

Gold on Blue in Philadelphia

Robert C. Smith and the Installation of the 'Portuguese Chapel' at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial

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Abstract

In 1957, American art historian Robert C. Smith was asked by Julius Zieget, Secretary and Treasurer of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), to travel to Lisbon to purchase gilded woodcarved objects, sculptures and *azulejos* (hand painted tiles) to create a 'Portuguese chapel' within the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, established in the deconsecrated Church of the Evangelists in Philadelphia. This was the first time that Portuguese art pieces would leave Portugal with the specific aim of musealizing a chapel in a public space. Smith's valuable contacts in Lisbon, namely with João Couto, then director of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (MNAA), led him to the antique dealers and private collectors that would eventually supply the objects he sought.

This essay explores and reflects upon the cultural and historical context surrounding the project, and looks into the commissioning, acquisition and installation of the chapel, a process that lasted from 1957 to 1960 (the chapel was inaugurated in 1961 by Luís Esteves Fernandes, then Portuguese ambassador to the US). Working from unpublished documents, namely Smith's correspondence, the article also traces the fortune of the pieces purchased by Smith from the moment they were placed in the Fleisher Foundation chapel to the present.

Introduction

[1] Robert C. Smith's (1912–1975) first contact with Portuguese art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took place in 1932 as he travelled to Naples to carry out research for the bachelor's degree in Fine Arts he had begun at Harvard University (1929–1933). At that crucial moment in his studies, Smith came across drawings by Neapolitan architect Luigi Vanvitelli in the archives of the Palatine Library of Reggia di Caserta that confirmed the latter had designed the chapel of St. John the Baptist in Lisbon's São Roque church, commissioned by king João V of Portugal (r. 1707–1750) in 1742.¹ A few years after completing his degree, Smith travelled to Portugal, visiting Coimbra, Lisbon and Mafra, where he became aware of the significance of the royal palace-convent of Mafra, and decided to make it the subject of his doctoral thesis. This choice was unusual for an American art historian of the 1930s, a time in which the interest in Iberian art was still rare in the US. Yet, the singularity of Smith's choice fitted in with the researcher's personality and his Harvard background.² The Fogg method practiced and developed at this university³ placed strong emphasis on the work of art itself as the focus of research and encouraged the 'discovery' and documentation of objects in fresh or neglected fields of study. Portugal presented Smith with valuable opportunities in this novelty-oriented, formalist comparative approach so suited to Smith's curiosity, determination, competitiveness, strategic vision, and networking ability.

[2] In Portugal, he seems to have been very well received in the institutions where he conducted his research. He was able to establish a network of contacts and influence that greatly contributed to the success of his studies. He also availed himself of every means at his disposal to divulge his findings on Portuguese baroque and rococo heritage both in Portugal and across the world.⁴ In addition to writing prestigious books on the subject,⁵ he published in a variety of outlets, from local newspapers, such as *Comércio do Porto*, *Tripeiro* (Porto) and *Notícias dos Arcos* (Arcos de Valdevez), to scholarly journals in Portugal (e.g. *Belas-Artes*, *Bracara Augusta*, *Colóquio Artes*) and abroad (*Apollo*, *Antiques*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *The Connoisseur* etc.). Smith's personal investment in the study of these forms of art largely derived from his realization that this area of research had long been neglected and underrated within the Portuguese scholarly community, and particularly among historians. It should be noted that in Portugal, art

¹ This authorship was already known and had been noted by Francisco Marques de Sousa Viterbo and Rodrigo Vicente de Almeida, *A capela de João Batista erecta na Igreja de S. Roque*, Lisbon 1902. Smith's finding of the drawings further contributed to understanding the commission and building process of the chapel.

² Sílvia Ferreira, "Robert Smith e André Soares: a vertigem do Rococó", in: *18 Olhares sobre André Soares*, ed. Eduardo Pires de Oliveira, Braga 2020, 85-89; Hellmut Wohl, "Robert Chester Smith e a história da arte nos Estados Unidos", in: *Robert C. Smith (1912–1975). A investigação em História de Arte*, exh. cat, ed. Dalton Sala, Lisbon 2000, 17-29.

³ Sybil Gordon Kantor, "The Beginnings of Art History at Harvard and the 'Fogg Method'", in: *The Early Years of Art History in the United States*, eds. Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter M. Lukehart, Princeton 1993, 161-174.

⁴ Smith's lectures in Portugal on Portuguese art and the articles on the topic published in foreign magazines are listed at the end of the catalogue for the exhibition at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *Robert C. Smith (1912–1975). A investigação em História de Arte*, exh. cat, ed. Dalton Sala, Lisbon 2000, 438-451. He published in English, Portuguese, Italian and French.

