

Building Bridges Between Cultures: The Originalities of the Portuguese Tile

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Abstract

Tile was introduced in the Iberian Peninsula by Muslims, who occupied it from the 8th century ahead, following the Muslim invasions. This material has become a striking element of the centre and south Spanish culture. However, its introduction and dissemination in the present Portuguese territory occurred only in the sixteenth century, more specifically in the D. Manuel I Reign. Not being a Portuguese creation, but resulting from multiple contacts and cultural crossings, the tile was not only absorbed by the local culture, but also taken by the Portuguese people to other places, such as Brazil or India. In these new places, it acquired new meanings, being adapted and transformed according to the local aesthetic tastes. The tile acquired a maximum expression in Portugal as a decorative element narrating, at the same time, events of the Portuguese society and culture. It has been used extensively over five centuries and has been adapted to the local spatio-temporal circumstances, being created in innovative and aesthetic forms. The tile, starting as a decorative element inside palaces, manor houses, churches and convents, would eventually become a material for facade cladding of public and private buildings. This represents panoramas of an abstract geometry and also events of the local life. In the 21st century, tile has acquired new symbolic values in the representation of the community to the tourist audience.

Keywords: Tiles, Museums, Cultural heritage, Symbolic value.

Introduction

The introduction of tile in Portugal allows the building of bridges between diverse cultural and geographical contexts, even though it is not a Portuguese invention. In the national milieu, tiles or panels of tiles took on local creative languages, being invented and reinvented constantly. This was taken by the Portuguese, in the Discoveries age, to other places like Brazil or

India, and it stands as an element capable of witnessing an enriched intercultural cross between Islamic, Christian, and other cultures.

In a world characterized by transnational flows of goods and people, ideas and cultural behaviors, it is urgent to question ourselves about the educational role and communication that the tiles can trigger in the understanding of various peoples. As an element of cultural connection, the tile allows the transmission of messages about various cultural behaviors. This helps to understand cultural diversity through the deconstruction of stereotypes about the communities that are currently confronted with globalization.

In this paper, we will reflect about the symbolic value acquired by the tile, in Portugal, as the result of a cross of cultures that not only crossed its territory but also was expanded to distant places, such as Brazil or India. In short, the Portuguese people received this “gift” from the Muslims and in turn spread it in new places.

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The tile was incorporated into the Portuguese culture which gave it distinctive specific characteristics. The Portuguese tile, reflecting and supporting religious or profane themes and reflecting narratives of the local culture daily life, has characteristics that distinguish it from other contexts where it has also been present, such as North Africa, Islamic culture, or southern Spain. In the Portuguese territory, it has been a prolonged use both in space and in time, as well as the techniques employed to make it. However, the aesthetic forms and its use are distinct from those of other places.

As Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos et al. (2015) pointed out that "the Portuguese tile, its artistic expression, and technical persistence are unparalleled in any other territory. Unlike other geographical areas of production, the emergence of new manufacturing techniques led to the abandonment of hitherto employed ones. In the Portuguese case, this did not happen. The techniques that could be classified as archaic are periodically recovered with another meaning and in diverse contexts of taste. This is what happens with the so-called Islamic tiling technique used initially in the production of pavements and was abandoned in the Peninsula in the first quarter of the 16th century" (p. 3, 4).

The tile of Muslim origin was introduced in Portugal in the sixteenth century by Manuel I, King of Portugal (1469-1521), who visiting “Castile, was so impressed with the ceramic compositions used in Andalusia that, [...] on his initiative, an order for 10 146 Hispano-Moorish tiles, for the decoration of his palace in Sintra, arrived in the port of Belém, in Lisbon, in 1508, in which a wide variety of tile patterns and techniques were applied like dry rope, edge,

stapled, and relieved tiles” (Roteiro De Museu Nacional Do Azulejo, 2005, p. 34).

The tile intensively used, in religious and civilian buildings in Portugal, came from Andalusia and were firstly executed using Spanish-Moorish dry rope technique. This was done at the Fernan Martinez Guijarro factory or maybe in his son’s, Pedro de Herrera, workshop, which are both potters of Seville. In addition, D. Jorge Almeida in the 16th century (1508) bought a large quantity of Hispanic-Moorish tiles produced in Seville, which is used to cover the Coimbra city cathedral. From the inclusion of the tiles, simulating the presence of tissues and spans, the cathedral became a testimony of the community sociocultural dynamics that inhabited this space, shaping it according to its interests of that moment. The Coimbra cathedral is a relevant testimony of the Portuguese Middle Ages as well as the introduction of the tile art in Portugal and its adaptation to the cultural specificity of the place.

