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Manager Claudia Napolitano

Editing
Francesca Petrucci

Informatic assistance Michele Gasparello

# Portuguese Baroque Art in Colonial Brazil: the Heritage of 18th-Century *Azulejos*

MARIA ALEXANDRA TRINDADE GAGO DA CÂMARA Open University of Portugal, Lisbon

Utilizado com carácter monumental desde o século XVI, como em nenhum outro país da Europa, o Azulejo é um elemento central da cultura artística em Portugal, rica e vasta memória patrimonial do nosso país, assumindo – com especial incidência especificamente no século XVIII – um sentido mais alargado do que o revestimento simples da arquitectura, modelador e regularizador, sendo hoje entendido como expressão artística maior, transmissor de ideias através das imagens.

Este ímpar conjunto de características e a sua intensiva produção tiveram também especial relevo no Brasil, onde particularmente na zona da Baía se conhecem deslumbrantes e magníficos exemplos. É pois desse fantástico e importante património, do seu estudo e da sua inventariação que propomos tratar neste sucinto artigo.

## INTRODUCTION

In Portugal the *azulejo* was widely used. Its complex adaptation to various spaces and diverse ends exceeds the purely decorative role initially conceived for it. Its relief and colour and the natural shine of glazed ceramic plates, resulting from irregular exposure to heat or deficient firing conditions, added to this medium a specific plasticity that distinguishes the *azulejo* from other materials. Furthermore, the dematerialization of surfaces and the animation of architectural spaces to create fictional, illusory environments made the *azulejo* a fundamental element of scenographic creation, especially within the baroque space.

The most significant art product of Portuguese culture, the *azulejo* indicates in each period the social, mental and artistic evolution of Portugal, as well as the country's major transformations, often assuming more of a spatial, architectural character than a merely decorative one. Its permanent and widespread use has elevated its status to that of national icon<sup>1</sup>.

The 18th century was no doubt the period in which the *azulejo* played a major role, becoming at this time a key feature of Portugal's physiognomy. It emerged as a luminous presence, a view held unanimously among Portuguese and foreign art historians. A privileged medium for painting on many dignified occasions and a cornerstone of the Portuguese

collective imagination, the *azulejo* possessed an important functional value throughout the 18th century, and is today recognized as a multifunctional artistic medium.

The true essence of the *azulejo* resides in its intimate relation with architecture. The *azulejo* stands out for its architectural application, the spatial configuration it promotes and the adequacy of the decorative and iconographic programs of the buildings for which it was conceived. This mutual dependency – architecture/the *azulejo* and the *azulejo*/architecture – was capable of integrating the formal and semantic transformations experienced by the *azulejo*, particularly during the 18th century.

In the period in question, the art of the *azulejo* was an active force in the architectural context and an essential component of the Portuguese version of Total Art<sup>2</sup>, in its relationship of interdependency not only with architecture but also with painting, sculpture and other decorative arts.

Relative to the expansion of the Portuguese art of the *azulejo* and the unifying role it played in Lisbon, we may speak of a genuine diaspora of the *azulejo*. During the Ancien Regime, Lisbon played a fundamental role as the center of *azulejo* production and made a decisive contribution to spreading this art throughout continental Portugal, as well as to its island and colonial territories. The volume and dynamic nature of Lisbon's exportation of the *azulejo* to these regions not only impacted upon the adoption of the *azulejo* elsewhere but also played a considerable role in renewing other regional arts.

This impact was primarily felt during the 18th century, as has been mentioned, the period of the widest *azulejo* production, its aesthetic values, erudite expression, formal language, scenographic effect and decorative motifs serving as the main unifying force behind the art of remote regions, on different continents, due to the influence of its decorative elements on these regions.

Such is the notable – but not unique – case of Brazil, which will be considered here. The journey of the *azulejo* throughout this Portuguese-speaking space had a significant impact on this vast art. Mass levels of production led to some of the most complex and spectacular examples of architectural integration, yielding some of the most important and captivating baroque collections of this period.

