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Artistic manifestations as a means of connection to the world outside the cloister: mural paintings in the Monastery of São Bento de Cástris

Abstract

S. Bento de Cástris Monastery was the first extramural monastic community in the town of Évora and the first Cistercian female community in southern Portugal. In the 16th century, as in other monasteries, its regular life underwent an intense reformation, because one of the main goals of the Ecumenical Council of Trent – held between 1545 and 1563 – was the regularization of monastic communities. Together with a spiritual renovation, influences of the Counter-reformation and of the Baroque culture were felt in the monastery artistic production (e.g. gilded woodwork, tiles, liturgical furniture, vestments, and frescoes). Mural paintings were particularly present in the cloistered spaces that were only accessible to the nuns (Refectory, High Choir, and Infirmary). Even today these spaces are not easily accessible for security reasons. The aim of this paper is to provide an insight view of the paintings and of the religious and cultural context on which they were produced.

1. Introduction

St. Benedict of Cástris is a Cistercian monastery of nuns in the south of Portugal, and an example of the adoption of the Benedictine Rule by a pre-existing eremitical community under the observance of the Cistercian Order, as in other Cistercian communities (Fig.1). This community was first established in 1169 by Urraca Ximenes, but it would only complete its regular reformation in 1275 with Domingas Soeira. In 1278, the Supreme Pontiff confirmed the institution, imposing the Benedictine Rule and acknowledging its obedience and affiliation to the closest male Cistercian abbey, which was Alcobaça. It was the first extramural monastic community in the city of Évora and the first Cistercian community in southern Portugal. In the 16th century, as in other monasteries, its regular life underwent an intense reformation, because one of the main goals of the Ecumenical Council of Trent – held between 1545 and 1563 – was the regularization of monastic communities. The monastery accommodated a female Cistercian community until 1890, 1890, the year in which the last nun died, more than six hundred years after it had been officially founded. Thus, this conventual complex allows interpreting the evolution of history, architecture, art, or even landscape and territorial planning throughout time. In fact, despite the deprivation of assets it witnessed with the extinction of the religious orders and the major changes made to the building when it was refurbished to accommodate the male Casa-Pia of Évora in 1957-1958 - a period when it was already in an advanced state of neglect -, this monastic-conventual ensemble still has the so-called spirit of place, open to new interpretations and discoveries. Moving away from the city and from the location of its first settlement,

close to the old hermitage of Vera Cruz, at Portas de Lagoa, the community dedicated its church to the Virgin Mary. It was consecrated in 1328 and built over the old hermitage that D. Soeiro - a bishop from Évora - had dedicated to Saint Benedict nearly a century before that. In the case of the Cistercian communities, this choice to move away from the world, is based on the idea of desertum recommended by Bernard of Clairvaux, keeping in mind that the choice of a locus was also determined by its relationships with the ecclesiastical and the civil powers, by its closeness to the existing roads but, especially, by its topography and hydrography.

2. Building Structure

In the currently existing building, and in its relationship with its surroundings, the monastery preserves the idea of distant citadel, marking its space of spiritual defense at three different levels: the great fence, the courtyard and church and the nuns' cloistered space. In 1530, the monastery was already described by Claude de Bronseval as a building that looked like a castle, "vale collectum ad modum castelluli", mentioning the Chapter House, the church, the sacristy, the armorium and the nuns' private bedrooms, arranged around the small and beautiful cloister. In compliance with the typical Bernardine harmony, the ensemble is built around a two-storey trapezoidal cloister that plays its role as central and agglutinating element. It is an ensemble that reveals the architectural particularities of the Alentejo, with hybrid elements and several influences (Mediterranean, Mudéjar, Late Gothic) that seek a symbiosis with the Order's requirements. There are still some Gothic traces in the east wing, as well as a few capitals in the south wing, and there were extensive building works carried out in the 16th century that went on during the offices of the following triennial abbesses and renovated Cástris' architecture. The interventions conducted in the 17th century included structural works, namely a new Chapter house, construction of new dormitories, renovation of the infirmary, High Choir, and Refectory, which had a remarkable presence in terms of frescoes. In the 18th century, the ensemble underwent an extensive intervention, especially after the return of the nuns from Odivelas, from which we highlight the artistic tile campaign. In 1808 the building was attacked and pillaged by Loison, in the context of the French invasions. Later it suffered a fire and the Cloister's eastern gallery was only rebuilt in 1825. The last nun died in 1890, as previously mentioned, and the monastery's assets were dispersed (lands, retables, goldsmithing articles, paintings, books, etc.). In 1891, the building accommodated the Agricultural-Chemical Station of Évora (with the Church working as a barn) and, in the 1940's, there was an extensive building works campaign for the installation of the male Casa Pia in 1957/58, which abandoned the building in 2005.

