

‘PROJECT ‘SOS AZULEJO’: A HORIZONTAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH
TOWARDS THE PROTECTION OF PORTUGAL’S CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT:

Portuguese historic and artistic “azulejos” stand out in the world cultural heritage for their invaluable richness in quality, quantity, style and range of uses. Although this relevance is nowadays internationally recognized by art historians, scientists, artists, antique dealers - *and* burglars - it is still not generally acknowledged, favouring the massive plunder it has been inflicted to in the last twenty years. In fact, “azulejos” have been present in Portuguese cities in all kinds of sceneries for so many centuries that – paradoxically - the average attitude towards Portuguese tiles tends to a general lack of attention and care. The result is an endless quantity of tile covered constructions needing conservation measures badly and rising “azulejos” theft.

Because the Polícia Judiciária (PJ) has competencies in crime prevention and in crimes related to cultural heritage in Portugal, the PJ Museum decided to implement a crime prevention project against theft, traffic and vandalism of Portuguese historic and artistic tiles which is simultaneously a campaign for raising people’s awareness to the relevance and the need for conservation of this important cultural heritage. Name of the Project: “SOS AZULEJO”. With the partnership of various public organizations (Ministry of Culture, two universities, local authorities and other police forces), this interdisciplinary project intends to contribute to the protection of this unique Portuguese cultural heritage and to the continuity of this tradition in Portuguese architecture.

After exposing this context, the paper describes various actions implemented by “SOS Azulejo” and the attained positive results (2007-2012) especially in Lisbon.

KEY WORDS: Projeto ‘SOS Azulejo’, Portuguese cultural heritage, lack of conservation and theft, preventive and rewarding measures, positive results.

1.- Introduction

This paper does not pretend to present a theoretical work nor a totally independent research. Within 'AZULEJAR's interdisciplinary effort concerning the study and protection of Portuguese historic and artistic tiles – or “azulejos”, according to their Iberian designation - the goal of this article consists on presenting a practical case study as objectively as possible, although with specific limitations, as the author of this text and the mentor of the studied case are one and the same person.

Having said that, which clarifies the used perspective, we will go on presenting what we defend as an innovative, interdisciplinary, horizontal and in many ways efficient project and approach to a specific Portuguese cultural heritage problem. The project is called 'SOS Azulejo', its mentor is the Portuguese Judiciary Police Museum and its target consists on the effective protection of Portuguese historic and artistic “azulejos” - turning a problem into a cultural opportunity.

Let us start by introducing the main reasons which motivated the creation of 'Project SOS Azulejo':

Portuguese historic and artistic ceramic tiles stand out in the world cultural heritage for their invaluable richness in quality, quantity, style, materials, and techniques.

Portuguese architecture is known worldwide for its “azulejos”, which cover the exterior and interior walls of hundreds of thousands of Portuguese buildings, from churches to hospitals, from palaces to railway stations, from monuments to schools, from all sorts of public buildings to entire ancient urban private housing blocks.

Introduced by the Arabs in the Iberian peninsula in the 14th century and specifically in Portugal in the 16th century by importation of tiles and ceramists from Flanders – notwithstanding influences from other Iberian producing centres in Andalusia or Valencia - ceramic tiles demonstrate a rich and unique expansion and development in Portuguese soil in the following periods¹. They have accompanied and illustrated Portuguese history and behaviours in all its levels and approaches, representing all kinds of themes – from eloquent religious scenes and great historical events to simple stylish decoration, advertising or cartoons. In result of this systematic use in all kinds of buildings, for all sorts of purposes - with the consequent imprint in architecture, art and atmosphere, - Portuguese “azulejos” gained a proper status at an international level.

