

## **FROM THE CONVENT TO THE MUSEUM: THE DISPLACEMENT AND EXHIBITION OF BAROQUE GILDED WOODCARVING ALTARS IN PORTUGAL**

In 1834 the religious orders were declared extinct in Portugal. This law of disentanglement had a major impact on the cultural heritage of the country. With it, all of the estates and patrimony of these religious orders became national assets. This patrimony included many altarpieces and other smaller objects in carved, gilded wood (*talha dourada*), one of the most significant Iberian religious art forms. Again, in 1911, the Law of Separation of Church and State promoted new heritage displacements and appropriations by the state, including of monumental gilded wooden altarpieces. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese state carried out restoration works in Romanesque and Gothic churches, clearing their spaces of any trace of the baroque style in order to restore the monuments to their original appearance. These three major actions had an enormous impact on baroque gilded woodwork. Some altarpieces and other objects were sold at auctions or reassembled in museums and in other churches<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to discuss the past, present and future options available to museums for the analysis and public presentation of historical objects. In this process we have to consider three different and complementary roles. The first is that of the curator: the process of reassembling huge altars to fit into the confined spaces of the museums, including the description of the adaptations undertaken, ethical concerns, and the impact in each case on the authenticity of the exhibited object. The second is the role of the art historian: the historical contextualisation, the aesthetic reading and the interaction with the museum to provide scientific knowledge and credibility and thus mitigate the loss of authenticity due to the lack of the original environment. The third is the role of the public as observer and critic of the strategies used by museums in the exhibition of objects that are related to the artistic identity of the country.

I have selected as case studies three museums in Portugal that have woodcarvings on display: the Museu de Santa Joana Princesa, Aveiro, the Museu Municipal de Lamego and the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon.

### **THE MUSEU DE AVEIRO / SAINT JOANA (NORTH PORTUGAL)**

After the abolition of the religious orders in Portugal in 1834, the nuns were allowed to stay in the convents until the death of the last member. In the women's Dominican convent of Saint Princess Joana in Aveiro, that death occurred in 1874. Following this, the Portuguese government had to take control of the heritage – not only the building, but also all of its contents. Furniture, jewellery, sculpture, silver, lavish textiles, ceramics, and a huge church decorated with woodcarvings presented a huge challenge in heritage management<sup>2</sup>.

The convent of Saint Princess Joana had always been cherished and financially supported by the Portuguese monarchs. Princess Joana (1452-1490), daughter of King Afonso V (1432-1481), was something of a Portuguese heroine for her resilience and attitude towards religion and faith. Several times she was promised in marriage to important princes in Europe, but she always remained faithful to her religious vocation and

chose to live her life in the confinement of the convent, which she had entered in 1472. Following the example of the princess, over the centuries many noble ladies entered the convent of the Dominican nuns of Aveiro, enriching it with their many endowments and bequests to the nunnery. Furthermore, the beatification of the princess in 1693 by Pope Innocent XII furthered her reputation as a miracle worker, her cult and the consequent enrichment of the convent with art works<sup>3</sup>.

After the closure of the convent (1874), the Portuguese state decided to create a museum in the city of Aveiro, and the ancient nunnery of Saint Princess Joana seemed a good choice. The building was huge and could not only exhibit its lavish collection of artworks, but also receive other collections from convents and monasteries in Aveiro and from other cities in Portugal<sup>4</sup>.

This singular example is very important in our investigation because the solution for the artworks of the convent was to keep them in their original location in order to preserve and show them to the public. The transformation of the convent into a museum, preserving its church with all its rich and lavish decoration of gilded woodcarving, made this institution a model case study in Portugal (fig. 1)<sup>5</sup>.

Presently, the museum of Saint Joana is working strenuously on strategies to present its baroque altars and other woodcarvings to the public, providing a sense of authenticity for such emotive objects. It is the only museum in Portugal to have a curator solely for the collection of gilded woodcarvings (Maria da Luz Nolasco Cardoso). Nowadays the museum works actively with art historians, who provide the necessary historical contextualisation, aesthetic reading and scientific knowledge, thus mitigating the loss of authenticity due to the lack of the original environment. Such actions taken by the museum of Saint Princess Joana sometimes include the use of baroque music played by an organist when people are visiting the church and the use of candle-like illumination to create a sense of proximity between the works of art, their time and the public. Furthermore, the museum often presents concerts of religious music in an attempt to recreate the ambiance of the religious practice of the baroque period (fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>.

