

Cesare Brandi's Theory of Restoration and *azulejos*

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SUMMARY: Cesare Brandi's capital "Theory of Restoration" has enjoyed a recent surge of interest, spearheaded by its translation to English in 2005. Though he himself never refers glazed tiles in that work, his theory applies generally to art heritage (both narrative art and architecture). In this communication I propose to make a theoretical exercise by examining the restoration of *azulejo* panels, particularly the treatment of *lacunae*, at the light of Cesare Brandi's principles.

KEY-WORDS: theory of restoration; cesare brandi; *azulejo* panels; *majolica* tiles

Cesare Brandi's capital "Theory of Restoration" has enjoyed a recent surge of interest, spearheaded by its translation to English in 2005 [1] and the organisation of a number of events during his centennial year (2006) and afterwards. Brandi never refers glazed tiles in that work, although he dwells briefly on Roman mosaics, but his theory applies generally to art heritage (both narrative art and architecture) and has in fact been discussed in the context of a number of other fields, including modern art [2], urbanism [3] and even historic movies. I propose to make a theoretical exercise by examining the restoration of *azulejo* panels at the light of Brandi's principles.

Firstly, it will be useful to remind that Brandi's theory does not apply to just any heritage asset. His definition of restoration as *the methodological moment of recognizing a work of art* limits the field to works recognized as *Art*, leaving aside industrial products meant as utilities. Restoration is thus an act of discernment - once recognized as art, conservation becomes a cultural imperative.

Azulejo panels have often both an artistic facies and a utilitarian one, as wall coverings of (relatively) long durability and easy maintenance. When the design of *azulejos* is based on a repetitive pattern, they are fully the product of an industrial process, albeit with the incorporation of hand painted decoration, and should rank with other so-called decorative arts products. When designed as original narrative panels, they are more clearly conceivable as an art creation, particularly when integrated in the architectural context for which they were intended.

Art has a material body that supports its appearance: a canvas in a painting or the clay tiles¹ in an *azulejo* panel. But there is also the material of the appearance that transmits the image: the paint in the case of a painting; the glaze with the pigments in the case of

¹ I shall call "clay tile" to the *bisque* resulting from the first firing

azulejos. And there is also that part of the environment that contributes to the way it is perceived. Together they constitute the material part of the work of art.

The image of the work of art itself is immaterial, constructing itself in every observer each time it is perceived. An artist produced it in a creative process that ended definitively with its completion. From the reconnaissance of this duality matter/content in which the content is the result of a closed process, stems Brandi's First Principle that only the matter of a work of art may be restored.

The historical and the aesthetic views of the art object must be considered next. The azulejo clay tiles have no aesthetic content, though they have historicity because they were produced at a certain chronological time with a certain technology and were contemporaneous with all the events that occurred since their inception until the present time. If all tiles were produced together, then each one has the very same historicity.

The azulejo panel itself has historicity and aesthetics. Aesthetically the azulejo panel is a whole, and though it may be dismantled in individual azulejo units it cannot be said that the work of art is made up of their sum because it can only be perceived as art when these units are put together in a given manner and often when architecturally integrated in their own environment, according to an original design. As Brandi remarks, art is indivisible but once fragmented each unit holds in itself the potential of the whole. That potential must then be materialized to reconstitute the work of art. Brandi's Second Principle states that restoration must aim to re-establish the potential unity of the work of art, as long as this is possible without producing an artistic or historical faux and without erasing the passage of time. It must be noted that no mention is made here of the material. And that is because, according to Brandi's theory, if necessary a part of the material may be sacrificed with its historicity because the aesthetic aspect takes priority.

The ageing of azulejo panels often leads to the detachment and loss of azulejo units or of parts of them. But azulejos also decay, leading to partial loss of the glazing that holds the image and exposing parts of the clay body underneath. In both cases a lacuna arises and decisions on how to handle lacunae may be indeed one of the crucial points of the preparatory phase of the restoration of azulejo panels and its theory according to Brandi is the main subject of this paper.

The most common lacunae found on azulejo panels derive from missing parts of glazing, often originating at the periphery of single azulejos and propagating from there to the centre of each affected unit (figure 1). In this case the clay body is preserved but the image is locally lost.

The loss of whole azulejo tiles or of parts thereof through detachment, accident or vandalism is also occasionally met with. In such cases even the clay body is missing.



