

# *The Azulejos of Lisbon: Art and Decoration, a Short Survey*

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**T**his study presents some of the most important *azulejos* (glazed tiles) that decorate churches and palaces in Lisbon, pointing out the characteristics and changes in the art of the *azulejos* that occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The focus here is on Lisbon, although there are, of course, many *azulejos* to be found in other cities. This art also spread beyond Portugal's continental borders – to the islands of Madeira and Açores, and to Brasil.



Fig.1: Palace of Sintra, Hall of the Arabs (after Sabo et al. 1998:Pl.57)

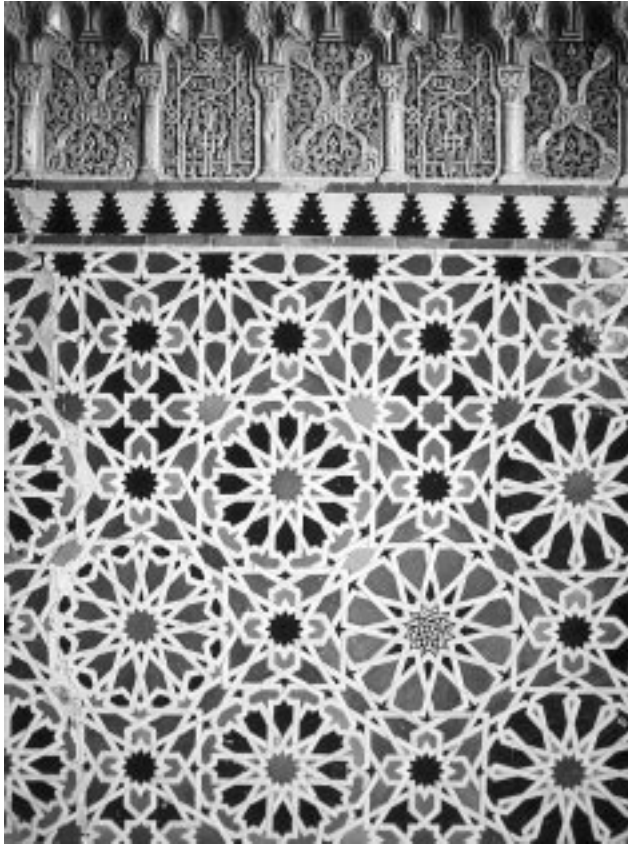


Fig. 2: Alhambra, Granada, Ambassadors Hall

The *azulejo* was first used in Mesopotamia. The name derives from the Arabic term for a small, smooth polished stone - *aljulej* or *azulej* which evolved to *azzelij* in Muslim Spain and then to *azulejo* in Spanish and Portuguese. The earliest *azulejos* introduced into Portugal were those imported by King Manuel I (who thanks to the Portuguese Discoveries, became one of the richest monarchs of Europe) at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> This king, after visiting southern Spain, imported *azulejos* from Seville, an important center of production, to decorate his palace at Sintra. This palace has remained almost intact, for the 1755 earthquake (which destroyed large parts of Lisbon), caused it only minor damage. The palace at Sintra (now called the National Palace of Sintra) near Lisbon was built on the foundations of an earlier residence of the Muslim rulers, who were expelled by Portugal's first king, Afonso Henriques in 1147. The kings who followed him enlarged and altered the palace, but the most important changes were those of Don Manuel I.

The room in the Palace of Sintra called *The Arab Room* (Fig.1) is one of many examples of the use of patterns of Spanish Muslim *azulejos*, known as *Mudejar*. The geometric patterns present similarities with those in 14<sup>th</sup> century Alhambra, Granada, in the Ambassadors Hall (Fig.2). However, while in the Portuguese palace the *azulejos* emphasize the architecture (such as forming borders around the doors and windows), in Muslim Spain *azulejos* were used in combination with *stucco* decoration – resulting in *horror vacui*. The pattern of the *azulejos* in this hall of the Sintra Palace creates an optical illusion that the blocks are stacked diagonally. The upper border is composed of Gothic lines with stylized lilies and thistles in relief. Such work in high relief was unknown in Spain in that period – so it seems possible that it was produced in Portugal, probably inspired by the *della Robbia* ceramics, imported from Italy.<sup>2</sup>

