

THE INTEGRATION OF AZULEJOS IN THE MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE OF PORTUGAL AS A UNIQUE CASE IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing international appreciation of Portuguese azulejos, spurred not only by the acknowledgement of their integration in Baroque architecture as a unique heritage, but also by the continued use of painted tiles that spans to this day, azulejos have been a subject of interest and research. The technology of manufacture, the forms of decay and the materials and techniques for restoration have been studied for pre-20th century azulejos. However, such studies did not encompass modernist azulejos, manufactured after the second world war, which must be understood and conserved now, so that they will be available for future appreciation. Understanding the relevance of modernist azulejos in Portugal as cultural heritage and the *raison d'être* of their integration, not only in Portuguese, but also in Brazilian architecture is important to discuss their preservation. The aim of this paper is to discuss and attempt to assign values to modernist azulejos in Portugal as an unique regional trend in the modern movement in Europe.

Keywords: Azulejos / Values / Modern Architecture / Portugal

1. INTRODUCTION

For about five centuries, azulejos have been one of the favourite materials for parietal finishing and decoration in Portugal, acquiring a uniqueness of artistic aspects [1-3]. The azulejo itself is the result of a slow technical evolution, due to successive improvement of processes that resulted in the faience azulejos that we know today [4,11]. Figure 1 summarizes the use of azulejos in Portugal over the years.

As several studies report [4-13] azulejos were introduced in Portugal from once-Islamic Andalusia in the early 16th century. Following a visit by King Manuel I to Spain, azulejos were imported in large quantities and used inside of palaces and churches as decorative elements, depicting their Islamic origin through the patterns [4,7,12]. However, the use that the Portuguese gave to azulejo was highly creative, setting them in ways that were

influenced by the style of the buildings they were to enrich. As Santos Simões (1907-1972) notes, the Portuguese conceived differently the use of azulejos:

*“Desde o início parece ter existido um particular espírito “monumental” no uso dos azulejos”*¹ (J. M. Dos Santos Simões, 1956)

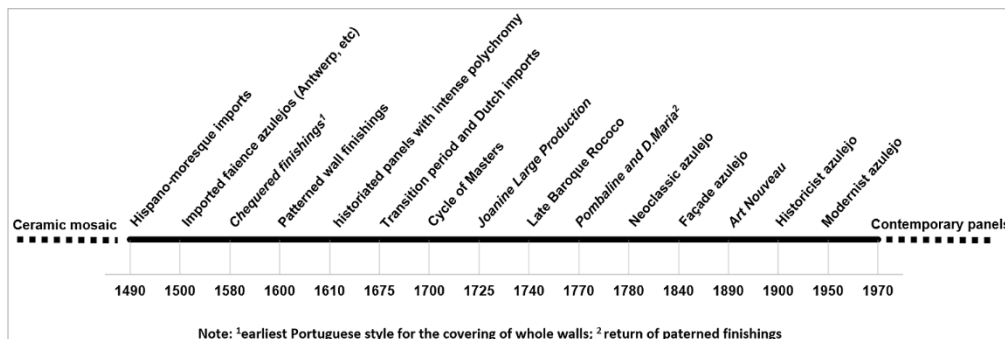


Figure 1: Azulejo applied in Portugal over the years [12]

From the early 18th century, practically only azulejos produced in Portugal were used in the country and since then they have acquired a definite and specific character [4,7,9]. One may say that azulejos became the Portuguese solution for mural decoration fulfilling the function which, for example, in countries such as Italy or France was accomplished by mural paintings or tapestries [2,4]. Also, the characteristics of azulejos allowed them to be the final “touch” to the Portuguese constructions of which they became an inextricable part and a characteristic aspect of easy recognition [2,5,11].

As stated by Santos Simões² in 1961, it was in the 17th century that the local characteristics of azulejo use were set: *the monumentality* - Portuguese had the extraordinary notion of scale of this material; *the modernity* – azulejo emerged in parallel with any other art; *the versatility of its use* and, finally, *the way it adapts to the architecture* - for its simplicity, the azulejo, when properly used, gives a classy look to an otherwise plain building. It is interesting to note that, after all this time, these characteristics may continue to be called upon to demonstrate the relevance of the azulejo as a cultural heritage. They continue valid even in the present day. The evolution of Portuguese azulejos, in contrast to the static and routinely use in other countries gives it a peculiar value as “obra de arte”³, in the words of Santos Simões [4].

¹ “Since the earliest times a peculiar “monumental” view on the use of azulejos seems to be apparent” - João Miguel dos Santos Simões (1907-1972) in *Estudos de Azulejaria. Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda*, p. 168 [4].

² João Miguel dos Santos Simões (1907-1972) in *Estudos de Azulejaria. Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda*, p. 253 [4].