Figure 1- Azulejos with lacunae in a panel [4]

The restoration of e.g. small flakes of coloured glaze does not violate Brandi's First Principle because only the matter of the panel is being restored (white, or yellow, or blue coloured glass or pigment). But the repristination of a panel formerly with plainly apparent lacunae (that is, its restoration to a like-new condition) is out of question since it would try to erase the passage of time. Thus the lacunae cannot be hidden to an extent that they may seem inexistent at close inspection. But, as Brandi repeatedly states, art is primarily meant as an aesthetic expression and thus the aesthetic aspect should take precedence over other considerations as far as permitted by the Second Principle. So, whenever the original design can still be reconstructed without the restorer taking upon himself the re-opening of the creative process, lacunae can be treated in the most satisfactory way without producing an artistic faux. That is, repetitive patterns may be reconstructed, uniformly coloured areas may be reinstated, lines with a monotonous curvature may be given continuity, etc. An abstract design may be preferred in areas where a reconstitution is not feasible, as I shall point further on. But in all cases, as Brandi states, the new paint should be retractable and, at close inspection, easily discernible to the naked eye as a restorations. The absence of a gloss imitating the original glaze may be sufficient to achieve differentiation between incorporations and the original, without impairing the image.

But other treatments are possible that are more on the safe side of Brandi's theory in the sense that they leave no room whatsoever for personal interpretation of the original design. Lacunae of the first sort mentioned expose the clay, whose colour ranges from off-white to burnt ochre. The simplest and most straightforward way to treat these lacunae is to paint them in a tint that will present itself to the viewer as interfering minimally with the image, a colour that will not distract the viewer's attention from the narrative panel itself or whatever may remain of it. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the same panel of figure 1 with lacunae painted in white, medium blue, and light blue. These test trials were produced on Photoshop, give testimony to the powers of graphical platforms as instruments and show that the light blue treatment may offer a very satisfactory

alternative as long as the tint is adequately chosen and applied. Such a technique has already been seen applied to actual panels by restorers.



Figures 2, 3, 4- Comparison of solutions with lacunae painted in white, medium blue or light blue

Clearly the treatment in white (figure 2) is the least effective, constructing a sort of multi-panelled window set between the observer and the panel. This fact should be borne in mind as I know of, both in Brazil and in Portugal, remounted panels in which the individual tiles were set slightly apart, as is done with modern ceramic tiling, and the joint sealed with white mastic that was disturbing to observers and strongly affected the aesthetics of the azulejo panels (figure 5).



Figure 5- Panel with white joints, breaking the image into squares
(Barcelos Mater Church)

Dealing now with lacunae caused by the loss of whole azulejos (clay bisque and all) we should remark that a solution has been found long ago- when an azulejo was broken or lost for any reason and a copy could not be provided, the pragmatic “restorers” of Old simply pasted in its place another azulejo that fitted, not because it had the proper design, but rather because it had the proper balance of white and blue areas (or any other combination of colours as applicable- figure 6). Since a panel is often made up of several dozen individual azulejos, a few losses become thus almost invisible, except when the motifs are individually inspected.



Figure 6- Panel with four missing azulejos reintegrated with replacements at an undetermined date [4]

Using the same basic solution, newly fired clay tiles with an abstract design and the proper colour balance may replace missing azulejos that cannot be reintegrated by analogy (figure 7). Such a surrogate should be dated in very small print so that the restoration may be properly attributed in the future and Brandi’s Second Principle is complied with because the work of the original artist has in no way been meddled with or unduly completed and the aesthetic aspect has been given priority.

