

Post 1755 Lisbon earthquake tiles as signs of popular devotion

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In Portugal the use of tiles in the 18th century was considerably more intensive than in other European countries. Although tiles were profusely used elsewhere, for example in Spain and the Netherlands, in Portugal tile work became a form of art and a medium for communication and devotion, although, much like pottery, it was considered a lesser art for a long time. This paper addresses a specific form of tile decoration, aimed at popular devotion, which was used in the period following the devastating earthquake and disasters of 1755.

Introduction – the 1755 Lisbon earthquake

The psychological effect of the earthquake which hit the Lisbon area in 1755 on the population of the city is impossible to determine. However, several testimonies were left that allow us to understand the strength and aftermath of the disaster. The witness accounts, mostly written by foreigners, are very consistent. The first shock happened around 9.30 a.m. on November 1st and lasted for ten to twenty minutes. In total, there were three quakes, the second being the strongest and the longest. Modern experts estimate the intensity to be between 8-9 in the Richter scale (IX–XI on the modified Mercalli scale) (Paice 2009, 106–107). A tsunami followed shortly after, reaching a height of between 6 and 30 m. It was one of the rare teletsunamis recorded; a tsunami that travelled more than 1000 km, being felt on both sides of the Atlantic (Paice 2009, 136–143). Contemporary scientists tried to explain the events with theories such as air compression in underground caves, the influence of the heavenly bodies or the existence of a central fire within the Earth (Sousa 1990, 7).

The earthquake was not the biggest cause of casualties. The giant tsunami, the constant aftershocks that continued for months and massive fires had far more devastating effects. The damage caused by this natural catastrophe was not only felt in Lisbon. Through the official reports requested from each parish, the extent of damage can be assessed and the quake's intensity can be measured. Almost the entire shoreline was affected, particularly punishing the areas of Lisbon, Setúbal, Ericeira, the Vincentian Coast and the Algarve. In the north of Portugal damage was less severe, with Oporto suffering little loss of life and property.

Despite attempts to develop rational explanations, for example by the Marquis of Pombal who argued for natural causes in lectures and pamphlets (Sousa 1990, 9), the vast majority of people believed the earthquakes to have a religious or supernatural explanation; God was punishing the people of Lisbon for their immoral behaviour and the way that they spent money. Catholic clerics also pointed to the abundance of Protestant foreigners that were protected and could worship freely in the city. Almost all Christian preachers worldwide, agreed that this would be the first of a series of disasters that God would bring upon a sinful mankind.

The first half of the 18th century had been a period of optimism in Europe, however the earthquake raised philosophical questions that challenged the new worldview of the age of enlightenment. Debate concerning the nature of God was initiated, for how could a benign God impose such torment on humanity? Kant and Voltaire were the most prolific scholars on the matter (Sousa 1990, 11). The latter wrote his famous *Poems about the disaster of Lisbon* and several scenes of *Candide* have the apocalyptic Lisbon as a background. Interestingly a phenomenon occurred, that can only be described as morbid curiosity: Lisbon became a tourist destination as visitors flowed into the city, attracted by the destruction, in numbers never seen before (Sousa 1990, 13).

The disaster had profound economic effects, as the loss of goods paralysed Portugal's commercial system. No ships left the Tagus and the Sado Rivers, and only a handful left the Douro. The main public buildings connected to economic and administrative governance were concentrated in the most afflicted area, by the Tagus (Serrão 2007, 142). Trading was blocked and there was no way of establishing the extent of the losses since most records were burnt. Private losses

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were also severe, rendering the population without means of subsistence.

However, as Serrão notes, economies affected by natural disasters tend to recover quickly (Serrão 2007, 148). Serrão highlights that the same factors that worsened the situation were also the ones that allowed a quick recovery, because the structures enabling commerce could be temporarily settled in public spaces that had not collapsed. The authorities' response was crucial in restoring order to Lisbon. Measures were taken to prevent the population from fleeing and to ensure the continued supply of goods to the city. Economic recovery was aided by freezing prices, and a law was introduced (the *lei dos falidos*¹), that exempted merchants, who could not pay their debts as a direct consequence of the earthquake, from being sent to prison. These measures were not only undertaken in Lisbon: in Setúbal a temporary customs house opened on November 5th (Serrão 2007, 147–53). For the entrepreneurs, the reconstruction effort provided new opportunities, especially in house and shipbuilding, as well as in industries such as tile production.

