

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

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ABSTRACT

One of the jewels in the collections of the Museu Nacional do Azulejo (National Museum of Azulejo) is a Nativity painted in renaissance style and colours, topped by an Annunciation and flanked by the images of two Apostles, originally from the Nossa Senhora da Vida (Our Lady of Life) chapel of the now demolished Santo André (Saint Andrew) church in Lisbon. These azulejos were already specifically mentioned in 1721 for their exquisite quality in the important work *Santuário Mariano*, a collection of books by Fr. Agostinho de Santa Maria (1642-1728).

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

RESUMO

Uma das jóias da coleção do Museu Nacional do Azulejo é uma natividade pintada ao gosto e nas cores do Renascimento, encimada por uma anunciação e ladeada pelas imagens de dois apóstolos. Pertenceu à Capela de Nossa Senhora da Vida, outrora da Igreja de Santo André, em Lisboa, entretanto demolida. O painel já havia sido referido em 1721 pela sua requintada qualidade na importante obra *Santuário Mariano*, uma coleção de livros redigidos por Fr. Agostinho de Santa Maria (1642-1728).

Esta comunicação revê as fontes documentais mais antigas atualmente conhecidas que referem este painel e apresenta novos resultados na investigação de um dos mais importantes testemunhos de continuidade tecnológica referente às primeiras décadas de produção de azulejos de faiança em Portugal.

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KEYWORDS: Renaissance majolica / Azulejo panel Nossa Senhora da Vida / João de Góis /
/ Francisco de Matos / Early Portuguese azulejos / Museu Nacional do
Azulejo

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Paper produced as an output of Project FCT-AzuRe - Estudos no Azulejo Português para Candidatura a Património da Humanidade (PTDC/EPH-PAT/5096/2014) funded by FCT, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology.

LNEC Research Project 0202/111/19747.

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1. THE WINDING PATH FROM SANTO ANDRÉ CHURCH

Santo André (Saint Andrew) church, once head of a parish of the same name in Lisbon, was built between 1334 and 1340 following a land donation by the king and queen of Portugal to Ayres Martins and his wife Maria Esteves. The church had a single nave that extended to the main chapel and four small side chapels, among which, near the entrance, was the Nossa Senhora da Vida (Our Lady of Life) chapel. This had been instituted by Bartholomeu Vaz de Lemos, who had been parish-priest in this church. Inside the chapel laid the tomb of João Pedro Soares da Veiga and although a sculpture of the Virgin reputed to be miraculous was also there (the image still exists and can today be seen in the nearby Graça church) it was the azulejo panel lining the back of the chapel that was always described as an exceptional piece. These azulejos were considered unparalleled in Lisbon, and they represent in *trompe l'oeil* a large stone retablo with two niches for the statues of two Evangelists (John and Luke). At the centre is a representation of the Nativity with Shepherds (Figure 1) topped by a semi-circular pediment with a curious frame reminiscent of a Della Robbia *tondo* superimposed to an Annunciation having in the middle an opening that once framed a window.



Figure 1. The superlative Nossa Senhora da Vida azulejo panel

One of the inspirational sources has been identified: the print by Caraglio of an Annunciation by Titian (Figure 2). Since the figures reproduced and their context do not follow exactly the print, it may be supposed that the painters used several sources but rearranged the individual figures throughout the panel with considerable freedom.



Figure 2. Caraglio print of a lost Annunciation by Titian – one of the sources for the composition of Nossa Senhora da Vida

The first known reference to these azulejos dates from 1712 in a description of the chapel by Padre António Carvalho da Costa (1650-1715). In the last volume of his *Corografia Portuguesa* he states that the chapel “is tiled with such an azulejo that is reputed to be unique” (*he azulejada de hum tal azulejo, que tem nome de ser singular*) [1]. Nine years later, in 1721, when the 7th tome of an important work in ten volumes describing all the churches, chapels and sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Portugal and its overseas territories was published, its author, Frei Agostinho de Santa Maria (1642-1728), also describes the Nossa Senhora da Vida chapel [2]. He says that “among the chapels of this church, that of the greatest notoriety is Nossa Senhora da Vida” (*entre as Capellas desta Igreja, a de mayor nome he a da Senhora da Vida*). It is through this testimony that we know that the man who instituted in his lifetime this chapel, Bartolomeu Vaz de Lemos, had been parish priest of the church and he had nominated João Pedro Soares da Veiga its administrator, explaining why Da Veiga’s tomb was there. The author does not mention the date of the institution of the chapel, but we know from another source that by the end of 1582 Bartolomeu Vaz de Lemos had already died. José Maria António Nogueira, cited by Ribeiro Guimarães in 1872 [3], refers to a document with his *post-mortem* dispositions dated from the 30th May of 1582, an element that can narrow the period when the panel was made and the chapel consecrated.