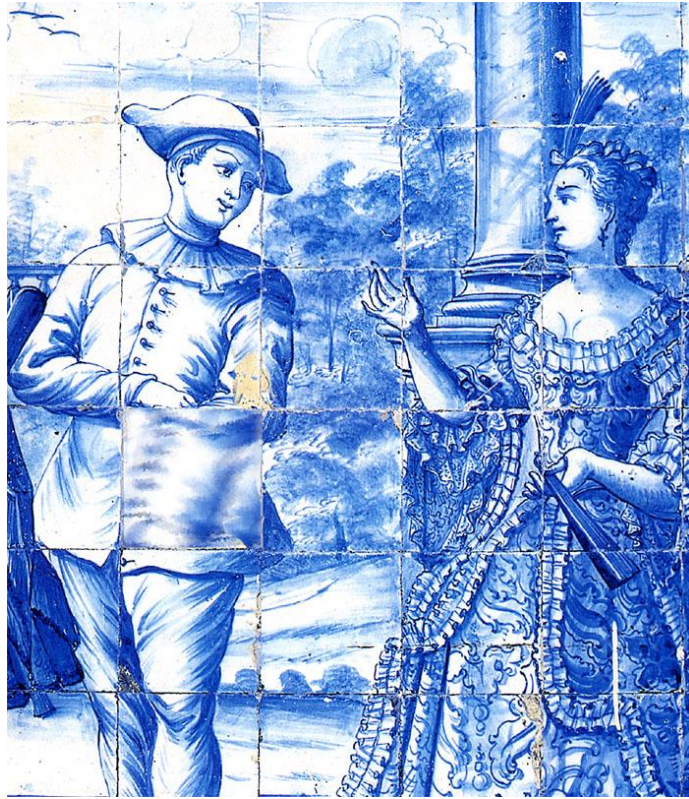


Figure 7- Missing tile “1” from fig.6 reintegrated with a surrogate made from the tile above it

A particular case occurs when so many of the tiles are lost or decayed that the reintegration of the panel as a potential whole from the remaining glaze area can no longer be achieved without incorporating new art into it, albeit abstract, which would violate both principles. Then, the image is essentially lost although part of the matter remains. This is the status that Brandi calls a *ruin* and in this case the historical aspect takes precedence because the aesthetic aspect no longer justifies classifying the remains as a work-of-art-present but only, at most, as a work-of-art-past whose passage through time brought about an ineluctable loss. If it is the ruin of a work of art whose historicity justifies its preservation for the future generations, then it should be conserved as it is. Any other intervention aimed at “increasing the perceived value” of the ruin would go beyond Brandi’s theory and could neither be classified as conservation nor as restoration in Brandi’s sense.

Finally, I shall dwell briefly on the architectural environment of an azulejo panel. Two cases are to be recognized: when the panel exists for decorative purposes, relating to the wall in the same way as a canvas painting, then it may conceivably be considered independently of its original architectural environment. But if the panel is integrated in an architectural space in a way that the space is itself a work of art with it or because of it, then the association cannot be broken. In a restoration, the space of existence of the panel must be considered as a physical environment controlled by it and should be

given a similar treatment as respects the global appearance and historicity as the panel itself.

Thus, a panel of majolica set to decorate a wall without particular architectural integration may conceivably be displayed in a museum if appropriately set and lighted, but the azulejo decoration of a majestic staircase, topped by an “invitation figure” welcoming visitors in (figure 8), cannot be isolated from “its” stairs any more than the gothic stained glass windows can be separated from “their” cathedral. And the only acceptable exception, as Cesare Brandi states, is the instance when extraction from the environment with which it inextricably relates becomes the only possible way to preserve the work of art, albeit degraded in its wholeness.



Figure 8- An invitation figure in a trompe-l'oeil azulejo panel showing the often inextricable relationship with the environment [5]

Some azulejo panels may indeed be considered as art controlling their environment instead of the other way round. Many others, though not art-in-themselves, make up part of the environment of architecture in such a way that they grant particular meaning

to the whole. And because of that, they must be considered as part of the material and of the image of art, even if subordinated and controlled by architecture like the plain tiles of the kitchens of Sintra's Palace and Alcobaça Monastery, that so impressed Cesare Brandi when he visited Portugal [6].

Many other issues might have been raised here and most of them could be theoretically tackled by considering Brandian principles and priorities, as we did before. In all cases our commitment to conservation, as persons who rejoice at art that was legated to us by past generations, must be to entrust to the future the legacy we received, as whole as possible, firstly in its aesthetics, and then in its historicity. And for that desideratum to be achieved as completely as possible, Brandi stresses the need for what he calls *preventive restoration*, rather than emergency treatments, because the last often implies previous decay, and decay means loss.

And if I may be allowed, as researcher, to digress for a minute into my own field, it is in preventive interventions, aimed at avoiding loss before decay even occurs, that the need for previous research is more evident. From onsite observation of azulejo pathologies must stem research towards determining its causes, mechanisms of spread and consequences- and this is a scientific endeavour. Then methods and technologies of repair for emergency interventions, and of prevention to reduce risks, must be developed- and this is a technical role to be shared with restorers. Research should support practice, of which theory is the philosophical backbone; practice should feedback to research, without which results might be inapplicable. All interventions should be guided by theoretical principles and soundly based on scientific and technical grounds without which a seemingly straightforward decision may lead to loss instead of preservation, as unfortunately happened so often in the past and still happens nowadays.

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