

CERAMICS IN PORTUGUESE ARCHITECTURE (16TH-20TH CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a synoptic view of the evolution of Portuguese architectural ceramics, particularly focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, because the origins of current uses of ceramic tiles in Portuguese architecture stem from those periods.

Thus, the paper begins with the background to the use of ceramics in Portuguese architecture, between the 16th and 18th centuries, through some duly illustrated paradigmatic examples.

The study then presents examples of the 19th century, in a period of transition between art and industry, demonstrating the diversity and excellence of Portuguese production, as well as the identifying character of the phenomenon of façade tiling in the Portuguese urban image.

The study concludes with a section on the causes of the decline in the use of ceramic materials in Portuguese architecture in the first decades of the 20th century, and the appropriation of ceramic tiling by the popular classes in their vernacular architecture. Parallel to this, the paper shows how the most erudite route for ceramic tilings lay in author works, often in public buildings and at the service of the nationalistic propaganda of the dictatorial regime. This section also explains how an industrial upgrading occurred that led to the closing of many of the most important Portuguese industrial units of ceramic products for architecture, foreshadowing the current ceramic tiling scenario in Portugal.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, ornamental ceramics used in architecture are generally - and almost automatically - associated only with tiles, even though, depending on the historical period, one can enlarge considerably the approach, beyond this specific form of ceramic art. Nevertheless, tiles effectively dominated the spectrum of ceramic decoration in Portuguese architecture in the last five centuries. This predominance was more patent during the centuries that correspond to the Modern Age, resulting in numerous examples of high artistic value, some of it widely known, even abroad. Much still needs to be done, however, to provide a better understanding of Portuguese tiles and other types of ceramic artefacts applied to Portuguese architecture, particularly those dating from the 19th century.

Although ceramics have been used since immemorial times in Portuguese architecture, their use with clear decorative purposes took precedence above all from the late Middle Ages on.

By the beginning of the 16th century, some Portuguese palaces, monasteries and churches were already decorated with ceramic artefacts, mostly tiles applied to the lower parts of walls. It was the so-called period of the *Hispano-Árabe* or *Mudéjar* tiles, produced with the same techniques used by Moorish manufacturers in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, many of these artefacts were even imported from the Seville region. Thus, to be precise, by the beginning of the 16th century one cannot really speak of Portuguese tiles: the technology and the decorative patterns were not yet typically Portuguese. Even later on, Portuguese tiles continued to be exposed to many external influences. However, these influences gradually decreased, leading to the emergence of some distinctive styles of Portuguese ceramic artefacts applied to architecture.



Figure 1 and Figure 2. Two examples of excellence in ceramic decoration applied to Portuguese architecture of the Modern Age: Church of Our Lady of the Saudação, Montemor-o-Novo (seventeenth century); Chapel of the Desterro, in the Monastery of Alcobaça (eighteenth century).

By the middle of the 16th century, the influence of Andalusia was weaker: covering walls with *Hipano-Árabe* edged tiles became out of date. The Italian majolica

technique and its renaissance patterns were seen as modernity. However, solutions that may be considered as already characteristically Portuguese were by then taking shape. This was the case of the *enxaquetados* (geometrical compositions with flat and monochromatic tiles of different sizes and colours) and, later on, the *atapetados* (tiles with patterns similar to the ones used in tapestry, like in figure 1).

By the middle of the 17th century, the main influence in Portuguese tiles was already a Dutch one. This influence may be seen, not only in the 1x1 patterns called *figura avulsa* (in which every single tile has a different motif in the middle, although with similar frame and theme as the others), but also in large figurative panels painted in cobalt blue on white glaze. Portuguese tiles dating from the first half of the 18th century are almost all painted in blue – a characteristic that was largely influenced by Dutch ceramic artefacts but it is nowadays assimilated as typically Portuguese. This archetype seems to us perfectly reasonable, since the art of Portuguese tiles quite frequently surpassed the excellent Dutch tiles of that period, not only in terms of painting skills, but particularly in terms of expressiveness (figure 2). One must consider also the greater impact of Portuguese baroque tiles on the overall architectural image, due to larger coverings, often overlapping the internal walls of churches and palaces, reaching arches and domes, which, sometimes, became completely covered with tiles. Additionally, the gardens of palaces and manors were often also decorated with these blue-and-white glazed artefacts, in walls, seats and other leisure structures.

