

An unknown jigsaw in the Cathedral of Setúbal

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SUMMARY

Recently, Father Rui Rosmaninho of the *Sé de Setúbal* (Cathedral of Setubal) contacted the Museu Nacional do Azulejo because of some azulejos extant there. Eventually he also mentioned a curious application of odd azulejos lining a hidden wall. Secluded by the altar, was a series of 16th century renaissance azulejos with images in white with blue contours over a yellow background (figure 1). The azulejos were probably once part of a chapel lining that was removed and some were re-applied here at an unknown time. Their origin and purpose remain mysterious. The tiles were applied without any concern for continuity and it was necessary to photograph them individually to then digitally reassemble this jigsaw and reveal the hidden images. Now it is possible to identify flowers and fruits, probably related to two cornucopias, but the most surprising elements are two feminine winged figures. Both have crowns, although of different sorts, one is a young lady with butterfly wings (figure 2) and the other is an elderly woman with bird wings. In spite of our efforts it is very difficult to combine the azulejos because of the extensive floral elements, and only after their removal and through the biscuit markings will it be possible to perceive the number and dimensions of the panels and gain a better insight of the motifs.



Figure 1 – The renaissance puzzle as it was found in the Cathedral of Setubal



Figure 2 – Partial reconstruction of the butterfly-winged Young Lady

The painting of motives in white with blue contours against a yellow background can also be seen in the *Capela de São Roque* (St. Roch Chapel) in Lisbon [1] but there are important differences between the two sets. The Setúbal series is amateurish, compared to its Lisbon counterpart: the hand of the painter was not particularly sure; the blue colours ran over firing, resulting in drips that tarnish the composition, and the yellow pigment covered the white glaze unevenly. However, these aspects do not diminish the importance of the find. On the contrary, they seem to point to an early effort that may place these panels among the earliest examples of

the production of majolica azulejos in Portugal. An alternative but also compelling possibility is that they were produced by a new workshop aiming to compete in the field with established producers, but whose technology was not yet sufficiently evolved.

Five azulejos were sampled and test items produced 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.

The observations and analyses have shown that there are two different types of azulejos in the Setubal panels. Although the compositions of the glazes are similar, the biscuits are very different in their calcium content. The morphology of the glazes and of the interfaces are also quite different although both suggest a firing cycle involving a long cooling period [2]. It is not known at this time whether each type corresponds to a different panel, or whether one of the types corresponds to a loose number of azulejos produced at a later time to replace missing or decayed original tiles. This can however be ascertained when all the tiles are removed and individually classified in each of the two types.

Considering all characteristics together, however, and comparing them with the panels at Igreja da Graça [3] there can be little doubt that the tiles are of Portuguese production and can be ascribed to the technological circle of the workshop of João de Góis.

This communication will present a partial restitution of the figures, report some results of the first study made of the azulejos with instrumental support and discusses their technological placement towards other examples of known origin.

Key-words: Renaissance majolica; Portuguese azulejos; Francisco de Matos; Sé de Setúbal; Igreja de Santa Maria de Setúbal.

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