Returning to Agostinho de Santa Maria’s description, he praises the fact that “this Chapel is tiled with an ancient azulejo, but excellent, where one can see painted some mysteries

of Our Lady, who is represented in the middle of the retable, and albeit very old is very perfect” (*está esta Capella azulejada de hum azulejos antigo, mas excellente, aonde se vêm pintados alguns mysterios de Nossa Senhora, a qual se vê collocada no meyo do retabolo, que ainda que antigo, he muyto perfeyto*) [2]. Two aspects stand from this description: that, from his experience, the writer seems suspicious of the quality of ancient paintings (*albeit very old is very perfect*); and also that he does not stand as particularly interested in azulejos (*tiled with an ancient azulejo, but excellent*). This is supported by the fact that amidst the 2,393 items he describes in the ten volumes of his work, the only azulejo panel to which he refers in some detail is precisely this one, notwithstanding the fact that by his time there were many other Marian representations in azulejo panels, testifying on the noteworthiness that Nossa Senhora da Vida still had in the religious decorative context. An interesting aspect that Santa Maria refers is that not long before the writing of his book “there was occasion for the renewal and painting of the vaulted ceiling of the chapel, a work already completed without too much expense” (*ocasião de se lhe renovar e pintar o tecto da sua Capela, que he de abbobada; e estando ja pintada sem ser obra de muyto custo*).

Three years after the catastrophic earthquake of 1755, in August 1758, there was an inquiry made to the condition of the church [4]. In the description that was made about the Nossa Senhora da Vida chapel is referred that “it is tiled with an ancient azulejo that according to what we see and is said, is peerless in this city” (*azulejada de hum azulejo antigo que segundo se vê, e se diz não há outro semelhante nesta cidade*). It is also referred that following the earthquake there was “ruin all over the church and because of the lack of means and a poor parish it has not yet been rebuilt” (*padeceu ruína no Corpo todo da Igr.^a e por falta de meios e freguesia pobre se não têm adiantado em reedificação*). And it remained in that condition until 1835 when it was definitively closed and the medieval tombs, statues and other objects considered precious and that could be transported, were moved to the nearby Graça church, where they remain to this day.

The demolition of the church started in 1845 but through the efforts of a man called José Valentim, who mentioned the panel to Malaquias Ferreira Leal, a municipal architect, the opinion of an influent professor of sculpture of the Academy of Fine Arts, Francisco de Assis Rodrigues, was sought and at his advice the panel was saved [3]. The removal of the azulejos started on the 7th January 1845, with the assistance of José Valentim, following which they were boxed and kept in storage until 1861.

In 1861 an Englishman proposed to acquire the panel and once again José Valentim intervened, writing to a curator of the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library), then lodged in the ancient São Francisco convent in Chiado. He alerted the Head Librarian, Mendes Leal, who claimed the panel to be installed in the Library. The boxes were transferred to this new place on the 6th April of the same year and in 1863 they started to be restored because “before they were removed from the chapel where they belonged they were decayed and after being poorly removed and with the transportation they deteriorated further. The first damage started with the nails that were hammered into the joints between the tiles for the worshippers to hang gifts offered to Our Lady of Life... this way the edges of many cracked, and some tiles even broke” (*antes de serem arrancados da capella onde estiveram, se achavam deteriorados, depois mal levantados e com as conduções, foram-se deteriorando mais. O primeiro estrago começou com os pregos que se pregavam entre os azulejos, para dependurar as oferendas que os devotos levavam à Senhora da Vida... d’este modo estalaram as arestas de muitos d’elles, e alguns até se quebraram*). At this point it was intended to make new tiles to replace those in worse condition or that were missing but “those who work in this industry declared a good reproduction to be impossible because they ignored the

process of painting that allowed the tiles to be fired without the fading of the colours” (*os artifices, que se empregam n’esta industria, lhe declararam que era impossível a imitação, por quanto ignoram o processo da pintura de modo que indo os azulejos ao forno, ella se não perca*) [3].

