

Art squared

The venerated Portuguese tradition of azulejos is well worth a visit.



Story, story on the wall

The most revered visual artists in Europe traditionally excelled at fresco, oil painting and sculpture. Not so in Portugal, where artists shone at making azulejos, glazed ceramic tiles that were fashioned into narrative scenes.

In the 16th-18th centuries entire walls of grand palaces and richly endowed churches were covered with this work, some of it very large. A stupendous blue-and-white panorama of Lisbon, made not long before the destructive earthquake of 1755, measures almost 795 feet (242.3 metres) in length, and was even longer before elements from both ends were lost. What makes these creations so winning is their exuberance not skilful mastery of technique or sophisticated drawing. Though some are marked with splashes and smudges of glaze, all have an endearing freshness and even joy.

The golden age of azulejo art came during Portugal's colonial expansion. China, Brazil, Goa and the East Indies created enormous wealth for Portugal. The rich wanted to advertise their status and had the means to do so. New palaces, churches, convents and monasteries were built and tile scenes were commissioned to decorate them inside and out.

In the 17th century green and yellow, blue and white were the colours most often used, reflecting the influence of Italian majolica. A century later, when the craze for Chinese export porcelain was at its height, blue and white dominate. Red, difficult to keep true when it is fired at high temperature, doesn't appear until the 19th century. The range of subjects is considerable. Biblical scenes and cycles from the lives of the saints dominated the decoration of Portugal's many churches and religious institutions. But even here there is secular imagery too. One series of tile narratives in the imposing monastery of São Vicente de Fora depicts a 12th-century siege of Lisbon. Upstairs in one of its cloisters a series of tile panels illustrates the fables of Jean de la Fontaine.

War and hunting scenes were popular in palaces; muses also. However many hours were spent in prayer, sensuality was not overlooked, especially in the country houses of the privileged. At Quinta da Bacalhôa between Lisbon and the sea, the tile decoration of its arcaded, lakeside rooms (including a rendition of the story of Susannah and the Elders) reflects the pursuit of the

pleasures of the flesh. Elsewhere tile artists combined humour and social commentary. "Singerie: The Chicken's Wedding" (pictured above) shows a chicken seated in a coach led by elaborately costumed servants and celebrators all of whom are monkeys.

Lisbon's National Museum of Tiles is instructive as well as a visual treat, with many tile tableaux from ruined or abandoned palaces and religious buildings on show. In some the influence of the art of the country's new colonies in Africa, China, South America and India is evident. The building itself—the Madre de Deus Convent established by Queen Leonor in 1509—is part of the story, as reflected in a recent exhibition, "Casa Perfeitíssima". The church, added almost 50 years later, remains attached to the museum. There visitors can see tile scenes in their original setting and appreciate how successfully they were integrated with such other elements as carved, gilded wood, religious paintings and glittering reliquaries.

In modern times, patronage has given azulejo art another boost. The first stations of Lisbon's underground were opened in 1959. All have been decorated by contemporary artists working in tiles. The results range from blowzy abstractions to a nervy, drawn portrait of Fernando Pessoa, Portugal's most celebrated 20th-century poet, bringing to life an art form at which the Portuguese have excelled for more than half a millennium.

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