



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.



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I – Contextualisation

The collection of documents relating to “Tiled altar frontals”, housed at the Art Library of the

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, was from the outset part of the programmatic agenda of Santos Simões, who intended to publish these documents as a supplement to the *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa* [Corpus of Portuguese Tiles]. This is clear from Santos Simões’ “Proposta de Publicação do Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa [Proposal for the publication of the Corpus of Portuguese Tiles]”, dating from 30 December 1958, in which he stated that his works on altar frontals, tile images and lesser types of tile work were, at that point, being prepared for immediate publication.¹

In a same vein, Azeredo Perdigão, in his report referring to the period between 1951 and 1959, revealed that the work on “Altar Frontals” as well as on “Tile Heraldry”, “Tile Images” and “Tile work embodied in the Portuguese and Brazilian façades” was in its advanced stages.²

The topic of altar frontals, together with many others, was revisited in 1969 in the introduction to “Azulejaria em Portugal nos séculos XV e XVI [Tiles in 15th and 16th-century Portugal]” but this time the collection of documents was referred to as *Estudos Temáticos Complementares ao Corpus* [Thematic Supplements to

¹ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões*, “Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa”, 30 December 1958, EMD001.218. The English translation of this text was produced by Hanna Pięta and revised by John Elliott under the DigiTile Library project (PTDC/117315/2010).

² Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, Azeredo PERDIGÃO [Prefácio], *Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Açores e na Madeira*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1963, p. X.



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the Corpus]. In this introduction, Santos Simões declares his intention of publishing these supplements, together with volumes that he labelled as generic.³

As a result of the renovation of the Brigade for the Study of Tiles, the year 1969 was to witness an important shift in the plans for the publication of the *Corpus*. Significantly, the topic of “Tiled Altar frontals [Frontais de Altar de Azulejos]” was also included and a reference was made to the envisaged date (November, 1969) and type (Commented Inventory) of publication.⁴

Finally, in a handwritten, undated (1969/1970?) text entitled “Cap. IV – Frontais de altar [Chapter 4 – Altar frontals]” Santos Simões declared the following:

“A detailed study of altar frontals will be published in a monograph specifically dedicated to this subject and included in the Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa [Corpus of Portuguese Tiles]. It will consider all the examples that are known to have been produced or installed between the 16th and the 19th centuries in Continental Portugal, the Azores and Brazil. The present volume of the Corpus of Tiles in 17th-century Portugal will encompass the material and generic considerations regarding the typology of altar frontals; the “inventory”, for its part, will include references to locations and brief descriptions of 17th-century examples inventoried during the exploratory expedition. Readers and workshops particularly interested in this form of tile art are advised to consult the monograph, which contains typological considerations and the respective examples. Although apparently redundant, these publications are autonomous and serve different purposes: the first does not aspire to completeness, but instead analyses the collected material in the context of 17th-century tiles; the other is more ambitious and is intended as a more detailed expert study.”⁵

³ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa – Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Séculos XV e XVI*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1969, pp. 12-14.

⁴ Arquivo da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, *Proposta quanto à reestruturação da Brigada de Estudos de Azulejaria*, 31 March 1969.

⁵ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Cap. IV – Frontais de Altar”, EMD001.389. [1969/1970?]. The original reads: *O estudo pormenorizado dos frontais de altar de azulejo será objecto de publicação monográfica especial, integrada no conjunto do Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa. Aí são considerados todos os exemplares de que houve conhecimento, tanto em Portugal Continental como nos Açores e no Brasil, fabricados ou instalados desde o*



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Description

For the purposes of the DigiTile Library Project, the Art Library of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has reorganised this entire collection of documents into 122 separate portfolios. These portfolios reflect the great diversity of the information gathered by Santos Simões between the 1940s and the 1960s, and particularly in the 1960s: i.e. the decade in which the volume on *Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Açores e na Madeira* [Portuguese Tiles in Azores and Madeira] was published and in which the volume on *A Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII* [Tiles in Portugal in the 17th century], issued in 1971, was being prepared.