Sometimes guided tours of the church are preceded by an explanation of the art of religious woodcarvings in its three major aspects: the technical, the formal and the symbolic. A brief explanation about the techniques, materials, tools, artists and the different stages of the work introduces the subject of gilded woodcarving. The explanation of the formal aspect covers the various styles recognised in Portuguese gilded woodcarving. The third aspect addressed is the symbolism of these works. Here the diverse messages and implications of the iconographic elements are presented to the public: religiosity, the political/economic power of the commissioner(s), and the creativity of the artist<sup>7</sup>.

It is also important to suggest to the public the best route to take through the museum to see and understand some sets of woodcarvings. As the museum has a wing dedicated to baroque sacred art with several pieces that belonged to the old convent, visitors can make the link between these religious artefacts and the church itself, imagining how the interiors of the convent would have looked before it was abolished (fig. 3). The museum also has an informative role and facilitates access to existing and available resources in the field of research, cataloguing, conservation and restoration for the scientific community. In this way, the museum aims to create empathy with the public<sup>8</sup>.

## THE MUSEU MUNICIPAL DE LAMEGO (NORTH PORTUGAL)

The Museu Municipal of the city of Lamego represents a very different situation. All the gilded wood-carved chapels that are on exhibition in several rooms came from the extinct Franciscan convent of Santa Maria das Chagas of the same city. The four chapels that went to the museum were formerly located in the cloister of the convent<sup>9</sup>. Their dismantling, transporting and reassembling in the museum was an epic under-

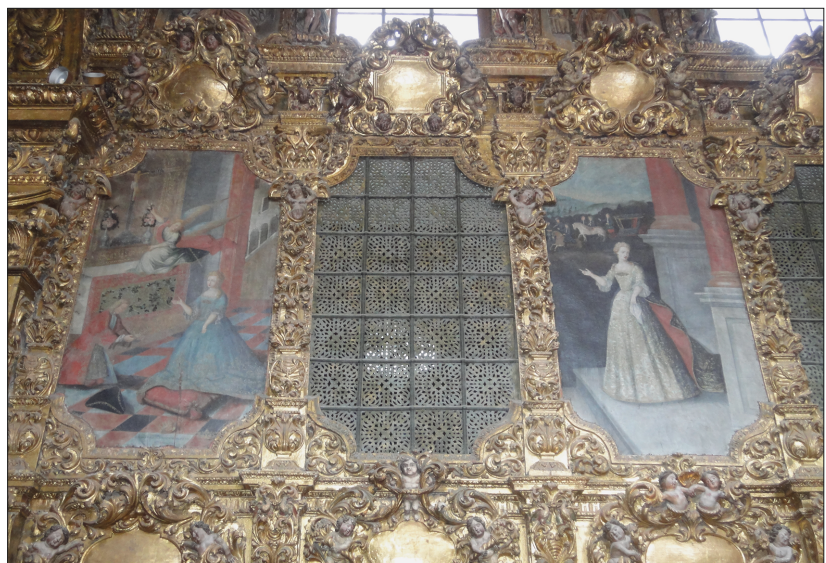




**Fig. 1** Church of Jesus. Museu de Aveiro. – (Photo J. P. Novais).



**Fig. 2** Church of Jesus. Museu de Aveiro: Detail of the organ. – (Photo S. Ferreira).



**Fig. 3** Church of Jesus. Museu de Aveiro: Detail of the main chapel. – (Photo S. Ferreira).





**Fig. 4** Museu de Lamego: Altar of Saint John the Evangelist. – (Photo P. Pinto © Direção Regional de Cultura do Norte / Museu de Lamego).



**Fig. 5** Museu de Lamego: Ceiling of the chapel of Saint John the Evangelist. – (Photo J. Pessoa © Direção Regional de Cultura do Norte / Museu de Lamego).

taking for its resilient first director, João Amaral. He struggled hard to protect the chapels from theft and decay following the abandonment of the convent in 1906 when the last resident nun died. At that time, no one wanted to finance this project and it was the director of the museum himself who paid for all the work of transporting and reassembling the chapels between 1919 and 1928 (fig. 4)<sup>10</sup>.

In order to place the chapels in their designated spaces it was necessary to make adjustments. Some parts of the altars were removed, creating a new structure that differed from the original. The same occurred with the images of saints that decorated the altars; most of them did not belong to the altars and were added to compensate for the lack of the originals (fig. 5)<sup>11</sup>.

