THE CONTEMPORARY AZULEJO: AN IDENTITY ISSUE?

AZULEJO CONTEMPORÂNEO: UMA QUESTÃO IDENTITÁRIA?

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ABSTRACT

One of the aspects that has supported the idea of the azulejo (tile) as a cultural heritage of the Portuguese identity is its continuous employment since the end of the fifteenth century until today, now having become a part of the projects of artists, architects and designers. This article seeks to ponder upon the relationship that contemporary authors have established, or not, with this appreciation of the azulejo as an art connected to identity, discerning the reasons that have led them to select it for their pieces.

KEYWORDS

Identity | Tile | Authors | Contemporary

RESUMO

Um dos aspectos que tem sustentado a ideia do azulejo como herança identitária portuguesa é a sua aplicação contínua, desde o final do século XV, integrando, na contemporaneidade, projectos de artistas, arquitectos e designers. O presente artigo procura reflectir sobre a relação que os autores contemporâneos estabeleceram, ou não, com este entendimento do azulejo enquanto arte identitária, observando as razões que estiveram na base para a opção de recorrer ao azulejo no contexto das suas obras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Identidade | Azulejo | Autores | Contemporaneidade
INTRODUCTION

Over the last years the idea that the azulejo is an art that defines the Portuguese cultural identity has been the focus of a growing academic and public debate, which is also connected to its appreciation that is, in turn, linked to a taste rooted in Portugal. Also, as a result of its continuous employment for over five centuries, the azulejo is an artistic frame which artists, architects and designers frequently resort to, therefore prolonging its use while updating its application in contemporary production. This article seeks to observe the tile production since 1950, aiming to assess whether the purposes that lead artists, architects and designers to use the azulejo are connected to this notion of “identitarian” art or not.

Even though the azulejo’s socio-cultural meaning as Portuguese heritage might be regarded as a hot topic, it is important to explain this debate started in the second half of the twentieth century, like other articles published by Nuno Rosmaninho, Alexandra Gago da Câmara and Rosário Salema de Carvalho, Sandra Leandro and João Pedro Monteiro in this volume have made clear. By reading the original texts and the considerations they later elicited, the importance of recognising the azulejo’s particular employment in Portugal is plain when compared to its counterparts in other countries. Equally vital is its recognition as a national art of “unique expression in the world”, therefore worthy of being considered a separate, autonomous category in ceramic studies (Santos, 1947: 86-94). Although the term identity was not a part of these researchers’ texts, their ideas helped develop a discourse that values the differentiating characteristics of the Portuguese tiles and are echoed in José Meco’s recent words: “Portugal seems to have been fated to become the land of the azulejo. Although it did not invent this material, it was its greatest producer and customer within Europe, surpassing by far the output of all other Western countries. (…) However, the most striking features of Portugal’s tile production are not its quantity and continuity, but the extraordinary creativity of its decorations, along with their outstanding ability to blend, in with the architecture, transforming and completing each space in the most original way, as well as with the other art forms, giving rise to artistic ensembles that reflect in a unique way the artistic qualities and taste of Portuguese people”1 (Meco, 2017: 9-10).2

However, over the last couple of years, the concept of identity associated with the azulejo has been ever more present in official discourses and narratives conveyed by the National Azulejo Museum as well as by society in general. In fact, a set of touristic materials decorated with tile motifs, which are meant to be a symbol of Portuguese culture, has been growing. It is, therefore, from the synthesis that we have just outlined that, bearing in mind the ambiguity of what identity might be understood as today, that we seek to understand the contemporary tile production’s permeability to such issues connected to national identity.

On the one hand, in what concerns art practice, it is possible to acknowledge that contemporary production reiterates and develops the singular aspects mentioned by historiography. The azulejo continues to serve as an adjective for the spaces it is placed on due to its association with architecture and because it is applied

