

Original Paper

Portuguese *Azulejo*: A Transcultural Odessey of the East and the West

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Received: December 19, 2024 Accepted: January 04, 2025 Online Published: January 24, 2025
doi:10.22158/assc.v7n1p1 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v7n1p1>

Abstract

This research focuses on the art of Portuguese azulejo. Originating in Moorish Andalusia during the medieval period, azulejo manifests as architectural ornamentation, tiled murals, and various forms of decorative painting. Their transmission to Portugal led to the development of uniquely Portuguese tiled panel artistry. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, East-West cultural exchanges resulted in the integration of Chinese blue and white porcelain artistry into Portuguese azulejo, impacting their colors, styles, and aesthetics. To this day, Portuguese azulejo artistry stands as a cultural heritage and a national cultural symbol. Therefore, the history of azulejo is indeed a transcultural history of art.

Keywords

Azulejo, blue and white porcelain, China, Portugal, transcultural communication

1. Introduction

The Mediterranean civilization stands as a vortex of global cultural confluence and dynamism. It served not only as a wellspring for European and Arab cultures but also as a crucial intermediary point for the exchange between Eastern and Western traditions, thereby holding a unique significance in the annals of world cultural history. Situated at an exceptional geographical crossroads, the Mediterranean straddles the boundaries of Europe, Asia, and Africa, defying easy categorization as either “East” or “West”. Notably, the ancient Silk Road, a pivotal artery of trade and cultural exchange, also terminated at the Mediterranean.

Mediterranean is not the birthplace of tiles. Tracing back to their origins, tiles are a form of expression of porcelain, and the main source of porcelain was China. The birth of ceramics was an achievement of human civilization, a product of the combination of fire and agricultural civilization. As early as more

than 3,000 years ago, during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, the earliest type of porcelain—primitive celadon (celadon ware) appeared on the land of *Huaxia*. After the development and progress through the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties, by the Song and Yuan dynasties, China's porcelain firing techniques and porcelain making craftsmanship had reached the peak, dominating the world. Although porcelain was also invented relatively early in other ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Chinese porcelain undoubtedly led the trend for a long time.

With the exchange of cultures and the spread of civilizations, tea, silk, porcelain, and other specialties of China gradually spread to neighboring countries. In addition to the close neighbors in East Asia and Southeast Asia having the advantage of being the first to benefit from proximity, the opening of the Silk Road also enabled the people of Central Asia and West Asia to subsequently learn from China's advanced experience. Especially during the powerful Yuan dynasty, as China expanded to the West, it also brought the advanced achievements of Chinese civilization to the West.

The dissemination route of porcelain generally followed a path from China (possibly including Egypt as well) to Arab countries in West Asia, and subsequently to Europe. (Xu, 2013) During the process of porcelain firing technology's transmission, some Arab and European nations, adapting to their specific circumstances (climatic conditions, lifestyle habits, cultural customs, etc.), created the particular ceramic product of tiles. Due to their novelty and practicality, they were quickly popularized and became an important product that was widely welcomed. It is generally believed that tiles were transmitted from Arab countries to Spain and the Netherlands, and then to Portugal.

2. The Origin of *Azulejo*

The Moors brought Islamic mosaic and tile art to the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century and it is here when *azulejos* began. Etymologically, the origin of the term "*azulejo*", the Portuguese word for "tile", which derives from the Arabic "*al-zillīj*", signifying a small, smooth polished stone employed by medieval Muslims, and this evolved to *azulejo* in Portuguese. This early adoption occurred following the Moorish occupation, where elements of their artistic and material culture were integrated into the local aesthetic. The *azulejo* tradition gained national prominence in Portugal during the 16th century, developing into a distinct ceramic tile tradition with a 500-year history.

The dissemination of *azulejo* in Portugal is often attributed to King Manuel I's exposure to the art form in Granada. The initial manifestation of their application was witnessed at the National Palace of Sintra, the royal residence. Approximately seventy years later, by 1560, workshops in Lisbon began production, utilizing technological advancements originating in Italy. Consequently, Italian ceramic aesthetics became a crucial influence on the artistic expression manifested in Portuguese *azulejo* production.