Post-earthquake tiles – general features

After the earthquake and the partial destruction of Lisbon and other cities, tiles were commonly used to decorate buildings. This was partly a practical choice as tiles were quick and cheap to produce. The earthquake did not lead to a decrease in production; rather, tiles gained popularity (Câmara 2005, 307). The tile workshops seem not to have been adversely effected by the earthquake. Tiles produced after the earthquakes are distinctive and their manufacture ended around 1767, with the establishment of the *Real Fábrica de Faianças do Rato* (Royal faience factory of Rato), one of the industrial developments implemented by the Marquis of Pombal.

The new era of tile production maintained many features of pre-earthquake manufacture, most notably the tin-glaze (Fig. 1). Paint was applied to the biscuit body and a tin (or sometimes lead) glaze was used to absorb the pigment and permanently fix the painting before the tile was re-fired. Painting over the glaze layer reveals the colours that were previously applied over the fired clay. The reign of João V (r. 1706–1750) brought a shift in tile production and design, which would remain unaltered until after the 1755 earthquake. This style is known as Joanine production. Tile panels were gracefully designed, often depicting landscapes. Images were created using a cobalt wash instead of a pure pigment application, allowing for the creation of a wider range of colour shades than seen in previous periods (Câmara 2005, 55–56). Production of the *albarradas*² and the *figura avulsa*³ tiles began in this period. Being strongly stylised and so easily reproducible by apprentice artists, they would continue to be produced after the earthquake. The majority of

tiles produced throughout the post-earthquake period were blue and white.

After the earthquake a new architectural style, the Pombaline style, developed. This was characterised by sombre lines, a lack of decoration and an emphasis on strength to prevent collapse in the event of another seismic event. Tiles were used to 'lighten' these buildings through the introduction of colour and decorative motifs. They were particularly commonly used by the upper classes who sought to make the functional architecture with anti-seismic properties look more lavish. Several decorative innovations occurred in this period. These include the use of thicker brushes, stereotyped ornaments (plant elements, shells, architectonic motifs), shape effects given by contrasting lighter and darker shades, polychrome painting, either on the entire composition or just on the framing elements (that could also be only blue or purple), marble-like painting with one or more colours (*pedra torta*, 'crooked stone' tiles), and the introduction of the *esponjado* (sponged) technique, in which a sponge or a piece of cloth is soaked in paint and is lightly applied to the tile – this was used both to completely cover the surface of the composition or only as a background to historic design panels, namely vegetation (Câmara 2005, 55–56).

Post-earthquake tiles as expressions of popular devotion

After a major natural disaster, it is not unusual for the survivors, especially in a deeply religious population such as 18th century Portugal, to accept that the event was a form of divine punishment for individual and collective sins, and to seek atonement through devotional and pious actions. The period after the earthquake saw a religious frenzy from which not even the royal family escaped, as proven by the procession held on November 16th from Alcântara to the Church of Necessidades, which the entire court and high nobility attended (Paice 2009, 182). Notable events were recorded and interpreted as miracles, particularly the retrieval of religious images from the rubble of the churches, and the saving of people from the debris after several days.