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1. Original translation.
2. Let us recall the perspective of the author of the first history of the Portuguese azulejo, Reynaldo dos Santos: “The importance of the azulejo, in the history of the decorative arts in Portugal, is indisputable. To the eyes of the national and mostly foreign art historians, the azulejo is the prime example of our decorative art, the most unique, the one that impresses everyone because of the variety of its specimens, its continuous evolution, the range of its employment and as always, the charm of its colours and glaze. (…) The originality of an art does not rest essentially in technical discoveries; technique is only a means, and, in decorative arts, the unprecedented level of its creations lies on the ornamental concept that inspires and renews it. (…) From the very beginning, what characterised the singular nature of the Portuguese azulejo, which has mostly used the majolica glazing technique, that is, painting over a terracotta flat surface, was the monumental idea behind its employment - even in imported tiles - that renewed itself in the wide use in the mural and polychrome decoration of the seventeenth century, fully covering walls, doors, windows, altar fronts and even ceilings and vaults. Thereby, an atmosphere of colour and shimmer was created, mainly in churches, that surpassed the more ornamental function of a tile surface. A decorative art if not merely judged by the individual elements that it is made of, but by the application possibilities that are conceived from them and it is precisely in this that its originality rests on. (…) The azulejo’s evolution among us had such a continuous renewing spirit, which reached its golden age when it had already started to decline in the Peninsula. (…) One of the unique features of the Portuguese azulejo was that it had its own evolution from the 16th century onwards; its unity lies not on an unchanged traditional concept, but on the variety of inventions inspired by the adaptation to the style and spirit of each age.” (Santos, 1957: 7-8).
in a continuous renewal of discourses and forms, shaped according to the challenges set by the last decades. The use of computer pixels, the incorporation of language used in comics, the expansion of the square format to other settings, volumes and textures or even the integration of street art are examples of the adaptability and renewal that has always been a feature of the Portuguese tiles (Fig. 01). In the urban culture setting, the idea that the tile is today an integral part of the Portuguese daily life has also been reinforced over the last couple of years by the growing use of the themes related to the azulejo in artistic projects in which the ceramic material is replaced by paper, wood or mural painting (Leitão, 2016: 40-43; Menezes, 2017: 219-222; Pais, 2018: 10).

On the other hand, in theoretical terms, what artistic discourse upholds these options and practices? Is the acknowledgement of the azulejo as “one of the most significant principles of Portuguese art” today a result of a discourse built around its identity? Can we consider the creations or the allusion to works in azulejo by contemporary artists, architects and designers are connected to this understanding of the tile as an art linked to identity? How do the different authors define identity as a concept?

3. Limited more specifically to a timeframe between the second half of the twentieth century until now, which is connected to the alterations made to the azulejo both at a technical and a formal level, from the 1950s onwards a generation of architects and artists led a nationwide reassertion of the azulejo that, under Brazilian influence, reinterpreted the combination between the ceramic material and its architectonic frames, therefore, allowing a reintegration of tiles in the national artistic stage wherein, though adapting to the different decades’ characteristics, it has remained until today (Henriques, 2000: 70-82; Almeida, 2012; Leitão, 2016: 40-43; Menezes, 2017: 219-222; Pais, 2018: 10-13).
Aiming to think about these issues, in this approach we chose to privilege the analysis of the different authors’ discourse concerning the azulejo, keeping in mind that this study will not cover the theme fully. On the contrary, it is only a complement to the critical analysis of the works, which we have been developing.

As methodology of work we selected a vast set of interviews published or conducted by us, more or less as conversations, with the authors; in total we collected thirty-one national testimonies and four international ones. The citations and references we used and published in interviews were, mostly, brought together from questions that were not directly focused on the issue of identity or why the authors at hand decided to work with azulejo. For this reason, it is relevant to draw attention to the fact that, if we faced the authors with direct questions on the subject under study, their answers would, most likely, be very different from the ones we obtained using this strategy. However, and considering that, on the one hand, many are not among us anymore and, on the other, that these testimonies denote the discourse of certain authors about the azulejo and its employment in Portugal, we believe that, despite some acknowledged limitations, it is a pertinent approach in the context of a critical reflection on “the identity(ies) of the azulejo in Portugal”.

Therefore, the work conducted has allowed us to divide the options regarding the azulejo’s use into three areas: 1) authors who acknowledge they decided to use azulejo due to its traditional nature (“Then we remembered to put azulejo [because] it is ours”); 2) the ones who, despite identifying the azulejo as part of the Portuguese heritage, do not directly claim that is the reason behind their option (“Acknowledging a tradition: “We are a country that has azulejo in its past”); and, 3) those who work with azulejo because it is one of the demands of the commission (“Azulejo: an obligation”). These are the three perspectives around which we have structure the analysis that follows.