Nevertheless, the panel was restored and laid on the wall of the National Library in 1865. Some new azulejos were made and missing areas filled with stucco but the restoration was not considered as good as was desired. A small panel was made to fill the area of the former window in the top and in it the known history of the panel was narrated. This panel was framed in an imitation of a reddish limestone (*lizo vermelho*) because this was the material framing the original chapel window. In 1961, when the National Library was transferred to its present Lisbon location in Campo Grande, there was a request for the panel to be integrated in the collection of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* (National Museum of Ancient Art) to be subsequently passed to the *Museu Nacional do Azulejo*, then about to open [5]. And so, in 1969, the panel was transferred to the old Madre de Deus convent, where the museum was to be installed, and since its opening is on display there as one of the prize pieces of its collections.

We do not have information on who the painters of the Nossa Senhora da Vida panel were but Ribeiro Guimarães stated in 1865 that one could recognize “at least two hands, because there are parts that are better finished and others imperfect” (*obra pelo menos de dois artistas, porque há partes melhor acabadas e outras imperfeitas*) [3]. After inspecting the painting we can state that it is indeed possible to recognize several styles (for instance in the two angels of Figure 2) and maybe up to four different painters worked in the panel, pointing to a workshop important enough to command the work of a number of artists. But if, at least for now, we cannot name any of the painters, we may nevertheless hypothesize on when the panel was made.

We already know that the chapel was instituted during the life of Bartolomeu Vaz de Lemos who was already dead in mid-1582. Ribeiro Guimarães, based on the testimony of José Valentim, states in his text of 1865 that there was another set of azulejos in the building and “in the painting that was in the other side of the chapel, and was of lesser quality, one could read the date 1580” (*no quadro que ficava do outro lado da capella, e que era de somenos merecimento, lia-se a data de 1580*). So the author believes that “it is likely they were from the same time although the others were not as valuable, being less well sketched and of inferior colours” (*é de crer que seja d’esse tempo, com quanto os outros não tivessem tanto valor, por serem mais incorrectos e de inferior colorido*). The date given (1580) is consistent with the other information and the technical quality of Nossa Senhora da Vida is also level with the panels lining São Roque chapel in Lisbon, one of which dated “1584” [6].

2. SUDDENLY IN 2018...

A peculiar aspect of the Nossa Senhora da Vida panel is that instead of depicting the Four Evangelists, only two are shown, which is very unusual in this type of representation. When we look at the representation in this panel we see the Annunciation on top and the Adoration of the Shepherds in the centre. These two moments of the narrative of the life of Mary and Jesus were only addressed in the Gospels of Luke and to a lesser

degree Matthew (in this case only the Annunciation is indirectly mentioned). Indeed, in the panel we can see the figure of Luke on the right side of the panel, recognisable through the ox that stands by him, but on the left side, instead of Matthew, we see John who never even mentions these events. This is one of the most puzzling aspects of the panel: why John and not Matthew, who was always depicted as a middle aged or elderly man escorted by an angel?

One should keep in mind that José Valentim said that there was a second set of azulejos on the other side of the chapel where one could read the date “1580”. What “the other side of the chapel” means is not very clear: was it on the walls of the same chapel, but facing the panel of Nossa Senhora da Vida? But Nossa Senhora da Vida lined the back wall of the chapel... This would presumably mean that the chapel was not fully open to the main body of the church and there were walls on both sides of its entrance. Or did he mean “on the other side of the church”?