A testimony of these 'miracles' occurs on a farm on Calado Road, Lisbon. Tiles here refer to the relocation of the image of Our Lady of Pena, taken from the rubble of her church to a temporary place until the new church was completed:

EM O 1º DE NOBRº DO ANNO DE 1755/ SABº
DIA DE TODOS OS SANTOS PELAS NOVE
HORAS/ E MEIA O UVE O Dge THERRAMOTO
E MLXª EM Q SE DES/TRUIRAM OS TEMPLOS
E TODA A CIDADE E NO DOMINGO Q SE
COM/TAO 2 DO Dº MÊS PELA MANHÃ
VEYO N. S. DA PENHA DA SUA/ IGREJA
POR CAUZA DA ROINA Q NELLA O UVE E



A



B



C

Figure 1. A: Portuguese 16th-century Hispano-Arabic tile from the workshop of Santo António da Charneca (Barreiro, Setúbal). (<http://memoriaefuturo.cm-barreiro.pt/arqimgFStA-azulejos-1.jpg>). B: 17th-century panel with pattern tiles and a figurative composition (in Pais *et al.*, 2009, 29). C: Late 17th-century panel displaying Melpomene, the muse of tragedy (in Pais *et al.* 2009, 69).

SE COLOCOU NO /MIRANTE DESTA QT^a
ADONDE ESTEVE VARIOS DIAS ORANDO/
PELOS PECADORES E DESPOIS SE LHES FES
SUA IRMIDA ADONDE/ ESTEVE SEMPRE E
COM G^{de} ASISTENCIA DOS SEUS RELIG.os/
E COM VENERAÇÃO DE TODO O POVO/
CHRISTÃO E DAQUI FOI EM 3 DE JULHO DE
1756 COM GRANDE /SOLENIDADE E POMPA
PARA A SUA IGREJA NOVA ADONDE/ HOJE
SE VENERA E ADORA COMO SEMPRE⁴
(Correia 1922, 88).

This testimony is a display of devotion to a sanctified image, but can also be seen as an attempt to portray normality in daily life, as suggested by the phrase *como sempre* (as always).

Registos with invocations of saints

One group of tile panels created after the earthquake are the so-called *registos*, which record and express a desire to keep the memory of the event alive. Simões (2010, 77) estimates there are approximately 200 known *registos* in Portugal today. The most

common tiles demonstrating popular devotion are those depicting protector saints. These tiles can be seen as religious appeals by those who sought divine protection from disasters. This type of expression of devotion was unusual before the earthquake, and becomes more common thereafter. Simões estimates that 80% of panels depicting protector saints are of post-earthquake date (Simões 2010, 79). The saints can be divided into two categories: those who protect the family; The Virgin Mary, Holy Family and Saint Anthony (Fig. 2), and those who protect against natural disasters; Saint Martial (Fig. 3) and Saint Francis Borgia (Fig. 4). Although we can distinguish the saintly intentions, elements can be combined in the same *registo*. Another type of *registo*, a more naïve arrangement, is the *alminha*, which can complement bigger compositions like the base of a large Cross. These can be composed of several tiles, but are mostly single tiles.

The *registos* are usually placed on the façade, over the door or windows, following construction. Non-habitable structures such as mills, fountains, bridges (Meco 1989, 173) and cemeteries were also covered with these kinds of panels for protection, undoubtedly



Figure 2. Saint Anthony with his attributes the cross, the flowers and Baby Jesus, framed by a polychromous composition. It is placed in nº 27, Correiros Street, Setúbal (in Coelho-Soares 2007, 142).



Figure 3. Saint Martial standing in front of burning buildings, dressed like a bishop. The polychromous frame shows the date (1783) and the name of the saint. It is found in n° 16, Dr. Paula Borba Street, Setúbal (in Coelho-Soares 2007, 140).



Figure 4. Panel with Saint Francis Borja with his attributes, the cross and the crowned skull (in <http://www.museudacidade.pt/>, with the inventory number MC:AZU:R.0015).

because they served vital purposes. In Spain, more specifically in the potters' quarter of Triana, Seville, there is a similar tile tradition, between the second half of the 18th century and the 19th century, depicting the Holy Family and Marian representations. These were usually put on the façade of churches (Pleguezuelo 1996, 121) meaning that although sharing similarities with the Portuguese examples they were intended to serve a different purpose, displaying a completely different positioning logic, and consequently a distinct symbolic appropriation.