The first Portuguese tiles are a sociocultural document. It depicts scenes from the life of Christ and other elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition which has marked the cultural life of the medieval and pre-modern national community. On the other hand, the national tiles and their techniques were distinguished earlier from the Spanish tiles. As noted by the historian João Simões in 1956, "although the tiles come from Andalusia, its decorative arrangement does not follow that of the original parietal panel’s type “lambri”. The Portuguese tile setters made a highly imaginative use of these tiles, arranging them in architectural patterns, following the style of the buildings they were to enrich. Such is the case of the tile decoration of the Old Cathedral of Coimbra" (Monteiro, 2007, p. 32).

The tiles and panels of tiles were used by the clergy and the nobility in their "public statement of prestige ... and are often the preferred support for the heraldry inscription, as is the case of D. Jaime I, Duke of Bragança, coat of arms (c.1510), a sevilian worked piece ...” (Roteiro de Museu Nacional do Azulejo, 2005, p. 35).

The tile intensive and uninterrupted use over the last five centuries, as a decorative and as a narrative element, is a characteristic that distinguishes Portugal from other European countries. Here, the use of the tile has also been common but not continuously in space and time. The tile introduction in Portugal, coinciding with the discoveries age, operated as an historical and cultural record of the Portuguese life over time. It becomes an integral part of the Portuguese society and culture, working both as a decorative art and as a device for recording the community imaginary, and recording at the same time the local community social and cultural memory.

As stated by Paulo Henriques, Portugal is different from other countries "for the originality of the functional and symbolic use attributed to the tile, ubiquitous both as a monumental architectural and as a urban cladding

and support of the most genuine national imaginaries” (Henriques, 2005, p. 7). On the other hand, Alexandra Curvelo (art historian and tile researcher) pointed out that the Portuguese tiles are unique because "the tile establish a dialogue with the space where it is located, it is a tile that completely fills this space, which change this space, and which on the other hand is always in a dialogue with other arts..., the engraving..., and we also have the architectural references, of course. Therefore, it is this cross between the various arts, and on the other hand the dialogue with the space where the tile was initially located which in fact illuminates and transforms it into totality, which is an absolutely distinctive character of Portugal's tiles” (Visita Guiada Ao Convento Da Madre De Deus, Lisboa – Portugal, 2014, 3,11 Minutos).

The first Portuguese tiles imported from Spain followed the Mudejar or Hispano-Moorish patterns, influenced by the Muslims techniques living in the Iberian Peninsula. They created this artistic style in the fourteenth century. According to Robert Gomes (2011), it can be stated that the Hispano-Moorish style was "a style of tile that was rehearsed and developed in this place, resulting in different tiles typologies, which are affirmed by the materials and techniques used, reflecting chronologically the changes of the decorative languages.

The whole plot associated with the Mudéjar and Hispano-Mourisco tiles use had a certain influence on the development and improvement of the taste for ceramic decoration in Portugal” (Gomes, 2011, p. 19). In this sense, the Portuguese culture is also the result of the temporal crossings with the people of Islamic culture who developed this technique to tile in the Iberian territory.

However, one of the largest Portuguese examples of Spanish-Moorish tiles is located in the Sintra Palace which is a symbol of tile introduction in Portugal. They have common characteristics with the Islamic production like vegetal and geometric patterns. However, we highlight in this context, the local figurative adaptation that is visible in Discoveries pattern with the armillary sphere that was commissioned by Manuel I (Monarch of the Portuguese Discoveries Golden Age).

According to J. Pereira (1991), “the Sintra Palace are the only examples of tiles engraved with the armillary sphere... resulting from the Sevillian production of the first half of the 16th century, where it is possible to read excerpts from a significant period of the Portuguese history.”

The expansion of the art of making tiles has followed cultural flows which are manifold, diverse, and crusading. This cultural movement has been accentuated by globalization. However, they are neither new nor innovative. With the Muslim occupation of the Iberian Peninsula for nearly eight centuries, new buildings construction modes and models were introduced. In

the present days, there are many testimonies of these technical, artistic, and architectural innovations introduced by the Muslims, such as the ancient city of Medina Azahara classified on July 1, 2018, as World Heritage, or the typical architecture of the Algarve in the south of Portugal, or yet the famous tiles located throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Among all the civilizations that crossed the Portuguese territory, we emphasize the Roman and the Muslim which contributed to the people's miscegenation and to their cultural syncretism, leading to the cultural behaviors that contributed to the permanent becoming of the Portuguese community. Portugal received from the Muslims numerous architectural and artistic influences, especially the art associated with the tile.

