

## The azulejos in the *Capela de São Roque* in Lisbon

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### SUMMARY

The azulejos in the *Capela de São Roque* (Saint Roch Chapel) in the church of the same saint, in Lisbon, are justly considered one of the major majolica works made anywhere during the last quarter of the 16th century [1]. The earliest known surviving ensemble of Portuguese manufacture signed and dated, (“Francisco de Matos / 1584”) has long puzzled art historians mostly because their magnificence seems to have sprouted literally by spontaneous generation with no predecessors and few immediate successors.

The set may be considered composed of four panels: two lower panels, facing each other, have the attributes of the saint painted on them. One of these, on the Gospel side of the chapel, depicts the dog with the loaf in its mouth (the “Panel of the Dog”) and bears the date and signature (figure 1). Although the design is noticeably different, technically the facing panel is a mirror image of the first. However, as we look up, the panel is not interrupted and continues up to the ceiling depicting a scene of the miracle of the bishop (the “Panel of the Bishop”). There is a clear boundary marked by the tints of yellow and of the blue showing that the upper panel was produced at a different time and very likely painted by a different hand (figure 2). Side by side with this panel, over a door, is the fourth panel depicting two winged children looking back to the chapel (the “Panel of the Cherubs”).



Figure 1 – The signed panel on the Gospel side of Capela de São Roque



Figure 2 – A partial view of the panels on the Epistle side of Capela de São Roque

At the insistence of José Queirós, a noted artist and historian of Portuguese ceramics, a large painting that covered both the bishop and the cherubs panels was removed in 1913 and the upper side of the lining was thus discovered [2]. Queirós reports that the panels were damaged because of the careless perforations needed to support the painting and a restoration of all the panels was entrusted to António Luiz de Jesus, an aged third-generation master painter. Queirós reports that

all fragments of the cut and perforated tiles were conserved but yet 47 reproduction tiles had to be made plus a number of fragments and that although the blue and violet were satisfactorily reproduced, the yellow and green did not match the original [2].

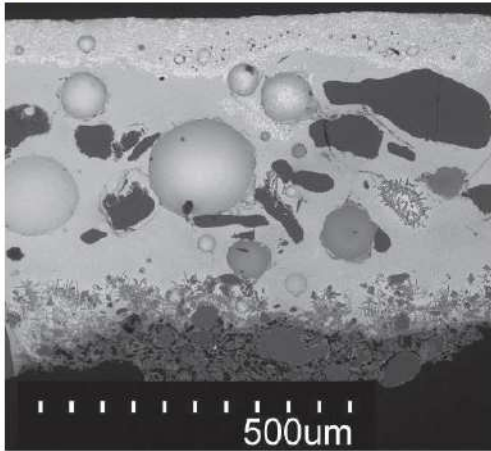


Figure 3 – The glaze and glaze-biscuit interface of a yellow tile of the Panel of the dog (sample Az068/02)

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 microscopic SEM analysis has shown that the composition and the morphology of the glazes and the glaze-biscuit interfaces (figure 3) are remarkably similar to the tiles of João de Góis in Igreja da Graça (see [3]) showing that technologically the linings of Capela de São Roque are not an isolated oddity.

Unexpectedly, samples from the several panels do not depict clear morphological differences suggesting that the panels of the bishop and of the cherubs were not manufactured much later than the lower panels. The reproduction tiles are clearly identifiable by their glaze-biscuit interface with only minor crystalline growth. However, their composition is uncannily similar to that of the original tiles, testifying to the knowledge of the restorer who did not use any “modern” materials then available.

This communication reviews José Queirós’ references to the panels made over a century ago, when a part of the lining was uncovered, and his information is compared with the objective proofs gained from instrumental results. The results also point to a definite technological ancestry.

*Key-words:* Renaissance majolica; Portuguese azulejos; Francisco de Matos; João de Góis; São Roque church in Lisbon

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