DIVERSE APPROACHES TO THE AZULEJO

“Then we remembered to put azulejo [because] it is ours”.4

Most authors we observed justified their use of the azulejo as “something ours”, traditional or connected to Portuguese identity. The first underground stations in Lisbon (1959), by the architect Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) and artist Maria Keil (1914-2012), who was responsible for the tile placement, are a relevant example of this. As Maria Keil mentioned in several interviews about this project, the decision to integrate tiles in the underground stations in Lisbon was related to several factors, among which are the singular nature of the ceramic material in Portugal. Master Manuel Cargaleiro (b. 1927),5 ceramist Cecília de Sousa (b. 1937)6 and the artists Rogério Ribeiro (1930-2008)7 and Joana Vasconcelos (b. 1971)8 also share this perspective and acknowledge that the tradition regarding ceramics influenced them. Manuel Cargaleiro even suggests there is an unconscious

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4. This expression was taken from an interview to the artist Maria Keil, when she explains the option to apply azulejo (tile) in the Lisbon Underground. The original phrase is: “Then we remembered to put azulejo. (...) It is ours, it is washable, it is durable, one can give the colour one wants and it was very cheap” (Mantas, 2012: 11).
5. “I have worked with this material for over 40 years and I have never stopped using it. Since Portugal is one of the countries with greater tradition in this artistic field, perhaps because of that, I have fallen in love with the azulejo from the very beginning” (Botelho, 1991: 39).
6. “I saw [azulejo] modelled by hand, I saw [it] being fired on the floor. This learning process has weighted a lot on what I do, even though I still enjoy glassmaking a lot and have been influenced by our tile tradition” (Tomás, 1993: 36).
7. On his work for Lisbon’s underground, “The wall is regarded as a surface for the azulejo, because – as a material – it is convenient and because it is “from here”, its recovery or its use and coexistence, as well as its cost, have indubitably elected it” (Botelho, 1991: 56).
8. “What I do is look at the traditions and legacy of the popular Portuguese arts, to what distinguishes us and is a part of our heritage and I decontextualize it, I reinterpret it in the contemporary world. To do this I often use material and techniques developed in our country; above all, what most interests me is to create discourses through the development of a clash and dialogue between cultures. Work in crochet and in azulejo, the introduction of fado in some works, the reinterpretation of ceramic pieces by Bordalo Pinheiro, all of these [endeavours] fit in an effort to value and preserve our memory for future generations, but also in developing a new take on these elements” (Aires, 2017).
fondness of the *azulejo*, a statement sustained by other of the master’s testimonies in which he refers that it is a part of his imaginary since his childhood. As for Joana Vasconcelos, this option is at the core of her work, as the artist explores popular Portuguese objects and traditions such as lacework, embroidery and filigree, among other cultural symbols that are a part of the national imaginary.

More recently, the street artist Add Fuel aka Diogo Machado (b. 1980), has incorporated a very similar speech in his work. Add Fuel reinterprets tile tradition through the ceramic material itself or its sign in mural painting (Fig. 02), aiming to explore one of the “national heritages” so as “to bring Portuguese culture into the present, trying to rethink it and help preserve it” (Machado, 2018: 132). This intent to rehabilitate the tile patrimony matches the work done by Pedrita Studio that, comprising Pedro Ferreira (b. 1978) and Rita João (b. 1978), restores discontinued industrial *azulejos*, mainly from the 1960s and 1970s, placed in great figurative compositions that gain greater expression at a distance (Fig. 03).

Curiously, a great number of the authors that choose to allude to the *azulejo*, instead of using the material

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9. “When I went with my parents to a beautiful church in Monte da Caparica, which was covered in eighteenth century *azulejos* – absolutely lovely – I was about five or six years old and instead of listening to the mass, I would amuse myself by looking at the *azulejos*, interpreting them and following their lines. Not only did the figures draw my attention, but also the material, especially the glaze and shimmer of the tiles. To me, it was fascinating” (Tomás, 1994a: 43).

10. “What I do is not mine, it is ours. What I do ends up being our heritage (...)” (RTP Play).