The technique called *majolica* or *maiolica* (the origin of the name may have come from the ceramics of Maiorca, according to one theory, but there are also other theories) made it possible to paint directly on the tiles. The famous Florentine *della Robbia* family of artists developed the production of high relief terracotta covered by a thick enamel opaque glaze on which mineral colours were painted. The Italian ceramists brought the *majolica* technique, developed at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to the Netherlands, where Flemish ceramists adopted the technique, as well as the iconography of the Italian Renaissance. Portuguese noblemen at first imported from Italy entire tableaux for their large villas, such as scenes of Virgil's *Aeneid*, produced in Urbino.<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands also supplied many tableaux in the Mannerist style for palaces such as that of Vila Viçosa, in Alentejo.<sup>4</sup> This led Flemish ceramists to settle in Spain and Portugal and to establish workshops there.<sup>5</sup> Gradually, Portuguese craftsmen mastered the *majolica* technique and local production became well established.

*The Adoration of the Shepherds* (Fig.3), of ca.1580, is one of the earliest masterpieces of Portuguese *azulejos*, attributed to Marçal de Matos, one of the great masters of 16<sup>th</sup> century *azulejaria* art in Portugal. He had followed, so it seems, an engraving of an Italian painting of the Renaissance, or of a Flemish painter. Now on display in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo, this was formerly the retable wall of the chapel of Our Lady of Life (Nossa Senhora da Vida) in the Church of Santo André in Lisbon: the rectangle in the upper lunette with the scene of the Annunciation indicates the place where a window had once been. The blue and white squares create perspective; illusory depth can be observed in the rectangles of the base, the pedestals, and the columns. An Apostle is featured within each of the *trompe-l'oeil* niches on the sides of the central scene: John the Evangelist and his eagle are on the left and Luke and his bull on the right.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 3: Church of S. André, Retable wall, Museu Nacional do Azulejo (after Sabo et al. 1998: 26)

The scene of *The miracle of S. Roque* healing a victim of the plague is depicted on a panel in the Church of S. Roque, Lisbon, of ca.1580 (Fig.4a). This is by Francisco de Matos, who is assumed to have been the nephew and pupil of Marçal de Matos, the artist of the retable with the Adoration, mentioned above. Their workshop was one of the earliest Portuguese *azulejo* workshops. The younger artist signed his works and dated them. Their workshop drew its inspiration from the Italian and Flemish Renaissance and Baroque paintings for both the iconography and the style of its *azulejos*. The scene of the *miracle of S. Roque* (Fig. 4a) appears in the central medallion, placed above an *amphora*, surrounded by garlands of fruits and flowers, crowned by a woman's winged bust, a diadem of feathers on her head. The artist borrowed the wrought-iron (*ferronerie*) motifs from Flemish engravings and combined these with Italian *grotesques*, cornucopias, flowers, and ribbons on a yellow ochre background, thus producing a Baroque effect.<sup>7</sup>



a  
 Fig. 4a: S. Roque Church, *The saint healing a plague victim* (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.87)

b  
 Fig. 4b: S. Roque Church, *Grotesques* (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.87)

Flemish engravings were widely accessible in Portugal during the 60s and 70s of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Italian books of architecture and ornamentation, as well as engravings were certainly a source of inspiration for the *grotesques* and other motifs so frequent in *azulejos* of the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

The panel on a pilaster in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century São Roque Church (Fig.4b) presents *grotesques* on a yellow ground, with *putti* or angels growing out of flowers. The sponge and the spear, the instruments of Christ's Passion, appear within the oval medallion. The style of this panel, which is from a Seville workshop, differs from the one near it. Thus, simultaneously and in the same monument, we find *azulejos* from both a Portuguese and a Seville workshop.<sup>9</sup> Spain's rule over Portugal (from 1580 until 1640) led to the renewed importation of *azulejos* from Seville, where the work was executed in *majolica*, of course, in accordance with contemporary fashion.