From the various documents that have recently been reorganised, five main groups are of particular relevance. These are:

1 - A portfolio with a written version of Santos Simões’ lecture entitled “A propósito de frontais de altar de azulejo [On tiled altar frontals]”, delivered at the Portuguese Academy of Fine Arts in 1958, which includes the lecture itself and a list of altar frontals ordered alphabetically and limited to the period between the 16th and the 18th century.⁶ This lecture was intended as a response to the lecture delivered by Reynaldo dos Santos on 23 October 1956, entitled “Frontais de Altar do Século XVII [17th-century altar frontals]” and published in 1957 in the *Belas*

século XVI ao século XIX. Neste volume do Corpus dedicado à Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII reunir-se-á no presente tomo a matéria e considerações genéricas sobre a tipologia de frontais de altar e, no “elenco” serão referidas as localizações e feitas as descrições sumárias dos exemplares seiscentistas registado durante a prospeção territorial. Para os leitores e estúdios mais particularmente interessados nesta modalidade da arte do azulejo aconselha-se o recurso à publicação monográfica onde, aliás, se repetirão as considerações tipológicas e respectivas exemplificações. Ainda que, aparentemente haja redundância, qualquer das publicações é independente e serve propósitos diversos uma tratando a matéria no conjunto da azulejaria seiscentista, sem preocupações exaustivas, outra, mais ambiciosa, procurando levar o estudo a pormenorizações de especialidade.

⁶ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “A propósito de frontais de altar de azulejo”, EMD001.2. [27 January 1958, reviewed in 1964].



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Artes journal (IIª série, nº. 10). It is possible that the text was revised in 1964, judging by the reference to this revision made on the fifth page of this text (and removed by Santos Simões).

2 - A group of documents entitled “Azulejaria Portuguesa do século XVII – Frontais de Altar [Portuguese Tiles from the 17th century – Altar Frontals]”. The documents with reference numbers EDMD001.3/EDMD001.3.2 are similar but include different corrections. A detailed analysis revealed that the first version was subject to a more complete editorial revision. According to information found on page 13 of these documents, they were written in December 1969.⁷

This same chapter on “Azulejaria Portuguesa do século XVII – Frontais de Altar [Portuguese Tiles from the 17th century – Altar Frontals]”⁸ was used in producing the first section of the text on “Frontais de Altar [Altar frontals]”. The second section of this latter text, however, was dedicated to the production and evolution of tiles in Seville and Talavera.⁹

The version entitled “Frontais de Altar [Altar frontals]” addresses the same subject but in a more condensed manner.¹⁰

In turn, the document “Frontais de Altar [Altar frontals]”¹¹ is a copy of the above-mentioned version – reference number EDMD001.9 – but includes different corrections and serves different purposes.

⁷ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões* “Frontais de Altar - Azulejaria Portuguesa do século XVII”, EDMD001.3/ EDMD001.3.2. [page 13 contains the following note: “recentemente em Dezembro de 1969 [recently in December 1969]”].

⁸ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões* “Frontais de Altar - Azulejaria Portuguesa do século XVII”, EDMD001.3

⁹ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões* “Frontais de Altar”, EDMD001.9

¹⁰ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões*, “Azulejaria Portuguesa no século XVII – Capítulo IV – Frontais de Altar”, EDMD001.8

¹¹ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões*, “Azulejaria Portuguesa no século XVII – Capítulo IV – Frontais de Altar”, EDMD001



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The examination of this group of documents allows us to conclude that they served as preliminary versions of the volume on “A Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII – Frontais de altar [Tiles in Portugal in the 17th century – Altar frontals]”, which, in turn, was based only on the aforementioned text (reference number EDM001.3.), and, for reasons related to the editorial process, has never been published in its entirety.¹²



Curiously enough, the original handwritten version of the chapter entitled

“Frontais de Altar [Altar Frontals]”, published in the *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa* [Corpus of Portuguese Tiles], is part of the Santos Simões Collection housed at the Art Library of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.¹³

3 - An unpublished study on “Frontais de Altar do Buçaco [Altar frontals from Buçaco]”, carried out between 1965 and 1971. This includes a typescript and a general layout of the Carmelite Church in which the altar frontal was found. As can be inferred from footnote 9 of Santos Simões’ text, he meant to include this study in the *Corpus*:

¹² Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1971, pp. 211-223.

¹³ Cf. Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Coleção Santos Simões*, “Frontais de Altar”, EMD1.389.



