

A CANOPY FROM THE PORTUGUESE MEDIEVAL MONASTERY OF BATALHA: A SINGULAR EXAMPLE OF MICRO-ARCHITECTURE IN THE CLOISTERS COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

The MET Cloisters acquired a peculiar architectural canopy in 2016 that belonged to the main portal of the medieval monastery of Santa Maria da Vitória in the Portuguese village of Batalha. This piece, now in New York, surmounted one of the twelve statues of the Apostles. In the 19th century, during restoration works, the portal was altered from its initial dimension and many of its original sculptural elements were replaced by copies.

This research note intends to trace the current location of all the original elements, in both public and private collections, as well as their path in the art market. It also analyzes how this canopy represents a unique example of micro-architecture, relating its composition to the monastery's architecture. The canopy seems to allude to the dual function and meaning of the Portuguese medieval monastery: the divine temple is represented by the five small buildings and their tile-roofs, as the church's chevet with five radiating chapels; and royal funerary place as represented by the vertical segment, a sectioned octagonal volume evoking King John's funeral chapel.

In its simplicity and micro-scale, this canopy displays remarkable artistic quality, constituting an excellent example of the fourteenth-century production led by the master Huguet in the Portuguese construction site of Batalha.

KEYWORDS

Canopy | Monastery of Batalha | Restoration | Micro-architecture | MET Cloisters.

The MET Cloisters recently acquired a peculiar architectural canopy that belonged to the main portal of the medieval monastery of Santa Maria da Vitória in the Portuguese village of Batalha¹. (Fig. 01). This piece, now in New York, surmounted one of the twelve statues of the Apostles. In the 19th century, the portal was altered from its initial dimension and many of its original sculptural elements were replaced by copies. These transformations occurred during major restoration works due to the historical significance of the building and in a specific moment of national identity affirmation.



Fig. 01. Master Huguet, Monastery of Batalha (Portugal) workshop, Canopy, ca. 1402–1426, limestone, 20 7/8 × 19 1/2 × 13 3/4 in., 120 lb. (53 × 49.5 × 34.9 cm, 54.4 kg), The Metropolitan Museum of Art—The Cloisters Collection (2016.246).

The founding of the monastery had been ordered during the late 14th century by King D. João I, near the place where this monarch had defeated the King of Castile, a contender for the Portuguese throne, in the famous Battle of Aljubarrota on August 14 1385. The king dedicated the monastery to the Virgin Mary and entrusted it to the Dominicans (Sousa, 1767: 618, 621).

Construction began around 1388 under the guidance of the Portuguese master Afonso Domingos, who was succeeded, around 1405, by a foreigner named Huguet, probably from Catalonia although earlier historiography identifies him as being English. This deduction arose from the nationality of King John's wife, Queen Philippa of Lancaster, granddaughter of King Edward III of England.

The plan of the monastery consisted of a grand church with a main nave flanked by aisles, of eight bays, a protruding transept with the second portal in the south end and an apse with five chapels. To the north, a cloister was erected, around which the conventual accommodations were arranged: chapter house, refectory, kitchen, cellar, library, among others. D. João I, Grand Master of the Order of Avis, was born as the natural son of King D. Pedro I of Portugal. Thus, the new monarch was committed to building a grand commission to assert his power and legitimacy. In fact, the funerary component was promptly considered by King D. João, who decided to assign the monastery he founded as the new dynastic pantheon of Avis (Sousa, 1946: 27). This decision translated into plans for a sepulchral chapel connected to the south church aisle, parallel to its first three sections². This chapel took the laborious yet symbolic shape of an octagon traced from the center of a square, alluding to the Resurrection. Referencing the octadic form employed by the emperor Charlemagne in his palatine chapel of Aachen underlines the grandiose discourse of power undertaken by King D. João I. (Fig. 02)

1 MET Cloisters, 2016.246.

2 Gottschlich 2006, pp. 339–357.



Fig. 02. Vigé & Plessix Photographers, Monastery of Batalha, general view, ca. 1860, paper & albumin, 31,5x 40,5 cm, Ajuda Library, Lisbon (46925 DIG) © DGPC/ADF.

THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECTION OF THE HISTORIC BUILDING AND ITS RESTORATION

The Batalha monastery received international historical and artistic criticism through English antiquaries in the 18th century. The first considerations on the monument were due to Thomas Pitt (1737–1793) (Pitt, 2006: 133-137), nephew of the influential English minister William Pitt (1708–1778). William Conyngham (1733–1796) followed, who eventually recruits a young architect by the name of James Cavanah Murphy (1760–1814) to travel to Batalha and conduct a complete architectural survey of the monastery. Murphy remains about thirteen weeks at Batalha in 1789, measuring and drawing. On his return to the United Kingdom, Murphy brings with him all the elements needed to design a high-end illustrated volume.

The announcement of the publication, by installments, of the album about the Portuguese monastery was made at the Society of Antiquaries of London at the beginning of 1792 (Murphy, 2008: 71). The Album, completed in 1795 (Murphy, 1795), with twenty-five magnificent engravings of plans, elevations, sections and drawings of decorative details “was at the time the finest set of engravings of Gothic buildings ever to appear in this country” (Watkin, 1983: 55-56). This album would have a great influence on the “Gothic Revival in England comparable with that of Stuart and Revett’s *Antiquities of Athens* on the Neo-Greek Revival” (R.I.B.A. Journal, 1957: 338).

Due to Murphy's work, the Portuguese monastery experienced enviable dissemination in Europe from then on (Murphy, 2008: 59–64). When Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg (1816–1885) marries the Queen of Portugal D. Maria II, he immediately visited the Batalha monastery in 1836. Faced with the building's reality of abandonment and degradation, he will exert all his influence for its urgent restoration.

The Dominican friars had been forced to leave the monastery in 1834, obeying the law of the extinction of religious orders in Portugal and the nationalization of their goods. However, the historic building had not gained relevance exclusively among foreigners. In Portugal, the former monastery was seen as a monument, symbolic of national independence and the golden age of the Portuguese maritime expansion that began with D. João I and his son Henry the Navigator. The restoration of the monastery then began in 1839, spanning over 60 years, until the early years of the twentieth century (Neto, 1997).

Around 1873, the churchyard facing the main church portal was demolished, a consequence of the removal of soil accumulated over the centuries near the base of the building. Photographs taken by Charles Thompson (1816–1868) and published in London in 1868 testify to this moment (*The Sculptured Ornament...*, 1868: 17, 19). (Fig. 03) The portal deserved particular attention during the restoration works for its composition and sculptural quality. It was the most elaborate medieval portal in Portugal. Instead of a usual gable, the great door of the Batalha church has an ogee, which allows for the existence of a double tympanum over the archivolts. The high arches, branching along the wall, rest on the base band, decorated by diamonds with four-lobes inwards. On this base band, on both sides, there are fourteen bases of slender columns whose intervals are carved shapes that appear to represent miniature blind crevices with a central mullion. Upon these, twelve corbels decorated with various phytomorphic, zoomorphic and heraldic motifs support the bases on which the Apostles' statues are set. Each Apostle is framed by an elaborate canopy on top.



Fig. 03. Charles Thompson Photographer, Monastery of Batalha, the western doorway of the church, in *The Sculptured ornament of the Monastery of Batalha in Portugal* 1868, p. 19, (purl.pt/18571) © BNP.

In the second half of the portal, corresponding to the six archivolts, thin columns of the jambs extend, and between them, starting from the top of the Apostles' canopies, small statues are set. These are representations of a Seraphim, Musician Angels, Old Testament Prophets, Kings of Judah, Saints, and, finally, Holy and Virgin martyrs, taken from the *Legenda Aurea* of the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (1228–1298). This celestial court encloses a representation of the *Majestas Domini* surrounded by the four Evangelists, with their respective symbols, in the tympanum. Over this ensemble, in the double tympanum, is the scene of the Virgin's Coronation topped by a canopy flanked by the crests of D. João I and D. Phillipa of Lancaster.