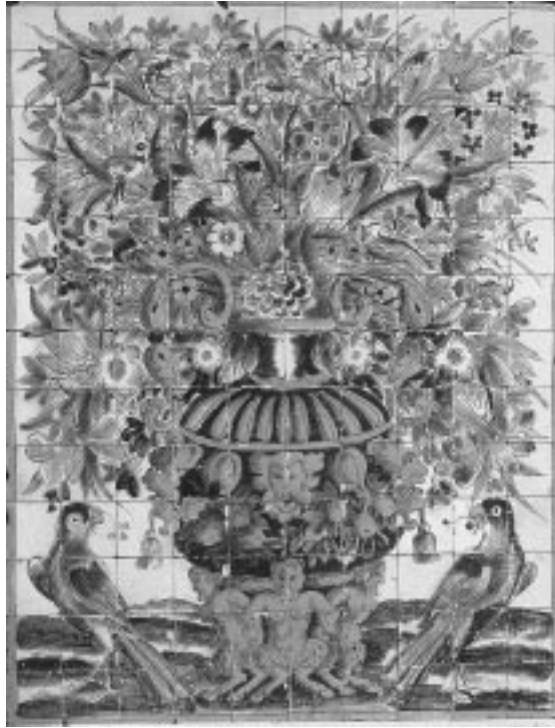


Fig. 5 : *Albarrada* (after Sabo et al. 1998: 30)

The pattern known as *diamond-point* (“*ponta de diamante*”) appears on tiles, also of Seville production, in the same church.<sup>10</sup> This pattern is an adaptation of the *cassetone* or coffered ceilings of Classical architecture; small oval shapes resembling inset jewels were added in the bands. The effect of three-dimensionality is created by the way the forms are lighted on one side and shaded on the other.

Floral vases recur frequently in 17<sup>th</sup> century *azulejo* friezes: *albarradas*, from the Arabic name *albarrello* for a vase with two handles or water jar. The inspiration for such floral arrangements may have been Flemish flower paintings. The vase or basket is usually flanked either by birds, as on the *azulejo* from a convent in Lisbon, now in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo (Fig.5), or by *putti* in other cases, and other birds perched on the branches amid the leaves. Rather than the meticulous painting of Flemish works, here the flowers are painted with lively brushstrokes. The composition is symmetrical. Flowers symbolize *vanitas*, because their beauty is ephemeral, but they may also hint at metamorphosis, or may also be the symbol of the passage of the soul into eternity. Because these *albarradas* appear frequently in churches and monasteries,



Fig. 6: Convent of Santa Teresa, Carnide, Altar front (after Meco 1985: 34)

they may also suggest another meaning. A monk (Juan de la Cruz) wrote that “flowers symbolize perfection of soul, and a bouquet of flowers, spiritual perfection”.<sup>11</sup>

The use of *azulejos* for the decoration of altar fronts or *antependia* is unique to Portugal, for it is found nowhere else. Several of these altar fronts (which can be found all over Portugal in churches and convents) follow a similar composition: the motif of the *Tree of Life* – trees with green leaves and flowers completely cover the background, and birds, some of them peacocks, appear perched on the branches.<sup>12</sup> These compositions seem to have been inspired by Oriental designs – probably Indian chintzes or embroidered textiles. It is important to remember that Portugal at this time had already “discovered” India and established strong commercial ties with it, and thus were accessible to artists. A 17<sup>th</sup> century *antependium* or altar front that was in a convent in Alcáçovas presents many similarities with Indian chintzes and Indian carpets and other textiles. The lower frame, with animals facing one another, includes tigers and elephants, as depicted in Indian art.<sup>13</sup>

Another altar front from the 17<sup>th</sup> century convent church of Santa Teresa Carnide, Lisbon, presents a central medallion with a coat of arms and a cross within it; the cross is the symbol of the new life given by Christ – immortality – to his believers. Large peacocks perched on flowering trees further emphasize eternal life.<sup>14</sup> Animals, mostly of Oriental origin, figure in the lower frame. (Fig.6)



Fig. 7: Carcavelos Church, *Nagini* on pendentif (after Meco 1985: 34)

The influence of Indian motifs is again visible in the inclusion of a *nagini*, a pagan figure of Hindu mythology, in the *pendentif* of the cupola in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Church of Carcavelos (near Lisbon) (Fig.7).<sup>15</sup> The *nagini* is associated with fertility and abundance. Her upper body is nude, and her lower body is formed by intertwining snakes; she holds on her head a large *amphora*, from which branches, leaves and flowers grow, with birds among them. The walls of the narthex in the 17<sup>th</sup> century chapel of Santo Amaro, Alcantara in Lisbon are decorated in the *grotesque* style. The arms and legs in the medallions are the emblems of the saint. *Nagini* appear here, placed in the spaces between the panels, on an illusionistic pilaster; in the lunette above, an *albarrada* is depicted with *putti* on the sides. The retablo with a scene of the saint as a pilgrim is hung as a picture.<sup>16</sup> Thus, these two churches are examples of the adoption of pagan figures in a religious context.