Let us now turn to this Portuguese art as it was assimilated in Brazil, particularly between the 1730s and 1790s, a broad chronological span starting with the so-called "Great Joanina Production" and extending to the Mariano period; a span during which a diversity of thematic motifs, decorative vocabularies and scenes became blended together.

# METHODS AND APPROACHES

Both Portuguese and Brazilian art historians have shown an interest in this aspect of the Portuguese cultural heritage, many significant contributions having emerged from a range of different editorial projects over the past sixty years. One of the earliest of these contributions is Reinaldo dos Santos's *A Arte luso-brasileira do século XVIII*, published in 1948, which offers a broad view of the art of the *azulejo* in open dialogue with other artistic domains, such as architecture, painting, sculpture and wood-working, and which, for the first time, calls attention to the genuine "transfusion" of Portuguese baroque art into the principal centres of religious and civil Brazilian life during the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1950s, João Pereira Dias published an important article on the pages of the "Revista Belas Artes" in which he offers the first analysis of the 18th century *azulejos* adorning the Cloister of the Third Order of Saint Francis of Bahia (in the city of Salvador), an interest he further developed in a paper delivered at the IV International Colloquium for Luso-Brazilian Studies held in that city in 1959.

One of the first essays in which the *azulejo* was the main object of study was the article by Joaquim de Sousa Leão which appeared in the "The Burlington Magazine" in 1944 under the title *Portuguese Tiles in Brazilian Architecture*. In 1945 Carlos Ott published an article in the "Revista do Serviço do Património Histórico e Artístico Nacional" (no. 7) on *The* Azulejos *of the Monastery of Saint Francis of Bahia*, in which he gives particular emphasis to the sources of inspiration that provided the basis for painting the *azulejos*.

Still in the 1950s and 60s, many attempts were made to recover and define a cycle of Portuguese baroque *azulejos* in Brazil. Among these are the first great overview provided by Mário Barata in *Azulejos no Brasil* (1955), in which, covering the period between the 17th and 18th centuries and drawing on archival sources, Barata develops a coherence description of the function of *azulejos* in Brazilian architecture, taking into account both models and sources of inspiration, as well as reflecting on the authorship of certain ceramic panels. In 1953 José de Valladares published a study – *Azulejos da Reitoria* – of the ceramic tiles adorning the University of Bahia building, which had been transferred from the old Aguiar manor house, also known as Bom Gosto.

The great pioneering work in this area involved the gathering and inventory of all the centers of *azulejos* existing on Brazilian soil, a task carried out by Santos Simões in the 1960s<sup>4</sup>: the monographical *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa* resulted in the publication of five separate volumes, one of which exclusively devoted to the *Azulejaria Portuguesa no Brasil:* 1580-1822 (1965). The aim of the series was to provide a panoramic vision of this art across the Atlantic.

The policy of inventorying and classifying the architectural heritage<sup>5</sup>, specifically in the case of Bahia (between the 16th and 19th centuries), allowed gathering more complete knowledge on certain group of *azulejos*.

The 1980s and 90s saw an increase in the number of publications on the subject. Notable contributions include those made by Pedro Moacir Maia (1990) and Ponce de Leon (1998), and two sequential works, *Azulejos na cultura luso-brasileira* (ed. Dora Alcântara, 1997) e *Azulejos-Portugal e Brasil* ("Revista Oceanos", 1998/1999). The published

Proceedings of the Luso-Brazilian Conference of Art History, held every two years, has constituted a forum for the exchange of information among specialists from the two countries whose research has most focused on this matter. Finally, two recent works have appeared on the subject. The broader one, which includes contributions of various authors, the Portuguese art historian José Meco among them, is entitled *Les Metamorphoses de L'Azur. L'art d'azulejo dans le monde latin* and was published in 2002 by Ars Latina; the other work is a specific study of the *azulejo* panels of the Cloister of the Third Order of Saint Francis of Bahia, undertaken during restoration process carried out by the Ricard Espírito Santo Silva Foundation in 2002.