3. Historical contributions for an interpretation of the place: the artistic elements and the importance of the mural paintings

One of the privileged ways to understand what once existed in the monastery with regard to its architectural evolution and decorative elements is its documents. Presenting them to experts from different areas for analysis and having an interdisciplinary approach to these documents were our starting points and, in this article, we have put a particular emphasis

on the decorative campaigns (paintings, mural paintings, gilded woodwork), rather than on the architectural interventions (Fig.2). Besides the architectural interventions conducted in the ensemble during the Manueline period by Estêvão Lourenço (1520), published by Viterbo[1], there are only scattered pieces of information. A document recently found in the documentation of other convent, St. Francis of Évora, testifies some works in the initial structure of the monastery when it had only one floor, in the last years of the 14th century [2]. These are somewhat more systematized from the 18th century onwards, but they still have a few gaps. Regarding the 17th century, the only systematized accounting references we can find correspond to the years 1672/73, 1673/74, 1674/75 and 1699/1700.

Left to right: Figures 1-2. Frescoes in the ceiling of the High Choir. September 2014. Figure 3. Scenes in the walls of the High Choir. September 2014.



3.1. 17th Century Decorative Campaign

The interventions carried out in the monastery during the 17th century included a series of structural works carried out on the first and second floors, namely the construction of a new Chapter house and new dormitories, but they were especially focused on mural paintings production [3, 4] (Fig. 2 and 3). On the ground floor, in the Refectory, we find several sections: a dated blazon (1605), which still shows the initials F.P.I.; a coffered ceiling (with an agriculturally-inspired calendar, the seasons of the year and the elements of nature) whose central figure is the Order's patron saint in a typical Counter-Reformist scene showing Saint Bernard and Christ embracing each other, thus strengthening the saint's mystical dimension, and the arms of the Congregation of Alcobaça; and the back wall, with scenes from the life of the Virgin, surmounted by the Holy Spirit (Fig.4). Also on this floor, it is likely that the 17th century chapels located in the first two sections of the new Chapter house had mural paintings, and gilded woodwork was their main decorative element. On the first floor, we find dated frescoes (1697) in the new Dormitory. There are also frescoes in the infirmary, including a stone altar covered with

stucco and scagliola (Fig. 5). The murals from the Refectory and the Infirmary were analysed by the PRIM'ART Project in both technical and historical-artistic terms. Together with these artistic campaigns that were being conducted in the ensemble, there were carpenters and stonemasons who were responsible for the building's maintenance and for various repairs (hydraulic, roofs) that went on over the following century.

Left to right:

Figures 4-6. Scenes in the walls of the High Choir. September 2014.



3.2. 18th Century Decorative Campaign

In the early 18th century, in 1700, during the triennium of abbess D. Maria Helena de Carvalho, we start finding references to building works that implied putting up scaffolding in the chancel and, in September that year, there is a reference to the construction of the chancel's ceiling, together with twelve painted panels for the Choir [5, fl. 98v.] - a work that was completed in October and included railings for the pedestals [5, fl. 102v]. The payment of four stucco panels for the Choir is mentioned again in 1740, with a reference to the presence of a carpenter and a mason and to the use of laths to perfect the paintings' frames [6]. Gilded woodwork, but also tiles, were still being used in the building works carried out in the church during the 1740's, and the documents reveal the presence of numerous materials and skilled workers: stone, brick, lime, wood, paint, painters, woodworkers for the altars of St. Benedict and St. Bernard, carpenters (especially Alberto dos Reis and the skilled workers who helped him), a stonemason (who built the new altars and put up the tiles), and stone carvers [7]. There are also references to expenses related to other skilled workers (carpenters, whitewashers, blacksmiths) and materials (nails, wood, bricks for the porch, window panes and wire mesh, railings, hardware, lime, paint powders), as well as to the painters and gilders who gilded and painted the Tabernacle's angels and the plinths for the large angels, gold for the tribune and glory, among others. Despite being highly degraded, we are still able to find a few fontes de fresco (fountains, surrounded by benches, used by the nuns to cool

