

## **PORTUGUESE AZULEJOS (GLAZED TILES)**

### **Introduction**

Azulejo is the Portuguese word to describe a square ceramic plaque with decorations and glaze on one side. Azulejos have transcended their utilitarian decorative function in Portugal to become one of the most expressive art forms of Portuguese culture. They exist in vast quantities throughout the country as well as in the Portuguese empire including Brazil, Africa and India\*.

Although azulejos do not originate from Portugal their extensive uninterrupted use for over five centuries, covering large surface areas on both the inside and outside of buildings, mean they have become representative of developments in Portuguese art for the last 500 years. Azulejos show influence from numerous cultures, from the first Moorish style designs to the European plant and animal themes of the Gothic and Renaissance and inspiration from the fabrics of India and the Orient. However it is the distinctly Portuguese tile production of the 17th century golden period that sees the true development of azulejos in Portugal, a tradition that was reawakened, in a modern manner, in the urban development of the 1950s.

### **The Islamic Tradition**

Azulejos were introduced to Portugal by Spanish Moorish invaders early in the 15th century, who had in turn adopted the craft from the Persians. The Arabic heritage of the tiles is unmistakable; the word 'azulejos' comes from the Arabic word for 'polished stone'. The majority of tiles from the early centuries have Moorish designs which have interlocking, curvilinear, lace-like and looping designs, or have geometric or floral motifs. Portugal retained a Moorish taste for completely covering wall and floor surfaces with decorations in the tradition of *horror vacui* (fear of empty spaces). The centre of Hispano-Moresque tile making at this time was Seville., where tiles continued to be created in the archaic techniques of *cuerda seca* (dry string) and Cuenca until the 16th century\*.

The first examples of azulejos in Portugal can be seen to have been imported from Seville by King Manuel I who used the tiles to decorate the floor and walls of the Arab room at his palace at Sintra in 1503\*. These tiles consisted of the *cuerda seca* mentioned above and a Moorish tradition in the form of panel tile mosaic called *azulejos alicatados*.



*View of the Arab Room, Sintra National Palace, c. 1500. photograph: Carlos Monteiro (DDF-IPM)*

Azulejos quickly grew in popularity and by the late 15th century were used in large quantities to cover walls and floors. With the capture of Ceuta (North Africa) the Portuguese adopted the azulejos techniques themselves but continued to heavily rely on foreign imports until the mid 16th century.

## The Italian and Flemish Influence

By the 16th century Portugal was receiving influences from other European tile makers. The Italians had developed the majolica technique which saw paint directly applied on to the tiles, making it possible to depict a more complex range of designs such as figurative themes and historical stories\*. These techniques had also spread to Flanders where motifs developed in the Flemish Mannerist style. By mid-century the Italian and Flemish potters moved to Portugal to fulfil the demand for tiles. Gradually Portuguese craftsmen adopted the majolica technique and production was established. The earliest of these artists include Marçal de Matos and Francisco de Matos (thought to be his nephew and pupil) whose workshop drew its inspiration from the iconography and style of the Italian and Flemish Renaissance and Baroque paintings\*.

Some of the earliest and most monumental compositions of this period include *Susanna and the Elders* (1565), in Quinta da Bacalhoa, Azeitão, as well as the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the National Museum of Azulejos in Lisbon by Marçal de Matos.



*Panel depicting Our Lady of Life, Marçal de Matos, c. 1580, MNAz inv. no. 138 Museu Nacional do Azulejos*

The Miracle of St. Roque (in the Church of S. Roque, Lisbon) is the first dated Portuguese azulejo composition (1584) by Francisco de Matos.