In an archaeological excavation held during the year 2018 at a building in the nearby Travessa do Açougue, where it is still possible to see the remains of Santo André church, five fragments of majolica azulejos from a figurative panel were discovered (Figure 3). Among these, part of the face of an elderly man and the locks of hair of a child suggested a hypothesis: that the remains discovered in the recent excavation were part of the lost panel “on the other side of the chapel”, maybe two panels on both sides of the entrance, representing the two other Evangelists, Matthew and Mark, and completing the narrative. It was very common to have images or symbols of the Evangelists in the four corners of cloisters and chapels and if this was the case it would be a correct and usual way of presenting them. The elderly man would be Matthew and the child his angel.

But if this was the case and the azulejos referred by José Valentim with the date “1580” belonged to the same chapel and were part of the narrative, why were they not saved? He himself tells us that both in design and colours they were of inferior quality and the fragments found, maybe the product of a different workshop, seem to agree with his statement.

The description of the removal of Senhora da Vida and the information that the numbers used to mark the individual tiles for ulterior re-assembling was faulty point to work done hastily, possibly under pressure from the demolition team. We shall probably never know for sure unless more fragments are found or the engravings used as a basis for the Adoration and the Four Evangelists are identified. If the elements discovered in the excavation match any of the absent figures, it would add weight to the hypothesis.

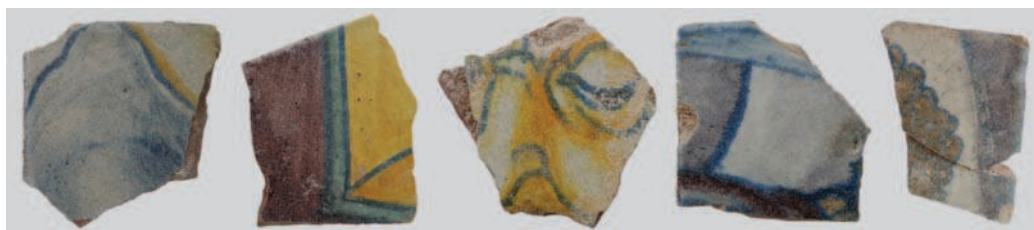


Figure 3. Azulejo fragments found during an archaeological excavation in the grounds of the demolished Santo André church and thought to have been part of a former panel

3. TO CONCLUDE WITH A FEW SURPRISES

The superb artistic achievement represented by the Nossa Senhora da Vida panel cannot be overstated but the technological mastery of the workshop should not be forgotten either. The quality of the tiles, notwithstanding the tortuous history of the panel, which conserved to this day the gloss and the fullness of the colours is certainly of technical note.