³ “work of art” - João Miguel dos Santos Simões (1907-1972) in *Estudos de Azulejaria. Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda*, p. 219.

The azulejo can be analysed in several aspects: the historical, the technical and the aesthetic. Azulejos are not easily parted from the architecture to which they “belong” since they would lose their integrative value and could not be properly appreciated. When considering values associated to cultural heritage, those properties that are unique to a certain region or country, are in a class of their own, for instance as pertains their interest to cultural tourism. This paper discusses the historical and aesthetic uniqueness in the European context of tiled modernist architecture in Portugal. The importance to bring to light the value that the integration of azulejos has in those constructions is to provide a first insight into the potential interest for their preservation as worthy cultural heritage at this riskiest of times, when they are not new enough to be assured of maintenance, nor old enough to be assured of conservation.

2. AZULEJOS “TORNA-VIAGEM”

Casks of wine once sent in the hold of Portuguese ships to the far reaches of its empire sometimes returned unsold and the wine was called *torna-viagem*, a word difficult to translate accurately meaning they had gone on a return trip. The same was said of Portuguese emigrants to Brazil in the 19th century who later returned affluent to their homeland.

Portuguese azulejos have a continuous history of relevant architectural integration, which spans for five centuries, but for a lapse of time their importance was almost forgotten until they made an extraordinary return trip. Portugal transmitted the art of integrated azulejos to most regions under its administration, foremost of them, Brazil which was intended as the *New Lusitania*. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, coinciding with an evolution phase of the azulejos in Portugal together with a regional Baroque architecture, their integrated use attained a summit. Although in Brazil the use of azulejos did rarely reach the monumentality of Portuguese examples still they are found in Bahia, Pernambuco, Maranhão, Rio, Minas Gerais, Pará and many other states. Around 1840 the urban façades of Portuguese towns started being tiled and the trend spread also to Brazil [14].

However, maybe in a process of aversion to the elements that referred to Brazilian colonial history, the Brazilian architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries stopped using azulejos as a visible major feature of local architecture. By the late 1930s the azulejo had been relegated to forgetfulness, both in Brazil and in Portugal and Modernism did not immediately assimilate their use in either country [15,16].

At that time Brazil lived a period of modernization and debate on national identity, aimed at asserting itself as an independent nation, not only politically, but also culturally. For that, Brazilian architects discourse connected tradition with modernity and made the national and traditional materials a bridge between History and Vanguard, using the azulejo in the conception of a Brazilian identity [15,16].

Most important in early Brazilian modern architecture was the then young Lucio Costa (1902-1998). Lucio Costa spearheaded the affirmation of the new architecture in Brazil and historically he was the first of the Brazilian architects to attribute importance to the

functional aspects of colonial architecture [15,17]. He reported that on his second visit to Brazil it was Le Corbusier himself, impressed by colonial and post-colonial integration of azulejos into Brazilian constructions, who suggested the use of the azulejo in façades of Brazilian modern buildings. This is all the more extraordinary, since he was also the man who had defended shortly before that "Modern decoration has no decoration" (Le Corbusier, 1925) [18].

Attentive to local materials, it seemed natural to Lucio Costa to accept Le Corbusier's suggestion and in fact he integrated the traditional Portuguese heritage – azulejo – into the iconic work of *Ministério da Educação e Saúde Pública (MESP)* in Rio de Janeiro, concluded in 1945, a work coordinated by Lúcio Costa with collaborations of other architects including Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) [15,19]. The integrated azulejo work, was by the Brazilian artist Cândido Portinari (1903-1962) who conceived parietal azulejo compositions in which he incorporated marine elements in shades of blue and white, reminiscent of the Portuguese Baroque [19].

Years later, Lucio Costa in an interview confirmed that the suggestion was given by Le Corbusier [15]. He concludes that the acceptance occurred by the fact that "Os azulejos eram uma tradição"⁴ (Silveira 2008). Lucio Costa also explains the reason for the suggestion given by a foreigner and not a Brazilian:

“(...) quem vem de fora é sempre mais sensível e repara. Nós não estávamos pensando nisso, aquilo era tão só um revestimento que existia ali. E ele já veio com outra riqueza de abordagem”⁵ (COSTA, 1995 op. cit. Silveira 2008).

In this sense the azulejo created a connection between the new and the historic and its use after that, expanded to several buildings in Brazil, most famously the Church of St. Francis in Pampulha (Belo Horizonte) and, of course, the administrative buildings in Brasília.

With the introduction of a rationalist architecture in Portugal throughout the decades of 1920-30, here too the azulejo disappeared from urban spaces [1,14,19] due not only to the economic situation and political instability, following the implantation of a Republican regime and the participation in the First World War, but also to an ideological trend towards Fascist Italian architecture during the early Estado Novo period. During this period an official and nationalist style was proposed to create a modern image of the country, appropriate to the regime's policies [1, 2, 20, 21].