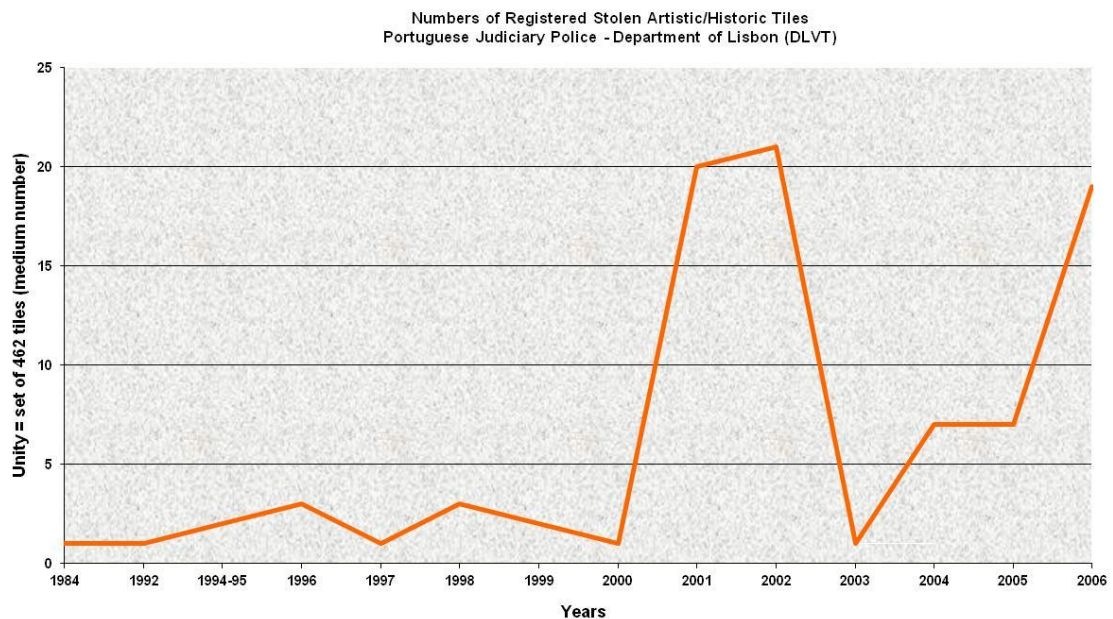
The first scholar who thoroughly studied and published in Portugal and abroad about Portuguese 'azulejos' was João Miguel Santos Simões (1907-1972), who was linked to the foundation of the 'National Museum of Azulejo'. Although today more and more academics and institutions are dedicating their work to this subject and although it is generally accepted that the brilliant colours, glaze, variety of patterns, physical characteristics and different uses of 'azulejos' are unique and mark a specific Portuguese architectural, artistic and cultural identity, *we defend that this potential is not yet sufficiently and globally recognized, sustained and taken as an advantage by cultural and economic politics and public and private institutions in*

¹ About the History of ceramic tiles in Portugal see especially Meco, José (1985) and (1989).

Portugal². As a consequence of this lack of global strategy and focus concerning historic and artistic ‘azulejos’, a number of negative facts occur, putting ‘azulejos’ heritage at risk, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Indeed, because ‘azulejos’ are increasingly valued by art experts, historians and national and international antique dealers, they are getting more and more tempting for art and antiques burglary and trafficking – and the number of thefts rose accordingly, from the late nineties on, especially in the area of Lisbon, as we can see in the following chart:

Chart 1. Statistical data concerning registered stolen artistic/historic tiles in the area of Lisbon within the period 1984 - 2006



The chart shows us the number of registered stolen historic and artistic tiles rose significantly in (and around) Lisbon since the late nineties to 2006. These statistical data show us the registered theft of hundreds of thousands of ‘azulejos’ in this geographical area, but empiric evidence shows many other ‘azulejos’ have been robbed without any information to the police³ or other institutions whatsoever. Curiously enough - and paradoxically - apart from some important referred exceptions, artistic urban ‘azulejos’ seem not to be much valued by common Portuguese people and institutions. These tiles have been so permanently present in Portuguese every day’s life for so many centuries that the average Portuguese citizen no longer

² The National Strategic Plan for Tourism (Plano Estratégico Nacional de Turismo – PENT, 2007) elaborated by the Ministry of Economy and Innovation enumerates and focuses on various differentiating and ‘identitary’ Portuguese characteristics which should be taken advantage of in this context. Portuguese ceramic tiles’ cultural heritage is not mentioned among them. See: <http://www.turismodeportugal.pt/Portugu%C3%AAs/conhecimento/planoestrategiconacionaldoturismo/Anexos/PENT%20VER%20INGLES.pdf>