Fig. 8: Carcavelos Church, carpet style (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.90)

The *azulejos* in this church present what is called the *tapete* (carpet) style: a repetitive pattern of geometric and plant motifs covering the walls. These designs were frequently used in churches and monasteries, with inset votive pictures depicting scenes from the lives of saints or of Christ. The scene of *St. Anthony preaching to the fish* is depicted in a blue-and-white *tableau*, attributed to Gabriel del Barco. This artist, born in Spain, is credited with having introduced the Baroque blue-and-white *azulejo* painting into Portugal, following the style of Flemish artists (Fig. 8).<sup>17</sup> By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the blue-and-white style had become the prevailing fashion. This was probably due to the influence of Chinese pottery, which had reached Europe, and had been adopted by Dutch ceramists, who then created the well-known *Delft blue* pottery. During this period (the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), Portugal imported *azulejos* made by Amsterdam workshops, such as

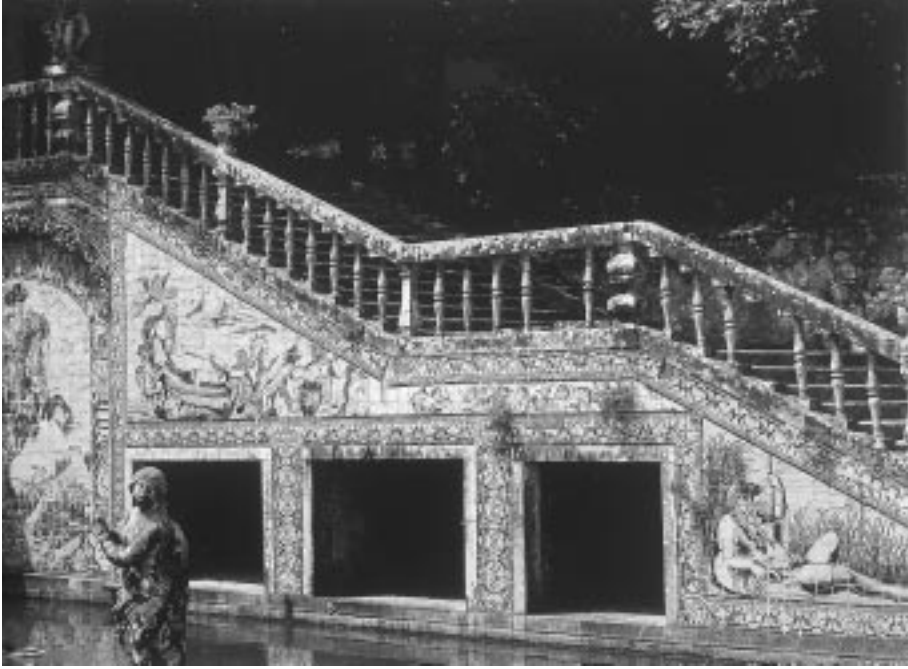


Fig. 9: Palace of Fronteira, Great garden and pond (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.100)

that of Jan van Ort, and from 1699, after his death, that of Willem van der Kloet, where large tile panels were created. For a period before this, however, between 1687 and 1698, the King had banned the importation of *azulejos*, thus protecting local artisans. Gabriel del Barco became prominent during this period, and Portuguese manufacturers gradually began to employ local painters to create monumental works and substitute the Dutch workshops.<sup>18</sup>

After Portugal regained its independence from Spanish rule, and the wars of restoration ended (in 1668), the nobility were again in a position to decorate their villas with rich *azulejos*. The Palace of the Marqueses da Fronteira, in Benfica (a suburb of Lisbon) is one of the most beautiful of noble dwellings of this period, and has one of the most important collections of 17<sup>th</sup> century *azulejos* in Lisbon. The gardens were inspired by Italian gardens, and this palace is one of the earliest to have had *azulejaria* specially created for the decoration of its gardens. The *azulejos* of the palace are of three types: polychrome, Flemish imported blue-and-white, and local blue-and-white.

The Great Garden of this Palace shows Italian inspiration: its hedges cut with precision seem to echo the architecture, which is decorated with many statues and *azulejos* representing the elements, the seasons, months, and the



Fig. 10: Palace of Fronteira, *Singing lesson* (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.on 34)

signs of the Zodiac.<sup>19</sup> Blue-and-white *azulejos* decorate the staircase of the Pond architecture in the Great Garden (Fig. 9).<sup>20</sup> On the side of the staircase, a river-god is shown; further on, the god Neptune, holding his trident, sits within a boat, while a *putto* crowns the god.