Recently, one of these chapels, the chapel of Saint John the Evangelist, was restored because of a severe risk of its ceiling collapsing. This was a good opportunity for the professional restoration of all the gilded work and wooden statues. In view of their historical and artistic importance, it was agreed that the restoration works should be »live« so that the public could observe the process and see how the structures were made. This option, though techni-

cally and logistically more complex, had the advantage of its potential as an educational outreach event. The interaction between the professional restorers and the public extended the duration of the work, even though extra time had already been allotted because of the educational value of the project. The restoration also enabled the subsequent realisation of an exhibition of the museum's baroque wooden statues, along



**Fig. 6** Museu de Lamego: Guided tour to the restoration works of the chapel of Saint John the Evangelist. – (Photo P. Pinto © Direção Regional de Cultura do Norte / Museu de Lamego).

with the display of images recording the chapel restoration process, and the establishment of a restoration workshop (fig. 6)<sup>12</sup>.

This work was also recorded in a video so that a wider section of the public could access it through the internet on YouTube. The museum also provided a digital publication of the history of the chapel, including a catalogue of images and details of the restoration work, which it made accessible on its official website.

### **THE MUSEU NACIONAL DE ARTE ANTIGA (LISBON)**

This museum is considered to be the most distinguished in Portugal because of the value of its collections. The great majority of the holdings came from extinct convents, monasteries and churches around the country. After the inventories of the possessions of the religious orders were completed, several destinations were imposed by the state. Those objects that were considered of exceptional quality and value were integrated into state collections, namely paintings, gold, textiles, ceramics, sculptures and carvings. As for items that were not »safeguarded«, their fate was much more problematic. The periodic waves of demolition following the disentanglement of the men's and women's convents allowed the looting of the moveable items and their frequent sale at public auctions<sup>13</sup>.

As for the incorporation of woodcarving into the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (MNAA), the inventories show that the buildings that contributed most to this collection were the extinct women's convents of Lisbon as well as some churches in the capital and surrounding cities. The incorporation of carvings that originated almost exclusively from women's religious houses is explained by the delay between the time of their inventories and the date of their extinction (1834). The concerted action of José de Figueiredo, the first director of the museum, and his team in the supervision of this heritage allowed its greater safeguarding and brought attention to its patrimonial value.

In 1911, José de Figueiredo wrote a letter to the inspector of the Portuguese Fine Arts Academy stating that the only part of the convent that should remain after the demolition of the building, where part of the MNAA was provisionally installed, was its church (fig. 7): »The only part to be preserved is the church which, in its interior, is a beautiful and typical example of seventeenth-century religious art and which [...] would be an interesting annex to the museum of ancient art. [...] [A] permanent exhibition of religious art would be





**Fig. 7** Woodcarving room at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon in 1912. – (Photo © Arquivo Fotográfico Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga).



**Fig. 8** Altar of the chapel of Centro de Estudos Judiciários, former prison of Limoeiro in Lisbon-Portugal, c. 1950. – (Photo © Arquivo Fotográfico Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga).

organised, which would thus enhance it in its own environment, at almost no expense [...] a *mise-en-scène* which is so sought after in museums outside [= abroad], and is generally only obtained with great expense and difficulty»<sup>14</sup>.

Reversing the trend, the 1940s and 1950s were marked by the departure of pieces of carving from the museum, destined for a variety of locations. The MNAA, under its second director, João Couto, felt the »burden« of the accumulation of the pieces stored. Various requests from other institutions for loans were therefore considered as options for the most suitable use of a heritage otherwise without prospects of being exhibited (fig. 8).

The requests continued, and on 6 July 1945, João Couto settled upon the request of Monsignor Amadeu Ruas for the transfer to the church of the ancient Limoeiro prison in Lisbon of 2000 tiles, a gilded altar, a painting, a curtain, four pedestals and two framed paintings, a balustrade, four panels of tiles, a chandelier and a gilded tabernacle. A loan of gilded woodcarvings and other objects was also effected in 1953 at the request of the Municipality of Almada. By 1950, the city had bought what was left of the Capuchin convent. The lengthy restoration works

that continued until 1952 aimed to restore the old church<sup>15</sup>. To decorate the completely divested church of the former Capuchin monastery, the following pieces were sent to Almada from the MNAA in August 1951: twenty balusters, pieces of woodcarving from two chapels of the extinct convent of Our Lady of Hope in



**Fig. 9** Almada: Main altar of the Capuchin convent. – (Photo S. Ferreira).

Beja, south Portugal (which would be used to assemble an altarpiece), a chandelier and several paintings (fig. 9)<sup>16</sup>.

With regard to the role of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in the management of this estate, it is important to consider different phases brought about by different circumstances. With José de Figueiredo, the motto was to collect in order to preserve because of the speed with which the estate's patrimony was disappearing. Where João Couto is concerned, he initiated a policy that, although seemingly contrary, continues to obey similar principles, except that now to disperse also means to conserve.