³ E.g.: The Directorate of the Judiciary Police from Oporto does not register a single complaint for theft of historical and artistic ‘azulejos’. Direct testimony from local municipal authorities however denies there are no thefts. A simple tour through the city is also elucidative about this matter.

especially notices or cares much about them. The result is neglect, needless tile removing from walls, demolitions of tile covered buildings, vandalism and an endless quantity of constructions with ‘azulejos’ which need conservation measures badly⁴. In fact, although this ceramic material is amazingly resistant, eventually it also deteriorates and needs some conservation care. Also, the deteriorated tiles are easily removable, favouring the massive plunder it has been inflicted to in the last twenty years.

As we will see, the ‘SOS Project’ was created in order to contribute to what we defend should be a global approach and a strategic line of Portuguese cultural politics, taking advantage of this unique and identitary cultural heritage.

2.- The Emergence of ‘SOS Azulejo’

In 2002 the Portuguese Judiciary Police Museum (from now on referred to as PJ Museum) started mentoring the idea of ‘SOS Azulejo’ for the above mentioned general reasons and also motivated by the following institutional and practical circumstances:

First of all, the Portuguese Judiciary Police (PJ) is the law enforcement agency in Portugal with the exclusive competence for crimes related to works of art and cultural heritage⁵.

Secondly, the PJ Museum) - which belongs to the ‘Escola de Polícia Judiciária’ (EPJ) - possesses a collection of stolen historic tiles which have been recovered by the police but not returned to their owners because their origin remains unknown up to this day. This situation is not completely unexpected in the context of the above mentioned neglect. These ‘azulejos’ (see below) have been exhibited on several occasions by this museum with educational purposes.



Images 1 and 2. Exhibition of collection of stolen historic tiles by the PJ Museum.

⁴ Apart ‘SOS Azulejo’, artist Eduardo Nery and investigators Margarida Almeida Bastos and Fernando Lopes are among the few authors who explicitly mention these problems concerning theft and neglect of ‘azulejos’. (Nery, 2007:101-105; Bastos, Margarida A. and Lopes, Fernando, 2007.).

⁵ Article 7, Law 49/2008, 27th August.

Linked to these educational purposes is the fact that from its very beginning in 1993 the PJ Museum decided to choose 'Crime Prevention' as its 'Social Function'⁶. In fact and as already mentioned, crime prevention constitutes one of the explicit competences of the Judiciary Police, although taking a secondary role in PJ's priorities (which concern crime investigation). In this context, the PJ Museum pretends to play a dynamic and complementary role in crime prevention through informative and educational exhibitions, projects and programmes which can be of direct interest and service to the community. As the PJ Museum will only have an exhibition room in 2013, its actions have been limited and scoped by this fact and have consisted up to now on 'out of the walls' museological actions (Malraux 1954)).

In this sequence, the PJ Museum decided to create a 'crime prevention project' to protect Portuguese 'azulejos' cultural heritage from growing theft, traffic and vandalism. Because of its museological perspective and functions however, this institution considered 'preventive conservation' as a major factor which could not – or at least should not – be discarded when approaching cultural heritage, and so this 'conservation' perspective was included in the project. Also, the PJ Museum considered most important to add a third perspective - raising people's awareness to the problem - so that the project could be more truly effective.

This global perspective meant absolute need of partnerships which would enable the project to proceed in the various necessary directions. After some time, the PJ Museum managed to involve several prestigious Portuguese organisations which embraced all thematic vectors of this problem, namely a representative of the Ministry of Culture, Universities, a local authorities' Association and other police forces. On the whole, these are the current six Partner institutions of PJ Museum (represented by EPJ) in the 'SOS Azulejo' Project:

- Associação Nacional de Municípios Portugueses (ANMP)
- Instituto de Gestão do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico (IGESPAR)
- Instituto Politécnico de Tomar (IPT)
- Rede Temática de Estudos em Azulejaria e Cerâmica João Miguel Santos Simões (RTEACJMSS) through Instituto de História de Arte (IHA), Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa
- Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR)
- Polícia de Segurança Pública (PSP).