This type of tile is not only found in Lisbon, with *registos* occurring in the historical areas of Setúbal, Évora, Santarém and Coimbra, for example. An extended inventory of surviving *registos* has been published for Setúbal (Coelho-Soares 2007, 135–6). Existing panels were described, providing a starting point for studies analysing their symbolism. Twenty panels were identified, although one of them appears to be of earlier date, being of different form. The most commonly represented saints are the Virgin Mary (nine) (Fig. 5), St. Francis Borgia (three), the Holy Family (three), and St. Martial (two). They

are found in buildings ranging in date from the first reconstruction campaigns in the decades following the earthquake, to the 19th century (Coelho-Soares 2007, 134). Some *registos* were reused in later façades, well after their original placement, in a clear sign that the devotion, and the memory of the disaster, was still very much alive.

In Lisbon the scenario is very similar. Using the online records of the Lisbon City Museum (http://www.museudelisboa.pt/colecoes/azulejaria/?no_cache=1) information could be gathered on 22 panels. Seven depictions of the Virgin Mary were recorded, six with St. Martial, two representing St. Antony and only one each of the remaining depictions (St. Dominic, Francis Borgia, Jesus, the Crucifixion and the Holy Family).

Usually these panels are indented, varying in size due to a variety of factors, including the wealth of the commissioner and the specific location or the symbolic intention itself (for example, the owner of a house not destroyed might have felt less compelled to seek protection). There are compositions of a single saint or two and more, sometimes with one of them



Figure 5. Depiction of Our Lady of the Rosary from n° 41, Machado dos Santos Square, Setúbal (in Coelho-Soares 2007, 145).

being prominently placed. The image of the saint(s) is always framed with the typical decorative motifs of the period (shells, plant motifs, etc.). Usually the frame is polychromatic and the central decoration (the saints) is monochrome, but in some cases the entire composition is monochrome. A votive inscription or a date is often included, making them a useful source for studying the evolution of design (Simões 2010, 79). Although some examples present great technical quality and a refinement in painting (probably having been painted by the master tile maker), *registos* were considered works of lesser status and were not signed, making it difficult to prove this hypothesis (Veloso *et al.* 1991, 34). The use of this composition continued until the establishment of liberalism, which changed the composition slightly in form, but not in intention. The only exception is Saint Francis Borgia, who stops being used in 1759 – when the Society of Jesus was expelled from Portugal – since he was a member of that religious order (Simões 2010, 174).

Two saints, Saint Martial and Saint Francis Borgia, were the most commonly depicted on the *registos*, prompting questions as to why these Saints were particularly favoured. St Martial lived in the 3rd century and was responsible for converting the area of Limoges (France), where he was bishop and martyr. He was used for protection from fires and is the patron saint of Portuguese fire-fighters. It seems that his cult was corrupted in Portugal, as elsewhere he is invoked in protection against diseases and plague. The reason for this change may be a painting of the saint in the *Palais des Papes* in Avignon (France), where he is depicted standing in front of a flaming building (Pais 1999, 47). Reproductions of that painting may explain the new attributes, although this association can be seen in the Peninsula as early as the 13th century, namely in the 52nd song of Alfonso X of Castille (r. 1252–1284), where the dean of Cádiz is mocked for his reading of pornographic books, saying he suffered *deste fogo que de Sam Marçal é*⁵ (Oliveira 2011, 329). He is represented with the paraphernalia associated with a bishop; chasuble, cope, crosier and mitre, sometimes a pallium, and behind him, burning buildings.