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“in order to avoid redundancies and considering that the tile work from Buçaco will again be mentioned in the second volume of this work, i.e. in *Elenco [Inventory]*, here we will present critical considerations and not the detailed enumeration”.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the second volume of the published version of “A Azulejaria em Portugal do século XVII [Tiles in Portugal in the 17th century]”, corresponding to the already mentioned “*Elenco [Inventory]*”, reads: “since this is a unique and paradigmatic example, it is analysed in the first volume of this work – for typology see the chapter dedicated to altar frontals”.¹⁵ However, a comparison with the information included in the volume on Typology shows that, of the sixteen altar frontals analysed in the unpublished text, Santos Simões included only five in the category entitled “*Ramagens [Flowering Branches]*” (Capela de São João da Cruz, Capela de São José, Capela de São Pedro) and two in the category entitled “*Damascados [Damascened tiles]*” (Capela de *Ecce Homo*). This brief comparison leads to the conclusion that the information published in the *Corpus* does not do justice to the wealth of documentary data collected and analysed by Santos Simões in the unpublished text belonging to the Art Library of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Buçaco – Frontais de Altar”, EDMD001.4 [1965-1971]. Version no. EMD001.3, which includes a brief study on the tiles from Buçaco, dates from 1969. The original reads: *a fim de evitar redundâncias, e uma vez que voltaremos a referir a azulejaria do Buçaco no 2º Tomo deste volume do Corpus – Elenco – desenvolveremos aqui as considerações críticas deixando para ali apenas a sua enumeração.*

¹⁵ João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII*, IIº vol., Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1971, p. 56. The original reads: “porque se trata de um núcleo *sui generis* e paradigmático é ele estudado no I tomo deste volume – tipologia no capítulo dedicado a Frontais de altar”.

¹⁶ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Iº Vol. , 1971, pp. 216-217



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4 - Various handwritten¹⁷ and typewritten lists of tiled altar frontals. One of these is dated from 1969, which may suggest that it was meant to be part of the “Elenco [Inventory]”¹⁸

5 – Sheets of A4-sized paper containing relevant information, organised into the following fields:¹⁹ place, nucleus, altar frontal, type, size of pelmet, orphreys, antependium, corners and sides. These sheets also include information on the origins of the altar frontals, comments, references, graphic documents, slides and notes concerning the conservation of the tiles. Interestingly, these sheets are designated as belonging to the third volume. It remains to be seen whether this material served as a tool for collecting data or, on the contrary, was intended to be incorporated into the supplement to the generic volumes mentioned in the preface from 1969, thereby providing material of thematic or chronological relevance.²⁰

¹⁷ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Frontais de Altar do século XVII”, EMD001.6; “Azulejaria do século XVII – Frontais de Altar Fotografados”, EMD001.11; EMD001.11.2

¹⁸ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Frontais de Altar de Azulejo – século XVII”, 30.12.1969, EMD001.7

¹⁹ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “[Ficheiro] Corpus da azulejaria portuguesa, Vol. III, Século XVII. Cap.º Frontais de altar”, EMD001.13 1 1.118

²⁰ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa - Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Séculos XV e XVI*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1969, [1st edition] p. 14.



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III - Literature Review

Before proceeding to a critical review of the literature on altar frontals, we will first focus on Santos Simões’ research, which, from the very beginning, paid special attention to this subject. As early as 1943, in an article entitled “Alguns Azulejos de Évora [Some tiles from Évora]”, Santos Simões briefly addressed this topic, pointing out that the city was, in fact, endowed with “a rich collection of tiled altar frontals”.²¹

At the beginning of this article, he drew upon Spanish research, especially the work of Diodoro Vaca and Juan de Luna, in order to refer to the Royal Pragmatics of the late 16th century, i.e. the period during which, by order of Filipe I of Portugal,

*“altar frontals were rebuilt using tiles that closely imitated the fabrics and embroidery of that time”.*²²

Subsequently, Santos Simões mentioned two aspects of fundamental importance. The first of these was the importation of altars from Talavera to Portugal, as was the case with the altar from the Convento dos Remédios. The second was that

²¹ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, “Alguns Azulejos de Évora”, Sep. *A Cidade de Évora Boletim da Câmara Municipal de Évora*, nºs 9 e 10, Évora, 1945, p. 23. The original reads: *riquíssima colecção de frontais de altar em azulejo*.

²² The original reads: *frontais de altar se reconstruíssem com azulejo imitando com a possível perfeição os tecidos e bordados da época*.



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*“the transfer of this decorative form to Portugal was characterised by the use of oriental fabric ornamentation, resulting in a distinctive type of altar frontal decorated with intriguing and unmistakable tiles”.*²³

To illustrate this, Santos Simões provides the example of the Capela de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, belonging to the Igreja dos Lóios and adorned with an image of a bird of the *Paradiseidae* family. This brief study, considerably limited due to time restrictions, includes guidelines for defining chronology and identifying influences.