In 2007 a protocol was signed between the PJ Museum (represented by EPJ) and five of the mentioned partners, officially creating the project.

The project's site www.sosazulejo.com⁷ was launched in February 2008 and in 2010 a sixth Partner – the above mentioned RTEACJMSS – took the initiative of joining the project, by signing an addenda to the original protocol.

⁶ The concept of the "museum's social function" which emerges for the first time in the 'Declaration of Santiago/Chile (1972) at the Round Table of International Council of Museums (ICOM) and consolidates itself at the "Declaration of Québec, Basic Principles for a New Museology" (1984) is afterwards largely disseminated in museums' studies, bibliography and actions. About PJ Museum's social function and its museological programme, see Sá, 2005 :5.

⁷ The site was sponsored by a marketing and design enterprise.

The functioning of this unusual and multidisciplinary partnership is light and flexible. The Partners have regular general meetings every three months and are coordinated by the PJ Museum, which invests a lot of effort in communication with the Partners. At this point, the Project has no budget. Each Partner performs its specific skills within its institutional budget, giving the project a multidisciplinary and global performative capacity. Occasionally sponsors are enlisted for actions that cannot be covered by the Partners.

3.- 'SOS Azulejo's Actions and Results

Since 2007 the Project has been implemented through various actions according to the following different thematic focuses:

3.1.- Focus 1: PREVENTING AND DETERRING THEFTS⁸:

Although being the result of a global approach to the protection of historical and artistic 'azulejos', the first priority of this Project consisted on fighting and preventing its most acute problem: rising theft and national and international traffic.

The first 'SOS Azulejo' action towards this goal therefore consisted on disseminating systematized information and images of stolen figurative tile panels through its website (and facebook). Easy access to these images aimed at:

- a) Making the identification and recovery of stolen historic tiles easier;
- b) Therefore making the circulation of stolen historic tiles in the market difficult;
- c) In this way discouraging and deterring this kind of crime for burglars and fences.

Indeed before this 'SOS Azulejo' action, we have direct information that even figurative stolen 'azulejos' panels circulated very easily in the legal market, art circuits and even state museums. With the launching of SOS Azulejo's site this situation completely changed. Good faith buyers – whether antique dealers, curators or other professionals - now have easily available information and buyers in bad faith can no longer claim ignorance.

The results of this 'SOS Azulejo' measure were immediate and encouraging. The very first day after the launching of the web site, the following stolen tile panel was recognized, identified and recovered by the police:

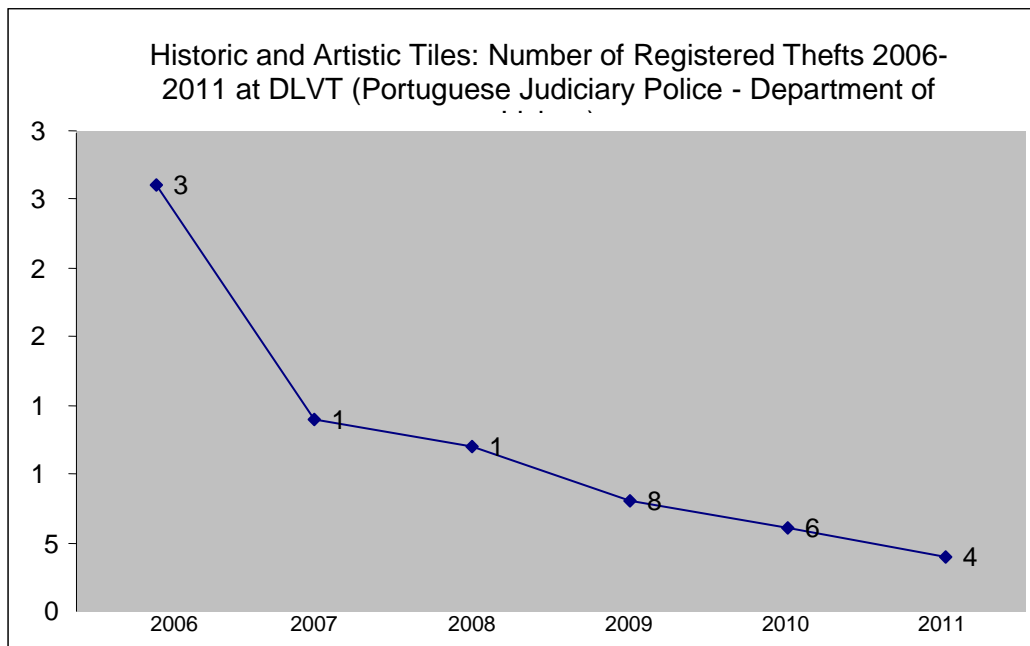
⁸ Focus 1- PREVENTING AND DETERRING THEFTS - is the only 'SOS Azulejo' activity branch which depends only on the PJ (Museum) and not its Partners.