During the first half of the 18th century, Portugal was the European country where tiles were used most massively, giving architecture a distinctive feature. It is symptomatic that the largest tile-pictures ever made in The Netherlands can be seen precisely in Portugal: in the convent church of Madre de Deus (Lisbon, nowadays the Portuguese Tile Museum), the largest one consisting of 931 tiles. Despite that, Portugal holds several much larger tile-pictures from the same period. Thus, the Portuguese case must be taken into account in every feasible approach to the global history of ceramic coverings in architecture.

Almost all the bibliographical references about this subject state that Portuguese baroque tiles represent the golden age of this type of art in Portugal. However, we don't entirely share that point of view.

In the second half of the 18th century, Portuguese tile painters progressively – but not entirely – replaced cobalt blue with other colours, adding also expressive *rocaille* motifs (figure 3). Simultaneously, new and more pragmatic tile coverings emerged, mainly inside the houses built in Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake. Confined to the lower parts of walls in lobbies, stairs and some main rooms, these coverings of the so-called *pombalino* pattern tiles (figure 4) foreshadow what would definitively happen in Portugal by the end of the following century: the democratisation of tiles in urban housing, both in interiors and in façades. In façades, Portuguese tile coverings from the second half of the 19th century may also be considered to be the golden age of this type of art in Portugal, impacting the urban image, which makes it archetypical.



Figure 3 and Figure 4. Two types of tiles in the palace of the Conde de Oeiras (second half of the 18th century): a more decorative one, rocaille, based on the baroque tradition, in a veranda; a more pragmatic one, based on monochromatic patterns, for non grandiose interiors, like this corridor.

2. THE DEMOCRATISATION OF TILES

During the second half of the 18th century, Portuguese tiles progressively lost their luxury aura. Obviously, this process was slow in time and these artefacts, due to their cost, continued to remain accessible only to the upper classes.

By 1834, when Portugal experienced a drastic change of regime – from a decadent absolutist monarchy to a parliamentary monarchy – tile coverings were still restricted to monasteries, churches and some chapels with wealthier patrons; the large majority of Portuguese palaces and also some less opulent manor houses, mainly on the outskirts of Lisbon. In all these architectures, tiles existed only in interiors and also in private garden structures. By 1834, there were also new urban buildings in the central areas of Lisbon with some tiles of the *pombalino* style in their lobbies, stairs and main rooms, as already stated. It was supposed that this type of more pragmatic applications would increase in Lisbon and even expand to other Portuguese towns. However, that was not entirely the case.

The political change of 1834 brought drastic consequences to the long-established Portuguese nobility and to the monasteries, which became extinct. Therefore, the tile market had to suffer a considerable adjustment: the demand for figurative panels dropped, since there were not so many new palaces and new churches to be clad with tiles. As for the *pombalino* pattern tiles concerns, these were mostly designed for smaller interior panels and were not so adequate to the romanticist taste that was emerging and that was linked to a new middle-upper urban class, which occupied the political voids left by the ancient regime. Initially, this new social layer of tradesman, stakeholders, politicians, doctors, teachers and other major urban actors updated the image of their existing urban houses. Since these houses were entangled with others, with only one public and visible front, it was almost impossible to transform them into manor houses. Yet, it was possible to give a new look to the façades, not only with the alteration of masonry details, but also with less expensive decorative solutions, similar to the

ones that were now being used in interiors. Inside these renovated urban houses, wallpapers with neoclassical pattern paintings, as well as ceiling stuccoes, were solving the problem of new decoration. In special rooms, like the ballroom, these renovated urban houses – particularly those linked to wealthier owners – received also murals, partially figurative and evocative - on a smaller scale - of something that was, until then, reserved only for noble palaces. Nevertheless, murals with figurative solutions applied to existing urban façades in public view were seen as bad-taste and therefore, as an inappropriate solution. Besides, even non-figurative murals were expensive if made by good artists and could become problematic in terms of maintenance. Additionally, wallpaper would easily degrade in façades. Thus, tiles with appropriate patterns were the most logical and efficient solution to renew these urban façades, Portugal having so much know-how in this type of production, which was by then reaching a point of lethargy. Tiles were easy to clean and maintain and would give these dull and entangled façades a bright new appearance, corresponding to the new social position of the owners.



Figure 5. Barcelos, several contiguous urban façades, in the core of the town, with tile cladding from c. 1860-1880: an example of similarity with wallpaper.