Once the churchyard removal and earthworks were carried out, the entire main facade of the church gained prominence. In order to make the portal

stand out even further, it is then decided to increase its original dimensions. To that end, the threshold is lowered and the four steps downward to the interior of the church are removed. Both doorjambes grow about 60 cm. New stonework is carved to add on both sides and, so that the tonal contrast between the new and old sections was not so evident, it is opted for an integral replacement of all elements until the archivolts outset. (Fig. 04) Thus, twelve new statues of the Apostles are carved, along with their corbels, bases, and canopies. Only the Apostles were made in Lisbon between 1886 and June 1887, while all other pieces came out of the chisels of the local stonemasons

in the early 1980s, copying the traits of the originals (Aires-Barros, Neto, Soares, 1998: 384-386). Some of the archivolts and their canopy figures that were damaged are also replaced: four Seraphim, two Musician Angels, two Prophets, two Kings of Judah, one Holy Pope, one Saint (St. Catherine), as well as some of their respective canopies (about 28 in their entirety and 19 in sections). In the tympanum, two of the Evangelists — Saint Mark and Saint Luke — are replaced, as well as the canopy over the representation of the Virgin's Coronation in the double tympanum (Neto, 1997: 118-130).

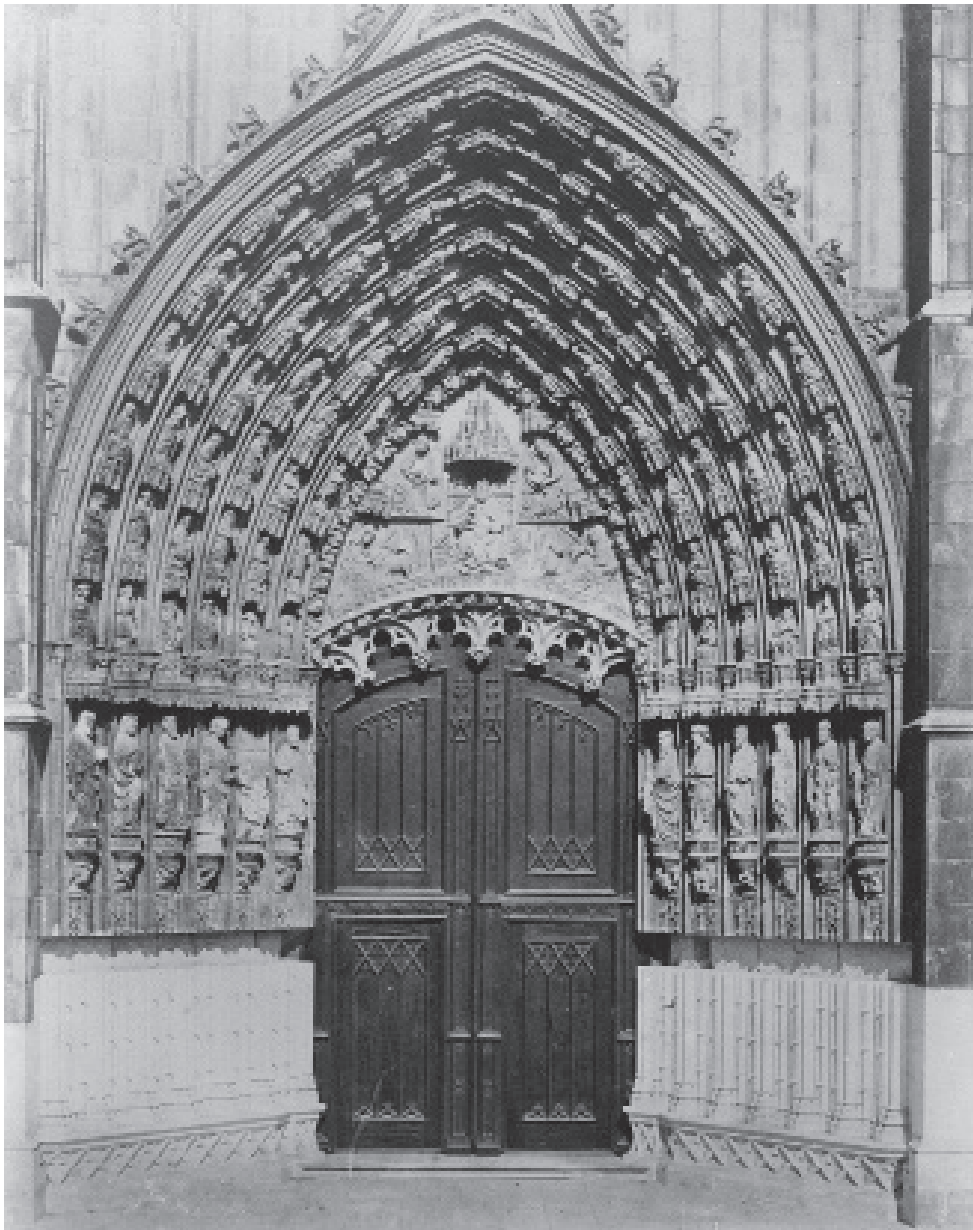


Fig. 04. Monastery of Batalha: The main door of the church during the restoration works, ca. 1880, (SIPA FOTO_00078522) © DGPC/ADF.