A long *azulejo* frieze covering one of the benches in the garden of the Palace of the Fronteira includes satirical scenes presented by cats and monkeys in a parody of human behaviour. One of these scenes is the 'Singing Lesson' (Fig. 10).<sup>21</sup> These scenes followed a genre initiated by the Flemish painter, David Teniers. In fact, such themes may be considered as continuing ancient models, as well as Medieval illustrated manuscripts.

The Gallery of the Arts in this Palace has niches built along the long wall with statues of the planetary gods placed within them; above the niches, busts of generals appear inside garlands of glazed ceramic in the *della Robbia* style. All the parts are decorated with *azulejos*, even the interiors of the niches. On the sides of the niches, the *volute consoles* presented in perspective feature bearded male busts, with tasseled cushions on their heads. Birds and plants decorate the balustrades.<sup>22</sup> On the lateral wall of this gallery, the allegorical figure of Poetry (*Poesia*) appears seated within the side niche, with flying *putti* holding a crown and a ribbon with an inscription (Fig.11).<sup>23</sup> The *azulejos* are in



Fig. 11: Palace of Fronteira, Gallery of Arts (after Sabo et al. 1998, Pl.108)

the blue-and-white style. Here too, the busts appear within garlands of glazed ceramics in the *della Robbia* style.

The statues in the lateral niches represent Apollo (with his lyre near him) in one, and Marsyas (his body showing the signs of his punishment) in the other. According to Dante, the flaying of Marsyas was like the agony to which the poet subjects himself, in order to attain the “crown of laurel”. Raphael had painted this theme, associated with Dante in the Stanza della Segnatura at the Vatican.

The goddess *Ceres* in her dragon car flying over the clouds to *Olympus* is depicted in a scene in the Hall of Pictures (*Sala dos Painéis*) of the Palace; it is in the blue-and-white style and is one of the *tableaux* attributed to the Flemish workshop of Jan van Oort, ca.1670<sup>24</sup> (Fig.12), ordered by the Marquis of Fronteira and imported from Amsterdam.<sup>25</sup>

One of the battle scenes that cover the walls of the Hall of the Battles (*Sala das Batalhas*) in the same palace, represents the Battle of S. Miguel. Except for some colour accents, such as the flags, the large panel is in the blue-and-white style. The inserted inscriptions refer to the names of the commanders.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 12: Palace of Fronteira, *Ceres*, Hall of Pictures (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.111)

The Palace of the Marquesses da Fronteira, as can be seen from these examples, presents a very rich iconography: mythological themes, battles, and also satirical motifs.

The late 17<sup>th</sup> century Church of the Convent of Madre de Deus has very large *tableaux* of *azulejos*, all executed in the blue-and-white style, the work of important Flemish workshops. The idyllic landscape was probably made by Jan van Oort's workshop, although some scholars believe that the *azulejos* of this church were made in collaboration between the Van Oort and the Willem van der Kloet workshops.<sup>27</sup> The architecture of the pavilion is Baroque, and the figures are courtly. This composition seems somewhat out of context in a church.<sup>28</sup> In the same church, the large *tableaux* of *azulejos* combine well with the *talha dourada* (gilt wood carving), adding to the Baroque effect. The blue-and-white style *tableaux* have also been attributed to the same workshops (Fig.13).<sup>29</sup>

Life-size figures in *azulejo* placed in entrances, patios and on stair landings, appear among the *azulejos* in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Patriarchal Palace (Palacio da Mitra) (c. 1730). These figures, known as *figuras de convite* (invitation figures),