Image 3. Figurative Panel of 'azulejos' from the beginning of the 20th century, by Leopoldo Battistini. It had been stolen from Palácio da Rosa in Lisbon in 2001.

On a longer run, statistics concerning registered thefts of 'azulejos' in the area of Lisbon from the nineties until 2011 are encouraging and show impressive positive measurable results:

Chart 2. Statistical data concerning registered thefts of artistic/historic tiles in the area of Lisbon within the period 2006 – 2011



Analysing the chart and considering the fact that 'SOS Azulejo' was created in 2007, we can see there is an important decrease of registered stolen 'azulejos' precisely from that year on in the area of Lisbon. To be more precise, in 2011 there were almost eighty per cent less registered 'azulejos' thefts than in 2006 in and around Lisbon.

3.2.- Focus 2: PREVENTING NEGLECT AND DESTRUCTION AND ENCOURAGING CONSERVATION

Fighting and preventing neglect and visible lack of conservation of ceramic tiles (which encourage vandalism and theft) also constituted a priority of this Project. Among the measures taken by the project towards this goal, we will mention the ones with more positive measurable results:

3.2.1.- Directly contacting the local municipal authority of Lisbon (CML) putting the potential of 'SOS Azulejo' at its service and raising its awareness to the problem.

After a long process, some positive results emerged:

- In May 2009 CML (Department of Culture) and Polícia Judiciária signed a protocol and organized a joint seminar, both aiming at the protection of historic and artistic 'azulejos' in Lisbon; in this sequence CML created a work group concerned with the issue of the safeguard of 'azulejos' in Lisbon;

- In November 2010 a Recommendation was approved in the Municipal Assembly of Lisbon for the creation of a municipal plan for the protection of 'azulejos' in Lisbon, explicitly recognizing the "truly remarkable" role of 'SOS Azulejo' in this process;

- By the end of 2010 the referred CML work group in the Culture Department presented for the first time its new plan for the protection of 'azulejos' in Lisbon. It is called 'PISAL'- 'Plano de Investigação para a Salvaguarda dos 'azulejos' de Lisboa' ('Investigation Plan for the Safeguard of Lisbon's 'azulejos'). The presentation was made at the 'Centro Nacional de Cultura'- 'CNC' ('National Center for Culture') preceded by a presentation of 'SOS Azulejo'.

The CML's initial efforts in creating a work group (which later turned into the 'PISAL') were recognized and given a prize by 'SOS Azulejo' in 2010. We hope to see some practical positive results of 'PISAL' in the near future.

3.2.2.- By the end of 2011 'SOS Azulejo' proposed an important measure to be incorporated in the new regulations of the Urbanism Department of CML⁹ that has been accepted: it consists of prohibiting the demolition of buildings' façades covered with 'azulejos' and/or the removal of 'azulejos' from the same façades. This means a full 180 degree turn in the protection approach of this kind of heritage in the capital: Historical and artistic 'azulejos' in Lisbon will be regarded and protected *as a whole and not only in cases of exceptional architectural value*. As soon as this new regulation is final and official, 'SOS Azulejo' intends to propose its implementation in all Portuguese cities. A single measure and input will potentially have an enormous output in terms of the global protection of the Portuguese historic tiles' heritage.