Right after 1834, the complete cladding with tiles began of some of the most prominent urban façades in Portugal. By the 1850s, this new artistic phenomenon, linked with the abovementioned social and political changes, was already spreading out from the urban elites of Lisbon and Porto to the elites of other towns. By the end of the 19th century, this phenomenon peaked. Yet, it was confined to urban areas or to some new houses along main roads, on the outskirts of towns, mostly belonging to nouveau-riches that were formerly emigrants in Brazil.

By the 1880s, the Portuguese urban elites were already rejecting the complete covering of façades with tiles.

On one hand, almost all moved to estates on the edges of towns, where they built cottages and eclectic manors surrounded by beautiful gardens. In these new houses, often located in leisure areas like Estoril (a beach near Lisbon) or Granja

(a beach near Porto), tiles were not really necessary to dress up dull façades, since these new houses were already built with architectonic details that made tile coverings expendable. Besides, the surrounding gardens provided a romantic atmosphere that cladding tiles could only simulate.

On the other hand, the Portuguese elites felt the need to distinguish themselves from the nouveau-riche, who were using the complete covering of façades with tiles in the most unusual and extravagant ways, in terms of colours and complementary artefacts, like allegoric figures, vases, pineapples, globes – all in ceramic materials and positioned on top of the façades, trying to imitate, on a smaller scale, the most lavish renaissance and baroque palaces. Also in terms of statues, vases and other crowning façade elements, the use of ceramic materials, to copy a previous model, allowed their democratisation. It reached the wealthier layers of the urban middle classes by the end of the 19th century (figure 6).



Figure 6. Ovar, detail of a middle-class house, with its façade covered with tiles and having also ceramic balusters and statues (c. 1900).

Some Portuguese novelists of the last 30 years of the 19th century insisted on the association between the nouveau-riche emigrants returned from Brazil and the new Portuguese houses covered with tiles, as well as complemented with other ceramic artefacts on all of their facings. This stereotype still echoes today, since all the superficial approaches to the history of Portuguese architectural ceramics of the second half of the 19th century eventually state it, as if it was a proven historic fact, which it is not. The phenomenon of the façades covered with decorative tiles and, in some cases, with ceramic crowning artefacts, is a complex one and its study has only recently begun (DOMINGUES, 2009).

With regard to design, the complete covering of Portuguese urban façades with tiles demanded appropriate patterns, not necessarily the ones used in wallpapers. We must take into account that the first examples of façades fully covered with tiles appeared in buildings with only a front turned into public space, sometimes without any special architectural decoration. Making these monotonous

façades more romantic needed to be done in order to avoid disapproval from other members of the urban elite. Otherwise, it could have the opposite effect, since this phenomenon was fundamentally based in emulation processes. Thus, the period between c. 1840 and c. 1860 was still closely connected to the past tradition of the most pragmatic tile patterns, influenced by the *pombalino* pattern tiles or by Dutch pattern tiles still in used in the first half of the 19th century. Not only rapid changes in style would demand a period of adaptation by tile manufacturers, but adopting it without cautiousness could also be risky in terms of social acceptance, except in the cases of advertisement tile coverings: in these cases, there was greater liberty to paint the tiles and to include figurative panels, since the aim was to create impact. Of course, in the case of tiles specially manufactured for Portuguese shop fronts, it was normal to have the coverings confined to the lower storey. However, there were many cases where higher storeys were also complete clad with tiles, usually painted with different patterns, which were not so exuberant (figure 7).



Figure 7. Paiva Pharmacy, at Leiria (c. 1860).

One might think that pragmatic *pombalino* pattern tiles would be perfectly suitable for the earliest façades of urban Portuguese buildings that were covered with tiles. Some earlier patterns used in Portuguese façades were, in fact, very similar to the ones used in interiors since the 1755 earthquake, particularly in Lisbon. However, in Porto, the tradition of *pombalino* pattern tiles was scarce. This factor was one of the most important in the formation of two rather different styles in the covering of façades: the Lisbon style and the Porto style.

In Lisbon, the first façades covered with tiles highlighted the outlines of doors and windows, as well as several lower storeys – very often having commercial functions – with the use of different pattern tiles, sometimes creating illusionist solutions, like marble rusticateds. In Lisbon, some previous tile manufacturers embraced this new market opportunity, which involved a certain continuity in terms of colours, together with innovative patterns, both geometrical and floral.

In contrast, in Porto – which was a less cosmopolite city – the first façades covered with tiles were more discrete. The outlines of doors and windows were not highlighted; the patterns were almost all painted in blue over white glaze; the same pattern prevailing in all the storeys of the façade. These patterns used in Porto between c. 1840 and c. 1860 were mostly floral and neoclassical and were produced by local ceramic factories which formerly didn't have tiles as their primary branch of production. Later on, the production of relief tiles emerged in ceramic factories of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia, which, in many cases, are unique in the world and which even in Lisbon, as well as in Brazil, are now rare.

