

# FRAME SIMULATIONS IN 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AZULEJOS

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## ABSTRACT

The present article is the result of an ongoing research project and aims to draw attention to simulated *azulejo* frames. On the one hand, these decorative elements isolate the compositions, closing them in on themselves. On the other hand, simulated *azulejo* frames help integrate with the tile decoration they are part of, which in turn is part of a global decorative system in line with the concept of artistic totality typical of the Baroque period. This article will examine the various solutions that resort to this kind of frame, known as canvas-frame, including decorative elements, plastic compositions and their effects or consequences for the overall decorations. Finally, the focus will turn to future research directions, based on the systematic cataloguing of the known examples.

## KEYWORDS

Frames | Frame simulations | Azulejo (tiles) | Baroque

## RESUMO

Resultando de uma investigação ainda em curso, o presente artigo pretende chamar a atenção para as molduras simuladas em azulejo que, ao contrário de outras tipologias mais conhecidas, isolam e fecham as composições sobre si próprias, mas sem deixar de as integrar no revestimento azulejar que, por sua vez, é parte integrante de um sistema decorativo global, próprio da totalidade artística barroca. Analisam-se as diversas soluções desta tipologia de moldura, designada por moldura-quadro, aí se incluindo os elementos decorativos, a construção plástica e os efeitos ou consequências provocados no conjunto em que se inserem. Por fim, apontam-se perspectivas de investigação futura baseadas na catalogação sistemática dos exemplos observados.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Molduras | Simulação de molduras | Azulejo | Barroco



## INTRODUCTION

Frames are important not only because they provide works of art with an edge and a frontier, thus helping to individualise them and to set them apart from their surrounding environment, but also because they help preserve works of art. Frames have long been used as functional objects, and their structure has changed alongside the various changes in taste, becoming an important source of information concerning the introduction of new artistic languages.

As far as *azulejos* are concerned, in addition to enclosing the decorations, frames also help to integrate them within the surrounding architectural space. In the case of *azulejos*, however, frames are painted, that is, simulated. Whether applied on entire walls (and ceilings) or as wainscoting, Baroque frames tend to assume a global dimension, visible in their organization, but also in the articulation with other artistic forms.

This integration seems to draw on a tradition of placing *azulejos* on the walls surface, similar to the one found in 17<sup>th</sup> century patterned decorations, e.g. following a decorative model that was gradually abandoned during the 1720s in favour of more dynamic frames. In fact, Baroque tile decorations usually include rectilinear repeating double *azulejo* frames<sup>1</sup> (as a means of unifying the decoration), but also indented and more sinuous frames, increasingly favouring simulated architectural structures and sculptural elements. The idea of limiting the figurative compositions is always present (especially when divided by sections), but while both frames and figurative compositions enjoy, at first, total independence, they are gradually made to intersect one another, with the frames literally “invading” the figurative sections.

The purpose of the present article is to explore another decorative type, namely the simulation of frames, a

case where the dialogue between the decorative motifs found in woodwork, marble inlays and *azulejo* is particularly noticeable (Coutinho and Ferreira, 2014: 393-411). Often complemented with other frames, these simulations constitute unusual experiments in that they seem to regard figurative composition as paintings, isolating them from the surrounding decoration, conceived as a whole. The traditional double *azulejo* frames thus represent transitional areas, while this simulated tile frames close the figurative sections in on themselves in a more concrete manner, virtually isolating them. On the one hand these decorations share the context of narrative cycles painted on other media, on the other hand, the simulated *azulejo* frames under consideration separate the compositions from one another, allowing each one to be perceived on its own, and thus granting it unity, identity and a guarantee of visibility (Stoichita, 1999: 89-90). This mechanism is described by Nicolas Poussin as follow:

“Quand vous aurez reçu votre tableau, je vous supplie, si vous le trouvez bon, de l’orner d’un peu de corniche, car il en a besoin, afin que, en le considérant en toutes ses parties, les rayons de l’œil soient retenus et non point épars au dehors, en recevant les espèces des autres objets voisins qui, venant pêle-mêle avec les choses dépeintes, confondent le jour” (Marin, 1982 : 8).

With the aid of several examples, this paper will describe the different options followed by the artists when creating what will henceforth be called canvas-frames<sup>2</sup>, integrating this solution within the context of the decorative systems of the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The work hereby put forward is the result of an ongoing research effort, and as such the systematic identification of all existing frames is not yet available. Nevertheless, the examples hitherto identified can offer a significant contribution to the debate regarding *azulejo* frames, particularly during the Baroque period.