The first study on altar frontals dates from 1958. It appears to have never been published, despite the initial stated intention to do so. As already mentioned, this text, entitled “A Propósito de frontais de Altar de Azulejo [On tiled altar frontals]” was intended as a direct response to the lecture delivered by Reynaldo dos Santos at the Academy of Fine Arts and its subsequent publication (in 1956 and 1957, respectively).

It was only after the publication of the Reynaldo dos Santos lecture that Santos Simões decided to present

*“some considerations on the subject in question and on the opinions of this learned speaker, which to a certain extent seem to be the opposite of mine.”*²⁴

In this article, he politely contests some of Reynaldo dos Santos’ theses, such as the suggestion that the altars at the Capela das Albertas and in the anteroom of the sacristy at the Convento da Graça were produced in Portugal. In particular, he argues that “it would be imprudent to depend on Francisco de

²³ IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 23. The original reads: *transplantação desta modalidade decorativa para o nosso país foi caracterizado pela adopção da ornamentação têxtil oriental, dando assim nascença a um tipo diferenciado de frontal, de azulejo curioso e inconfundível.*

²⁴ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “A Propósito de Frontais de Altar de Azulejo”, EMD001.2. The original reads: *algumas considerações sobre o assunto versado e sobre as opiniões do muito douto comunicante, estas apresentadas como de certo modo opostas às que tenho defendido.*



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Matos’ work to prove the Portuguese origins, since, except for their truly Portuguese designations, there is no other indication that would allow us to affirm that these extraordinary tiles were produced in Portugal.”²⁵

Moreover, Santos Simões disagrees with the assertion that Seville served as a main source of inspiration for the Portuguese tiles:

“Of course, I am not convinced that it was Talavera de la Reina and not Andalusia that had a significant influence on 17th-century tiles. Neither do I believe that studying such influences can diminish the artistic quality of our [Portuguese] tiles. Quite the reverse; I have always defended the originality of our tile decorations, their distinctiveness and superiority over foreign tile work. However, history is history and, in order to discover the truth, various patriotic sentiments need to be brushed aside.”²⁶

A year later (1959), in the journal *Archivo Español del Arte*, Santos Simões published a study entitled “Frontales de Altar de Azulejo en la Mesquita de Córdoba [Tiled Altar Frontals at the Mosque of Cordoba]”.²⁷ In this, he presented a brief overview, largely unsupported by documentary research, and argued that:

“the repertoire of altar frontals adorned with tiles that can be found in the Mosque of Cordoba is, to my knowledge and without a shadow of doubt, the largest and most diversified of all.”²⁸

²⁵ Idem, *ibidem*. The original reads: *não ser prudente, por ora, argumentar com a obra de Francisco de Matos para produzir prova de portuguesismo, dado que, a não ser o portuguêsíssimo nome, não temos qualquer indicação que nos permita afirmar que esses extraordinários azulejos tenham sido produzidos em Portugal.*

²⁶ Idem, *op. cit.* The original reads: *não me anima, evidentemente, qualquer propósito de reivindicar para Talavera de la Reina alguma influência significativa na nossa azulejaria de seiscentos, em prejuízo da Andaluzia. Tampouco julgo que o estudo dessas influências possa minimizar as qualidades artísticas da nossa azulejaria, antes sempre proclamei e proclamo a originalidade das nossas decorações azulejares naquilo em que realmente se distinguiram e superam as estranhas. Mas história é história e para alcançar a verdade não há que considerar sentimentalismos mais ou menos patrióticos.*

²⁷ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, “Frontales de Altar de Azulejo en la Mesquita de Córdoba”, in *Estudos de Azulejaria*, Vítor Sousa LOPES (coord.), Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, Col. Presença da Imagem, 2001, pp. 199-208.

