



# Fig tree (*Ficus carica* L.) art in the Azores (Portugal)

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## Notes on Ethnobotany

### Abstract

The art made with white heartwood slices obtained from the young branches of the fig tree (*Ficus carica* L.) is found only in the Azores (Portugal). It probably began in the convents of nuns, during the XVII century, and soon after the secularization of these institutions continued to be done by artisans. This exquisite traditional art produces light and delicate pieces, and it is now kept by few artisans.

### The fig tree in Portugal

The native range of the fig tree (*Ficus carica* L.) extends from the East Mediterranean region to Central Asia and Afghanistan and some authors propose that this species was domesticated as early as 11.000 years ago, coinciding with the beginning of agriculture (Falistocco 2020). Later, it was brought to the Iberia Peninsula, probably by the Phoenicians, around the beginning of the first millennium B.C., where it was cultivated and dispersed by animals, such as birds, and soon become naturalized because it found ideal conditions to thrive (Pérez-Jordà *et al.* 2017). It has always been an important food crop due to the high sugar content of the fruits (infructescences), that can be easily dried and stored. There are several regions in Portugal that produce fine figs, such as Mirandela and Torres Novas, but, historically, the most valued and well known are the figs produced in the Algarve, the southernmost Portuguese region (Sánchez *et al.* 2021). The Algarve was under the rule of Muslims from the beginning of the VIII century until the middle of the XIII century and as Muslims farmers knew this species well, they contributed to the increase of its cultivation area in the territory that is now part of Portugal.

In 2019, Portugal was the 27<sup>th</sup> world producer, with 3.380 metric tons, but the fig production has progressively declined since the 1960's – in 1969, the production was around 82.900 metric tons. This decline has several causes, including changes in the human diet, new patterns in the use of land and new agricultural practices (FAOSTAT, 2023).

### Azorean Fig Art

In the Azores, the fig tree, cultivated for its fruits, is naturalized throughout all the Azores islands, on coastal cliffs and ravines, generally below 500 m. The introduction of the fig tree in the Azores dates to the first settlements and must be related to the origin of the people who populated the Azores, who were from mainland continental areas of Portugal where the fig

tree was common (Costa, 1956). Nowadays, besides its use when ripe, in due season, they are also dried and used in sweets, jams, and fig brandy. Azorean folk medicine recommends figs to treat throat inflammation and as laxative; the latex helps the treatment of warts (Corsépius, 1997).

There is no consensus concerning the date nor the place where the art that uses the white heartwood of the young fig tree branches began, but tradition refers that it started in the nuns' convents during the XVII century, to create flowers and small zoomorphic figures for nativity scenes (Arruda *no date*).

Although this art was found in several Azorean islands, it was in the island of Faial that it survived up to the present. Its international prestige began when luxury pieces created by the artisan Emília Madruga Ferreira were awarded at the Paris Exhibition, in 1855 (Museu da Horta 1994, Rosa 2018).

The work begins with the harvesting of the raw material – the young fig tree branches with one or two years old. They must be cut between November and February, during the dormancy period, when the trees have no leaves nor fruits. If collected outside this timeframe, the young heartwood will become mushy and fragile, and so, unable to be used. The small branches are peeled off to obtain the heartwood that are left to dry for two to three days. In Portuguese language this core area is called '*miolo de figueira*' [fig tree 'cramb'] and this is the material that the artisans use.

The white material is fixed to a wood device (Figure 1), in Portuguese is called a *cortadeira*, in order it can be easily sliced with a sharp knife or a razor. An array of other tools will help the artisan to give form to part of a human figure, a petal of a flower, or any other item. To crease some details, for instance, the veins in a petal, the artisan uses a small device called a '*riscador*'. Then, the constitutive parts are glued together with liquid paper glue (in the past, Arabic gum was used). A flower (for instance, a small gerbera) takes up to four hours to be created and larger compositions may take hundreds to thousands of hours to be completed.



Figure 1. Slicing the young heartwood of the fig tree. Artisan Fátima Costa (Faial). Photo by Ofício Luísa Flores, Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores.

The Horta Museum – Horta is the main urban centre of Faial Island –, has a unique collection of 70 works [29 on display] made with '*miolo de figueira*' that were created by Euclides Silveira da Rosa (1907-1979). These works needed circa 35.000 fragments of fig tree branches and its weight is only circa 1200 grams. They depict an Azorean village, the seacoast near São

Paulo (Brazil, where the author lived), monuments, ancient crafts and national customs, vessels from the XVI century, commercial planes, and many other miniatures (Museu da Horta 1994).

Nowadays, the most common elements represented in this art are flowers (Figure 2) and branches of flowering plants (Figure 3), but more complex compositions, such as nativities scenes (Figure 4) continue to be made.