⁵ These books include *A talha em Portugal*, Lisbon 1962; *Nicolau Nasoni: arquitecto do Porto*, Lisbon 1966; *The Art of Portugal (1500–1800)*, London 1968; *Frei José de Santo António Vilaça: escultor beneditino do século XVIII*, Lisbon 1972.

history was not recognized as an autonomous discipline until 1976, when the first MA in Art History was established at the recently created Universidade Nova de Lisboa.⁶

The preparation – Portugal and the US

[3] Smith's idea of bringing to the US distinctive elements of Portuguese baroque and rococo art, such as *azulejos*, gilded woodcarving and statuary was grounded in his admiration for the art produced in Portugal, which he saw as unique.⁷ He had previously surveyed and studied Luso-Brazilian art of the colonial period as part of a research group devoted to Iberian-American studies. His first trip to Brazil in 1937 introduced him to Portuguese-produced baroque art. Taking advantage of the favourable environment for his research brought about by his participation in the 1940 celebrations of the 800th anniversary of Portugal's purported birth as a country, and the 400th anniversary of the Restoration of Portuguese sovereignty from the Spanish crown, Smith invested in contacts that would later prove fruitful.⁸

[4] The tradition of collecting European artworks in America, which intensified in the late nineteenth century, as well as the formation and development of Hispanic societies for studying and divulging Iberian-American culture were crucial for the education and thriving of a certain academic and social elite to which Smith belonged.⁹ The purchase and exhibition of pieces taken from major monuments that had fallen into disrepair or whose original function had been corrupted, such as palaces, manors, monasteries or churches, mostly Spanish, Italian or French, and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese, was a recurring practice within the United States until the mid-twentieth century. The appreciation for old European architecture and art, from Romanesque to Baroque, led wealthy American collectors to deploy their art dealers to Europe in search of the most exquisite pieces representative of those artistic periods.¹⁰

⁶ On the evolution of the discipline in Portugal and the efforts to assert it as an independent area of study, see Maria Alexandra T. Gago da Câmara, "A história da arte em Portugal: um balanço", in: *Des(a)fiando discursos: Homenagem a Maria Emília Ricardo Marques*, ed. Dulce Carvalho, Dionísio Vila Maior and Rui de Azevedo Teixeira, Lisbon 2005, 123-132, <https://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/handle/10400.2/342> (accessed June 12, 2020).

⁷ Smith expressed his admiration on several occasions, namely in the introduction to *The Art of Portugal*: "[...] The Portuguese, in the course of their long History, have developed a language, a literature and a temperament quite different from those of Spain [...] in the span of the three centuries with which this book is concerned, these two arts [tiles and woodcarving] [...] represent the most original expression of the genius of Portugal and constitute its greatest contribution to the art of Europe", Smith (1968), 15-16.

⁸ On the subject of the centennial celebrations, see (among others) Margarida Acciaiuoli, "Os anos 40 em Portugal: o país, o regime e as artes: 'restauração' e 'celebração'", PhD thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa 1991; Maria Filomena Mónica, "Exposição do Mundo Português", in: *Dicionário de História de Portugal*, vol. 7, ed. António Barreto and Maria Filomena Mónica, Lisbon 1999, 710-711.

⁹ Since the late nineteenth century Harvard University, Smith's *alma mater*, had seen the emergence of studies focusing on the history and art of Latin American countries. On this subject see Wohl (2000), 17-29, as well as the University's website, which elucidates the history and current situation of Latin American studies at Harvard, <https://ril.fas.harvard.edu/pages/history> (accessed July 15, 2021).

¹⁰ See Olga Raggio, "The Vélez Blanco Patio. An Italian Renaissance Monument from Spain", in: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 23 (1964), 141-176. On the dispersion of artistic monuments from Spain, see Immaculada Socías Batet, "El reverso de la historia del arte: marchantes y agentes en España durante la primera mitad del siglo XX", in: *La dispersión de objetos de arte fuera de España en los siglos XIX y XX*, ed. Fernando Pérez Mulet and Immaculada Socías, Barcelona/Cádiz 2011, 285-302.

