

The 16th century nativity azulejo panel called “de Nossa Senhora da Vida”

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SUMMARY

Among the first known references to *azulejos* from the 16th century integrated in Portuguese architecture is the so-called panel of *Nossa Senhora da Vida* (“Our Lady of Life”), belonging to a chapel of the demolished *Igreja de Santo André*, near the *Convento da Graça*. These azulejos were already labelled in the important work *Santuário Mariano* (1707), a collection of books by Fr. Agostinho de Santa Maria (1642-1728) who aimed to describe all the churches and chapels dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Portugal and its overseas territories. Among the hundreds of representations labelled in this extensive work there are only a few descriptions of azulejo panels, one of which precisely *Nossa Senhora da Vida* [1], which is a testimony of how impressive it still was at time when it was already outmoded.

The azulejos were considered matchless in Lisbon, and they represent in *trompe l’oeil* a huge stone retable with two niches for the statues of the Evangelists who describe the Birth of Jesus (Mathew and John). In the centre there is a representation of the Nativity with shepherds and above an image reminding half of a *Della Robbia* tondo with the Annunciation, having in the middle an opening where a window once was.

Igreja de Santo André had a gothic architecture with a top main chapel and four small side chapels. One of the chapels on the south side was dedicated to Our Lady of Life and the panel was part of its interior lining. The panel was removed circa 1845 when it was decided to demolish the church. Eighteen years afterwards the panel went to the National Library where it was exposed in 1872. After an adventurous pilgrimage it was sent in 1969 to the deposit created in the Madre de Deus convent and are today one of the prize jewels of the *Museu Nacional do Azulejo* installed there[2].

This communication reviews the oldest known written sources on the panel and presents the results of the first instrumental study done on the azulejos of one of the most important testimonies of a technological continuity respecting the first decades of the production of majolica tiles in Portugal.

Five small samples were collected from the panel, stabilized in resin and polished for observation and analysis by scanning-electron microscopy coupled with energy-dispersive spectrometry (SEM-EDS). SEM-EDS observations and analyses were made at the HERCULES Laboratory in Évora using a HITACHI 3700N SEM coupled to a BRUKER XFlash 5010 EDS. Figure 2 depicts a back-scattered image of a section of one of the samples, showing both the glaze and its interface with the biscuit.



Figure 1 – The center part of the panel entitled Nossa Senhora da Vida.

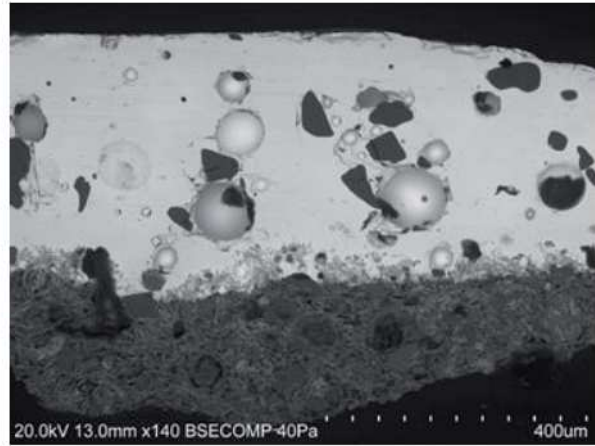


Figure 2 – Backscattered SEM image of the glaze and glaze-biscuit interface of sample Az032/01 taken from one of the tiles of the Nossa Senhora da Vida panel.

Both the microscopic morphology and the composition of the glaze are consistent with an origin within the technological circle of the workshop of João de Góis [3]. However, the red biscuits have a slightly different composition. The hypothesis of a production by the workshops of Lisbon is difficult to dispute given the morphological and compositional similitudes with the productions of João de Góis. We are now studying the local sources of marl which was the raw material for the biscuits to gather data on its origin in support of a better-founded opinion.

Key-words: Renaissance majolica; Azulejo panel Nossa Senhora da Vida; João de Góis; Instrumental study of majolica; Museu Nacional do Azulejo

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