Figure 2. Bouquet of flowers. Artisan Helena Henriques. Author's photo, Beja Botanical Museum.

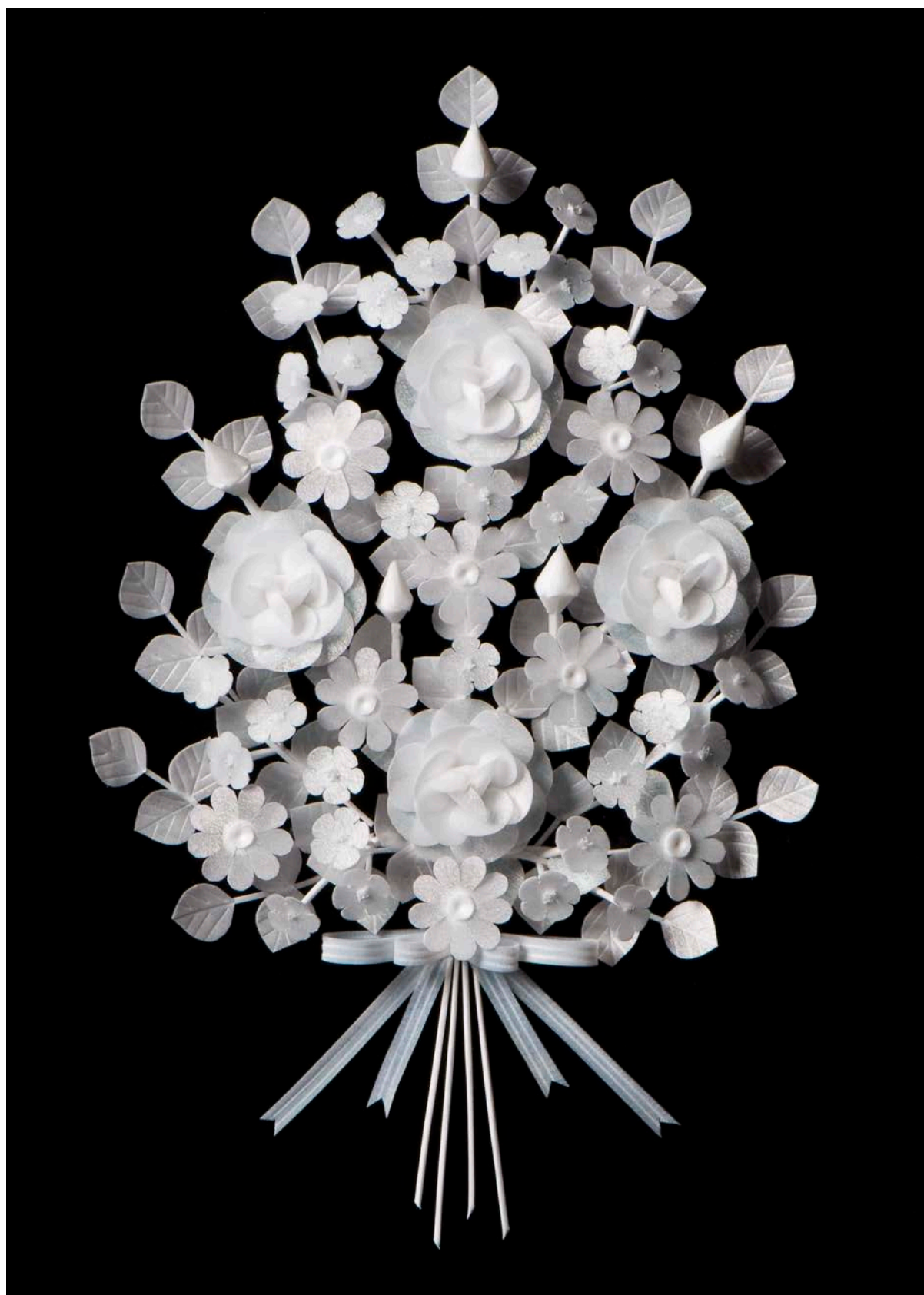


Figure 3. Flowering branches. Artisan Fátima Costa (Faial). Photo by Ofício Luísa Flores, Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores.



Figure 4. Nativity made with the young heartwood of the fig tree. Artisan Helena Henriques. Former Canha da Silva Collection, now at the Museum of San Francisco Church (Évora, Portugal).

Few artisans keep this tradition alive, although it has a high cultural and social value in the community, recognized by the Regional Government Ordinance 89/1998, December 3<sup>rd</sup> that certifies and adds prestige to this centuries-old art.

## Declarations

**List of abbreviations:** Not applicable

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**Consent for publication** Not applicable

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