Notwithstanding its tradition in Portugal the azulejo was not considered a choice material to integrate the architecture of the regime, in which the classical look imparted by stone or the cheaper marmorite, associated to the monumentality and sobriety required, were favoured [1, 2].

⁴ “Azulejos were a tradition” - COSTA, 1995 op. cit. Silveira 2008, p.8 [15]

⁵ “One who comes to us from abroad notices aspects to which we are not sensible, tiles were just a finishing that was there. And he came to us with a wealth of new views” - COSTA, 1995 op. cit. Silveira 2008, p.8 [15]

Due to the reintroduction of the azulejo in Brazil started with the building of the *Ministério da Educação e Saúde Pública (MESP)*, Portugal was indirectly inspired and new perspectives of collaboration between architects and artists emerged. This new concept in modern architecture that integrated azulejos started being known in Portugal during the 1940s through several channels. One of them was the catalogue of the exhibition *Brazil Builds, Architecture New and Old*, from 1943 at the MOMA - Museum of Modern Art in New York, which presented reflections on the Brazilian architecture, including the azulejo work of Cândido Portinari [19].

Later, with the First National Architecture Congress (São Paulo, Brazil) in 1948 and the Third Congress of the International Union of Architects (Lisbon, Portugal) in 1953, the Portuguese architects heard of the modern use that Brazilians gave to the azulejo, by then almost unused in Portugal [1, 2, 20, 21]. In this sense, Brazilian modern architecture unknowingly assumed an important role for the young Portuguese architects [2,19]. Afterwards, artists such as Almada Negreiros, Fred Kradolfer, Maria Keil, Querubim Lapa, Júlio Pomar, Rolando Sá Nogueira, Lino António, among others, were asked to contribute to the decoration of buildings and urban spaces designed by the new generation of architects, a collaboration that was determinant in the field of modern azulejos [19, 21].

As already stated the use of the azulejo in Brazilian architecture had its origins in Portugal, in the colonial period, and it was continued in the 19th century with azulejos imported by the then independent Brazil. Through (of all theorists!) Le Corbusier, azulejos recovered their importance in Brazilian architecture, now as a mark of modernity that incorporates its roots.

In a certain sense, the use of azulejos was lost in Portugal but brought to light in Brazil to then travel back to Portugal in *torna-viagem* way. The architecture of this period revived the traditional use of the azulejo and from this time on this characteristic trait in Portuguese culture flourished again to this day.

3. VALUE OF AZULEJOS INTEGRATION IN PORTUGUESE MODERN ARCHITECTURE

The integration of Portuguese azulejos in architecture and their combination with the different arts, bring to light their unique character [2]. In 1969, architect Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) denoted the importance of azulejos as the most characteristic Portuguese expression to embellish buildings. He also mentioned that the use of azulejos in the façades of buildings contributes to a clear valorisation of civil architecture in Portugal, which was, in his view, in general poor [22]. The notion of the added value of their integration seems clear to Keil do Amaral, since he denotes that the towns owe to azulejos what they have of most representative and seductive: the mural decorations that give value to the *Palácio dos Marqueses de Fronteira*, *Igreja de Santo Amaro*, *Hospital de S. José*, *Quinta dos Azulejos*, *Palácio Galveias*, *Igreja da Madre de Deus*, or *S. Vicente de Fora*, or still, dating from more recent times, buildings façades of several Lisbon neighbourhoods [22].

Modernist architects also adopted a related solution that we have not seen elsewhere and is routinely overlooked in Portugal: the use of glazed bricks in shades of the same colour to create texture, variety and interest on façade areas that would otherwise be plain and uninteresting (figures 2 and 3). The reference for this kind of work is not known but could be related to the monumental architectures of Mesopotamia finished with colour-glazed bricks, such as the Ishtar Gate [23] reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum, in Berlin, or with the 19th century use of azulejos imitating bricks glazed in plain colours.



Figure 2: Casa da Moeda 1942-48, Lisbon. Architects Jorge Segurado e António Varela



Figure 3: Building Calouste Gulbenkian, 1962, Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia Civil, Lisbon. Architects Januário Godinho and João Henrique de Mello Breyner Andresen

Francisco Keil do Amaral also relates the influence that the Portuguese architects received from Brazil to this “modern use” of azulejos:

“Olhávamos os azulejos como curiosidades de um passado morto e não ocorria à imaginação dos arquitectos portugueses que pudessem prestar-se à valorização da arquitectura moderna. Essa ideia, porém, seduziu os Brasileiros, que logo a exploraram com êxito, num momento em que as suas obras chamavam as atenções do mundo (...) E nós que não as soubemos explorar, passamos a copiar os Brasileiros (...) deslumbrados com a sua modernidade (...)”⁶ (Amaral 1969).