King Manuel I of Portugal (r. 1495-1521) visited Seville and the Alhambra palace in Granada and was dazzled by the Islamic geometric-patterned ceramic tiles he saw. King Manuel was one of the wealthiest monarchs in the Christian world thanks to the Portuguese age of discovery (early 15th - mid 17th century). He imported *azulejo* from Seville and decorated The Arab Room in his palace at Sintra

(Palácio Nacional de Sintra). The Spanish Muslim geometric patterns used in this room are called *mudejar*, and this period of tile decoration is known as the Hispano-Moresque. This marked the beginning of Portugal's journey, starting with the importation of tiles, transitioning to independent production, and eventually developing into a leading industry.

Cosme de Médicis during his 1669 visit to Portugal claimed, "The *azulejo* is a part of Portugal's landscape" (Simões, 1959, p. 23), asserting that it was a defining feature of the nation's visual art. This notion was further reinforced decades later by Merveilleux in 1726, who acknowledged the ubiquity of "glazed tile fashion" prevalent throughout the country (Carvalho, 1962, p. 152).

3. The Transcultural Journey of Blue and White Porcelain

The emergence of blue and white porcelain in China has often been told as a global story. Cobalt was sourced from Central Asia, and arrived in China by means of Islamic merchants, who moved freely throughout the Mongol empire that extended across the Eurasia landmass. Not only merchants and cobalt circulated throughout Eurasia, but also consumer demands from Central Asia (Gerritsen, 2020, p. 61). The emergence of cobalt blue decorations on the type of large white dishes that were popular in the eating practices of the steppe and in Central Asian societies, then, is seen as a story of regional adaptation to global tastes.

Porcelain from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) spread throughout Europe via the maritime trade routes opened up successively by the Portuguese and the Dutch, and in fact, they can be considered representatives of the earliest imported goods. From royal property inventories to travelers' accounts, these documentary materials provide us with a window through which we can glimpse the exquisite beauty of items from China:

"China is also the most populous region in the East, with more artisans and handicrafts than any other place, for many goods are produced here: beds, desks, cabinets, gold-threaded bed covers, exquisite porcelain, small curtains, gold and silver wire-inlaid crafts, taffeta, and thousands of other unique silk textiles, the quantity of which is comparable to the total of all other places in the world..." (Faria, 1655).

In the 15th century, blue and white porcelain had two characteristics: it had a distinctiveness that made it immediately recognizable as Chinese and valuable; and it had a certain adaptability in its shapes and decorative patterns that allowed it to be appropriated and embedded into new contexts (Gerritsen, 2020, p. 133). In those contexts, it could acquire new meanings, and communicate those values not only from the outside but from within that context.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Portuguese had taken the lead in starting trade in Chinese blue and white porcelain. This historical fact was recorded in the Chinese and foreign literatures, and, more importantly, remains of cultural relics have been found by archeologists on the ground, underground, and on the seabed. The temporal progression reveals an initial production of armorial porcelain, a porcelain item decorated with one or more heraldic emblems. The heraldic decoration can be simply

the crest, or it can be the full coat-of-arms; the escutcheon, badge, coronet, helm mantlings, torse, crest and motto (Edwards, 2022). Manuel I of Portugal (1459-1521) is thought to have been the first to commission a Chinese armorial with a European armorial on it. He had received a gift of porcelain in 1499 on the return of Vasco da Gama from voyage to Calicut. He was so delighted with the porcelain that he ordered an ewer bearing his heraldic coat-of-arms from a Portuguese expedition going to China in 1517 (Edwards, 2022). This incident is considered to be the genesis of Chinese porcelain decorated with European armorials (Denyer, Denyer, & Edwards, 2024) (Figure 1).