1. In Portugal, frames or border tiles are divided according to their shape and mode of application into “barras” (double *azulejo* frames), “cercaduras” (single *azulejo* frames), “frisos” (half or third *azulejo* frames) e “cantos” (corner *azulejos*).

2. This is a new term that refers specifically to the mouldings that simulate individual and portable frames.

## ISOLATED BUT INTEGRATED FRAMES

The notion of *quadri riportati* – an Italian expression used in the context of ceiling painting to designate a painting that should be seen on a wall but was instead moved to the ceiling, keeping its overall composition and the frame that separates it from the surrounding decoration – entails a sense of isolation or self-sufficiency vis-à-vis the surrounding space. To a certain extent, this is what happens with the figurative areas in tile decorations, divided into sections displayed alongside the frames but with an independent internal composition.

Even when the frames intersect the figurative sections, although there is a mutual dependence in what regards the pictorial execution, the frame and the enclosed scene remain independent from one another. These two elements form a grid responsible for the distribution of the figurative sections within space and for their articulation with the surrounding areas (sometimes shared by more than one figurative composition), granting a global dimension to the decoration.

This is the most frequent kind of frame, with enclosed spaces that are nonetheless integrated within a whole often transcending ceramic compositions and extending to other artistic forms, in line with the Baroque concept of artistic totality. The scrolls of acanthus, *putti*, birds, *espagnolettes* and other motifs displayed throughout the double *azulejo* frames evoke gilt woodwork decorations (Coutinho and Ferreira, 2014: 393-411), and the overlapping of the limits (usually a line or two) create a sense of tri-dimensionality. Other motifs evoke models more often found in sculpture, architecture and architectural sculpture. Nevertheless, *azulejos*, woodwork and marble inlays were all inspired by the numerous engravings in circulation during this period, some of which also relate to treatises of architecture. A very interesting example of these artistic interconnections is the Church of Santa Maria, in Óbidos (1670- 1680), where the canvases enclosed by gilt woodwork frames, decorated with acanthus leaves on the back and sight edges, and gadrooned at the top edge, are limited by another frame of acanthus leaves, simulated in *azulejo* and thus making up a double frame [fig. 1].

Although Baroque figurative compositions are generally considered to be *quadri riportati*, in the aforementioned sense, the present study is concerned above all with



Fig.1 · Óbidos, Church of Santa Maria, 1670-1680  
(photo by the authors)



the simulations created through what was previously called canvas-frames. In these the decorations are sought to close the represented space in on itself, isolating it from its surroundings, which in turn resort to the frames described above in order to achieve a global effect. On the one hand, decorations like the ones found, for instance, in the Church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, in Peniche [fig.2], or in the Basilica of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, in Castro Verde, are representative of mixed solutions, in which the painter resorted to a bar of acanthus scrolls whose inner limit nonetheless simulates a wooden frame, with foliate motifs. On the other hand, on the ceiling of the Church of Santiago's main chapel, in Estômbar, whose *azulejos* were applied in 1719 (Simões, 2008: 107), the frame used to separate the different figurative sections is adorned with leaves of acanthus on both limits, thus amounting to a similar, albeit more complex simulation, given that the double *azulejo* frames decorating the vault's edges have but only one line signalling the limits [fig.2]. The achieved effect is one of separation, resembling a panelled ceiling where each scene is enclosed by its own frame.

During the last decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, single and half *azulejos* frames were used in order to outline the figurative sections. In a way, they evoke the small figurative sections typical of 17<sup>th</sup> century compositions, enclosed by numerous single and half *azulejos* frames or by a single line signalling the limit between the patterns and the figurative sections. Examples can also be found, for instance, in the Church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção, in Alvito (c. 1647) [fig.3a]; in the Church of Santiago, in Marvão [fig.3b]; in the Church of São Pedro, in Moura; or in the Chapel of Nossa Senhora das Candeias, in Alvito<sup>3</sup> [fig.3c]. It is also useful to compare these solutions with the one devised by Gabriel del Barco for the Church of São Tiago (1699), in Évora, among others [fig.3d]. Another noteworthy example can be found in the main chapel of the old Convent of Nossa Senhora da Luz, in Rio de Moinhos (Simões, 2010: 508; Carvalho, 2012: 1114), where the blue and white patterned decoration is divided into different compositions depicting scenes from the life of Saint Paul the Hermit, enclosed by simulated frames with a concave section and adorned with foliage [fig.4].



Fig.2 - Peniche, Church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição; Estômbar, Church of São Tiago, main chapel, 1719 (photos by the authors)

3. A particularly interesting example, due to its use of astragal and triple bead motifs, often found in wooden decorations.