Subsequently, the Portuguese expanded the tiles art beyond the oceans. The tiles were taken by them to Brazil and India shortly after their introduction in the national territory, accompanying the expansion of the Portugal's Empire. In the 16th and 17th centuries, tile was introduced in Brazil, following the urban configuration of the Portuguese cities whose model was inherited from the Muslims. Tônia Matosinho (2016) stated that it is "different from the geometric model of city implanted and diffused by Rome, in which the grid layout is practiced, providing a rapid demarcation of the city in flat terrain; the Brazilian cities, mainly those of rugged terrain, were organically constituted with curved streets in the mold of the old Muslim cities" (Matosinho, 2016, p. 1).

In the buildings configuration, architecture and decoration, the Portuguese used the tile in the Brazilian cities, mainly from the 17th century. Therefore, this art acquired expression mainly in Bahia, a Brazilian state, and in Olinda in the Pernambuco state. According to Ingrid Wanderley (2006), "tastes, manners, customs... almost everything produced by the Royal Court was brought at the same time to the colony. It was the same with the tiles. At the end of the 17th century, polychromic pottery in the Italian style lost its place to the novelty of blue porcelain, imported from China (...). The Portuguese tiles began to reproduce in two shades of blue and the old polychrome patterns. The best specimens of this kind were sent to Brazil, such as the blue-patterned tiles present in the interior of the Nossa Senhora dos Prazeres church, in the Guararapes Mountains, in the Pernambuco State" (p. 17).

On the other hand, in the most important Brazilian city of the former Portuguese Empire, "Rio de Janeiro has few tiles of this period: among the oldest are the carpet tiles of the Açude Museum in the Alto da Boa Vista and those of the São Bento Monastery, in the centre of the city, both from the 16th century. The most representative tiles of the Rio de Janeiro city are from the 18th century, namely from Nossa Senhora da Glória do Outeiro Church, Nossa Senhora da Pena in Jacarepaguá, Nossa Senhora da Saúde - Church of the

Santo António Convent, and Church of the Nossa Senhora do Desterro - Santa Teresa Convent (Matosinho, 2016, p. 3).

In the 19th century, tiles were used in João Pessoa, both in civil and religious buildings, such as the well-known "Casarão dos azulejos" and Sobrado do Comendador Santos Coelho. This building has the exterior facades clad "with Portuguese tiles from the Devezas factory, located in the Porto city" constituting one of the last examples of residence in João Pessoa, which still presents this type of finishing (Memória João Pessoa: Informatizando a História do Nosso Património - Sobrado Comendador Santos Coelho). Another old and remarkable building, in the context of the tile introduction in Brazil, is the Nossa Senhora do Carmo Church. It started at the end of the 16th century. Due to suffering from the Dutch invasions, it was completed in the 18th century with the side walls of its main chapel and those of the nave "covered with Portuguese tiles from the 18th century, constituting ten panels depicting episodes of Carmelite life framed in the rococo language" (Memória João Pessoa: Informatizando a História do Nosso Património - Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo). In this period, the rococo, organic, and asymmetric forms marked the Portuguese aesthetic tile taste.

Consequently, the rococo, pombaline, and neoclassical styles were very present in the tiles manufacture in the second half of the 18th century. These tiles were used mainly for decorative purposes, reflecting a time when, as in other arts, "changes in Portuguese society taste are evident", suggesting rococo, organic and asymmetrical forms, with irregular shells and foliage, drawing frames complex in the tile panels, painted first in a strong blue colour in contrast to the pale blue colour of the central image, then in lush polychromy in dialogue with the central scenes only in blue or purple manganese colours" (Roteiro de Museu Nacional do Azulejo, 2005, p. 124). In these tiles, panels can be observed religious panoramas conjugated with profane images "gallant, bucolic, and chinoiserie, based on engravings of Watteau and Pillement" (Idem, p. 124), among others. The tiles of these styles constitute the majority of those that were transported to Brazil. In this country, similarly to what happened in Portugal, tiles started to be used as decorative and narrative elements of the interior buildings facades, mainly in the religious buildings and, later, on other buildings façades. Its decorative and narrative function adds to the protection against the tropical climate, which is adapted to the local context.

As Tônia Matosinho (2016, p. 4) states "sun, rain, sea, and humidity are responsible for the buildings wear and tear in a tropical country. As the glazed outer surface of the tile reflects the light, it serves as a thermal insulation, providing a cooler internal environment; and also repels moisture, minimizing the conservation costs due to the action of the weather" (p. 4).