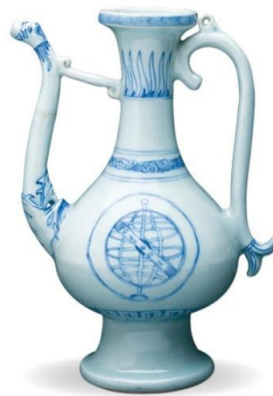


Figure 1. Jar with D. Manuel I arms; 1519-1521; Jingdezhen kilns; h.26cm; © Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida

During the 16th and 17th centuries, sea vessels returning from the New World docked in the port of Lisbon, bringing back exotic and fascinating “imports”: gemstones, jewelry, ivory, Indian and Persian silk carpets, and Chinese porcelain. This metropolis became a melting pot of merchants, wholesalers, diplomats, scholars, and artists from across Europe. The widespread dissemination of these items provided a rich array of materials for the hybridization and reconstruction of artistic forms. From mere importation to replication in Europe, these “souvenirs” (Gruzinski, 2004, p. 322) served as material vehicles for the convergence of visual cultures, giving birth to entirely new forms and decorative languages. Portugal and Spain have vast imperial territories thus became a stage for the exchange and interconnection of arts, with Chinese porcelain gradually capturing the hearts of people through trade, collection, and dissemination, nurturing an unprecedented aesthetic combination in the Iberian artistic landscape.

Also at that time, Chinese blue and white porcelain has been exported all over the world and has influenced ceramic traditions in many other countries. During the 16th century, Europe received significant amounts of blue and white porcelain, initially from Portuguese merchants and subsequently from the Dutch East India Company and other traders. One of the most well-known products of the early European trade was Kraak porcelain, a type of Chinese export porcelain produced mainly in the late Ming dynasty, in the Wanli reign (1573-1620), but also in the Tianqi (1620-1627) and the

Chongzhen (1627-1644), which was characterized by a central decoration and alternating decorative borders. Kraak porcelain was among the first Chinese export wares to arrive in Europe in mass quantities, and was frequently featured in Dutch Golden Age paintings of still life subjects with foreign luxuries. And then Chinese blue and white porcelain elements became clearly visible on *azulejo* in Lisbon. Existing scholarly discourse, as exemplified by the research of Portuguese art historian Maria Miranda (1995), suggests three principal influences on Portuguese blue and white *azulejo* iconography: Arab, Spanish, and Dutch antecedents. However, these analyses arguably lack a sufficient consideration of the direct influence exerted by Chinese blue and white porcelain.

The characteristic blue and white palette observed in *azulejo* design was a direct consequence of European fascination with, and scarcity of, Chinese porcelain. The limited availability of essential materials for European porcelain production rendered it a luxury commodity. Therefore, the Portuguese initially adopted more accessible Delftware tiles from the Netherlands for decorative purposes. The 17th century witnessed the successful imitation of blue and white pottery in Delft, the Netherlands, which was a direct outcome of the Dutch participation in the vast trade of Chinese porcelain. Moreover, the early 17th century saw the commencement of Portuguese large-scale production of blue and white ceramics. These factors, combined with the temporal proximity of Chinese blue and white export during the 16th century to the rise of blue and white *azulejo* in Portugal, strongly suggests a causal relationship. The consequent dominance of blue and white *azulejo* in Portugal during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, temporally aligned with the 16th-century export of Chinese blue and white porcelain, strongly suggests a correlation between these phenomena. Several factors highlight this connection, indicating a complex interplay of trade, cultural adaptation, and artistic innovation. A Portuguese expression “Ouro sobre azul” (gold over blue) signifies “perfect”, indicating the cultural connotation of blue and white *azulejo* for Portugal.

Prior to the late 17th century, Portuguese *azulejo* was typically polychromatic, characterized by diagonal lines and “enxaquetado” (checkerboard) patterns often combined with patterned tiles, covering entire building interiors. This period reveals a diverse array of influences, extending beyond Islamic models to encompass Mongol, Indian, and Chinese decorative elements. From the late 16th century onwards, *azulejo* featuring floral motifs began to proliferate, eventually covering the entirety of building walls by the beginning of the 17th century.