11. “[...] It also aspires to become an innovative option for the rehabilitation of the urban built heritage. It recovers discontinued production tiles, using them as units of decorative cladding panels, destined both to architectural façades and to the (re)furbishment of other urban elements” (Pedrita). Original translation.
itself, have as a goal to draw attention to the decay of this patrimony. *Kneaded Memory* (2012-2015) by Dalila Gonçalves (b. 1962),12 the projects *Recoverarte* (Recoverart, 2013) by Maria D’Almada13 and the first phase of *Preencher Vazios* (*To Fill Voids*, since 2015) by the designer Joana Abreu (b. 1992)14 as well as the manifestos (“the azulejo rebellion”) by Manuela Pimental (b. 1979)15 are examples of this (Fig. 04). The fact that this group of authors aims at raising awareness to the preservation of the tile tradition shows that their choice is made because they recognise its particular importance to national culture. In the project AZULagir’s case (2015), by the architect José Pedro Santos (b. 1981) and artist Alberto Vieira,16 the goal was to reinvent tile tradition through colourful funnels that were meant to refer to the traditional Port wine, thus recreating sixty-six different modules (Fig. 05).17

12. “In the past century, there has been an increasing degradation, destruction and exclusion of the decorative element in architectural use. Along with the exclusion of traditional decorative elements, the past century has also seen an increase in the usage of cement and concrete on the façades of most public and private buildings. *Kneaded Memory* looks into this particular relation between past and present, between memory, remembrance and oblivion” (Dalila Gonçalves). Original translation.

13. On the reasons that have led Maria D’Almada to work with material that alludes to azulejo, she stated: “I realised this patrimony is unique, but also always at risk” (Flores, 2012).

14. “Beyond carrying out an artistic and creative intervention, *Preencher Vazios* aims at drawing attention to the urge to preserve the Portuguese tile patrimony” (Lopes, 2015).

15. “(...) It is as if I am showing my fellow countrymen that we live in our history and that all we have comes from the past. My relationship with traditional Portuguese azulejos is a reinvention, to create over what has already been done, in order not to lose this piece of history” (Museu Afro Brasil, 2017).

16. Alberto Vieira was the winner of the 2nd edition of the public art competition VIARTES, held by Via Catarina Shopping (in Oporto).

17. Concerning the choice of azulejo, “it is a secular Portuguese tradition, here reinvented through the use of a tridimensional object (the funnel, which is also associated with Port wine) and the possibility of creating a panel that does not have a uniform or predetermined pattern, even though it is constructed from modules of a set geometric structure” (José Pedro Santos | architect).
Fig. 04 - Oporto, Kneaded Memory / Memória Amassada, Dalila Gonçalves (b. 1962), 2012-2015; Oporto, Preencher Vazios, Joana Abreu (b. 1990), since 2015; Manuela Pimentel (b. 1979), Não se fala do mar a qualquer pessoa, acrylic and varnish on street posters, on African derivative plywood, 2018.

Fig. 05 - Oporto, Via Catarina Shopping, façade, AZULagir, José Pedro Santos (b. 1981) and Alberto Vieira, 2015.
This proposal also expected the users of that space to participate in the project, as they were invited to create some of the modules.

In what concerns the authors that occasionally use azulejo in their work, this intent remains (Fig. 06). The artist Fernanda Fragateiro (b. 1962) claims that the reasons why she chose to include ceramic material in her work Projecto das Sombras (Shadow Project, 1998) was precisely its connection to identity. Like Manuel Cargaleiro, the artist mentions the choice was made from a nearly unconscious idea. Pedro Cabrita Reis (b. 1956) also used azulejo in his interventions at Lisbon’s International Exhibition in 1998 (Expo’98) because this material is now an integral part of the national artistic imaginary and, therefore, one of the elements that most embodies the Portuguese urban landscape.

In turn, the architect Luís Pedro Silva (b. 1971), concerning his project for the Port of Leixões’ Cruise Terminal (2015), stated that, despite the fact that the selection of a ceramic covering was connected to its resistance, durability and its typical aesthetical effect, the weight of tradition, even if unconsciously, also influenced his decision.

This idea is also perceptible in his testimony in the seminar AzLab#35 where he accredited the tile tradition as “something ours”.