The removed medieval stones were used to make the replacement copies and were eventually stored in the north wing of the monastery's second cloister, along with other pieces and fragments from various parts of

the monument. The intention was to create a 'Work Museum' (Correia, 1931: 52), but there was no great care in preserving this set.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ORIGINAL SCULPTURES OF THE MAIN PORTAL

Since 1990 we have sought to identify which sculptured pieces belonged to the main portal (Neto, 1997: 128-130). The task was not easy until the collection was moved to a deposit and some of these pieces were publicly displayed at the Monastery's Interpretation Center in 2012. It was then possible to confirm the existence of four seraphim³, two angel musicians⁴, a Prophet⁵, two figures of kings of Judah⁶ and a holy pope⁷ that belonged to the archivolt. Apart from the monument's collection, there are three figures, representing two musician angels and a prophet, which are part of the National Museum of Ancient Art collection in Lisbon⁸. The sculptures came to Lisbon shortly after their removal from the portal to be exhibited at the 1882 Portuguese and Spanish Ornamental Art Exhibition (Catálogo Ilustrado, 1882: 334). Thus, in relation to the statues of the archivolt taken from the portal in the nineteenth century, only the whereabouts of Saint Catherine are unknown at this time. Of their respective canopies, we noted the existence of six⁹. The two tympanum evangelists are on permanent display in the monastery¹⁰, as well as the canopy of the Virgin's Coronation of the double tympanum¹¹, eleven of the twelve statues of the Apostles¹² (six of them are also exhibited), eleven of their respective bases¹³ and the same number of support corbels¹⁴.

Of the Apostles' canopies, the National Museum of Ancient Art has one on permanent display. It also came to Lisbon for the 1882 Exhibition (Catálogo Ilustrado, 1882: 335). In the Batalha Monastery deposit, we noted the existence of three canopies intact in their general form although quite damaged in their decorative details¹⁵ and eight more fragments¹⁶. Among these fragments are parts of, at least, six more canopies¹⁷, perhaps seven. If there are indeed seven, the canopy now in MET Cloisters is the twelfth one left to account for. In spite of their state of conservation in some cases, it is possible to differentiate their technical quality of execution, thus showing that different craftsmen coexisted. Although all the canopies follow the same composition, some show greater skill in their carving [Figs. 05 and 06], particularly in the small decorative details. Such is the case for the NMAA copy, from the same hand as the one in Met Cloisters, as well as at least one in the Batalha Monastery, in reasonable condition¹⁸.

3 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 34, 37, 45. 97.

4 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 41, 194.

5 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 35.

6 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 42 e 98.

7 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 32.

8 MNAA, Inv. n.º 36, 37 and 545 ESC.

9 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 60, 68, 69, 72, 83, 85.

10 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 155, 156.

11 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 142.

12 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 1 to 9, 189, 190.

13 Monastery of Batalha Inv. n.º. 51, 67, 71, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 84, 91, 93. The set is missing the second Apostle on the left side, which before the restoration was already badly damaged and headless.

14 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 73, 77, 80, 86, 92, 94, 95, 96, 99, 100, 193. The missing corbel was supporting the fifth Apostle on the left and represented a crowned female figure.

15 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º. 143 A, 144 A, 145 A.

16 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º 49 A and 49 B, 54 A, 57 A, 59 A, 65 A, 66 A, 70 A, 81 A, 117 C, 163 A.

17 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º 49 A and 49 B, 57 A, 59 A, 65 A, 66 A, 70 A.