²⁸ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 201. The original reads: *o relatório de frontais de altar em azulejo da Mesquita Catedral cordovesa é, sem dúvida alguma, o mais vasto e variado de quantos tenho conhecimento.*



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The study describes the altar frontals from the perspective of a tourist:

“on entering the mosque through the palm tree gate near the patios with orange trees, we will start our visit with the ten chapels and three altars adjacent to the west wall – on the side of the palace”.²⁹

It also addresses the technical aspects of altar frontals, makes stylistic comparisons (for example with the altar frontal of Capela da Assunção and the tile panels from Quinta da Bacalhôa that depict historical episodes) and discusses the creative origins of the Capela da Assunção by analysing the monogram RE, which Santos Simões traces back to the painter Roque Hernandez.³⁰

In the first volume of *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa [Corpus of Portuguese Tiles]*, dedicated to tile compositions from the Azores and Madeira, Santos Simões analyses in more detail the altar frontals from the Azores, which he regards as:

“representing a particular case in the general framework of Portuguese tiles”³¹, stating that these curious phenomena prevailed until the 19th century.

Santos Simões claimed that the importation to Portugal of altar frontals inspired by Sevillian artefacts began in the early 16th century and that the importation of altar frontals from Talavera, with clear influences of rich fabrics,

²⁹ The Portuguese original reads: *entrando na mesquita pela porta das palmeiras a partir dos pátios das laranjeiras, começaremos a nossa revista pelas capelas contíguas à parede do lado poente – lado do palácio, num total de 10 capelas e três altares*. Only locations with altar frontals featuring tiles are considered, namely: Capela de Santo Ambrósio, Capela de S. Simão e S. Judas, Capela de S. Bartolomeu, Altar da Anunciação, Altar da Conceição; Altar do Santo Nome de Jesus; Capela de Nossa Senhora da Antiga; Capela de S. Miguel; Capela dos Santos Varões, Capela de Santa Ana, Capela de Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Capela do Nascimento; Capela da Assunção.

³⁰ João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Açores e na Madeira*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1963, pp. 205-208. Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Planta Esquemática da Mesquita de Córdoba”, EMD001.377; EMD001.379/380/81/82.

³¹ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria Portuguesa nos Açores e na Madeira*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1963, p. 14 e p. 19. The original reads: *representa no quadro geral da azulejaria portuguesa um caso particular*.



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started only at the end of that century. He also drew special attention to Portuguese altar frontals that imitated embroideries or printed fabrics from the Far East, arguing that they represented “one of the most graceful forms of Portuguese tiles”³², which was at its apogee in the 1660s and started to decline around the 1680s.

While briefly describing the existing examples, Santos Simões proposed various typologies to define the iconographic contents of the Azorean altar frontals, such as the typology of Spanish-Islamic tiles: type of fabrics, birds and foliage and grotesque.

Six years later, in his publication on 15th and 16th-century tiles, Santos Simões revisited the question of altar frontals when analysing the influences coming from Talavera.³³

Finally, in 1971, in the last volume of the *Corpus* published before his death, Santos Simões included a chapter on 17th-century altar frontals, in which he tried to establish a definition of tiled altar frontals,

*“thereby contributing to the identification of tile panels designed specifically for this kind of use, which differ from other tile compositions and which were eventually transferred to private or museum collections.”*³⁴

From then on, Santos Simões made various attempts to establish typologies to describe the form of the so-called framed altar frontals (“altares de caixa”) (by analysing the nomenclature related to pelmets, orphreys,

³² IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 15. The original reads: *uma das mais graciosas modalidades da azulejaria portuguesa*.

³³ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal nos séculos XV e XVI*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1969, p. 88.

³⁴ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa – Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII*, vol. I, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1971, [1.ª edição] p. 212. The original reads: *ajudando assim a identificar os painéis concebidos para tais aplicações, tão diferente de outras composições azulejares, e que eventualmente, foram transferidos como “painéis” para colecções particulares ou museológicas*.



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

antependium, sides, friezes and corners) as well as their iconographic contents (considering for this purpose, frontals with damascened tiles, frontals with grotesque decorations and frontals with flowering branches).

Establishing the methodology was not easy, as is clear from the following excerpt:

*“It is only natural that the first examples closely followed the ornamentation of “panos da Índia” [a type of cotton] and therefore it is this logical and simple criterion that will be used to establish sub-periods of a plausible evolution, since, as we have already mentioned, there are not enough documentary data to establish the precise chronology.”*³⁵

Certain categories proposed by Santos Simões included various subcategories. For example, the category entitled “Frontals with damascened tiles” includes “Brocades from Milan” and “Patterned Brocades”; the category labelled “Frontals with Grotesque Decorations” includes “Hybrid and Floral Ornaments”.