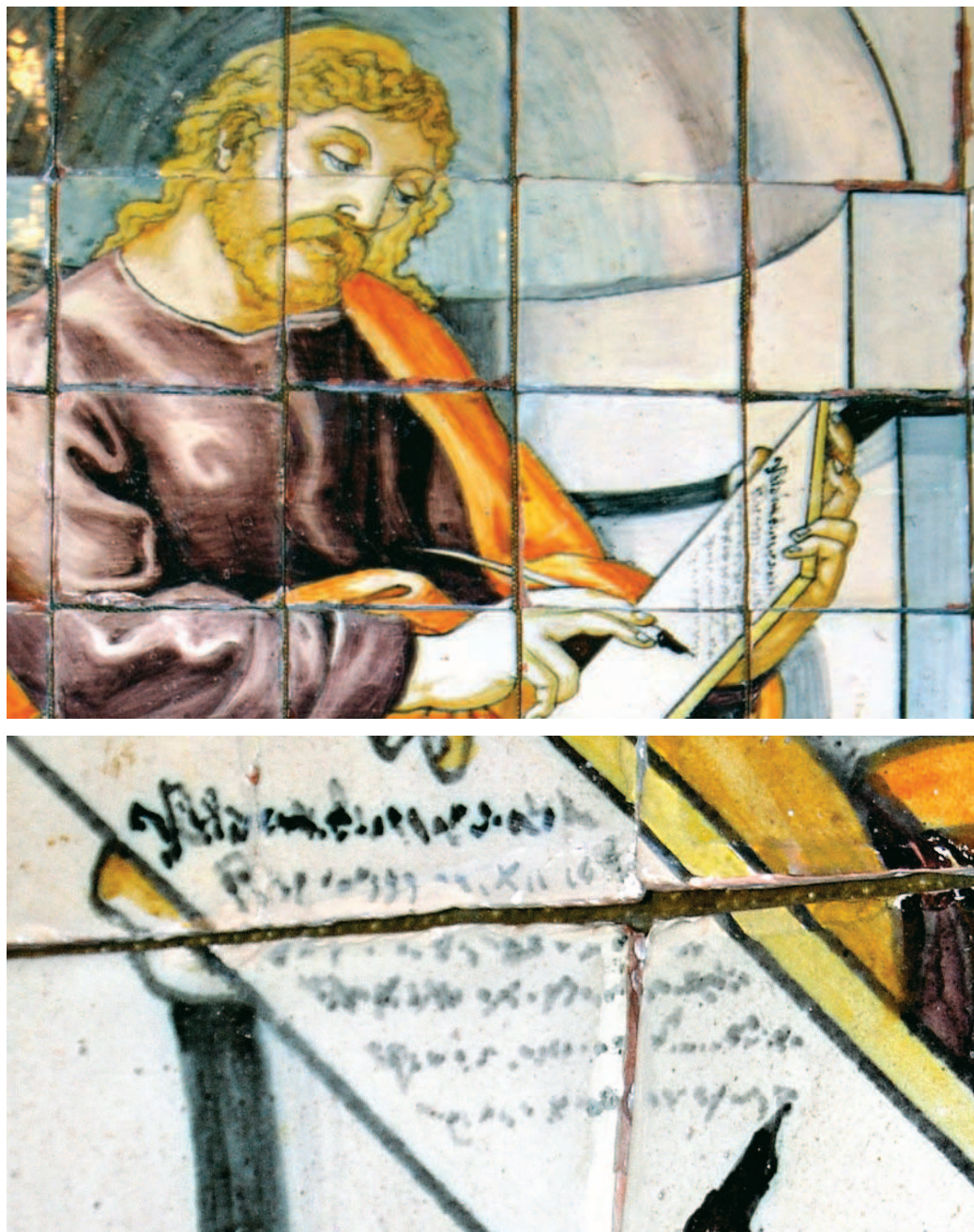


Figure 4. John the Evangelist, patronym saint of João de Góis

Studying Nossa Senhora da Vida, we ended up with the feeling that the panel was a quite unique job, either because the patron ordered and paid for a masterpiece, or because the workshop master wanted it to be a crowning achievement by which he should be recognized by his peers. But should he not have left his signature on such a timeless piece of artwork and craftsmanship? On one side of the Nativity is Luke who, maybe by coincidence, was the patron saint of Flemish *potbackers*, those who worked with clay, and everywhere the patron saint of painters because he himself had been one. On the other side is John and, again, why John and not Matthew? John is writing and the first line of his text was written over to try and make it more legible but actually garbled words that went unnoticed until now (Figure 4). It reads “F(e)ita em lisb (por?) Joao (de?)” (Made in Lisbon (by?) Joao ...). The second line is cut at mid height by an edge and was damaged and restored. The restorer scribbled some apparently meaningless signals as part of his work but it may still be seen that the first word has four letters, the first is a capital, maybe a “G” and the last a “s” followed by maybe numbers amidst which we can still make what seems to be, either a “3” or an “8”.

Feita em Lisboa por João de Góis (made in Lisbon by João de Góis) is the likely transcription and now we can hypothesise why John and not Matthew: the master signed his great work at the hands of his patronym saint. It had to be John because that was his own name! But young St. John is always represented as a beardless young man. However, João de Góis himself was “blond with a blond beard” as stated in his inquisitorial process [7]. Furthermore we suggest that the master may have lent John some characteristics of his own physiognomy. It is also likely that he was the painter of John and of the best sketched figures in the panel some of which may have been painted to the resemblance of actual people.

João de Góis seemingly had a flair for messages that no one read but he, as happened with the panels in Graça church where his monogram was also identified only recently [8]. Considering again the St. John in the panel, we notice that the light on his vest outlines the letter “G” on the right side of the chest (Figure 4). Maybe a coincidence; probably not... what other surprises await in Nossa Senhora da Vida?

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