

RESEARCH ADVANCES ABOUT PAINTINGS ON COFFERED CEILINGS IN THE NORTH OF PORTUGAL

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ABSTRACT

Paintings on coffered ceilings are a set of compartments in a ceiling with images inside that can be decorative or figurative. Mostly in the Portuguese Baroque style some churches and chapels have paintings on coffered ceilings, typically of rectangular or square format.

The paintings on coffered ceilings usually focus in sacrum-religious aspects, relating the lives of Jesus or Mary. Generally, the themes are connected to a particular place or church, describing the life of a Saint.

The investigation provides a better understanding of the paintings on coffered ceilings, typologies, themes, conservation diagnostic and points out aspects which ought to be taken into consideration for their technical and material characteristics.

It is through analytical methodologies that the conservator clarifies techniques and materials in works of art and makes the right conservation diagnostic in order to achieve the best possible methodologies for intervention.

Keywords: paintings, coffered ceilings, materials, conservation

INTRODUCTION

This form of artwork spread from North to South of Portugal since the first quarter of the XVII century to as late as the beginning of the XIX century. Through historical religious representations, these were developed in cycles, aiming towards catechizing and also seeking a decrease in the illiteracy that marked this period. (Fig. 1)

The use of paintings on coffered ceilings begins in the classical origins, Ancient Greece and Rome, but earned particular interest in the creativity and originality of the techniques and materials characterized by the Portuguese style.

Both the concepts and forms of the Greco-Roman Art were based on rationalism, harmony and proportion. Coffered ceilings were used for the first time by the Etruscan civilization while searching for the right balance between symmetry and harmony. The first ones were made of stone without the use of decoration or painting. [1]

Afterwards, the Renaissance Art came as a period of rediscovery and revaluation of the cultural classical values. These elements reflect the Greco-Roman Art, both in architecture, as in painting and sculpture which is common in the Baroque Art, although with a different structure.

OPERATIONAL GOALS AND METHODS

The main purpose of this research is to clarify issues related to the paintings on coffered ceilings from several perspectives, such as historical places, themes, forms, materials and techniques, and their relation to conservation.

To achieve this it was necessary to do an exhaustive research due to the large number of coffered ceilings, and a database was developed with locations, themes, shapes, types of ceilings, materials and techniques of execution.

Then, we selected the most interesting paintings for tests and scientific analysis. The work methodology was based on the visual observation of the paintings, on the information gathered from the available documentation on the subject, and also on the results obtained from several scientific analyses, namely infrared photography, ultraviolet fluorescence photography, energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (EDXRF), cross-section examination of samples collected from the paintings using optical microscopy. Microchemical and staining tests were also performed for the identification of pigments and binders as well as Fourier transform infrared microspectroscopy (micro-FTIR) analyses. EDXRF analyses and photography techniques using ultraviolet and infrared lights were done only in some paintings to characterize pigments, varnish

types and preparatory underdrawing, because of the difficulty to access to the paintings, displayed on the churches' ceilings at 5-9 meters high. The microchemical tests and spectroscopic analyses were relevant as they brought new information of techniques and materials employed in this artistic style.

By identifying the causes of conservation problems, we improve the ways for the maintenance of coffered paintings and also the techniques of conservation and restoration.

RESULTS

Paintings themes: decorative or figurative

For better comprehension the themes of this type of paintings it is important to understand the relationship between the paintings and the church or chapel, and also other conditions like the context of artistic creation, their location or the monument's typology.

With this, we outlined a duality of themes or, in other words, typologies, of coffered ceilings in the North of Portugal: Decorative and Figurative. However, in some ceilings it is possible to see a combination of these two typologies.

To understand the distribution of the coffered ceilings in Portugal, we made an exhaustive inventory which then led to a map with all the locations and identifications of the main themes in Portugal. (Fig. 3)

Regarding the decorative typology, we found sacristies' ceilings and naves of churches with floral style and ornaments, from North to South of the country.

The paintings in coffered ceilings with floral ornaments, volutes and turns are less common. The ceiling of the *St. António of Capuchos* Convent's sacristy in the city of Guimarães is an excellent example of this typology. This division has a coffered ceiling with phytomorphic decorations in shades of white, green and gold. It is decorated with fine lines of reddish painted plant forms on a white background. The marbled frames contrast with the white background of the paintings. In some ceilings, these elements are combined with sacred themes, usually portraits of apostles and saints or catholic symbols, as seen in the ceiling of the *St. Apolinário Church's* sacristy, in *Urros, Torre de Moncorvo*.

Another example of the decorative typology can be seen in the main Church of *Arcos de Valdevez*, in *Viana do Castelo*. The ornamental paintings are on the coffered ceiling in the side-chapel of the *Virgin*

of Our Lady of Sorrows. We found wooden original paintings hidden under these easel paintings. (Fig. 2)

Regarding the figurative typology, we noticed the existence of paintings with representation of images that can be grouped into four distinct categories according their themes: 1) figurative paintings with only one Saint or figure; 2) paintings of historical episodes; 3) themes of either symbolical or allegorical paintings; 4) paintings of profane themes.

The first theme (figurative paintings with only one Saint or figure) is the most popular and it was usually used in the sacristies or naves of Churches. The paintings are mainly half-body portraits and rarely full-body representations. The style of the compositions is simple, without motion, due to its static characteristics'. This figures, generally saints or Apostles, are represented accompanied by their representative element. Hence, these images with attributes are a consistent communication of Faith and Devotion. Either behind the figures or in their hands we can see objects that help identifying them. The distribution of the figures usually depends on images present in the iconographic scheme of the ceiling. The first paintings are the most important, usually representations of Virgin or Christ. We can find apostles or other Saints in the back of the paintings.