*São Roque Church, Francisco de Matos, Lisbon, 1584.*



The adoption of the majolica techniques led to the creation of polychrome tin-glazed tile ("enxaquetado rico") panels with Renaissance-inspired forms but by artists with little academic training. Most of the azulejos illustrate allegorical or mythological and biblical scenes, or hunting scenes, and the workshops accumulated veritable libraries of engravings that they re-used for the different orders. The Church in particular ordered small individual panels depicting saints, religious emblems and narrative scenes. The nobility commissioned more secular works to decorate the new palaces built during Portugal's independence from Spain in 1640. One of the most important collections of these during this period is found at The Palace of the Marquises of Fronteira in Lisbon\* \*.



*The Gallery of the Arts", Fronteira Palace, Lisbon, c. 1670.*

Renaissance inspired tiles can be seen in the Church of S. Roque, Lisbon



The Muse Thalia,,c. 1670, MNA inv. 6914.  
photograph: José Pessoa (DDF-IPM)



*The Leopard Hunt,  
Lisboan, 3rd quarter  
of the 17th century,  
Provenance: Quinta  
de Santo António da  
Cadriceira, Turcifal,  
Torres Vedras,  
MNAz invº 137,  
Museu Nacional do  
Azulejos.*

In the 17th century the Church of Santa Maria de Marvila in Santarém gained one of the most outstanding tile-based interior decorations in Portugal:



*Interior,  
Marvila  
church , in  
Santarem,  
Portugal*



Although creating large monumental ceramic displays became well established in Portugal, it was an expensive method and so repetitive patterns became more common\*. By the late 16th century a fashion for chequered azulejos (azulejos enxaquetado) had developed to cover large surfaces, especially in churches and monasteries\*. Even though production of the plain coloured tiles, was relatively cheap, the organisation of pattern construction in alternate colours was slow and complex and therefore expensive and short lived. As a result of this, standard pattern and 'easy to apply' tiles began to appear in large quantities. These tiles were put together in rhythmic modules to create powerful diagonal patterns. These patterns were produced with borders and bars around them to help their integration into the architecture of the building\*.



*Patterned tiles.  
Interior, Marvila  
church , in  
Santarem,  
Portugal*

During the 17th century a large number of framed tile compositions were produced which interwove the Mannerist drawings such as the life of a saint, with representations of roses and camellias (sometimes roses and garlands) these were known as azulejo de tapete. The best examples are to be found in the Igreja do Salvador, Évora, Igreja de S. Quintino, Obral de Monte Agraço, Igreja de S. Vicente, Cuba (Portugal) and the university chapel in Coimbra.



*Devotional panel: "Our Lady of Carmo", Coimbra, 1770 - 1780, MNA cat. 6111.  
photograph: José Pessoa  
(DDF-IPM)*

Other friezes that developed in this period included floral vases flanked by birds or dolphins. These were known as 'albarradas' and were most likely developed from the Flemish still-life paintings.

The second half of the 17th century saw the introduction of blue and white tiles from the Netherlands. The majority of these were the large tile panels displaying historical scenes imported from the workshops of Jan van Oort and Willem van der Kloet in Amsterdam. Portuguese tile production changed dramatically when King Pedro II stopped all imports of azulejos between 1687 and 1698, allowing local workshops such as Gabriel del Barco to take over production. These blue and white tiles quickly became the fashion and the last major production from Holland was delivered in 1715.



*The Dancing Lesson,  
Holland, Willem van der  
Kloet (1707). Blue-and-  
white earthenware  
Provenance: The Galvão  
Mexia palace, Lisbon  
MNAz invº 1680 Museu  
Nacional do Azulejos.*

## **Oriental and Indian Influences**

By the 17th century motifs were inspired by works from the Orient and India. This is particularly seen in azulejos used for altar decoration, which became common up until the 18th century, and which imitated oriental fabrics (calico, chintz). Examples can be found in the Hospital de Sta. Marta, Lisbon, or in the church of Almoester and the Convent of Buçaco.

Between 1650 and 1680 imported Indian printed textiles that displayed Hindu Symbols, flowers, animals and birds became influential, and an azulejo composition, called "aves e ramagens" ('birds and branches'), became fashionable.



*Indian patterns, Sintra Palace*