Saint Francis Borgia (1510–1572) was a great-grandson of Pope Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503) and one of the great names of the Spanish nobility. He joined the Jesuits after becoming a widower and climbed the order's hierarchy, becoming Superior General in 1565. He is typically represented with the Jesuit habit and a crowned skull in his hand, probably a reference to the vow he made while he accompanied the body of the Empress Isabel of Portugal (1503–1539) to Granada. Seeing the body corrupted by decomposition, he said he would no longer serve a master who would decay. Although not a particularly popular saint today, he was hugely so in early modern Lisbon because he was present during the entry of the Society of Jesus into Portugal, specifically, the founding of the first Jesuit

church – Saint Roch – where he gave a homily. His son, Juan Borgia, also joined the Society of Jesus and donated his father's collection of relics to that church, where he was buried. The connection between the church of Saint Roch and protection against plague is well known. It was built in the same place as a cemetery holding victims of the 1505 plague, associating this saint with the protective properties of the church. Moreover, in the days following the earthquake, the king asked Pope Benedict XIV (r. 1740–1758) to appoint St. Francis Borgia as the protector of the Portuguese Royal House against earthquakes, which happened on May 24th 1756 (Meco 1989, 174; Monteiro 2006, 877–88). This resulted in the adoption of this saint as a protector against earthquakes by the entire population.

The images associated with the protection of the home or family depict Saint Anthony of Lisbon, Saint Dominic and the Virgin Mary, in her many expressions. Traditionally, the Virgin Mary has a double role, for the protection of the living and the dead, protecting and comforting the former and pleading for the salvation of the souls of the latter. The Marian cult was active in Portugal, and its popularity increased from the 16th century when her role was protector of sailors – the devotion to Our Lady of Martyrs – and survives today. Since the reign of John IV (r. 1640–1656) Our Lady of Conception has been the patron of Portugal. It is possible that many of the tiles representing Mary are *ex votos* of pleas made during the earthquake.

Saint Anthony of Lisbon and Padua (1195–1231) was popular throughout the history of Portugal. He met the friars that would become the five martyrs of Morocco upon their travels to their final destination. This encounter, together with the spiritual life conveyed by the newly founded Franciscan Order, had a deep impact upon Saint Anthony, causing him to join the order to travel and preach. Worshipped as a saint during his lifetime, he was canonized less than a year after his death. He is the patron saint of married and unmarried couples, commonly known in Portugal as the 'matchmaker saint' (therefore, in custody of domestic affairs). Saint Anthony is also the patron saint for lost things and people and it is probably this feature that caused him to be depicted in the *registos*. Representations of this saint typically show him with Franciscan robes, holding Baby Jesus with one hand and in the other a cross or white lilies. This last attribute is a symbol of sorrow for the loss of a loved one.

Saint Dominic (c. 1172–1221) was born in Castille and joined the Canons Regular, following the rule of Saint Benedict, and later founded the Order of Preachers with a strict rule of prayer and penance. There was a preconception that Saint Dominic established the Inquisition, but in fact he predeceased the foundation of the Inquisition by ten years. Nevertheless, Saint Dominic's perceived connection

with the Inquisition became widespread, causing him to be used by Protestants during the Reformation as a symbol in their cause. In Iberia, on the contrary, his worship was renewed to include the Rosary and its symbology (Cross and Livingstone 1997, 496–7), connecting his image to the worship of the Virgin Mary. Due to this connection, Saint Dominic is always depicted receiving the Rosary in the *registo* tiles, and is included in the category of saintly protection of the family.

Alminhas

Alminhas are more modest demonstrations of faith and devotion, since most are composed of one to four tiles. Larger *alminhas* are rare though they do exist, especially in cases where they form part of larger compositions such as the base of the Cross or *registos* with protector saints. The number of souls in these representations may vary but there are usually two – male and female. They are placed in the centre of the composition, emerging from the flames of Purgatory (Simões 2010, 83) with their hands raised in worship. Painted only in blue, with a highlight of orange/yellow in the flames, these compositions occupy the entire

area of the panel and usually have either no frame or just a straight, simple outline (Meco 1989, 175) (Fig. 8).

Most of the *alminhas* have a caption, usually only the initials to save space: PNAM – *Padre Nosso Ave Maria*⁶ – PA – *Pelas Almas*⁷ and OPN⁸ – *Ora Pro Nobis* (Simões 2010, 81). These are clear expressions of a piety that seeks to provide comfort for the living and, more importantly, for the dead. It is a plea for divine intervention towards those who died without anointment and are now in Purgatory, atoning for the sins that caused God to release a punishment such as the earthquake. Preachers insisted on the responsibility of the population to live good lives, and this was a measure to ensure divine protection and prevent a new catastrophe.