18. This information was collected through a conversation we had with the artist herself for our master’s dissertation (Leitão, 2016), during which Fernanda Fragateiro explained some points regarding this project.
19. This information was collected through a conversation we had with the artist himself for our master’s dissertation (Leitão, 2016), during which Pedro Cabrita Reis explained some points regarding this project.
20. This information was collected through a conversation we had with the architect himself, during which he clarified some points regarding this project.
21. AzLab is a monthly seminar that takes place at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon and its goal is to create new analysis perspectives on issues connected to the azulejo. This initiative is organised by Az – Rede de Investigação em Azulejo (Az - Azulejo Research Network, ARTIS/IHA-FLUL) and the National Azulejo Museum (see http://blogazlab.wordpress.com). The aim of the 35th edition of the seminar was to debate “what is azulejo?”, challenging artists, architects, designers, historians and the general public to answer this question. The initiative was later expanded to include 49 testimonies to be published in a book (Carvalho, 2018).
22. “Judging by its ability to endure, and renew itself, and serve the Portuguese language, the azulejo is already ours. For five hundred years, it has reinterpreted its own identity, in some of the most improbable places on earth: acquiring different forms and meanings this celestial place, attached to a plural sensibility and mode of organization” (Silva, 2018: 96). Original translation.
In addition, the awareness of the singular nature of the azulejo in Portugal is also a part of the discourse of international authors (Fig. 07), like for instance the designer Ivan Chermayeff (1932-2017). In the ceramic covering of the Administrative Building of Lisbon’s Oceanarium (1996-1998), Chermayeff used azulejo because, as he explained, it is one of the elements that distinguishes Portugal from the rest of the world – “the azulejo is Portuguese”.23 Greek designer Charis Tsevis (b. 1967) also shares this idea and concedes that, despite the fact that tiles are used in other countries, in Portugal “it is not just an art form, it is part of an identity” (Fernandes, 2014). The work done by Brazilian urban artist Fábio Carvalho (b. 1965), who uses paper to create his azulejo sign, is associated with an “emotional memory” and to national identity, which according to the artist is not confined to Portugal.24 It should be added that, although Fábio Carvalho is an international author, we must bear in mind that Brazil also has a sound tile tradition, a point highlighted by the artist himself when he considers that the azulejo is not solely a part of Portuguese identity (Carvalho, 2018: 38).

In short, the symbolism which the azulejo is bond to in the Portuguese artistic culture is one of the factors that influences its use today. However, most authors under study see this aspect as something traditional that characterises Portuguese culture, so they address this tradition from a more or less critical perspective, reassessing its most defining elements. Among these, and beyond the singular nature they all concede to the Portuguese tile, it is how the azulejo can adapt to each epoch’s specificity and, in particular, to

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24. “For beyond “this ceramic pieces, usually with a square shape, glazed and shiny on one side”, the azulejo are also, for me, chunks of emotional memory, sources of pride and national identity (mostly Portuguese, but not only)” (Carvalho, 2018: 38). Original translation.
contemporary language that is most valued. Thus, a correlation between the past and the present, which is noticeable in some of these artists’, architects’ and designers’ work, is achieved through references to archaic techniques or distinct aesthetic elements of very specific periods.

**Acknowledging a tradition: “we are a country that has azulejo in its past”**

Some of the authors who have used tiles extensively in their work do not explain why they have incorporated the azulejo in their artistic discourse. However, and considering their awareness concerning the history and the azulejo’s usage, along with, in some cases, their technical mastery, we need to consider that this option might be connected to their understanding of the azulejo’s singular nature in Portuguese culture. Master Júlio Resende (1917-2011), for instance, claimed the azulejo is “one of the techniques that is most related to the Portuguese way of feeling.” In turn, besides acknowledging the azulejo’s importance within the national artistic production, Master Querubim Lapa (1925-2016) praises its ability to renew itself throughout the centuries. Although these two perspectives are somewhat different, since for the first the azulejo has a poetic relationship with the Portuguese tradition and mood while, for the second, it is a matter of history and the relationship the author wishes to establish with it, both are aware that this material is a symbolic element in the collective imaginary. Although we were unable to find a testimony regarding the reasons why both authors – who are key references in the national artistic milieu, namely in the ceramic production scene – decided to work the azulejo, the ideas we have mentioned show that the ceramic tradition has certainly influenced their choices.