The second theme (paintings of historical episodes) is normally arranged by cycles mainly in the nave's of the churches' ceilings because they allow a better distribution of the scenes. The most common themes are the story of the life of Christ, scenes from the Bible and the lives of Saints composing hagiographic narratives.

The ceiling of the *Salvador* Convent's nave, in *Braga*, consists of forty paintings in the late mannerist style [2], picturing the lives of Christ and *St. John The Baptist*, and may well be one of the first ones ever made in the country. (Fig. 1)

The third theme (themes of either symbolical or allegorical paintings) is not often used in paintings on coffered ceilings especially when isolated, in other words, in only one painting. Regarding the symbolical theme it can be divided into three types: isolated, with phytomorphic motives and symbolical with narrative pictures. The ceiling of the nave in the Church of *Custóias* is an example of an isolated symbolical theme.

The fourth theme (paintings of profane themes) regards all the paintings that represent historical

figures, popular motives or other forms, usually in domestic or civil buildings. Coffered ceilings were also used on palaces in the eighteenth century. For instance, the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa includes two spaces: the Dukes Room and the Virtues Room, representing the glorification and the exaltation of the nobility.

Materials and techniques of paintings on coffered ceilings

The paintings on coffered ceilings have different support materials: wood, canvas and stone. The most common material used for both the support of the coffered paintings as for the structures is wood. The internal structure of the ceilings is usually made of metal beams supported by stone foundations. The materials and techniques used in coffered ceilings paintings may vary depending on the client, the artist, the model used and also the types of materials most abundant in the region. There is still a lot to study and many doubts to be clarified. The brushstroke technique should be understood according to the purpose of the paintings, because, in addition to the decorative function, it has a strong means to catechizing. We found that it is common to use a base, *imprimitura*, in many ceilings in order to assist the composition. The under drawing, the scientific characteristics of pigments and varnishes, some restorations or even initial composition changes are other aspects have been explored in this research. (Fig. 2)

CONCLUSIONS

The database was fundamental for the investigation. This Database is the result of an exhaustive research about paintings of coffered ceilings in North of Portugal providing a better organization of many topics and consequently allowing paintings to be categorized, for example: themes, materials and techniques.

The paintings on coffered ceilings are based on specific characteristic themes of easel paintings, however differing slightly in some forms and models.

The typology of paintings on coffered ceilings in North of Portugal can be Decorative or Figurative. However, there are multiple themes inside these categories.

Regarding materials and techniques, several cases of study show that the presence of an initial pictorial layer similar to preparation, *imprimitura*, is crucial in this type of paintings because it allowed artists to

give an overall tone.

Only by knowing the characteristic of techniques and materials is it possible for conservation science to evolve and find appropriate forms of treatment according to criteria of compatibility and stability.

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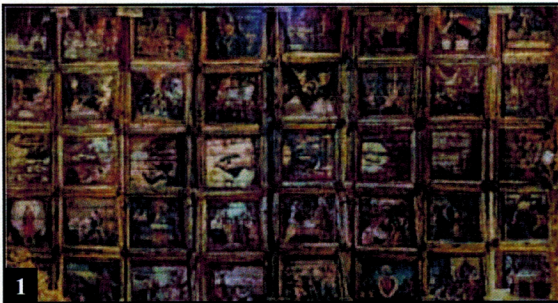


Fig. 1 – The paintings on coffered ceilings in the Salvador Convent’s nave, in Braga.
 Foto: Luis Ribeiro/QREN



Fig. 2 – The painting on coffered ceiling in the Church of Arcos de Valdevez – side-chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows, Viana do Castelo. The original painting on wood is under canvas picture.
 Foto: Rita Rodrigues.

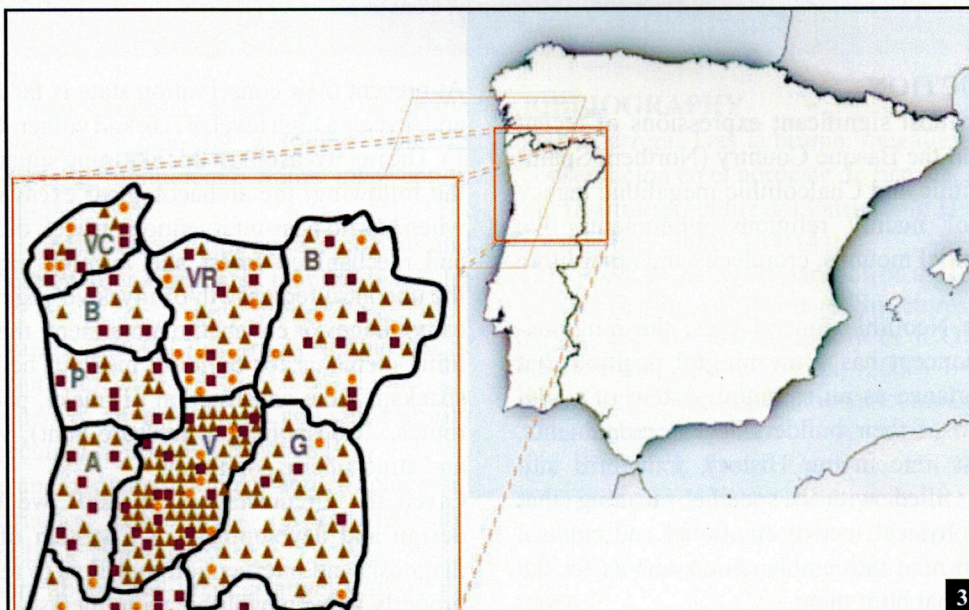


Fig. 3 – Map of the North of Portugal with the location of the coffered ceilings
 Figurative Paintings ▲ Decorative Paintings ■ Combination of both themes ● Letters – Districts