Conclusion

The analysis of the symbolism of the tile figures presented in this paper raises a number of questions regarding the motivations behind the placement of these tiles. Some of the motivations suggested by the present study include feelings of loss, fear and gratitude, all of which appear to have been intensified



Figure 6. Composition with Our Lady of Sorrows, or Santa Mater Dolorosa (top), Saint Martial (bottom left), the souls of purgatory (middle) and Saint Anthony (bottom right). Held in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo, Lisbon (in Pais 1999, 19).

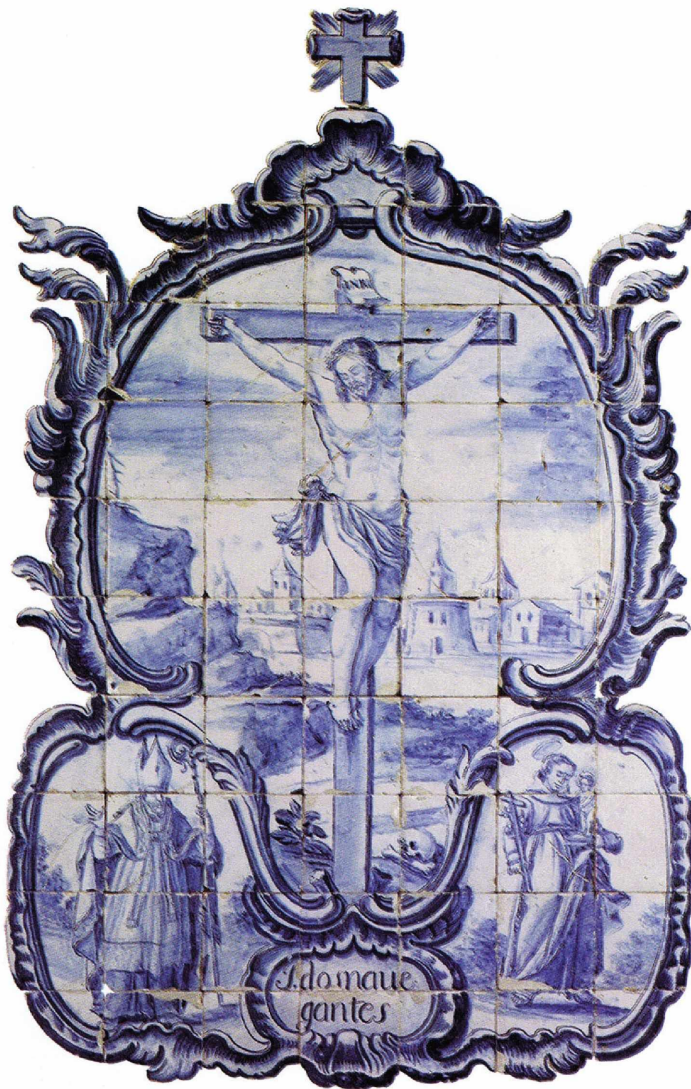


Figure 7. Monochrome panel of Our Lord of the Navigators with Jesus on the Calvary on top, Saint Martial on the bottom left and Saint Anthony on the bottom right. It is deposited in Museu da Cidade, Lisbon (in Pais 1999, 38).



Figure 8. *Alminbas* tile with a male and a female soul amidst the flames of purgatory and the caption P.N. AV. M. It is placed by the entrance to the cemetery of St. Lourenço parish in Azeitão, Setúbal. (Image: Author).

by the earthquake and its aftermath. The extent to which devotional tiles were enrolled in everyday piety in the years after the earthquake appear to have varied between households. Judging by the scale of human loss, a number estimated from 30,000 to 40,000 in Lisbon alone and around 5,000 in the rest of the country (Paice 2009, 210), it is likely that most families lost at least one person, and these figures do not correspond to the number of existing *registos*. Therefore, either not all the affected families showed their devotion in that fashion, or the tiles they used did not survive.