Fig.3a



Fig.3b



Fig.3c



Fig.3d

**Fig.3** · Alvito, Church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção, c. 1647; Marvão, Church of Santiago; Alvito, Chapel of Nossa Senhora das Candeias; Évora, Church of São Tiago, Gabriel del Barco, 1699 (photos by the authors)





Fig.4 · Rio de Moinhos,  
Convent of Nossa  
Senhora da Luz  
(photo by the  
authors)

Well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is easy to find examples of canvas-frame simulations assumed as such. In the Church of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, in Peniche (1723-1724) (Gonçalves, 1982: 13), B-18-00006 double *azulejo* frame<sup>4</sup> applied on the wall's second level give the decoration a strong sense of unity. However, each figurative section is highlighted by means of a single *azulejo* that recreates a frame decorated with floral and vegetal motifs, with a concave and convex section [fig.5].

The feature of the convex section is very similar to the one found in part of the inner cornice, probably attempting to recreate ashlars, which might also exist in gilt woodwork. The multiple simulations enabled by these various art forms, mutually evoking each other, make it difficult to identify the original materials, but do not weaken the illusion of a closed frame. In fact, this kind of simulation is very frequent in *azulejo* decorations<sup>5</sup> and can be found, for example, in the main chapel of the Church of Misericórdia, in Redondo,

4. For a description please see <http://redeazulejo.fl.ul.pt/pesquisa-az/padroao.aspx?id=732>.

5. Particularly in the cartouches dating from this period. Another interesting case can be found in the Chapel of Senhor dos Passos, in Monforte, where a frame with a convex section, enhanced at the corners with acanthus leaves and flower buds, is shared by the various figurative sections, each enclosed by a rectilinear frame.





Fig.5 · Peniche, Church of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, 1723-1724 (photo by the authors)





**Fig.6** · Braga, Church of Pópulo, Chapel of Santa Apolónia, António de Oliveira Bernardes (photo by the authors)



**Fig.7** · Castro Verde, Basilica of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Master P.M.P. (attr.) (photo by the authors)

dating from 1727 (Carvalho, 2007: 127). Here, this same convex frame section, partly covered by fake carved elements, is used to simulate an architectural structure found in the decoration's lower level. The same kind of approach is found yet again in simulated ceilings painting frames, such as the one found in the Church of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, in Peniche, carried out in 1719 and ascribed to the painter Pedro Peixoto (Gonçalves, 1982: 40-41).

Identical solutions can also be found in works signed by, or ascribed to, the Bernardes workshop, such as the decoration of the Chapel of Santa Apolónia in Braga's Church of Pópulo [fig.6]<sup>6</sup>, or the main chapel of the Church of Mártires, in Fronteira. Both display a simulated architectural structure with a convex frame decorated with circular elements and covered by acanthus leaves at the centre and corners. Another example of simulated architecture, the decoration of the Basilica of Nossa Senhora da Conceição's main

chapel, in Castro Verde [fig.7], houses a series of compositions bound by the same kind of convex frame.

One of the oldest known examples, possibly dating from 1703, is the decoration of the main chapel of the Church of São Tiago and São Mateus, in Sardoal, where the side walls' upper level displays scenes from the life of Saint James, enclosed by architectural sculptures. The latter cover in turn what seems to be a gadrooned frame, similar to the gilt woodwork frames found, for example, in the Church of Terço, in Barcelos, or in the Church of Anjos, in Lisbon.

In Portalegre, the decoration of the Church of São Lourenço, ascribed to Gabriel del Barco and originally found in the Church of Misericórdia, exhibits a complex structure isolating a square frame with beveled (concave) corners and a convex foliate frame, adorned with foliage.

6. Signed by António de Oliveira Bernardes with a latin formula followed by the word 'inventor': *Antonius aboliva / inventor*.



Another kind of frame – a foliate frame – can be found in the Church of Nossa Senhora da Nazaré, in Cascais [fig.8]. In this case, the outer limit of the three *azulejos* frame enclosing several figurative sections is adorned with a frame of foliage, while an inner limit ensures the specific isolation of each section. Scrolls of acanthus, winged children and faces, animal and other figures fill the space between both limits, sometimes covering them. The frames of the main chapel of the old Convent of Santa Joana, today the Museum of Aveiro, are also foliate, but with cross-bound fascies at the corners and centre and acanthus leaves at the corners. These frames enclose scenes from the life of Saint Joan.

A later example can be found in the Church of Boa Fé, in Évora, where the upper level of the aisle walls, decorated in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, already in rococo style, displays episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary (Simões, 2010: 516), enclosed by canvas-frames with a double section and semicircular corners adorned with foliage, standing out against a marbled background.