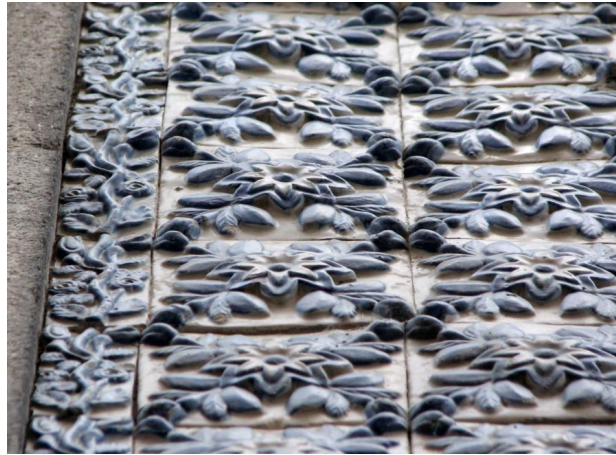


Figure 8. Porto, tiles in relief (c. 1875).

By the middle of the 19th century, the continued demand for larger amounts of pattern tiles, both in Lisbon and in Porto, drove their production to more mechanical procedures. The painting over *estampilha* became almost generalized. This fact lowered prices and, in a few decades, it enabled the access of urban middle classes to these artefacts, since they had also smaller façades to cover (figure 9). This social layer was, obviously, very interested in imitating the upper classes. However, by the end of the 19th century, this continuous mimetic process led the upper classes fully to abandon the complete covering of façades with tiles, with the exception of some more inflated *nouveau-riches*, particularly in urban expansion areas far from Lisbon and Porto. Besides the abovementioned fact of the upper classes now living in leisure areas on the outskirts of the main cities, after leaving their former urban buildings for commercial and renting uses only, there were growing prejudices against tiles, given their mass-produced character. On the other hand, since the beginning of the 1880s, some Portuguese art critics presented their arguments in the press against the industrial tiles being used. In doing so, they were following the same premises of the Arts & Crafts movement, only attaching value to manual crafts. This resulted in two important facts:

- a) the first real attempts to explore new patterns, new techniques and new colours that could combine the best of traditional Portuguese tile art with emerging artistic trends abroad, as occurred with the Bordalo Pinheiro factory in Caldas da Rainha;

- b) a large diversity of patterns available by the end of the 1890s – from the previously used patterns to the adaptations of foreign factories' catalogues (mainly English, Spanish and French) – as well as a vast array of complementary ceramic artefacts, mainly for the tops of façades, indicating the golden age of architectural ceramics in Portugal. The Fábrica de Cerâmica das Devesas is a perfect example of this peak.



Figure 9. Vila Nova de Gaia, one of the latest examples of façades covered with tiles (1930). This example is not the rule and represents the end of the line of this artistic phenomenon, at a time when only popular classes, especially living close to ceramic factories (as in this case), were keen to decorate the front of their modest houses with tiles whose patterns were already in use decades ago, as well as with other ceramic artefacts.

3. PORTUGUESE TILES: ACCEPTANCE, PREJUDICE AND IDENTITY

The Art Nouveau movement brought even more possibilities of choice, in terms of tile patterns. However, by the beginning of the 20th century, complete coverings of tiles were considered old-fashioned by the elites, even when adopting updated patterns. Moreover, Portuguese architects proposed the use of tiles in façades only as part of a complex decorative program, which had to include other materials. In every case, architects preferred tiles specifically designed for their projects, which were usually confined to small parts of the façades (figure 10).

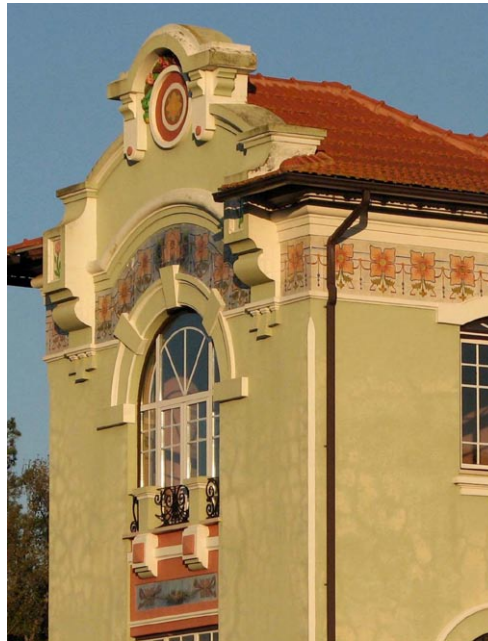


Figure 10. Late Art Nouveau house on the outskirts of Pombal (c. 1910-1920).