The category entitled “Flowering Branches” was divided into two groups: the first characterised by an Oriental decorative grammar and the second by a European decorative grammar, which also included representations of human figures. This category made it possible for Santos Simões to analyse the

³⁵ Cf. João Miguel dos SANTOS SIMÕES, *Corpus da Azulejaria Portuguesa – Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII*, vol. I, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1971, [1.ª edição] p. 219. The original reads: *É natural que os primeiros exemplares tenham seguido fielmente a ornamentação dos “panos da Índia” e é este critério lógico e simplista que nos servirá para escalonar no tempo os subtipos de uma possível evolução, já que como dissemos faltam dados documentais para uma cronologia precisa.*



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

morphological structure of altar frontals and to distinguish between antependia with a uniform decorative oriental grammar and those featuring religious emblems, as well as between altar frontals composed of bipartite antependia and those with asymmetrical compositions. At the very end of this chapter, Santos Simões makes a reference to the baroque decorative grammar, identifiable in altar frontals from the 1670s and 1680s.

Special attention should also be paid to the remaining documents from the Art Library, i.e. the different versions of the fourth chapter of *Azulejaria Portuguesa no século XVII* [Tiles in Portugal in the 17th century], which include theoretical considerations on the topic under analysis here. For instance, these documents contain further complete definitions of “Frontals with damascened tiles” as well as four alternative typologies: “Damascened tiles”, “Patterned tiles” (concerning the arrangement of antependia and not altar frontals), “Grotesque Decorations” and “Flowering Branches”. They also include proposals for a morphological distinction between simple, bipartite, tripartite antependia as well as antependia with a central cartouche, which were not included in the published version of this volume.³⁶

Equally important is Reynaldo dos Santos’ work on the subject under consideration. As already mentioned, in 1956, Reynaldo dos Santos delivered a lecture entitled “Frontais de Altar do Século XVII [17th-century altar frontals]”, in which he suggested that the topic “deserve[d] more attention than it has received so far”.³⁷

³⁶ Biblioteca de Arte da FCG, *Colecção Santos Simões*, “Frontais de Altar - Azulejaria Portuguesa do século XVII”, EDMD001.3/ EDMD001.3.2

³⁷ Cf. Reynaldo dos SANTOS, “Os Frontais de altar do século XVII” in *Boletim da Academia Nacional de Belas Artes*, IIª série, nº 10, 1957, pp. 2-7. The original reads: *tem uma importância maior do que se lhe tem dado*.



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

In his analysis of this mode of artistic expression in the context of ceramic wall decorations, Reynaldo dos Santos contested Santos Simões’ thesis concerning the foreign origin of Damascened frontals, providing the example of the altar frontal from Évora, whose

*“geometric patterns are not specific to altar frontals from Talaverano, and whose frames, more or less from the Renaissance, have natural affinities with examples existing at that time on the Iberian Peninsula, and logically they are more likely to have originated from Seville than from Talavera”.*³⁸

A year later he published *O Azulejo em Portugal [Tiles in Portugal]*,³⁹ which included a chapter on “Frontais de altar do século XVII [17th-century altar frontals]”, explaining that his choice was justified

*“by the peculiarity of its themes, influenced by oriental inspirations”.*⁴⁰

In this text, Reynaldo dos Santos defined three varieties: imitation of fabrics and brocades in line with the Sevillian pragmatic liturgy; “frontaleras de manera que parez com frontales”; pure and simple application of decorative wall patterns; decorations with oriental influences.⁴¹ He also considered embroidery for Chinese bedspreads, *panos da Índia*, and Persian carpets.

These studies served as a source of inspiration for João Pedro Monteiro and José Meco, i.e. the two contemporary authors who have studied the subject in question in most detail.

Accordingly, in 1994, under the framework of Lisbon as European Capital of Culture, João Pedro Monteiro, when analysing the production of faience, used

³⁸ Idem, *ibidem*, p. 3 e 6. The original reads: “é de padrões geométricos sem nada de especificamente talaverano e as molduras mais ou menos renascentistas têm as afinidades naturais com os espécimens peninsulares da época, mais logicamente emanadas de Sevilha que de Talavera.”

³⁹ Cf. Reynaldo dos SANTOS, *O Azulejo em Portugal*, Lisbon, Editorial Sul, 1957, pp. 93-97.

⁴⁰ IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 96. The original reads: *pela particularidade dos seus temas, inspirados em influência Oriental.*

⁴¹ IDEM, *op. cit.*, p. 94.