Whereas the canvas-frames recreated on wall decorations isolate the compositions but somehow manage to blend

into the global decorative solutions, ceiling decorations stand out in a stronger and much clearer way. Ceiling frames assume other shapes – rectangles with circular smaller sides; octagons – but the foliage and acanthus leaves on the corners are identical to those found in many of the aforementioned examples. Yet these frames appear more detached from the surrounding decorations than the wall examples due to their being placed in central positions or over backgrounds of scrolls of acanthus or compositions including architectural simulations. On the vault of the passageway leading to sacristy of the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Nazaré, in Nazaré (1714) [fig.9], the central painting depicting the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* (inspired by an engraving by Rubens (Simões 2010: 242)) stands out from a background of scrolls of acanthus, in much the same that Nossa Senhora da Conceição gains importance vis-à-vis the surrounding composition on the ceiling of the old Chapel of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, in the Church of Mercês, in Lisbon. Both decorations were ascribed to the painter António de Oliveira Bernardes (1662-1732) (Simões 2010: 242; Meco, 1989: 79-81; Sobral, 1999: 71-90).



Fig.8 · Cascais, Church of Nossa Senhora da Nazaré (photo by the authors)





Fig.9 · Nazaré, Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Nazaré, 1714 (photo by the authors)

## ISOLATED FRAMES

The Palace of the Marquis of Minas, in Lisbon, contains two *azulejo* panels, attributed to Master P.M.P., with an indented oval shape, portraying a man and a woman believed to be the Marquis and the Marchioness of Minas [fig.10] (Parra 1994: 52; Pais 2006: 156). Even though the original location of these decorations remains unknown, their indented shape and configuration, as well as their mode of application – isolated and with no connection to the surrounding space – seems to indicate that they were conceived as tile portraits, simulating real oil paintings with wooden frames.

Applied side by side on the same wall, both figures seem to be a pair, judging from their placement and the shadows they cast. Their frames, however, are different from one another. The one enclosing the male figure displays foliate motifs with cross-bound at the

centre top and lateral edge, while the one enclosing the female figure displays knotted motifs with cross-bound top edge at the corners and centre. Both frames' inner edges are adorned with dark semicircles evocative of Dutch tile frames (Parra 1994: 52) (see, among others, the panel *Dance Lesson*, ascribed to Willem van der Kloet, in display at the National *Azulejo* Museum, inv. 1680).

Two other medallions of the same kind are known, enclosed by cartouches and part of a wider decoration found on the stairway of the old Guedes Quinhones Palace, today the Real Palácio Hotel (Rua Tomás Ribeiro, n.º 150) (Pais 2006: 156). Equally ascribed to Master P.M.P., these medallions also contain a male and a female figure, and their frames, with a convex section, are adorned with vegetal motifs tied with a cross-shaped knot to the frames' vertical axis.





Fig.10 · Lisbon, Palace of the Marquis of Minas (photo by the authors)

Also, old photographs from the Leitão Collection (an art dealer whose photos were digitized by Az – *Azulejo Research Network* under the project *Studies on Provenances*) show more medallions featuring male and a female figures, integrated in a wainscot from a house in Lisbon, although its location remains unknown.

The fact that these medallions are part of a wider decoration makes one wonder even more about the indented shape and isolated application of the medallions found in the Palace of the Marquis of Minas. Nevertheless, this decoration is typically found on wooden frames of this period.

## FINAL REMARKS

The identification of the canvas-frames used in *azulejo* decorations from the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is part of the ongoing research carried out by the two authors of this article, both as a continuation of the research focusing on Portugal's modern frame tradition (Machado, 2015) and as part of an ongoing postdoctoral research project devoted to Baroque *azulejo* frames (see Rosário Salema de Carvalho's contribution to this issue). The first catalogue results, resorting to controlled vocabulary for the identification of decorative elements, are available online at Az *Infinitum* – *Azulejo Indexation and Reference System*<sup>7</sup>, in the "patterns and frames" tab.

As mentioned earlier, this is a work in progress, and as such still lacks a wider set of examples, which would enable us to make concrete hypotheses regarding the use of this kind of decoration in Baroque *azulejo* coverings. However, considering the decorative systems used during this period, the idea of isolation and autonomy visible in some figurative compositions might be justified by a matter of taste and articulation with easel painting, as well as to the narrative efficiency pursued by the artists. In the near future, we hope to be able to contribute to the debate concerning this and other questions, offering a wider understanding of the *azulejo* (integrated in, and articulated with, the architecture and other art forms) within the artistic totality typical of the Portuguese Baroque period.

7. <http://redeazulejo.fl.ul.pt/pesquisa-az>



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