[5] The political, socio-economic and cultural contexts of these countries, some faced with the impossibility of maintaining their vast legacy due to war or economic penury, but also ignorance, neglect and greed, explain to a large extent the cross-Atlantic drain of highly coveted objects obtainable at low prices. All these factors facilitated the acquisition of artworks by dealers searching Europe at the service of collectors whose recent fortunes allowed them to elevate their social standing and gain a greater influence on the society of their day.¹¹ An emblematic instance of this practice was the Vélez Blanco Patio, an ensemble of Renaissance marbles from the Fajardo family castle in Murcia, Spain, purchased by George Blumenthal for his house on Park Avenue in New York, and later bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹²

[6] A further direct consequence of this fascination with Iberian and Iberian-American art in the US was the creation of Hispanic studies societies. The development of academic knowledge following their implementation further increased the desire to purchase, collect and exhibit these artworks. This, in turn, gave rise to an exponential growth in donations to public museums and the creation of private collections with a view to cultivate and channel knowledge to the broader community.¹³

[7] In Smith's case, his position both as director and active member of the Hispanic Division at the Library of Congress in Washington DC – where he served as co-director (1939–1946), director (1942–1943) and curator of the department of photographs and prints¹⁴ – explains, to a large extent, his profound involvement with Luso-Brazilian art. This is well documented in the institution's annual reports, published as *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, in which Smith collaborated both as editor and writer between 1950 and 1961.¹⁵ For its part, the unpublished correspondence between Smith and João Couto (1892–1968), the director of Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (MNAA), as well as other documentation¹⁶

¹¹ An influence largely derived from the monopoly over multi-million business ventures, such as in the remarkable case of Archer Milton Huntington, founder of the Hispanic Society of America in 1908 and the largest collector of Hispanic objects in America. See Mitchell Coddling, "A Legacy of Spanish Art for America: Archer M. Huntington and the Hispanic Society of America", in: *Manet/Velázquez: The Taste for Spanish Painting*, eds. Gary Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre, New York 2003, 307, 324. Also on this subject, see the study on the confiscation and destruction of monuments in Spain, particularly the first chapter, "Expolio artístico y negocio", in: José Miguel Merino de Cáceres and María José Martínez Ruiz, *La destrucción del patrimonio artístico español: W.R. Hearst "El gran acaparador"*, Madrid 2012, 23-180.

¹² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, [accession no. 41.190.482](#); see Raggio (1964).

¹³ This included the donation of large collections to museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art or the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Investigating the provenance of museum pieces is currently one of the most active fields within these institutions.

¹⁴ On the relevance of the Hispanic Division to Luso-Brazilian studies and Smith's role, see Sabrina Melo, *Robert Chester Smith e o colonial na modernidade brasileira: entre história da arte e patrimônio*, Florianópolis, Brasil 2018, 67-74.

¹⁵ The *Handbook of Latin American Studies* was a publication of the Hispanic Division; it was fundamental to the development of scholarship on Luso-Brazilian culture. It offered readers the tools to research and remain abreast of the bibliographic production in the vast geographic and cultural space that the two countries represented. The *Handbook* was sponsored by the Committee of Latin American Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies, by the Rockefeller Foundation and by the Social Science Research Council, based in New York. After issue 9, the Library of Congress took on the role of editorial directors and supervised the activities of the Hispanic Division. See Melo (2018), 75.

¹⁶ Documentation kept in the Diplomatic Archive of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Lisbon concerning the Portuguese embassy in Washington, as quoted further below.

provide valuable insights into the way he went about creating a network of contacts and consolidating his academic prestige as a specialist in Luso-Brazilian studies. These sources are equally revealing as to his involvement in the process of acquisitions for and installation of the Portuguese chapel at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia, and the chapel's subsequent fortune.

Smith and his contacts with Portuguese cultural representatives

[8] In the historical documents of the Portuguese embassy in Washington, several letters and other correspondence between the Portuguese ambassador and governmental authorities in Lisbon and Washington shed light on the process of setting up the Portuguese chapel in Philadelphia. One such letter, dated 16 February 1940, is addressed to António de Bianchi, the Portuguese ambassador in Washington, by António de Oliveira Salazar, President of the Council of Ministers in Portugal. The letter is a standardised request for all ambassadors in countries with which Portugal had a relationship of friendship and cultural proximity, to invite official representatives to the festivities of the double centenary.¹⁷ Bianchi duly sent invitations to the US State Department, and by 18 May received confirmation that a special diplomatic mission would be sent to Portugal for this purpose. The delegation would include: Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland, Chief of the Mission with rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary; Charles Edward Courtney, United States Navy, Representative on the Special Diplomatic Mission with rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary; Paul T. Culbertson, Assistant Chief, Division of European Affairs, Department of State, Representative on the Special Diplomatic Mission, and Robert C. Smith, Hispanic Foundation, Library of Congress, Representative on the Special Diplomatic Mission.