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

the example of altar frontals to illustrate the process of autonomisation of Portuguese tiles.⁴² Drawing on Santos Simões’ methodological, chronological and technical premises, João Pedro Monteiro reflects on the iconological meanings of Frontals with Flowering Branches in the light of Christian values. In doing so, he draws on Rodrigo da Cunha’s knowledge of the Constitutions of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Lisbon from 30 May 1640.

In 1997, José Meco published a paper, presented at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1983, in which he analysed “16th and 17th-century tiled altar frontals – from *Mudéjar* art to oriental influences”⁴³.

The aim of this article was to “analyse the formal organisation of altar frontals, both as a discourse integrated within the general evolution of tiles and an autonomous vehicle for extra-artistic problematics that has distanced itself from this discourse.”⁴⁴

To fulfil this goal, the author examined the successive stages of Portuguese tiles, starting from altar frontals with Spanish-Arabic tiles dating from the first half of the 16th century, including Peninsular tiles with Flemish influences, Portuguese Mannerist tiles and, finally, 17th-century Portuguese altar frontals, which he divided into Grottesque Decorations and Birds and Flowering Branches. He also argued that the latter were inspired by oriental influences, such as *panos da Índia*, Portuguese oriental embroideries, Portuguese-Indian embroidered bedspreads and Chinese embroideries. He disagreed with Santos Simões’ thesis

⁴² Cf. João Pedro MONTEIRO, *A influência Oriental na Cerâmica Portuguesa do Século XVII*, Lisbon, Museu Nacional do Azulejo/Capital Europeia da cultura 94/Electa, 1994, pp. 18-53.

⁴³ Cf. José MECO, “Os Frontais de altar quinhentistas e seiscentistas de azulejo – do Mudéjarismo à influência Oriental” in *Boletim Cultural da Assembleia Distrital de Lisboa*, 1990/1998, nº 92, 2º Tomo, pp. 11-96.

⁴⁴ IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 17. The original reads: *a analisar a organização formal dos frontais de altar, tanto enquanto discurso integrado na evolução geral da azulejaria, como na medida em que dele se distancia e autonomiza, assumindo-se como veículo de problemáticas extra-artísticas.*



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suggesting that the altar frontals had been produced by workshops from Coimbra and Porto and proposed an alternative periodisation, consisting of two periods: the first coinciding with the second quarter of the 17th century and characterised by the use of:

“cobalt blue and antimony yellow with motifs outlined in blue or highlighted with brushstrokes of blue, orange or brown (iron oxide)”⁴⁵

and the second occurring in the middle of the 17th century and characterised by a wider chromatic range,

“featuring the already mentioned colours enriched with the addition of green copper brilliance and purplish Manganese, and with motifs drawn in a highly-concentrated Manganese metallized black.”⁴⁶

A year later, João Pedro Monteiro revisited the topic in a study of the altar frontal of the church of Nossa Senhora da Piedade Jaboatão in Pernambuco, Brazil.⁴⁷ In this article, he updated the chronological corrections proposed by José Meco in *A azulejaria em Portugal [Tiles in Portugal]* and developed the iconological interpretation of oriental and European symbols of Christian origin, concluding that

“the altar frontals with oriental influences are not only mere ceramic reproductions of naturally fascinating and attractive, exotic themes, but also the result of the appropriation of these themes by the substructure of Portuguese and Catholic culture.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The original reads: “o azul cobalto e do amarelo de antimónio com motivos contornados a azul ou acentuados por pinceladas cor-de-laranja ou acastanhadas (óxido de ferro)”.

⁴⁶ IDEM, *ibidem*, pp. 68-69. The original reads: *com as cores antes referidas enriquecidas pela adição dos brilhantes verdes de cobre e pelos arroxeados de manganés, associados ao desenho dos motivos num negro metalizado, de manganés concentrado.*

⁴⁷ Cf. João Pedro MONTEIRO, “O frontal de altar da capela de Nossa Senhora da Piedade Jaboatão, Pernambuco” in *Oceanos*, Nº 36/37, Lisboa, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, Outubro de 1998/Março de 1999, pp. 158-176.