The ease with which woodcarving objects can be transported means that by their very essence they lend themselves to being dismantled, and thus the consequent dispersal of their various components has resulted in their relocation and initiated a new phase in the history of this art.

## CLOSING REMARKS

These three case studies demonstrate how the museums dealt with this singular heritage in various circumstances. The first case, of the museum of Aveiro, is, in my opinion, the best example of the preservation, study and exhibition of this heritage, as almost all the objects were maintained in their original locations and are studied and presented by the curator of the museum with these circumstances in mind. As for the museum of Lamego, which housed objects from an extinct convent, the challenge is greater for the curators and requires different approaches to the exhibition and dissemination of the collection. As for the MNAA, the efforts to lend authenticity to the collection and present it to the public must bear in mind the original role of the main state museum as a kind of storehouse for the pieces chosen by its first director for their artistic value.

Finally, we must remember that the objects we are dealing with are of a religious nature; they were designed and executed in a historically specific context. In the museums, these objects naturally lost part of their former meaning. As we know, an altar is a significant object with its special structure, images and symbols. It is a narrative that lives through the dialogue between different actors: space, ambience, rituals and individuals. In the museum, all we can give them is the best possible environment by articulating the different perspectives: those of the curator, of the art historian and of the public.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was funded by national Portuguese funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) as part of the postdoctoral project »Presença, Memória e Diáspora: Destinos da arte da talha em Portugal entre o Liberalismo e a actualidade« (SFRH/BPD/101835/2014).

### Notes

- 1) Ferreira 2009.
- 2) Pereira 2013.
- 3) Madahil 1939. – Alves 1992.
- 4) Freitas 1911.
- 5) Costa 2013.
- 6) Cardoso 1999.
- 7) Cardoso 1999.
- 8) Cardoso 1999.
- 9) Amaral 1961. – Laranjo 1988. – Silva 1998. – Queirós 2001.
- 10) Amaral 1955.
- 11) Falcão 2015.
- 12) Santos 2015.
- 13) Seabra 2011.
- 14) Ferreira 2016, 250.
- 15) Fontes 2013.
- 16) Ferreira 2016.

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**Aus dem Kloster ins Museum: Die Verlagerung und Ausstellung barocker vergoldeter Holzschnitzaltäre in Portugal**

Zur Zeit der Auflösung der religiösen Orden in Portugal 1834 nahm der portugiesische Staat deren Vermögen in Besitz. Da viele Kirchen und religiöse Stätten der Nonnen- und Mönchsklöster damals aufwendig mit vergoldeten Holzschnitzaltären verziert waren, nahm diese Kunstform einen bedeutenden Platz im Kulturerbe der Ordensmitglieder ein. In diesem Artikel werden drei Fallstudien vorgestellt, welche die verschiedenen institutionellen Möglichkeiten des Verbleibs dieser Kunstobjekte nachzeichnen. Während einige Besitztümer verloren gingen oder aufgelöst wurden, wurden andere dem Verfall überlassen oder bei Auktionen verkauft, wodurch die Kunstwerke oft zerlegt und an Antiquitätenhändler verkauft wurden.

Dieser Artikel fokussiert sich auf die Bewahrung der Objekte im öffentlichen Raum, z.B. in Museen. Da nun mehr als ein Jahrhundert seit dieser Ereignisse vergangen ist, erlaubt die gegenwärtige Perspektive die nötige Distanz, um einerseits die Aufrechterhaltung der Authentizität dieses Erbes im Museumskontext zu evaluieren und zu analysieren, und andererseits die Vorgehensweisen zu untersuchen, die genutzt werden, um die Wahrnehmung und Erfahrung der Objekte zu einer unvergesslichen Erfahrung für ein breit gefächertes Publikum zu machen. Übersetzung: A. Kleuser

**From the Convent to the Museum: The Displacement and Exhibition of Baroque Gilded Woodcarving Altars in Portugal**

When the religious orders were declared extinct in Portugal in 1834, the Portuguese state took possession of all their assets. Among the patrimony of the regulars, the gilded woodcarvings occupied a prominent place. Many churches and other religious spaces within the convents and monasteries were lavishly decorated with this art form.

In this paper, I present and analyse three case studies that exemplify the various institutional options for the destination of these art objects. In addition to the actions that dictated their loss or dispersion, there were those that simply let them rot, or sold them at auctions, often to be disassembled and sold in antique shops. I focus my attention on actions aimed at their preservation in a public space such as that of the museum. More than a century has passed since these interventions; the contemporary perspective allows the necessary distance for an evaluation and analysis of this patrimony in terms of the maintenance of its authenticity in the museum context as well as the strategies adopted to make contemplating it a memorable experience for a diverse public audience.