It was specifically on the coast of Brazil (more concretely in the area of Bahia) that the baroque *azulejo* revealed levels of artistic excellence. Bahia possesses the largest and most noteworthy concentration of *azulejos*, an immense collection which, despite significant efforts, still remains an open field of study.

The detailed description of the legacy of 18th century Portuguese *azulejos* across the Atlantic remains to be done, hampered by difficulties which include not just the loss of certain sets due to demolition, theft and transfers but also piece-meal restoration work, which raises the considerable problem of identifying the most sophisticated, effective (and urgently necessary) methods for carrying out a complete study.

Nonetheless, there is some work of recording, analysis and even diagnosis which has slowly emerged from a range of different research projects and which is important to take into account.

The systematic use of *azulejos* in murals in both religious and secular spaces along the Brazilian coast varies in accordance with the uses and aims of the space in question. An analysis of the geography of the *azulejo* allows us to identify areas that received the *azulejo* from the continent and thus to discover the intentions that governed its usage at any given time.

A geography of the heritage of 18th-century *azulejos* and the cross-checking of information and documentation relative to each specific space allow us to identify architectural and decorative rhythms, the interests and tastes of the commissioner of the work, the "transplanting" of ornamental and figurative models and matrixes from one country to the other, and the dialectic between the desire for monumentality and wealth in the service of God and the spirit of restraint underlying certain religious orders (as in the Saint Francis monastery in Bahia).

From this perspective on the geography of the baroque *azulejo*, we can immediately distinguish two main groupings: the religious space, composed of cloisters, sacristies, church interiors, stairways, libraries and reception halls, and the secular space, including palaces and manor houses,<sup>6</sup> both places where the secular motifs of the *azulejo* are blended with religious figures.

Let us review several specific examples:

Among the diverse larger collections of *azulejos* belonging to the "Great Joanina Production" period in the north-eastern Brazil, one of the main ones is the substantial collection at the Saint Francis monastery in Salvador, the most noteworthy *azulejo* nucleus in the Portuguese-speaking world.

Of its vast spoils the thirty-seven *azulejo* panels placed on the bottom floor of the monastery stand out. Dated between 1746 and 1748, these panels came from Bartolomeu Antunes' workshop and were based on the *Teatro Moral de la Vida Humana y de toda la Philosofia de los Antigos e Modernos* (Fig. 1)<sup>7</sup>. In this baroque environment, the *azulejos* bring together a certain tradition of monumental architecture with the possibility of a medium incorporating both a formal language and a "modern" narrative.

The placement of symbolic *azulejos* in these cloisters is related to the circulatory and use-oriented nature of these architectural structures: on one hand, penitence; on the other, the pedagogical confrontation with the vision of the Holy Spirit.

Still within the same religious space, on the landing of the stairway – the space between the main chapel, the sacristy and the cloister – on the first floor of the monastery, six



Fig. 1

Convent of San Francisco in Salvador da Baía, workshop of Bartolomeu Antunes.



Fig. 2 Convent of San Francisco, first floor, allegorical figures.

arches open onto the galleries, which depict three great iconographic themes: the senses, the months of the year and the four parts of the world (Fig. 2)<sup>8</sup>. Significant here is the expression of a systematic relationship between allegorical figuration and the baroque valorisation of the image. The allegories thus direct us towards a specific knowledge of the world, nature and man himself.

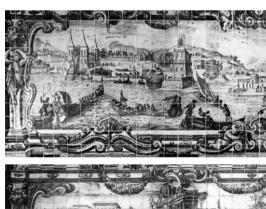
In the upper cloister of the monastery one finds five invitational figures<sup>9</sup>, which though not the primary decorative features of the space, contribute to its courtly dimension. The figures represent halberdiers, appearing in fabricated military garb (plumed helmets, chest plates, leather-fringed skirts and Roman sandals), thus reinforcing their eminently decorative value and symbolizing an involvement in the etiquette of courtly life.