18 Monastery of Batalha, Inv. n.º 145 A.



Fig. 05. Master Huguet, Monastery of Batalha workshop, Canopy, side and bottom view, ca. 1402–1426, limestone, 53 x 49 x 54 cm, Monastery of Batalha—Deposit (Inv. N.º 145 A) © MB/DGPC.



Fig. 06. Master Huguet, Monastery of Batalha workshop, Canopy, ca. 1402–1426, limestone, 54 x 46,5 x 53 cm, Monastery of Batalha—Deposit (Inv. N.º 143 A) © MB/DGPC.

The historical and artistic value of all these original 15th-century elements is unquestionable, and it is fundamental to determine their temporal and stylistic context. We now know that the design of the main portal in Batalha was largely due to the monastery's second master-builder during the first quarter of the 15th century (Guillouët, 2011: 74). However, since we can find similarities and affinities with several counterparts in neighboring Spain, there is not one exact model.

The artistic references to the *puerta del Sarmental* of the cathedral of Burgos in the Batalha portal have already been pointed out (Correia, 1929: 32), underlining political reasons for it, given the significance that this cathedral had for the king of Castile. The monarch, defeated in Aljubarrota, had his coronation in that cathedral (Hediger, 2005: 329-343). However, in structural terms, the *Del Sarmental* portal has a central mullion that does not exist in the portal of the Portuguese Dominican monastery.

Furthermore, the theme of the Virgin's Coronation in the double tympanum of Batalha seems to be from Reims Cathedral due to its placement (Guillouët, 2011: 106). Examples in Spain place it on the tympanum along the archivols, constituting the central theme, such as in Santa Maria Del Toro in the southern door of the cathedral of Leon or the cathedral of Ciudad Rodrigo (Salamanca province). The portal of the church of Santa Maria de los Reyes de Laguardia (Alava province) depicts the coronation in the upper section of the main tympanum. Dating from the late 14th century, this portal has other affinities with Batalha, such as the slanted jambs and in the outline of the structure, its height and in the archivols. Another example in Spain that should be compared with the portal of the Portuguese monastery is Santa Maria de Requena (province of Valencia). It is not

only the use of the ogee that brings them together but all the decoration in the closed arcades over the arch, including the platband crowned with fleur de lis (Guillouët, 2011: 182).

These similarities allow us to accept not only the possible Catalan origin of Master Huguet but also the provenance of masters and sculptors from the Spanish regions, Levante or Basque Country, drawn to the construction site in Batalha to work in the great undertaking of the king of Portugal. In turn, the craftsmen operating in these Spanish regions counted on artisans beyond the Pyrenees for sharing knowledge and techniques, thus creating a dynamic and broad exchange of references.

SCALE AND SYMBOL

The architectural element, now exhibited in New York, left the Batalha Monastery at a date and circumstances not yet ascertained. It belonged to a private collection until it entered the art market in the late 1990s when the owner, who was residing in Oporto, passed away. It was first acquired by Isabel Lencastre Antiques, placing it on auction sale, first in 2013 without success¹⁹, and again the following year when it was sold for the reserve price of 1,600 Euros²⁰. In the catalogs of both auctions, the architectural element is not identified as being from the main portal of Batalha Monastery, noting only '15th century Portuguese production'. The acquisition was made by Pedro Aguiar-Branco Antiques for the Rue de Beaune Gallery in Paris where, months later, in 2015 it is acquired by the renowned London-based medieval art gallery Sam Fogg Ltd., which in turn traced its origin to the main portal of the Batalha Monastery²¹. The piece is sold to the MET the following year with the proper provenance information, to be exhibited in the permanent collection of the Cloisters Museum²².

It is an element that was once part of the main portal structure of the Portuguese monastery but individualised

in its miniature architectural forms. It is a unique example of microarchitectures, composed from an octagonal planimetry, and replicating a centralised vault with its various geometric sections. The ribs mark this set of shapes from a central frame from which six-sided polygons are joined on each side, attached to smaller squares. (Fig. 07) Accompanying the rhythm of the planimetric cutout, small ogees decorated with vegetal elements and pierced by quatrefoil oculi rise between miniature buttresses. Over these microstructures, five tile-roof buildings are laid out, whose layout is curious, with a central elongated volume flanked by two wider ones and smaller volumes set in the angles.