In the second decade of the 20th century, only in some interiors – mainly kitchens and bathrooms – tiles continued to be largely used for coverings, both by higher and lower classes of the Portuguese urban population, probably for practical reasons (hygiene and tolerance to water cleaning). In façades, besides small friezes and isolated special tiles, only urban middle-class owners and some old-fashioned nouveau riche from more remote Portuguese regions continued to clad completely with pattern tiles. Nevertheless, the trend was of decadence. Even pattern tiles lost their quality, these being increasingly produced with aerographers or mechanical stamping, according to English techniques generalised in Portugal by the Fábrica de Louça de Sacavém, which were not so appropriate to tiles used in exteriors. As a consequence, from the 1920s on, some Portuguese ceramic factories – until then with a polyvalent range of production – became specialised either in construction materials (being decorative artefacts limited to some clay roof components) or in tiles specially designed for interiors.

Meanwhile, new possibilities were emerging for the endurance of figurative tiles in Portugal, through special panels made by a couple of famous painters, often applied to public buildings, at the service of the dictatorial regime's nationalist propaganda, or even as a reminder of the way the Catholic Church used tiles in the first half of the 18th century: spreading the message. In Portuguese public buildings, like town halls, railway stations (figure 11) or courts of law, tiles appeared in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s as had never occurred before, although only in erudite panels. Pattern tiles were now not even an option for important façades, due to strong prejudice. Ironically, it was only from this period on that some façades of long existing Portuguese churches received the first figurative panels, a trend that would last, in many regions, until the 1980s, progressively becoming more vernacular in style (with some exceptions).



Figure 11. Railway station of Leiria, with tile panels presenting tourist information (1935).

This return of tiles as a resource in erudite projects, both in interiors and façades, although quite limited in number of buildings, has been overvalued ever since by art historians and even by factory owners. The Viúva Lamego factory, for example, despite being one of the best producers of pattern tiles in the last 40 years of the 19th century, completely neglects today this fact, with the exception of a sole painter from that period (Luis Ferreira), just because he was the author of interesting advertisement panels.

The myth, largely due to the pioneer tile researcher J. M. Santos Simões (SIMÕES, 1965), that urban façades with cladding tiles were a solution imported from Brazil (as a consequence of the return of emigrants), severely increased prejudice against Portuguese architectural ceramics of the second half of the 19th century. As a consequence, academic studies about Portuguese tiles from this period are almost inexistent, and the negative effects on this important urban heritage are notorious. Moreover, one must consider also the negative indirect effects of this prejudice against 19th century pattern tiles in the way Portuguese architects, owners and promoters are using - or not using - ceramic coverings in contemporary architecture.

4. CONCLUSION

For some centuries, glazed ceramic tiles have been used as decorative panels or as finishes of whole walls and façades, in several countries. However, in Portugal, they stand out as an extremely relevant part of the national cultural heritage: considering their quality; their numerous, large and impressive examples; and also the fact of certain types of ceramic applications and artefacts being almost exclusive of Portuguese architecture. This exclusiveness applies even more to the second half of the nineteenth century: a period of transition between art and

industry, when the diversity and excellence of Portuguese ceramic production reached their peak, even though not surpassing the expressiveness and skills of Portuguese baroque tile painters.

Overall, tiles are, therefore, part of the identity of Portuguese architecture. With regard to architectural ceramics of the second half of the 19th century, some cladding and decorating solutions may even be considered typically Portuguese, since in no other place in the world can they be observed, except, scarcely, in some Brazilian towns with a more preserved historical core. Nevertheless, the examples in Brazil were deeply influenced by Portuguese ones (DOMINGUES, 2009), despite many contrary statements seen in the existing literature.

The progressive appropriation of architectural ceramics by the popular classes, to a degree that cannot be seen in any other European country, also raised numerous prejudices against this form of art and architectural resource. It is our conviction that a better knowledge of 19th century architectural ceramics in Portugal and the subsequent promotion of the research results will have very positive and lasting effects, improving the acceptance of ceramic cladding and decoration solutions in Portuguese contemporary architecture.

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