

# THE STONES OF LISBON

A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS TRAINED  
IN PAINTING, PRINTMAKING, AND ETCHING  
REVOLUTIONIZES THE AGE-OLD  
PORTUGUESE CRAFT OF *AZULEJOS*.

BY PETER HYMAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP LEE HARVEY



WALK DOWN ANY STREET IN LISBON and you'll notice a landscape of tile-covered facades. Brightly colored *azulejos*—the Portuguese term for decorative glazed ceramic tiles—adorn every corner of the city, from the ancient quarters of the Alfama district to the grand, palm-lined Avenida da Liberdade. They've been a continuous part of Portugal's artistic tradition for more than 500 years, imparting the story of the nation's conquests and its colonizers.

Today, a new generation of artists is reviving the form through the creation of large-scale public works. Thanks to municipal commissions, many of Lisbon's most pedestrian public spaces have been upgraded, its Metro and railway stations chief among them.

The term *azulejo* is derived from the Arabic word *az-Zulayj*, which means "little polished stone." This relationship reflects the dramatic influence the Moorish invasions had on Portugal's ceramic heritage, which has its roots in the

14th century. By the late 1500s indigenous tiles were being created for monumental wall coverings in key churches and palaces.

The next 200 years brought the golden age of *azulejos*, bolstered by the country's liberation from Spain and its vigorous trade-based economy. One of the best examples of this era's splendor is Lisbon's Palácio Fronteira, a country manor built in 1672. The estate, still used as a residence by one of the relatives of the original 17th-century owner, maintains



Page 45: a section of Querubim Lapa's *Faiança*. Opposite page: a "brush stroke" on an apartment building decorated by Jorge Martins. This page: a Lapa original in Lisbon's Bela Vista Metro station.

most of its original decor and functions as a living *azulejo* preserve.

Tile application became democratized and secular in the 19th and 20th centuries, giving rise to the outdoor art form so visible today. The artists working currently are continuing this tradition of integrating tiles into the architectural makeup of the city.

"Tiles have always been assimilated into the moment," says Paulo Henriques, director of the Museu Nacional do Azulejo, which houses

the finest collection of *azulejos* in the world. "And today the artists who are coming at tiles from a non-ceramics background are creating the most interesting dialogues."

One such artist is Jorge Martins. A painter by training, he says tile lets him bring a fine artist's approach to an artisan's medium, and communicate with the public in a different way. "Painting is intimate," says Martins. "Tile must have a larger function." By this he means that tile work is an art form that must be adapted

to the space and conditions of the structure to which it's applied. And Martins should know.

Chief among his tile projects is the facade of an enormous apartment building in the Parque das Nações section of Lisbon, a relatively new area developed when Lisbon hosted the World Exposition in 1998. The building's surface covers 64,584 square feet and required the use of nearly 400,000 colored tiles. It was like having two football fields as a canvas. Because the building is longer across than it is high (and

## RESOURCES

### WHERE TO SEE AND PURCHASE AZULEJOS:

#### GALERIA RATTON CERÂMICAS

This gallery represents the most noteworthy artists working in *azulejos* today. In addition to facilitating large-scale public works, Ratton also deals in the artists' works. To acquire *azulejos*, make arrangements through the gallery. (351-213-460-948; ratton@sapo.pt)

#### MUSEU NACIONAL DO AZULEJO

Housed in the former Madre de Deus convent (built in 1509), the museum catalogs the history of *azulejos*, offering examples from the 15th century to the present. Closed Mondays. (351-218-100-340; www.mnazulejo-ipmuseus.pt)

#### PALÁCIO FRONTEIRA:

This country estate, originally built in 1672, showcases *azulejos* in their original setting. Of note are the Battle Room and the formal gardens. Call to arrange a tour. (351-217-782-023)

### WHERE TO STAY:

#### LAPA PALACE

Built in 1870 as a residence by a noted viscount, the Lapa Palace retains much of its historic opulence. Modern upgrades include a high-end spa and the city's top-rated Restaurant Hotel Cipriani. The hotel and its leafy gardens are centrally located on a hilltop in the diplomatic district. Double rooms from about \$615, with a hearty breakfast buffet. (351-213-949-494; www.lapapalace.com)

### WHERE TO EAT:

#### BICA DO SAPATO

Located in the soon-to-be-gentrified Santa Apolónia port district, Bica do Sapato is Lisbon's hippest restaurant. (Actor John Malkovich is a partner.) And while people come to be seen, it's Mozambique-born chef Fausto Airoldi's arresting modern Portuguese menu that brings them back. The restaurant also features a cafeteria and a sushi bar. (351-218-810-320)



A panel of Bartolomeu dos Santos' Pragal station "comic strip" depicting the sea voyages of explorer Fernão Mendes Pinto

thus not visible in its entirety), Martins chose to "deconstruct" the space, creating a series of different panels. While the color selection is somewhat traditional—blues, whites, greens, and browns—the shapes are modern and geometrical. The result: a white edifice that appears painted in giant brush strokes.

Querubim Lapa represents a bridge between the current artists and those who fostered a "new wave" of tile work in the 1950s. The spry and expressive Lapa has several pieces on display in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo, though he too was trained as a painter. "I am like a bomb," he says, his hands flailing over our lunch of codfish and Portugal's unique *vinho verde* (or "green wine," so called because of the Portuguese habit of harvesting the grapes at a premature age). His work has a similar explosiveness, defying the very traditions he was motivated by in the first place.

One of his most exciting recent works is the Bela Vista Metro station, built in 1998. To offset the distance across the large, atrium-like platform, Lapa chose tiles that were larger than the 5-by-5-inch squares typically used. As he's done for his entire career, he executed all the work himself, including painting the tiles by hand (many artists today send the factories sketches, which are then transferred onto the tiles). The work is a spectacle of shapes that traverses and surrounds a set of parallel subway tracks, bringing light to a place starved of sunshine.

"I was born in a city covered in tiles, so of course I wanted to work with them," says Bartolomeu dos Santos. "Unfortunately, I found myself in deep trouble the first time I tried to create a panel." Frustrated, he reverted to the art forms he knew best: printmaking and etching. Scratching away at the glaze, he created a technique similar to engraving wood, but one that hadn't been typically applied to tiles. The result is a textured tile with grooves and contours, giving dos Santos' work a unique flavor.

An example of his persistent "scratching" is a large mural above the turnstiles at the train station in Pragal, a town just outside Lisbon. The work is a series of seven panels that detail the seafaring voyages of Fernão Mendes Pinto, a famous 16th-century adventurer who spent his last years in Pragal. The panels function as a comic strip, relating various episodes from Pinto's journeys, including his inevitable shipwrecks, the wildlife of Java, and the arrival of the Portuguese in Japan. The installation is 82 feet long, and dos Santos spent two months etching the tiles with a tool no bigger than a butter knife.

Like all artists creating public installations, dos Santos was acutely aware that his work was incidental to his audience's primary purpose (in this case, commuting). This meant creating something that was more sensual than conceptual. "The people viewing this art are in a hurry," dos Santos says. "But if it gives them a good feeling and they learn something, then I am happy." □