Another volume, over the buildings and on a second plane, has five visible sides. Intended to create the illusion of an octagon, the three hidden sides constitute a rough element designed to fit into the portal structure

19 <https://www.cml.pt/leiloes/2013/154-leilao/2-sessao/818/parte-de-baldaquino> accessed 6-2-2019.

20 <https://www.cml.pt/leiloes/2014/159-leilao/2-sessao/774/parte-de-baldaquino> accessed 6-2-2019. I am grateful to Isabel Lencastre and Miguel Cabral de Moncada for confirming this information.

21 I am grateful to Pedro Aguiar-Branco and Sam Fogg for confirming this information.

22 *The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "One Hundred Forty-sixth Annual Report" 2016*, p. 41: <https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/about-the-met/annual-reports/2015-2016/annual-report-2015-16-departmental-accessions.pdf> accessed 22-1-2018. (Guillouët, 2019: 47-50).

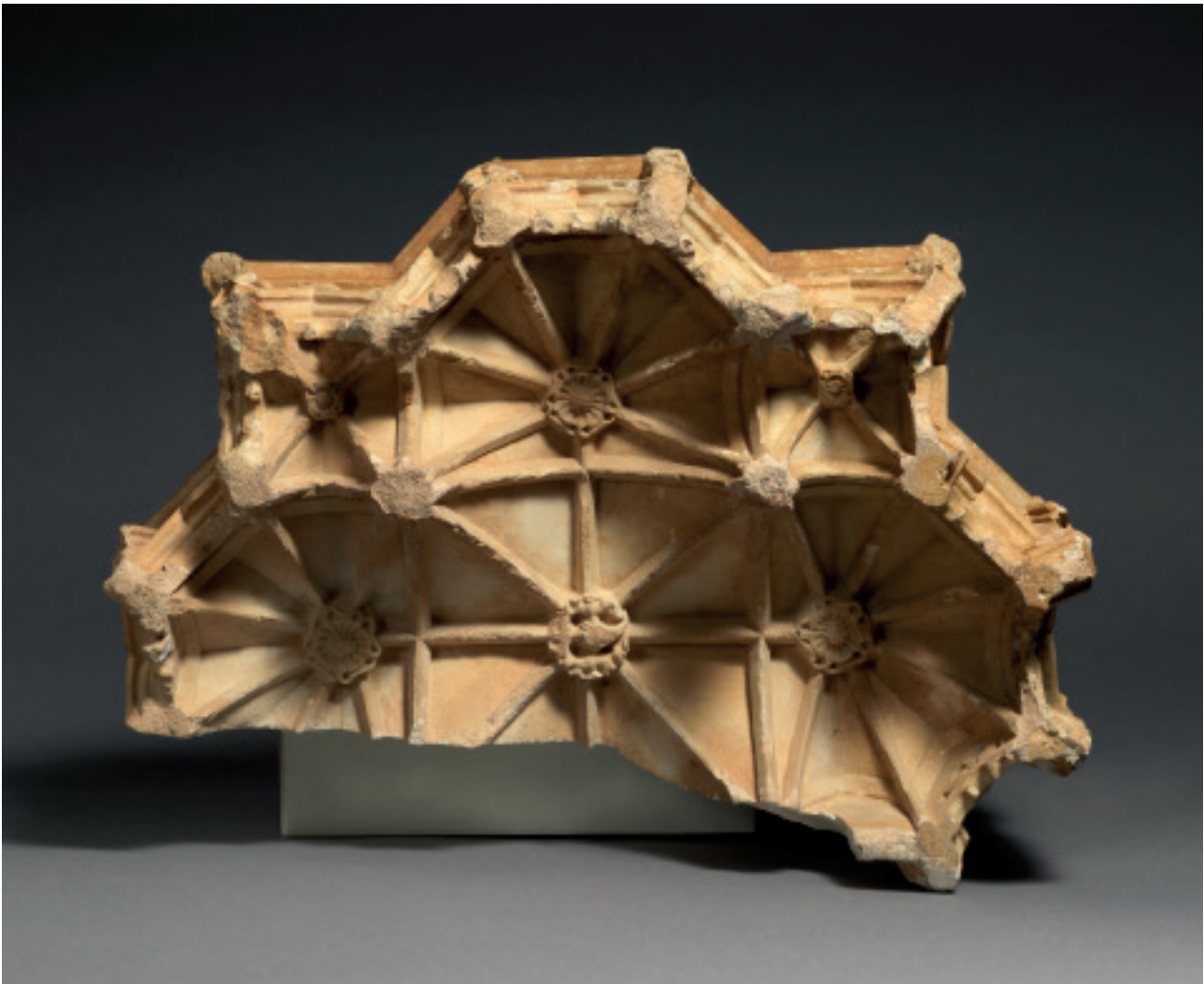


Fig. 07. Master Huguet, Monastery of Batalha workshop, Canopy, view of the vaulting, ca. 1402–1426, The Metropolitan Museum of Art—The Cloisters Collection (2016.246).

and secure the canopy into it²³. This supposed octoid construction is punctuated at the angles by buttresses with a pyramidal trim and small crockets. Among these micro-buttresses are protruded double-span mullioned windows and quatrefoil oculi. The outer profile of these narrow fenestrations is defined by ogees with exuberant stylised vegetal decorative motifs. The minuteness of the architectural details in both the base and platband of this small construction is noticeable. The small protrusions and friezes of the presumed support elements on the base stand out and the top parapet is filled with a delicate sequence of trefoil oculi.

These micro-architectures in the canopies—of which the one in MET Cloisters is particularly well preserved and artistically compelling —establish a symbolic

relationship with the monastery's architecture. It seems evident that there is a clear dialogue between the macro-architecture and the micro-forms that compose the canopies. This miniature world is not immediately apparent but rather requires the observer to exercise an active imagination capable of formulating images in relation and perspective. If, in François Bucher's operational thinking, it is possible to accept this conception as an *idea* of the Gothic architectural theory and practice (Bucher, 1978: 487-496), the miniaturization present in this example must be observed in its extraordinary visionary and symbolic aspect (Binski, 2013: 3-19) that allows for the transposition of the observer to the sublime of the work and the wonder it evokes (Ibáñez Fernández, 2018: 51).