In a deeply religious population it is easy to understand the overall reasons for the use of devotional motifs on everyday objects such as tiles. Understanding the choice of each motif is, however, less easy to determine. It would appear that motifs were selected according to the circumstances of individual families. For example, a *registo* that only includes an image of the Virgin Mary may indicate that the commission was made by someone who suffered more human than material loss, such as the loss of children or a great number of family members. However, if we consider those depicting protector saints against natural disasters, the same motivations do not necessarily apply, since protecting against earthquakes does not only mean saving the physical household and its possessions, but also saving its inhabitants from harm. The need to protect both people and property is emphasised in cases where different figures are combined: some arrangements show the Virgin Mary surrounded by Saint Martial and Saint Francis Borgia, with souls in Purgatory below them (Figs. 6 and 7). This composition suggests that the commissioner was taking steps to protect himself and his family against all woes in this world and the afterlife.

When only Saint Martial is represented on a *registo*, the interpretations set out above, which stress the protective nature of the tiles produced after the earthquake, are strengthened. These representations connect to the descriptions in contemporary sources of the fire and the tsunami, which followed the earthquake and caused as much (if not more) damage as the earthquake itself and lasted for longer. These disasters may have perpetuated the need to seek divine protection against fire. Saint Martial is thus the most represented saint, together with the Virgin Mary, present in the vast majority of the *registos*, even the more modest ones. Of course, factors other than loss or fear may explain the placement of some tiles, such as gratitude. Further examinations of the commissioners and their losses would help to deconstruct the motivations behind the acquisition and display of these tiles.

Notes

- 1: ‘Law of the bankrupts’ is a direct translation.
- 2: An *albarrada* is the depiction of a trophy-like pot with flowers and sometimes birds or other animals.
- 3: ‘Single image’ in a direct translation. These were tiles with one image at the centre (flowers and animals were the most common) and a very small motif in each corner, a stylised version of a star or flower.
- 4: Translation: On November 1st 1755, Saturday, All Saints-day at half past nine there was the great earthquake in Lisbon in which all the temples and the entire city were destroyed and on Sunday the second in the morning, Our Lady of Pena came from her church due to its ruin and was placed in this farm’s gazebo where she was praying for the sinners for several days and after her shrine was build where she always was and with great assistance of her religious and devotion of all the Christian people. She went to her new church on July 3rd 1756 with great solemnity where she stands today and is worshiped as always.
- 5: ‘This fire that is Saint Martial’s’.
- 6: ‘Our Father Hail Mary’.
- 7: ‘For the souls’.
- 8: ‘Pray for us’.

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Résumé

Au Portugal, l'utilisation de carreaux au 18ème siècle a été considérablement plus intense que dans bien d'autres pays européens. Bien que les carreaux aient été abondamment utilisés ailleurs, par exemple en Espagne et aux Pays-Bas, au Portugal le travail des carreaux est devenu une forme d'art et un moyen de communication et de dévotion, bien qu'étant, tout comme la poterie, considéré comme un art moindre pendant longtemps. Cet article traite d'une forme spécifique de décoration de carreaux, visant à aider la dévotion populaire, qui a été utilisée dans la période qui a suivi le tremblement de terre dévastateur et les catastrophes de 1755.

Zusammenfassung

Der Gebrauch von Fliesen im 18. Jahrhundert war in Portugal deutlich intensiver als in anderen europäischen Ländern. Obwohl Fliesen anderswo, beispielsweise in Spanien und den Niederlanden, reichlich benutzt wurden, wurde die Fliesenarbeit in Portugal zu einer Kunstform und einem Medium der Kommunikation und Hingabe. Wie die Keramik galt sie aber lange als unbedeutendere Art der Kunst. Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit einer bestimmten Art der Fliesendekoration, die auf Volksfrömmigkeit abzielte. Sie wurde in der Zeit nach den verheerenden Erdbeben und Katastrophen von 1755 verwendet.