Still within this same type of architectural space, the Venerable Third Order of the Saint Francis Congregation of Bahia is one of the most noteworthy of Portuguese artistic ef-

forts on Brazilian soil. The *azulejos* are spread throughout the entry hall, the atrium, the cloister, the side corridors of the church, the stairway, the consistory and assembly hall, the gallery of the nave and other compartments. These were the result of different commissions and not all can be found in their original locations, some having been moved for restoration work.

The most striking *azulejos* of the building belong to the great baroque decorative campaign of the second quarter of the 18th century, among which are the linings of the cloister and the consistory (Figs. 3-4), which recently benefited from conservation and restoration work<sup>10</sup>. The historical value of these works is unquestionable<sup>11</sup>, as they represent the Portuguese capital prior to its partial destruction by the 1755 earthquake.

The cloister presents this unusual narrative horizontal pannel depicting the royal arrival at Lisbon of the Prince and Princess D. José e D. Mariana Vitória in 1729, along with their respective nuptial procession leading up to the See Cathedral. The framing of these scenes is simple, with straight-lined bases and entablature, centring on panels bordered by figures of young children and interwoven with spiralling baroque compositions. The supposed images of Lisbon that provide the background for the procession are entirely invented, there being not a single building or space reproduced faithfully enough for identification. Its main interest is scenographic, and lies in its framing of the royal arrival. The panels stand out for their picturesque representations and for their suggestive images of the procession and the triumphal arches. The immense procession was condensed by the painter of the *azulejos*, and of the twenty-six actual arches only the most important were reproduced. Through the raised arches, almost all bearing inscriptions,





Figs. 3-4 Panels of the *Consistory Room.* 

a few carriages pass, observed in the foreground by a series of identifiable social types: members of the church and of the nobility, commoners, children and beggars.

The *azulejos* belonging to the consistory are organized into ten ceramic paintings surrounding this magnificent room, conveying the contrasts and irregularity of the city, with its dense and varied buildings. The panels reveal buildings whose details are severely distorted, which raises the difficult questions of the scale being used and of the model or source of inspiration.

Both sets of *azulejos* perform their function with complete effectiveness: to reproduce and thus perpetuate the idea of the capital as an urban centre with a representative function, while translating the affirmative rhetoric of the Portuguese colonial empire.

Halfway through the 18th century, between 1750 and 1760, new ornamental styles were introduced, including an increased decorative use of shell patterns. The rococo style thus began to spread, a style in which blue and white tones predominated, offering greater compositional density and drawing out the transparency and depth of the figurative walls.

A good example of an ornamental surface with rococo motifs can be found in the sacristy of the Boa Viagem church (Fig. 5) and in that of the Saint Anthony of Cairú monastery. In the latter case, the theatricality of the baroque is visible in the *washroom* – in the curtain surrounding the *spring*, and, on the remaining walls, in the magnificent framings of the doors, windows and chest of drawers, reflecting a conceptual elegance brought about by the fluid shell patterns characteristic of the French Regency style.



Fig. 5 Sacristy of the *Boa Viagem* church.





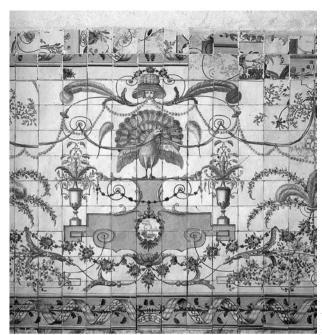


Fig. 6 Sacristy of the Monastery of Saint Anthony of Cairú.