⁴⁸ IDEM, *ibidem*, p. 176. The original reads: *os frontais de altar de influência oriental não são apenas uma mera reprodução cerâmica de temas exóticos, naturalmente fascinantes e atractivos, mas também uma apropriação dos mesmos por parte de um substracto cultural português e católico.*



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

In 2004, in the special issue of the journal *Monumentos* dedicated to the Convento do Buçaco, José Meco published his article on tile heritage entitled: “Embrechados e Azulejos do Deserto Carmelita [*Embrechados*⁴⁹ and Tiles from the Carmelite Desert⁵⁰]”, in which he listed and described altar frontals decorated with tiles from the Carmelite Desert,⁵¹ aligning the various remaining examples with the typologies previously considered by Santos Simões,⁵² who defined these altar frontals as a pragmatic reference, occupying a special place in the historical and artistic framework of Portuguese tiles.⁵³

More recently, other authors have addressed the subject, both in brief encyclopaedia entries and in more detailed studies.⁵⁴

Alexandra Curvelo dedicated two pages of the exhibition catalogue entitled “*Um gosto português: o uso do azulejo no século XVII* [A Portuguese taste: The use of tiles in the 17th century]” to this subject.⁵⁵ By adopting Santos Simões’ methodology in her formal analysis of altar frontals, she identified oriental influences, as reflected in the existence of a pagoda in an altar frontal in the care

⁴⁹ Coverings of small fragments of quartz, basalt, iron scoria and cork.

⁵⁰ The name used to describe the architecture and landscape of the Buçaco forest in Portugal.

⁵¹ Cf. José MECO, “Embrechados e Azulejos do Deserto Carmelita”, in *Monumentos Revista Semestral de Edifícios e Monumentos*, Lisboa, Direcção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais, N° 20 / Março, 2004, pp. 93- 101.

⁵² Cf. João Miguel dos Santos SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII – I Tipologia*, Lisbon, FCG, 1971, pp. 211- 223.

⁵³ Cf. João Miguel dos Santos SIMÕES, *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII – II Elenco*, Lisbon, FCG, 1971, p. 56.

⁵⁴ Cf. Alexandre PAIS e Alexandra CURVELO “Frontal de Altar Tripartido” in *Azulejos – obras do Museu Nacional do Azulejo*, Lisbon, Ed. Chandeigne/ Museu Nacional do Azulejo, 2000, pp. 42-44.

⁵⁵ Cf. Alexandra CURVELO, “O uso do azulejo e a presença portuguesa na Ásia no século XVII” in *Um gosto português: o uso do azulejo no século XVII*, Maria Antónia Pinto de MATOS (coord.), Lisbon, Museu Nacional do Azulejo/Babel, 2012, p. 344-345. The article partly repeats the catalogue entry mentioned in the previous footnote.



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

of the Machado de Castro National Museum. Incidentally, the existence of this element was also noted by Reynaldo dos Santos.⁵⁶

Moreover, Curvelo suggests that the composition of altar frontals was inspired not only by Asian fabrics, but also by Mongolian garments as well as Persian paintings and tile compositions. She also highlights the lack of rigour in the Indo-European terminology, claiming that this terminology fails to include the diverse artistic manifestations – an aspect which should be considered in future studies in Decorative Arts.



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Conclusion

Forty-four years after the publication of *Azulejaria em Portugal no século XVII* [Tiles in Portugal in the 17th century], Santos Simões’ methodological guidelines are still followed by the majority of researchers studying altar frontals. Although the issues regarding workshop production, chronology, typology, iconography and sources of inspiration have naturally been developed further since then, Santos Simões’ approach, nomenclature and morphology are closely adhered to by the majority of authors quoted in the present article. Echoing his words, these authors are unanimous in suggesting that frontals known as flowering branches represent a truly Portuguese element insofar as they reflect the rich substructure of Portuguese culture.

⁵⁶ Cf. Reynaldo dos SANTOS, *O Azulejo em Portugal*, Lisbon, Editorial Sul, 1957, p. 96.



Teresa Pimenta PERALTA, “Altar fronts with tiles” in *DigiTile Library: Tiles and Ceramics Online*, Susana Varela FLOR (coord.), Artis – IHA / Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the R&D project [PTDC/EAT-EAT/117315/2010], Lisbon, 2015.

It should be stressed that to date there have been no academic dissertations dedicated exclusively to this topic. Moreover, it should be recalled that, although at present only the corrected nomenclature concerning the Far East is used, in the 1950s, Santos Simões contacted the curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum with a view to initiating an interdisciplinary exchange; therefore the concepts that he uses should be considered in the light of the times in which they were conceived. Finally, prominence should be given to Santos Simões’ critical and systematic approach, resulting in a distinction between pure and reassembled altar frontals, the latter being very common in Portugal.