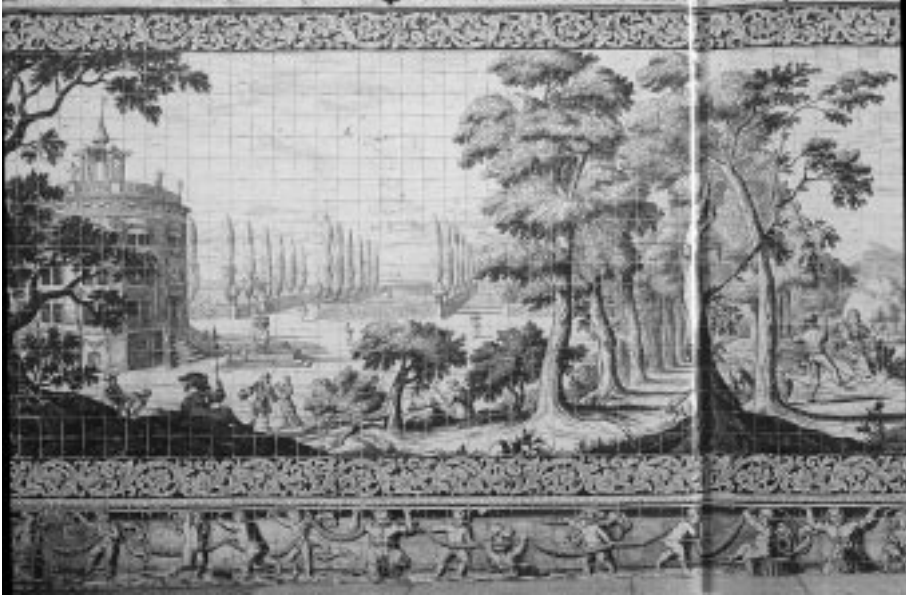


Fig. 13: Convent Madre de Deus, Landscape (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.118)

are unique to Portugal and are found only in *azulejo*, and seem to have been taken from the theatre, and from the Baroque sense of pomp. The life-size figures establish direct eye contact with the viewer, surprising him, while courteously inviting him to enter. They greet the arriving guests, welcoming them. An artist who signed himself "PMP" invented these figures (Fig. 14).<sup>30</sup>

The façade and the gardens of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Palace of the Condes de Mesquitela, in Carnide, Lisbon (built before the 1755 earthquake) are an example of Rococo *azulejos*. The four large scenes on the terrace represent allegories of the four seasons in blue-and-white panels encircled by polychrome frames; a lively rhythm is created by the cut-out outlines. Above, portraits of Roman rulers, in blue-and-white style, appear within medallions hanging from polychrome garlands. *Azulejos* with life-size depictions of famous Classical sculptures, placed on pedestals, decorate the terrace and gardens of the same Palace. Among these representations of famous statues in *azulejos* are the *Amazon by Polykleitos*, the *Wrestlers*, the group of the *Gaul killing his wife*, and the *Farnese Hercules*. (Fig. 15).<sup>31</sup>

The destruction of large sections of Lisbon in the 1755 earthquake, gave rise to a change in the style of *azulejos*: Neoclassicism made its appearance, adopted from French and English styles. The forms became simpler and more delicate, and the colours more subdued, and restricted to soft tones.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 14: Palace of Mitra, *Invitation Figure* (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.139)

The art of *azulejaria* in Lisbon underwent several changes over the centuries, influenced and inspired by Indian art, the Italian Renaissance, Flemish painting, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassicism. Engravings and printed books were widespread and made the works of famous artists easily accessible to Portuguese *azulejo* artists and craftsmen. At first, polychrome was the prevalent style, but this later changed to blue-and-white, and then back again to polychrome. The themes depicted included mythological, religious, as well as historical and satirical scenes, and were used in both religious and secular contexts. Artists created pictures in panels of all sizes, and also decorated architectural elements, such as walls, niches and benches in gardens. *Azulejos* were used for both interiors and exteriors of palaces and villas.