The great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 brought about another remarkable period in the use of tiles in Portugal, such as the invention and reinvention of its aesthetic forms. Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo (better known by Marquês de Pombal) was a secretary of State in the José I reign. He led the reconstruction of Lisbon after the earthquake, integrating the national tiles in the capital city reconstruction and reissuing the tradition of “pattern” tile (an effective and inexpensive decorative solution). In a case of cultural syncretism, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo was inspired by the Brazilian tradition, ordering the facades cladding of the new Lisbon buildings with tiles. It is a cultural communion between two cultures, “from a tile heritage, not only from a decorative point of view but also from the utilitarian value” (Matosinho, 2016, p. 4).

The tiles manufacture led to the installation of new production centres, first in Portugal and later in Brazil, where “the oldest potteries of Lisbon with Muslim roots were located in the Anjos area (oriental pottery), expelling in the 16th century to the South Bank and later to the West of the city, to the Santos zone” (Sebastian, 2010, p. 91-138). Crockery and tiles were produced at the same time in the pottery of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (Carvalho & Mangucci, 2018, p.9). Later, new factories were founded, producing sophisticated and beautiful tiles such as the “Real Fábrica de Louça in the Rato area of Lisbon, founded in 1767. It was included in the industrialization policies carried out by the Marquês de Pombal. The “Real Fábrica de Louça” assembled the various tasks in the same place from the preparation of the clay to the hanging, through to the painting of crockery and of pattern and figurative tiles....” (Carvalho & Mangucci, 2018, p.13). These stood out based on the technical advances and creativity.

Although it has been receiving Portuguese tiles since the 17th century, it is only at the beginning of the 20th century that some factories appear in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil. The Brazilian tiles acquire relief in the second quarter of this century when the tiles became one of the basic elements of the Brazilian modernist architecture. Candido Portinari and Athos Bulcão were two of its main users and Brazilian disseminators. As Tônia Matosinho (2016) point out, “Portinari creates in the early 1940s the tile panels for the Gustavo Capanema Palace, a landmark of modern tile in Rio de Janeiro; and Bulcão, in designing since 1957, panels for Brasília, the capital that was emerging” (p. 5).

Also, Lúcio Costa and Óscar Niemeyer “used the Portuguese tile tradition with a new understanding of public expression. This sense brought to Portugal the use of large tile panels in public spaces, creating a generation of artists who worked on it adapting to the languages and demands of their time, and it also reflects on the pictorial and technical memories of the past”

(Matos et al., 2015, p.5). Thus, this takes pace in an enriched cultural synchronism.

On the one hand, the multiple cultural heritages contributed to the permanent making of the Portuguese culture. Also, the Portuguese bequeathed several cultural traits to Brazil, both in the domain of their cities and the use of the tile in their buildings. The tiles in Brazil acquired a new and innovative language, in particular with modernism, which marked the country's aesthetic movements throughout the 20th century.

Conclusion

The tile began to be part of the Portuguese cultural behavior from the 16th century to the present day. Its intensive use in space and time, the insertion and invention of new forms of design, and new artistic styles has attributed unique characteristics to the art of tile production in the Portuguese context. First, it was used to decorate the interior palaces walls and religious buildings. It was later, especially in the 18th century, used for the exterior decoration of buildings facades. Being an aesthetically beautiful solution, effectively communicative and of a little economic demanding, the tile ended up defining the rural and urban landscapes of Portugal. The tiles, individually or in panels, more or less old, are common in public fountains, parks, train stations, buildings facades etc., a bit throughout the country.

However, by acquiring unique aesthetic and technical forms inside this context, the tile is useful for thinking and challenging concepts such as "authenticity" or "cultural roots". This is irrespective of the fact that it is not an original Portuguese element. Its introduction into Portugal has resulted to a crossroads of cultures that have crossed Portuguese territory from Islamic to Christian religions. This is because it was taken to distant lands such as Brazil or India.

Tiles covered with Western religious and secular themes were applied to churches, palaces, and Indian houses. The Portuguese fascination with the oriental culture had its influence on the Portuguese tiles in a remarkable cultural syncretism. Rosie Mitchell (2017) notes: "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 (p. 348).

India is therefore another territory where the Portuguese, remaining about 450 years, left elements of their culture, and they were influenced by the

Indian artistic styles. Until date, cultural contacts and the Portuguese presence are visible in various cultural domains such as language or architecture. Thus, the tile which was also introduced by the Portuguese in India is present in the decoration of civil and religious buildings. It is still used as a narrative element in both religious and profane space, allowing the definition of bridges between different cultures. With the discovery of the maritime route to India by Vasco da Gama, in 1498, and the resulting cultural crossings due to the introduction of tile, there would be a new line of research that would be developed in the future.

Nowadays, museums, based on effective educational and communication services, stand as fundamental institutions in changing the value of objects as well as in the development of a positive image of the community cultural behaviors which they intend to represent for a growing audience.

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