

RESTORATION OF A VALENCIAN CERAMIC FLOORING IN THE PALACE OF THE VARONA FAMILY. VILLANAÑE (ALAVA)

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most representative examples of 14th and 15th century fortified complexes in the province of Alava is the tower and palace of Villanañe.

The fortress was built close to an important route that connected the Ebro river and the Bay of Biscay during the Middle Ages. The fortress consists of a two-storey palace joined to a tower. A fortified wall, a moat and two bridges located at the South and West ends of the fortress complete the site.

In 1988, the Regional Council of Alava decided to start a restoration process to recuperate the architectural aspect of the fortress, thus regaining a part of the Region's artistic and cultural heritage.

In this study we are only going to deal with the restoration process carried out on the ceramic flooring in two of the rooms of the palace.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CERAMIC FLOORING

The ceramic flooring was manufactured in Valencia in the mid-nineteenth century. Altogether, there are 1809 floor tiles in the two adjoining rooms of the palace.

The tiles were made by pressing a calcareous ferruginous type of porous clay. The colouring is a fairly homogeneous chamois yellow orange colour. The surface area of each tile is 205 mm x 205 mm and the thickness is 17 mm.

All the tiles were covered on the upper side with white tin glaze and then decorated with different types of oxides. The tiles were fired twice in a ceramic kiln at approximately 900°C although the tiles were not glazed or decorated until the second firing.

The smaller of both rooms has 591 floor tiles altogether which are covered in white tin glaze. Some tiles have geometrical decorations in cobalt blue. The design formed by the borders runs parallel to the parameters of the room. There are two different motifs repeated on each border, which form two different compositions and were designed by using stencils.

There are 1218 floor tiles also covered with white tin glaze in the larger room of the palace. The decoration of the tiles in this room is richer and more varied. All the tiles are hand-painted with different oxides such as cobalt, copper, manganese, iron and antimony. The layout of the motifs is similar to the adjoining room, that is to say, parallel to the walls.

The tiles in this room are decorated with four scenes from Don Quixote, a central mythological scene, four allegories of the four seasons of the year, four bouquets, sixteen floral designs and twenty-eight tiles with the image of a butterfly.

STATE OF CONSERVATION

The ceramic flooring of the palace was restored once before and the process went as follows:

In order to restore the tiles it was necessary for them to be removed first. Firstly, all tiles were numbered and finally they were removed from the floor slowly and carefully by using a chisel and a mallet, so as not to damage them.

Any remains of mortar and cement on the back of each tile was removed mechanically, then the tiles were cleaned properly and stored in numbered boxes. All the tiles were desalted by immersing them in demineralised water until all salt levels were practically reduced to zero. Afterwards, all the tiles that were fragmented were glued back together, all gaps were filled in with plaster and all colours that had disappeared were repainted. The restoration process was correctly performed except for the last two steps when the tiles were refilled and repainted, in which many mistakes were made.

STATE OF CONSERVATION AFTER THE FIRST INTERVENTION

The main problem detected after the first restoration process involved the ARALDIT glue used and the refilling of the tiles in hard plaster.

An excessive amount of glue was poured into the cracks to join the tiles together and most of the tiles were not aligned correctly, as there were differences of up to 2mm in some parts of the tiling. Also, all the tiles that were refilled with plaster had irregular and uneven surfaces.

With regard to the chromatic and decorative restoration process, it was obvious that



Detail of the ceramic flooring prior to restoration



Detail of the ceramic flooring after restoration

the colours were not uniform and the shades used were not exactly the correct ones, so that one's perception of the room was altered.

For these reasons, all glue and plaster refills were stripped in order to perform the restoration correctly.

Some of the surfaces of the tiles were dirty and others had some dirt in the hairline cracks. The glaze on some of the tiles was coming off, exhibited flaking or was chipped.

TREATMENT

- Tile surface and cracks in the glaze were cleaned.
- Tiling was strengthened.
- All plaster refills that were carried out incorrectly in the first restoration process were removed.
- All the glue that was not applied correctly was removed.
- Loose tiles were bonded again.
- All the gaps in the tiles were refilled with hard plaster, after removing the previous fillings, in the clay and the glaze.
- All tiles that needed to be repainted were restored and all the refills were specially protected.

Before putting the tiles back into their place, a product that prevents salt from the background from getting through to the tiles was applied to the floor, and then the tiles were installed with lime and sand.

Once the tiles were put back in their original place, access to the rooms was restricted to a certain area in order to prevent any further deterioration of the palace. From the area the public has access to, there is a full view of the rooms which have been furnished in 18th and 19th century period, and which will become a museum along with the rest of the fortress.