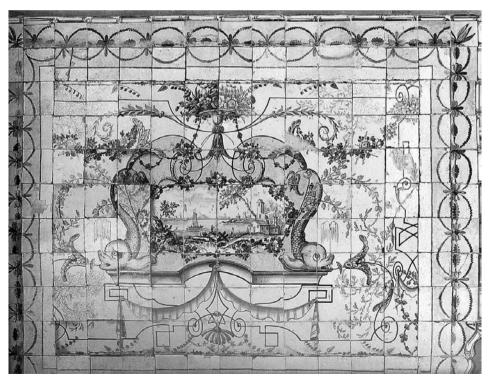
Among the secular *azulejos* of this general context, though somewhat later, the Conde dos Arcos manor house (Figs. 7-8) offers one of the most impressive collections of Portuguese neoclassicism in Brazil. This manor house maintains four distinct nuclei of *azulejos*, each full of loose ribbons and branches, with delicate floral patterns in rich alternations of colour. One may find medallions filled with manganese purple landscapes flanked with dolphins, coastal landscapes and seascapes in blue, bunches of feathers and other motifs centred on a peacock with its tail spread open and the small head of a girl with a hat.

The other secular collection is to be found today at the administration building of the University of Bahia, having been transferred from the Bom Gosto manor house. These panels are monochromatic, with blue forms against a white background, and the scenes represented are expertly designed. Iconographically, the themes depicted range from mythological scenes to scenes of idealized daily life and *chinoiseries*. The placing of these *azulejos* in their new setting obeyed strict criteria, their grouping having been dictated by type and theme (Figs. 9-10)<sup>12</sup>.

In closing we might state that, as it was used in Portugal and overseas, the 18th-century art of the *azulejo* represents genuine contribution to the universal history of art.



Figs. 7-8 The *Conde dos Arcos* manor hou-



# **Perspectives**

As we have seen, the heritage of the *azulejo*, transported to Brazil by the Portuguese, constitutes a "spatialized" cultural product, given its architectural fixity and its essentially practical, aesthetic and symbolic functioning within the building that houses it, often actively structuring the space in question and charging it with meanings and significance.

Nevertheless, the great diffusion and dispersion of the Portuguese *azulejo* throughout this period has complicated an exhaustive inquiry into this subject, as well as the subsequent work of comparative analysis. The baroque *azulejo* in Portuguese – speaking environments – specifically that of Brazil – has yet to be adequately characterised, embracing (as we have seen in the examples cited) a multitude of styles and tastes, and having been drawn into large production cycles which still require precise definition.





Figs. 9-10 Administration building of the University of Bahia.

A great portion of these *azulejos* is anonymous, providing no information about who produced or commissioned them.

We are well aware of the many paths available today for the study of this heritage in Brazil. We need to define new methods and work perspectives<sup>13</sup>, to think of new forms of aesthetic agency, as we search for an understanding and common pattern between this art and other art objects, drawing on historical information, artistic analysis and iconographic readings.

We must discover how to establish specific lines of action, to define a common method, checking criteria for the identification of the pieces existing in private and public collections, registering and preserving *azulejos in situ*, cultivating an effective restoration policy and putting together an inventory of the 18th-century *azulejo* heritage. This requires starting with complete or partial inquiries and articulating them with well-conducted multidisciplinary projects<sup>14</sup>, oriented to ensure the convergence of the knowledge they produce. This means constructing an integrated system through which it will be possible to assess the degree of preservation of particular examples of the *azulejo* heritage, to determine the methods used in previous interventions and to provide a continuous reading of the evolution of this same heritage.

A continuous and up-to-date inventory of this important heritage will supply material for reflection in disciplinary areas as diverse as art history, the history of culture and mentalities, sociology, anthropology, museum science, conservation and restoration, and the preservation of urban heritage.

We believe that an exhaustive inventory of the *azulejo* heritage in Brazil, accompanied by particular studies and development projects, with careful attention to current conditions and states of conservation, may soon offer a field of study for future generations of art historians and scholars from other fields.