²³ The canopy currently at MET Cloisters no longer has this rough stone block. Most likely it was sawn off for the sake of alleviating its weight when it became part of a private collection.

In a recent study, the authors propose various operational categories for the analysis of microarchitectures. In a comparative model, these canopies are seen as “must have been developed as part of some kind of architectural debate or, at least, as daring experimental exercises in this field”²⁴, considering their vaulting to be very close to Trier’s Liebfrauenkirche.

Without dismissing these possible relations, it seems more pertinent to observe these pieces within another operative category proposed in the same study, “a type of model that seems to have, above all, an important iconological value” (Ibáñez Fernández, Zaragoza Catalán, 2018: 50). Its miniature forms seem to allude to the dual function and meaning of the Portuguese medieval monastery: divine temple and royal funerary place. The allusion to the temple can be perceived in the five small buildings and their tile-roofs, as the church’s

chevet with five radiating chapels. Furthermore, the vertical segment is a sectioned octagonal volume, with a formal and certainly symbolic connotation with the funeral chapel of D. João I. In the diligence of the carved elements, it is possible to recognize, in miniature scale, the same module as the Infantes’ tombs in that chapel: ogees between buttresses with the same type of decoration and trim²⁵. These small arches reproduce the mullioned window structure of the ones in the founder’s chapel on the first floor. In its simplicity and micro-scale, this canopy displays remarkable artistic quality, constituting an excellent example of the fourteenth-century production in the Portuguese construction site led by the master Huguet. Concurrently, it seems to contain in its somewhat eidetic conception and composition references to the temple dedicated to Santa Maria da Vitória and the funerary space of the founder of the Avis dynasty.

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path in the art market in recent years. I am also very grateful to Joaquim Ruivo, director of the Batalha Monastery and Maria João Vilhena de Carvalho, curator of the sculpture collection of the National Museum of Ancient Art (Lisbon), for facilitating my examination of the other original canopies from the Batalha Monastery.

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²⁴ Ibáñez Fernández, Javier and Zaragoza Catalán, Arturo 2018, p. 51.

²⁵ Some of the canopies, interestingly those of lower sculptural quality, even register grooves in the walls where the arches are inscribed (M.B. inv. No. 143A) as well as in the south wall of the Founder’s Chapel that houses the tombs of the Infantes in arcosolios.

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