

The marble façade of the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa in the context of the 1940 Centenary Commemorations: cleaning and consolidation

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The Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa, headquarters of the Most Serene House of Braganza, is one of the most notable 16th century manor houses still existing in the Iberian Peninsula. This article will focus on its magnificent façade – which is completely covered with white and Ruivina marbles from the Estremoz Anticline – contributing to the debate on topics of stone cleaning and consolidation (methods, materials, criteria).

Vila Viçosa was chosen as the setting for the Commemorations, in 1940, of the Centenaries of the Foundation of Portugal (1140) and of the Restoration of Independence (1640). The impressive façade should serve as a backdrop for the celebrations which would take place on the adjacent square. Within this context, in addition to some conservation and restoration works on the building, the Directorate-General for National Buildings and Monuments (DGEMN) technicians argued for the cleaning and “repair” of the stonework of the main façade, including the replacement of some broken pieces. At the time, the interventions on monuments were, in accordance with DGEMN guidelines, mostly aligned with the principle of “style unity” defended by the 19th century architect Viollet-le-Duc, which led to somewhat radical restorations that sought to retrieve the “original beauty” of the buildings. The approach adopted in Vila Viçosa is surprising, since it complies with the core principles of the 1931 Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments, which privilege conservation over restoration and favour the use of ancient materials and techniques over modern ones.

The technical description written on the occasion (1939) and the report of the Superior Council for Public Works (CSOP) (1940), both unusually detailed documents for the time, establish the action criteria: cleaning with safeguarding of the golden patina of time; removing any accumulated plants and dirt with the use of “pointer trowels”, and resealing the joints with a grout made of hydraulic lime and sand; and the replacement of stones - the new marbles should, as far as possible, resemble the colour and appearance of the original after having been briefly cleaned. Such restrained cleaning “should not”, according to CSOP, “involve the use of grinding wheels nor wire brushes, but only common water and piassava”. If it was carried out,

the stone consolidation (for restoring its cohesion and adherence) was probably achieved through injections of fluid grouts, then common practice in most of DGEMN interventions; and the stones attached, like in other monuments, with a strong plaster made of cement and sand, along with, perhaps, rustless brass “staples”.

Despite being one of the priorities in the program of the celebrations of the centenaries, and of the speed with which the technical and administrative process regarding the intervention on the Palace – House of Braganza’s property – was handled, the actual intervention only began after the 1940 celebrations, after the Administrative Board of the House of Braganza Foundation took office in January 1945, with the works resumed as they had been planned in 1939. Raul Lino, then chief architect of the Department for Studies and Works on Monuments of DGEMN, authored the intervention plan which aimed to adapt the building into a Museum-Library. The intervention on the façade took place in 1945 and was among the first works made. Lino’s criteria for this intervention were made clear when he stated “...we take no interest in plumb lines nor in rigorous alignments, but in ensuring the permanence of what already exists”. Critical of “style unity”, Raul Lino, aligned with the most recent international ideas, plays an essential part in transforming the practice of conservation and restoration of monuments. He opts to respect the pre-existing structures and materials, excluding “radical technical restorations” or imitations that may “be deceiving regarding the time of their execution”. In line with CSOP experts, Lino declares that “a special importance was given to the conservation of the appearance of the monument”, “we are concerned with preserving its evocative value”.

The prevalence of Raul Lino’s ideas, based on minimal intervention principles and on the prioritisation of conservation over restoration, gave way to new possibilities in the realm of monument intervention in Portugal, turning the Palace of Vila Viçosa into a fruitful example, revealing changes in the most radical action paradigms of DGEMN.

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