Other artists that fit this group are Maria Emília Araújo (b. 1940) and Eduardo Nery (1938-2013). The latter, proprietor of an extensive and important work in tile, believes the azulejo is an art “rooted in Portuguese culture” (Nery, 2007: 9), highlighting the importance of colour in cities and, especially, in Lisbon. Much like Manuel Cargaleiro, Eduardo Nery supports that the taste for this material is due to the strolls he went on with his parents during his childhood and teenagerhood, as these stimulated in him an awareness to the “immense richness contained in our azulejos” (Nery, 2007: 9).

The architects Catarina Almada Negreiros (b. 1972) and Rita Almada Negreiros (b. 1969), who, in partnership with Viúva Lamego Factory, are the authors of the kinetic tile, revealed that “when we started studying architecture, we were far from thinking that the azulejo would become a form of expression for us” (Fig. 08). The azulejo was a material that occasionally appeared, some more important than others, but it was not a means of expression, like we perceive it today” (Barbosa, 2012). However, both acknowledge the importance and influence of the tile tradition in contemporary production – qualities that their ceramic projects incorporate. The artist Maria Ana Vasco Costa (b. 1981) also does not specifically refer what reasons led her to work the azulejo, but she outlines as a goal “to innovate in shape, design and depth, while preserving its tradition”, Thus, she proposes

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25. This expression was taken from an interview to the artist Querubim Lapa, where he stated: “Although my things always hold on to the past, they belong in the present, in the period in which I live. Our tile tradition is rich in that sense. Having started in a distant past, it has moved on step by step and [re]appeared with [new] rich and exuberant elements, never discarding the past though. We have a country that has azulejo in its past [...]” (Tomás, 1994a: 37).

26. “First of all, ceramics, no matter what its physical purpose is, must be one of the techniques that has most to do with the Portuguese way of feeling. I was going to say perhaps nostalgia... There is a mood, even an atmosphere, of the sea, the temperatures, the reflection... / I think ceramics can translate that with great perfection given its glazed, translucent nature. The whole physical look, I guess, has a lot to do with the Portuguese people; that is why we get along well with azulejos. [...] This has to do with the so-called popular art” (1989: 29).


28. Eduardo Nery collaborated in a study about the behaviour of colour in urban interventions and its relevance for the construction of cities. In addition, the artist also delved into this idea in his artistic work (Nery, 1993; Nery, 2007: 50-55). Consequently, he drew attention to the azulejo as one of the best materials to be applied in cities.

29. “[...] From the 15th century, with its Mozarabic tiles decorations, to the present day, the azulejo has established itself as a protean material, evolving and adapting to the spirit and specificity of each historical period. [...] This long journey has become a solid work base for contemporary intervention, which absorbs this art form and create new images and languages [...]” (Negreiros and Negreiros, 2018: 14). Original translation.

30. This information was collected through a conversation we had with the artist herself, during which she clarified some points regarding her ceramic production.
the azulejo’s expansion to other configurations, textures and volumes (Fig. 09). Draw aka Frederico Campos (b. 1988), who used azulejo in one of his most recent works, does not disclose the reason behind his choice, but acknowledges that one of his purposes was to think about the tile production of the city that would welcome his work, Viseu. 31

When it comes to the international setting, Belgian artist Françoise Schein (b. 1953), who was aware of the tile tradition and its cognitive importance in Portugal, 32 started using the azulejo because of some of its characteristics. 33 She applied it for the first time in her project at the Concorde underground station in Paris (1989-1991). Yet, in her composition for Lisbon’s underground, she displays a clear awareness of the symbolic value that this material bestowed on her work. Previous knowledge of a tile tradition, which is at the core of this second group, is clear in some of the works done by aforementioned artists, like Querubim Lapa, Eduardo Nery, Catarina and Rita Almada Negreiros and Draw who, on the one hand, recover old techniques and, on the other, reinterpret iconic aesthetical elements. Therefore, and considering these authors’ work, along with their conceptualisation of the azulejo, we believe this issue has influenced their choice, even if unconsciously.