themselves off on warm days) that were built during the 1750's. One of them, in the courtyard's fountain, had its backs painted with frescoes and tiles below the seats [8]. In 1768, when the abbess was D. Teresa Josefa de Vasconcelos, the payment of the Choir paintings was fully settled [9]. In addition to the paintings, the monastery's Livro da Folha (Record Book) for the 1765-1768 triennium also mentions that the Choir, which was extended and vaulted, had tiles and a window close to which there was a portal [10, fl. 76]. In April 1778 - an essential moment, when the building was reoccupied after the return from Odivelas -, there were refurbishment works in the monastery that covered the entire conventual complex, from the fence to the church, including the chaplaincy and various workshops. There is an extensive list of works recorded from February 1779 onwards, which are also described as refurbishment works. During the following two years, the documents reveal the presence of carpenters and carvers who worked in the Choir and in the manufacture of chairs for the lower Choir [11]. The monastery's Record for the triennium that spanned between April 7, 1782 and April 7, 1785 shows that there were building works in the Priests' residence and in the Guesthouse, the Sacristy, the Infirmary and the Bell Tower. This was the period when the Cloister was fully clad with tiles but, above all, from the artistic point of view, we should highlight the Church, which had undergone interventions that had dealt with the chancel, the tiles and the gilded woodwork four decades before: "(...) pedreiros que tirarão o Azoleijo, rasgarão as Grades dos dois Coros abrirão seis Tribunais sete Janelas modarão o Púlpito elevarão o Arco da Capela mor fizerão hum Confessionario defizerão a Abobeda da Capela mor e Paredes da parte da Estrada fizerão outras de novo Estucarão a Igreja fizerão o Altar e taparão as varias Portas (...)" [10, fl. 165]. Regarding the tiles, this is surely the intervention that is still visible today and covers the entire church with a total of 19 panels with the hagiographic representation of St. Bernard. Manufactured at the Rato factory, they are based on engravings by Gottfried Bernhard Goz [12-18]. There were expenses related to tilers, gold and silver, glass, stone powder, paints and oils, the master carpenters who built the railing for the upper Choir, doors and pavements for the tribunes, but mainly to the "(...) Pintores que fizerão cinco coadros doirarão as Mulduras e remates das Janelas capiteis florais Armas, e ornatos da Capela Mor e imalhado da Grade de Cima pintarão as grades dos dois Coros e Rotulas das Tribunais (...)" [10, fl. 166v.]. From this campaign, and from the artistic point of view, we highlight the intervention carried out in the Chapels: "(...) Despesa em tres retabollos dois para a Igreja e hum para S. João Batista, quarenta e oito mil réis (...)" [10, fl. 198 v.]. During the last quarter of the 18th century there were more displays of grandeur, especially with regard to the Church and its assets, from which we should highlight the gilded woodwork and the goldsmithing articles [19]. There was a painter working in 1788, who painted and faked walnut on the doors of the Church's tribune, and decorated the edges of the lower Choir's organ, where he applied six pounds of gold. During the following triennium, the most relevant expenses were related to the painting and gilding of the Church's collateral chapels, as well as to "(...) a pintura e dourado de quatro paineis da Igreja e da Sanchristia(...)" [20]. The gilded woodwork still stands out among the other arts: the Church's collateral chapels were gilded and painted during the last 4 months of 1790, and over the first months of the following year there were "(...) pintores que dourarão de empreitada quatro painéis dois que estão na Capella mor e dois ao lado da grade do Coro de sima e dourarão e pintarão os três que estão na sanchristia (...) pintura e dourado do estofa que se fez nos Patriarchas

nas capelas colaterais (...) pintura que se fez na Capella de S. João Evangelista do claustro e pintura e retoque do Senhor Santo Cristo na Sanchristia (...) em mandar dourar e pintar as cadeiras das duas alampadas da Capella mor e o docel do santo Christo da Sanchristia (...)” [21], to mention a few examples; goldsmithing articles and vestments were also very important elements.

4. Final comments

The interventions we have just described were accounted for on a regular basis during the aforementioned period, hence the interest of assessing their significance within the scope of the overall expenses of the monastery, which was nearly 6%. Thus, we realize that the building works and repairs (which included interventions in the oak groves, vegetable gardens and other areas of the monastery) had little significance when compared with the total expenses, considering both the ordinary and the extraordinary ones. Considering only the latter, and deducting the expenses related to the (physical) maintenance of the community, we are offered a different perspective, since they correspond to 11% of those expenses. On the other hand, and despite all these documental testimonies, our proposal has to do with the challenge of studying elements that are part of the monastery’s built and artistic whole and are now inaccessible for safety reasons, to avoid the acts of vandalism they have suffered over the years. These elements include the High Choir and they need to be subject to extensive studies that may lead to their contextualization, both in terms of the building itself and in terms of the regional and national coeval expressions, and to put forward preservation and restoration proposals that may allow their future fruition.

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