The transition from porcelain to tableware, and subsequently to *azulejo*, illustrates the adaptability of pottery artisans in adjusting and interpreting decorative patterns in response to new trends. Beyond merely imitating the manufacturing processes, Portuguese artisans also drew inspiration from porcelain, readily incorporating its designs into the creation of *azulejo*. They combined different prototypes with ease, ultimately giving birth to new hybrid images. For instance, the recurring motif of the sika deer, doe, roe deer, and elk found in azulejos are abundant on porcelain plates as well (Figure 2 and 3). In Chinese culture, deer symbolizes longevity. When these motifs are applied to altars and other ceramic altar decorations, they retain their symbolic significance, albeit within the context of European cultural

backgrounds. Deer, as the mount of “*Shouxing Lao*” (Deity of Longevity), and as one of the animals in Noah’s Ark in Christian culture, as well as a common presence in hagiographies, carry complex connotations. Their appearance in the decorative system of *azulejo* is not a mere coincidence but a deliberate choice. The adaptation of a motif from Taoist culture to a Christian context depended on its potential compatibility within the culture of the recipient. The dissemination of themes found in Chinese porcelain transcends the boundaries of aesthetic history, reflecting a considered and deliberate creative process. The artisans’ choice of porcelain patterns is not a random act, they had to be compatible with religious decorative systems, with each selected motif or figure serving a specific purpose. (Shanghai Museum, 2022)



Figure 2. Azulejo of the altar; Portugal; 1600-1650; 55.5x83.5cm; © National Museum of the Azulejo



Figure 3. Blue and White Glazed Dish with Deer; Portugal; late 16th Century – early 17th Century; 5x30.4cm; © National Museum of Ancient Art

The inspiration derived from the patterns and figurative decorations of Chinese porcelain significantly enriched the decorations of churches and palaces in the 17th century in Portugal. The circulation of goods provided the foundation for the diversification of tile decorations. Subtle transformations

occurred in both patterns and colors. From the last three decades of the 17th century to the whole of the 18th century, the uniqueness of *azulejo* works lay in the simplification to a blue and white color, coupled with the skillful mastery of pattern drawing techniques.

From mere imitation to free-spirited interpretations, the production of Portuguese *azulejo* illustrates a creative process of integration, reflecting the convergence of different aesthetic traditions, and the transposition of decorative motifs from one medium to another. (Shanghai Museum, 2022)

Chinese porcelain, with its brilliance and superior quality, exerted a profound influence, despite the manufacturing techniques remaining an enigma in Europe at that time. Lisbon artisans strived to replicate the form and texture of the originals. These objects and art represent the material embodiment of cultural hybridization. Portuguese ceramics, through the integration, transformation, and reinterpretation of foreign forms, demonstrate a unique synthesis of Chinese decorative languages. *Azulejo* reveals a rich vocabulary of decorations, reflecting a transcultural phenomenon with combination of different aesthetics and it becomes a testimony to the value of cultural exchanges.

Later, the advent of Baroque and Rococo styles further influenced *azulejo* design, leading to the incorporation of diverse figural elements on their surface. While this creative approach bears similarity to the methodology of Chinese blue and white porcelain production, Portuguese artisans integrated Western principles of *chiaroscuro* (light and shade) and optical illusion into their tile painting, resulting in a more precise, rigorous, and realistically rendered product. This fusion of artistic techniques imbued Portuguese *azulejo* with a distinct temperament and aesthetic charm, contrasting with the more elegant, ink-painting-inspired style of Chinese blue and white porcelain (Figure 4). The Portuguese blue and white *azulejo* can therefore be described as an oil painting style on a faience canvas.



Figure 4. Igreja do Carmo (1910) in Porto; Photo by author

4. Conclusion

Throughout the history, the nature of *azulejo* as both a practical building material and a form of artistic expression became increasingly apparent. For centuries, *azulejo* is not a mere decorative surface but an ongoing dialogue between diverse artistic practices and cultural influences. It displays the complex processes of adaptation, assimilation, and innovation, showcasing its role as a significant catalyst for

intercultural exchange. *Azulejo* experiences the journey where different cultures and aesthetics from the East and the West have merged to create something new. This versatility enabled the *azulejo* to convey multiple layers of meaning, making it a powerful medium for transcultural communication and creating an art treasure on the history of human civilization.

In contemporary Portugal, *azulejo* continues to function as a dynamic and evolving medium, contributing a unique and vibrant characteristic to the nation's architectural landscape and public spaces.

Funding

This paper is supported by Project of Chongqing Municipal Education Commission Foundation on Humanities and Social Sciences (Project Number: 23SKGH378).

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