⁹ The regulation is called "Regulamento Municipal de Urbanização e Edificação de Lisboa" and is usually referred to as 'RMUEL'.

3.2.3.- Disseminating useful, valuable and not elsewhere available information in its website (complemented by facebook) concerning a global approach to the protection of Portuguese Historic and Artistic Tiles for public access. The available information includes:

- Practical advice concerning: a) theft and vandalism – crime prevention;
b) conservation care - preventive conservation;
- Useful information on good practices and how to accede municipalities' "Tiles' banks" for public free use;
- Academic works, information and news about all sorts of (educational) events and activities concerning historic and artistic tiles.

3.2.3.- Creating effective prevention tools concerning Hospital buildings in Lisbon (ancient convents and palaces) with very important tile collections. These buildings were sold and will become vacant and very vulnerable in the near future. Experience tells us the precious 'azulejos' from vacant buildings are very easily and systematically stolen. 'SOS Azulejo' identified this risk in these hospital buildings and developed three levels of preventive actions:

- a) Making the inventory of all concerned tile collections (through Partner RTEACJMSS);
- b) Promoting guided visits to these buildings and rising awareness of the outgoing board of directors and people in general;
- c) Meeting and convincing the new owner to order and implement a security plan to the first vacant building with the help of other two Partners: PJ and PSP. This security plan has been implemented in May 2011. 'SOS Azulejo' intends to replicate this model of procedure as soon as other hospital buildings get vacant.

3.3.- Focus 3: DISSEMINATING AND AWARDING GOOD PRACTISES

Departing from a focus on negative information - linked to the repression and prevention of thefts, vandalism and degradation, - 'SOS Azulejo' soon started to realize the importance of enlarging its perspective and adding a positive and rewarding scope of action. In this sequence, 'SOS Azulejo' developed a series of actions targeting a positive message, focused on¹⁰:

- Disseminating and encouraging good (conservation) practices (including inventories);
- Encouraging and awarding academic studies, artists and community actions: Annual 'SOS Azulejo Awards' were created since 2010, allowing to publicly recognize individuals and institutions whose work related to 'azulejos' is remarkable and contributes not only to their safeguard, but also to their study, dissemination, fruition and continuity in contemporary art. These awards have given visibility to works of excellence in many different fields, and are meant to have an encouraging role. The ceremonies have taken place at the emblematic Fronteira Palace and have been most gratifying for all the involved;
- Disseminating love for 'azulejos' especially in school children: 'SCHOOL ACTION SOS AZULEJO' took place on the 5th May 2011, with the participation of 12 local municipal

¹⁰ The following list does not include annual seminars and other actions of the Project

authorities, 32 schools and 2200 participants, especially schoolchildren and teachers, but also seniors. On this day various playful activities were performed by schoolchildren related to the knowledge and manufacturing of 'azulejos'. The planning of Partner ANMP ('Municipalities' Association') was determinant for the implementation of this event at a national level. The event was a success, for children and teachers participated with great enthusiasm. Although this kind of initiatives is difficult to measure, the feed back was extremely positive and we are certain to have raised awareness to this kind of cultural heritage in many children, aiming at a better faith for 'azulejos' in the future.

4. Concluding Remarks:

Several projects aiming at 'azulejos' protection have emerged after 'SOS Azulejo' (although more focussed in specific sectors and not so multidisciplinary), which might be seen as a probable consequence of this Project's actions and contribution to the cause of 'azulejos' in Portugal. Also, institutional services awarded by this Project were afterwards given better conditions and means by their managers. This seems a good sign in terms of the Project's results – although not completely measurable - considering SOS Azulejo's initial aims in terms of raising institutional and people's awareness to the importance of Portuguese tiles.

Furthermore, at the end of this article we consider our initial proposition has been materialized and proven, that is, we hope to have shown 'SOS Azulejo' has achieved measurable positive results regarding the protection of Portuguese 'azulejos' (especially in Lisbon) by developing innovative, preventive and positive actions within a strategy of global approach, through unusual partnerships and a multidisciplinary perspective – trying to turn a problem of theft, vandalism and neglect into a cultural opportunity for the dissemination of Portugal's cultural heritage.

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