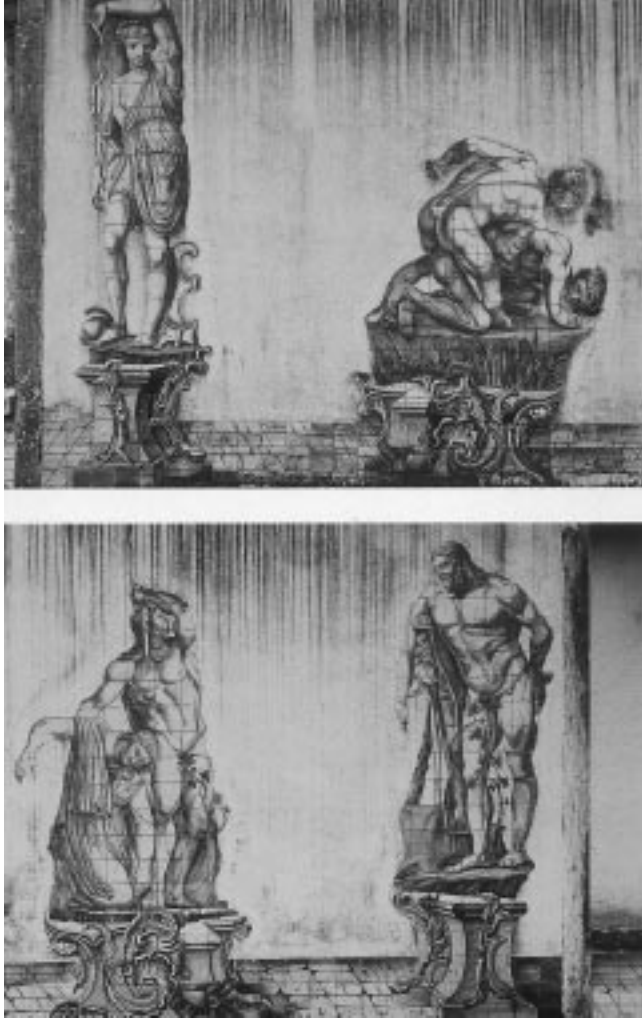


Fig. 15: Palace of Condes de Mesquitela, Carnide, *Classical statues* (after Sabo et al. 1998: Pl.191)

Portuguese modern day artists, many of them well-known, such as Vieira da Silva, Julio Resende, and others, have carried on the tradition and continue to create new *azulejos* to decorate the walls of railway and metro stations, as well as of many public buildings.



## Notes

1. Sabo et al. 1998: 20-22.
2. Sabo et al. 1998: 22.
3. Marggraf 1991: 201.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The commercial and cultural ties between Portugal and Flanders were well developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Everaert and Stols 1991: 8-9.
6. Pereira 1995: 42, 43, Figs. 43-46; Sabo et al. 1998: 26-27.
7. Sabo et al. 1998: 27, Pl. 87; Pereira 1995: 42, Fig. 42.
8. Engravings and books by architects such as Serlio with decorative frames on the covers, and books and engravings of Flemish editors and printers certainly exerted an important influence on the 16th century artists who created the Portuguese *azulejos*; see Mandroux-França 1983: 87-90, Ills. 86-89.
9. Meco 1985: Fig. 10; Sabo et al. 1998: 27, Pl. 87.
10. Sabo et al. 1998: 28.
11. *Ibid.* 31-32.
12. Monteiro 1998/99: 161-176.
13. Meco 1985: 34.
14. Meco 1985: 31-33, Fig. 26; Pereira 1998: 46, Figs. 65-66; Sabo et al. 1998: 32. For one of many parallel compositions of birds among branches and Christ's monogram in the center, see the 5th century mosaic in the Archepiscopal Chapel at Ravenna.
15. Meco 1985: 34; Sabo et al. 1998: 32, Pls. 90, 91; the same figure also appears in the narthex of the Santo Amaro Chapel, in Lisbon, see *ibid.*, 32, Pls. 96-97.
16. Sabo et al. 1998: Pl. 94.
17. Sabo et al. 1998: Pls. 90-91.
18. Marggraf 1994: 29-30.
19. Meco 1985: Fig. 29; Sabo et al. 1998: Pls. 2-3; Neves 1995: 82, 85.
20. Neves 1995: 90-92; Sabo et al. 1998: Pls. 100-101.
21. Sabo et al. 1998: Pl. 34.
22. Sabo et al. 1998: Pl. 109.
23. Sabo et al. 1998: Pl. 108.
24. Sabo et al. 1998: 36, Pl. 111; Neves 1995: 59 attributes this panel, as well as all the others in the hall, to the Dutch Van der Kloet.
25. Van Dam 1994: 59.
26. Neves 1995: 36-37; Sabo 1998: Pl. 114.
27. Marggraf 1994: 19-20; Sabo et al., 1998: 41-42.
28. Sabo et al. 1998: Pl. 118.
29. Sabo et al. 1998: Pls. 118-119; Arruda 1998: 60-64.
30. Sabo et al., 1998: 45, Pl. 139; Arruda 1993.
31. Sabo et al., 1998: Pls. 188-191.
32. Sabo et al. 1998: 48, with Pl. on 48; Meco 1985: 71; Pereira 1995: 50-51, Pls. 103-110.

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