In sum, within the context of colonial art in Brazil in this period, we can now recognize that the art of the *azulejo* offers us a dynamic approach to a decorative tradition that remains very much alive.

# Notes

- "[T]he azulejo is "naturalized" Portuguese in its decorative thematics of polychromatic patterning and in its scale as applied to walls, with such bold uses as the decoration of entire walls, a singular instance in the conception of Western ornamentation" (J.M. Santos Simões, A Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVIII, Lisbon 1979, p. 3).
- On this matter see L. Moura Sobral, Bel Composto: a obra de arte total do primeiro barroco português, in Struggle for Synthesis. A obra de arte total nos séculos XVII e XVIII, Braga, vol. I, p. 303 ff..
- <sup>3</sup> Among the foreign scholars who have devoted attention to the Brazilian side of issues in the history and criticism of Luso-Brazilian architecture, particularly to the question of the art of the azulejo, are Germain Bazin (Architecture Religeuse Baroque au Brésil [São Paulo 1949]) and Robert Smith (Robert Smith [1912-1975]. A Investigação na História de Arte [F.C.G. Serviço de Belas Artes, Lisbon 2000]).
- <sup>4</sup> In 1960 the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (F.C.G.) created the Group for the Study of the Art of the

Azulejo, directed by J.M. Santos Simões, whose objective was to gather information on the azulejo in Portugal, carrying out a systematic survey of the most representative and most aesthetically valuable azulejo nuclei in Portugal. By 1968 the full territory of continental Portugal, the adjacent islands and Brazil had been covered. See M.A.T. Gago da Câmara, O estudo da azulejaria barroca em Portugal: história, análise e evolução, in II Congresso Internacional de História de Arte. Portugal: encruzilhadas de culturas, das Artes e das Sensibilidades, Associação Portuguesa dos Historiadores de Arte, Porto 2001, pp. 163-72.

- <sup>5</sup> Cf. *Inventário da Protecção do Acervo Cultural*, vol. I Monumentos do Município de Salvador, Bahia 1974.
- 6 These constructions of Portuguese design are called "sobrados", and are currently being studied as important elements of Portuguese heritage in their own right.
- On this matter see the important article by A. Nobre Pais, O Theatro Moral de la Vida Humana no Convento de São Francisco da Baia, "Revista Oceanos, Azulejos", 36/37, 1998-1999, pp. 100-12.
- See P. Moacir Maia, Os cinco sentidos, os trabalhos dos meses e as quatro partes do mundo em paineis de azulejos no Convento de S. Francisco em Salvador., Bahia 1990.
- These are figures done on a human scale which appear in strategic areas and spaces. They first became an object of study in the pioneering work by L. Arruda, Azulejaria Barroca Portuguesa Figuras de Convit, Lisbon 1993.
- See Festa Barroca a Azul e Branco. Os azulejos do Claustro da ordem Terceira de São Francisco, São Salvador da Baía, Lisbon 2002.
- See M.A.T. Gago da Câmara, Lisboa Reencontrada: registos iconográficos na azulejaria Setecentista, "O Imaginário da Cidade, Revista Discursos: Língua, Cultura e Sociedade", 3rd series, 5, 2002, pp. 167-79.
- <sup>12</sup> See J. Valadares, Azulejos da Reitoria, Salvador 1953.
- See M.A.T. Gago da Câmara, Azulejaria Barroca em Portugal: história, análise e evolução," in Actas II Congresso Internacional de História de Arte. Portugal, encruzilhadas de culturas. Das Artes e das Sensibilidades, pp. 163-72.
- There is currently a Ph.D. project underway on the devotional figurative panels at the Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Pena in Rio de Janeiro. The project is being carried out by the architect Maria das Graças Ferreira and, focusing on the conservation of Portuguese azulejos in Brazil, involves a more general effort of theoretical grounding, as well as an exhaustive photographic and iconographic inquiry.

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