It seems important to point out that, together with Brazil, the use of azulejo in modern architecture is something unique. And in the European context, its use in Portugal is unique indeed and singularly interesting because it emerged, not only as the inheritance of a cultural past, but also as a mark of individuality towards the standards of architecture at the time. The use of azulejos in the modernist architecture in Portugal has historic and aesthetic values. There is also a technical side which we will exclude from the present discussion until further research. The historic side was pointed above and is particularly enhanced by the fact that the international modern movement had adopted canons characterised by pure volumes, sober lines and great rationality that excluded most forms of decoration. Such rules also had an expression in Portugal [20]. The integration of azulejos not only goes counter the sobriety normal in other European countries at the time, but have the added value of following a suggestion by none other than Le Corbusier. The singularity thus enhances the historic value.

As for the aesthetical value, it is for each one to judge with the cautionary note that it has withstood the test of time and once rekindled, the integration of azulejos marks architectural works in Portugal to this day.

4. CONCLUSIONS

For decades, the use of azulejos became something inherent to the Portuguese architecture, giving value to each construction they integrated, which in their absence would certainly be poorer. Yet, for a time their use was almost lost, as reported Maria Keil (1914-2012):

“Poucas artes aplicadas têm tradições tão portuguesas como a dos azulejos de revestimento e pouquíssimas contribuíram tanto para o que há de característico nas nossas edificações dos últimos séculos. E, no

⁶ “We looked upon azulejos as curiosities of a dead past and it never dawned on us that they might come to bring value to modern architecture. However, that idea seduced the Brazilians who soon explored it successfully at a time when their work was in the limelight. And we, who had not been able to explore the possibilities, went on to get inspiration from the Brazilians, dazzled by their modernity (...)” - Francisco Keil do Amaral 1969, in *Uma Cidade em Transformação*, p.171 [22].

entanto, mercê de circunstâncias mal definidas, essa tradição magnífica quase se perdeu (...). Parece-me que vale a pena, a vários títulos, insuflar vida nessa tradição decadente e que aos arquitectos cabe, necessariamente, um papel importante nessa tarefa: porque se não derem guarida aos azulejos nas suas obras, nada feito. Mas a nós, pintores e decoradores, cumpre fornecer aos arquitectos azulejos adequados para os edifícios e as soluções de hoje (...).”⁷ (Maria Keil op. cit. Mantas 2012).

Recovered from a return trip to Brazil the integration of azulejos in the Modern architecture of Portugal is unique in Europe and became an important characteristic which marked the urban landscape when the European canons mostly denied the advantages, aesthetic or otherwise, of decoration in architecture.

Integrated azulejos, new or old, must be valued as a national mark often neglected possibly because Portuguese “eyes” are so very used to it. But maybe they are not used to their absence and will sense when their warm presence is finally lost. And it is important to remark that the modern constructions with integrated azulejos are indeed at risk at a time of urban expansion and increasing value of land in old parts of towns, if its preservation is not assured. A recent example is the modernist building in *Praça Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro*, Lisbon, erected in the early 1970s with 33 integrated panels of azulejos (Fig. 4). An investment company wants to transform it into a five-star hotel with Pombaline aesthetics, with demolition of the façade or at least removal of the azulejos to the interior. However, such expansion fuelled by tourism tends to forget that the use of azulejo in modernist architecture in Portugal is also a value for tourism itself, since their uniqueness in Europe as well as their interpretation by the local architects and artists can be explored through cultural routes. Little sought for at the present time, maybe, but assuredly valuable in the future. But... will those buildings prevail in our urban landscapes if not valued and preserved now?

⁷ “Few applied arts have a tradition as Portuguese as that of facing azulejos, and very few have contributed so much to what is characteristic of our buildings in recent centuries. And yet, due to ill-defined circumstances, this magnificent tradition was almost lost (...). It seems to be worthy, in various respects, to breathe life into this decadent tradition, and that architects necessarily play an important role in this task: because if they do not give a place to the tiles in their works, nothing can be achieved. But we, artists and designers, must provide architects with suitable tiles for today's buildings and solutions (...).” - Maria Keil op. cit. Mantas 2012, p 274-75 [21].



Figure 4: Building in *Praça Raphael Bordallo Pinheiro*, 1970s, Lisbon. Architects Diogo José de Mello and João Andrade e Sousa. Azulejos author António Vasconcelos Lapa

In this sense, it is important the effort to define their value not only as a characteristic aspect of Portuguese culture, but also as an unique regional trend in the Modern Movement in Europe, that cries out for preservation now, so that they may be here to be appreciated in the future.

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