Azulejo: an obligation

The last group consists of authors who only used azulejo because they were commissioned to do so, as is the case of the artists Charters de Almeida (b. 1935) and Jorge Martins (b. 1940), 34 or because they were...

31. “We will paint in a more classical manner, though obviously with a contemporary twist in what concerns the painting, which is what we want to add to what Viseu already has in terms of tile technique” [LUSA 2018].
32. In her testimony, when answering the question “What is azulejo?”, Françoise Schein states, it is “traditional Portuguese material” [Schein, 2018: 92].
33. “From now on, these mural compositions will be in ceramics, an ideal material: handcraft and industrial, universal and traditional, adaptable and inalterable” [Cartuyvels, 2014: 32].
34. The information concerning Charters de Almeida and Jorge Martins was collected through two conversation we had with the artists, in which they clarified some points regarding their works in tile.
Fig. 09: Lisbon, Friendly Border Apartment, façade, Maria Ana Vasco Costa (b. 1981), 2016

Fig. 10: Lisbon, Écran Building, façade, Jorge Martins (b. 1940), 2000
Among the diverse aspects that characterise Portugal’s artistic culture, the azulejo has taken a leading role as one of the arts that best identifies Portuguese heritage. Although in some historical periods this distinction may have been sustained by the nationalistic spirit of the time, the azulejo’s singular nature is clear when faced with its counterparts in other countries. A part of the daily life of the Portuguese people for over five centuries, the azulejo has been continuously and diversely applied in architecture in incessant renewed forms that are often connected to the demands of each period. These characteristics feed many historiographic perspectives that identify the azulejo as one of the singular elements of Portuguese art. As mentioned earlier, our goal is to clarify how contemporary art understands the azulejo. To this end, using the research we have been developing as our basis, we believe “arts’ workers” (artists, architects and designers) define the azulejo as a symbolic, traditional and characteristic material. For these authors, the points we highlighted helped build the country’s collective taste and memory, which became particularly clear when they were faced with the question “what is azulejo?”. Along with the technical and formal aspects, these “workers” define the azulejo as “something ours” and acknowledge that it is a national phenomenon.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Among the diverse aspects that characterise Portugal’s artistic culture, the azulejo has taken a leading role as one of the arts that best identifies Portuguese heritage. Although in some historical periods this distinction may have been sustained by the nationalistic spirit of the time, the azulejo’s singular nature is clear when faced with its counterparts in other countries. A part of the daily life of the Portuguese people for over five centuries, the azulejo has been continuously and diversely applied in architecture in incessant renewed forms that are often connected to the demands of each period. These characteristics feed many historiographic perspectives that identify the azulejo as one of the singular elements of Portuguese art. As mentioned earlier, our goal is to clarify how contemporary art understands the azulejo. To this end, using the research we have been developing as our basis, we believe “arts’ workers” (artists, architects and designers) define the azulejo as a symbolic, traditional and characteristic material. For these authors, the points we highlighted helped build the country’s collective taste and memory, which became particularly clear when they were faced with the question “what is azulejo?”. Along with the technical and formal aspects, these “workers” define the azulejo as “something ours” and acknowledge that it is a national phenomenon.

However, although this issue is not, in any way, fully addressed by these authors’ statements, the analysis we conducted from the hypotheses initially determined, has allowed us to distinguish three key reasons that justify why the azulejo is used; they are: its traditional appearance; the acknowledgement of a tradition, even if somehow unconsciously; and an obligation imposed by the commission, which may be related to a public or private body or even to the work’s own architect. Most authors do not raise the issue of identity, in fact the term is only mentioned by four of the twenty-five interviewees. Nevertheless, all the authors acknowledge the azulejo’s importance to Portuguese culture, regarding it as one of its characteristics and defining it as an unconscious taste or something traditional. This point becomes clear in most of the work completed by these artists, architects and designers, even in those cases for whom the azulejo was a request. They explore the tile tradition whether through references to some of its ancestral techniques or some of its aesthetical elements, offering an occasionally critical reassessment of this art so genuine in Portugal, valuing and preserving it as well as offering new aesthetical and conceptual readings.

35. On the contrary, these statements are a wealth of information through which we can learn the uses and interests of this tradition in depth.
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