photograph: Paulo Cintra and Laura Castro Caldas*

Chapter 3: the 20th century

Early 20th century

Portuguese tiles did not escape the prevalent European styles of the early 20th century. The Art Nouveau is demonstrated in the works of artists such as Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, Júlio César da Silva, José António and Jorge Pinto. A good example of this can be seen in the work of the ceramics factory in Caldas da Rainha founded by Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, which created many of the imaginative pottery designs for which this city is known.

Detail of the ceramic tiles covering the station walls, by Manuel Cargaleiro. Photo by Paulo Cintra and Laura Castro Caldas.

This period was shortly followed in the 1930s with the Art Deco demonstrated by the work of António Costa.

The 1950s

The 1950s and its vast urban development brought about a revival in tile design, but on a modern platform and with modern materials. A new generation of architects commissioned young artists such as Júlio Resende, Júlio Pomar and Sá Nogueira to create tile panels for their new urban projects.

Under the influence of Jorge Barradas, who in the 1940s rediscovered ceramics, a number of young artists become interested in painting tiles. An example of this is the work of Manuel Cargaleiro. Artists began exploring the plasticity of clay as well as other new materials. This can be seen in the plaques of Querubim Lapa and explored further in the work of Cecília de Sousa and Manuela Madureira.

Detail of the ceramic tiles covering the Lisbon station walls, by Querubim Lapa. Photo by Arnaldo Sousa.

Significant activity occurred in Oporto at this time under Júio Resende who worked in cooperation with a number of modern architectural projects. His figurative compositions on tiles and ceramic plaques culminated in 1985 with an immense panel entitled 'Ribeira Negra'.

Ribeira Negra, Lisbon, Júio Resende 1985

The new Lisbon underground likewise provided space to be filled with compositions on a monumental scale. The majority of these designs are from Maria Keil. Her abstract designs combined the new modern aesthetic with the Portuguese taste for surfaces covered with all-embracing ceramics. In particular her decorations of the station 'Intendente' is considered a masterpiece of contemporary tile art*.

Detail of the ceramic tiles covering the station walls, by Maria Keil. Photo by Paulo Cintra and Laura Castro Caldas.

Since the 1950s the underground system has continued to support the use of tiles in public spaces commissioning further works from Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Júlio Pomar, Manuel Cargaleiro, Sá Nogueira and Eduardo Nery to decorate its new stations.

The newest additions to these include work from artists such as Júlio Resende, Querubim Lapa, Menez, Cecília de Sousa, Martins Correia and Joaquim Rodrigo, Jorge Martins, Costa Pinheiro and Graça Pereira Coutinho. The underground has also supported the tile work of international artists such as Zao-Wo-Ki, Sean Scully and Hundertwasser*.

Camões, Graffiti in ceramic tile, by Júlio Pomar. Photo by Paulo Cintra and Laura Castro Caldas

One of the most notable creations of azulejos during this century was the monumental decorations, consisting of 20,000 azulejos, in the vestibule of the São Bento railway station in Porto, created by Jorge Colaço. These depict historical themes in the narrative style of a picture postcard.

The entrance hall of the train station São Bento in Porto Photo: Cornelius Kibelka

Contemporary Design

The use of decorative ceramic and tile wall coverings still remains relevant in Portuguese art and architecture. This was demonstrated during the restoration of the eastern part of Lisbon in preparation for EXPO ’98, the last great World Exposition of the 20th century. Pedro Cabrita Reis and Pedro Casqueiro’s industrial tiles, sat alongside the ceramic figurative creations of Ilda David and Fernanda Fragateiro. Likewise Ivan Chermaieff's work in the Oceanarium, combines traditional standard-pattern mass-produced tile with new computer technology to portray large marine animals*.

The Shadow Fernanda Fragateiro, part of a set conceived for Wave Garden and Water Garden. 2000 Lisbon, Oficina do Castelo Blue earthenware MNAz Invº 7034 Made for Expo’98, Museu Nacional do Azulejos

Ivan Chermaieff work in the Oceanarium, Society for Environmental Graphic Design

Detail of a tile panel at the north end of the Oriente station part of 7 new stations in Lisbon built for the Expo, in the theme of 'water' by Yayoi-Kusama. Photo by Arnaldo Sousa.

Manual techniques can still be found in the work of Luís Camacho who draws symbols onto the glazed surface of tiles and the traditional witty and narrative painted tiles of Bela Silva*.