[9] The documentation at the Portuguese embassy in Washington suggests that by this time Smith was well known, both there and in the Portuguese community in Philadelphia. Aside from the fact that he would certainly have applied for a visa there for his 1935 trip to Portugal, his name appears in the documents as being part of a group of scholars of Portuguese history, art and culture who met up with the ambassador in Washington in order to organise commemorative events of the double centenary in that city. For that occasion, Smith was asked to give a number of lectures on Portuguese art, for which he wrote to António Ferro, then director of the Secretariat for National Propaganda, in order to obtain illustrative images. The images requested, listed at the end of the letter, are of works considered emblematic and representative of the nationalist ideal promoted by the *Estado Novo* regime (1933–1974).¹⁸ These included Lisbon cathedral, the Jerónimos monastery of the same city, the Convent of Christ in Tomar, and the Batalha monastery, among other monuments elsewhere in the country containing Portuguese painting and sculpture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The conditions for Smith's full introduction into the Portuguese cultural milieu were therefore in place, and his participation in the centennial commemorations only contributed to consolidate it.¹⁹

¹⁷ Diplomatic Archive of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Lisbon, Portuguese Embassy in the United States of America, box 52, S11. E4 P1/68626, File 67, *Delegação americana às celebrações centenárias*, 1940.

¹⁸ The Portuguese *Estado Novo* (New State; 1933–1974) was a dictatorial regime that coincided mainly with the government of António Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970), prime minister from 1932 to 1968. The regime bore parallels with Francisco Franco's in Spain (1939–1975) and Getúlio Vargas' in Brazil (1930–1945).

¹⁹ Smith compiled a list of cultural events that took place throughout the country, emphasizing those in Lisbon as well as the presence of Brazil as a guest country. See Diplomatic Archive of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Lisbon, Portuguese Embassy in the United States of America, box 52, S11. E4 P1/68626, File 67, *Delegação americana às celebrações*

[10] As for the letters written by Smith to the director of the MNAA, João Couto, the first one dates from November 1939, when he was assistant director of the Hispanic Foundation (now: the Hispanic Division) of the Library of Congress.²⁰ Smith introduced himself and mentioned that he had been invited by João António Bianchi, the Portuguese ambassador to the US,²¹ to give a series of lectures in Portugal in the year of the double centennial celebrations. Smith asked Couto to send photographs of museum pieces to accompany his presentations. The list included works by painters such as Vieira Portuense, Vieira Lusitano, Domingos Sequeira, Cristóvão Lopes and Nuno Gonçalves.²² João Couto replied on 21 December 1939, informing Smith that he had already given instructions for the photographs to be sent. Smith wrote again on 25 January 1940, thanking Couto for his kindness and mentioning the huge relevance of these images to his work, adding that he had also notified the Portuguese minister on the matter.²³ On 4 May 1940, shortly before Smith's trip to Portugal to participate in the Commemorations of the Portuguese World, João Couto wrote to say that the requested photographs, by Mário de Novais, had already been sent in April.²⁴ On that date he also mailed a few of the museum's publications, asking whether Smith had their catalogue.²⁵ On 20 May 1940, Smith wrote to Couto once more to inform him that he had received by mail the books published by MNAA,²⁶ adding that he had been appointed the official US representative to the celebrations of the Portuguese World Congress and that he would be arriving in Lisbon on June 13th. He also let João Couto know of his keen interest in studying the MNAA's collections and that he anticipated fruitful conversations with its director.²⁷ From this initial exchanges, Smith and Couto went on to establish an enthusiastic and intellectually challenging interaction that laid the foundation for a friendly and rewarding work relationship lasting for decades, as attested to by the correspondence between the two men over time. Years later, in a letter dated 8 May 1949, Smith, in his unique style, would still recall the pleasurable days spent at the Portuguese World Congress, highlighting its significance, excellent organization and the

centenárias, 1940, "800th anniversary by Robert C. Smith member of the special embassy of the United States Government to the double centenary in Lisbon".

²⁰ On Smith's role at the Hispanic Foundation, see also Anthony John R. Russell-Wood, "Robert Chester Smith: investigador e historiador", in: Sala ed. (2000), 31-65: 44.

²¹ Portuguese ambassador in Washington from 30 July 1944 to 12 July 1947. <https://www.portaldiplomatico.mne.gov.pt/relacoesbilaterais/paises-geral/titulares/estados-unidos-da-america-titulares> (accessed July 10, 2020).

²² MNAA, Lisbon, João Couto Archive (AJC), under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 134.

²³ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 135.

²⁴ On this photographer, see Mário Novais. *Exposição do Mundo Português 1940*, Lisbon 1998. In 1985, his studio's collection of photographs was acquired by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and is available online at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/biblarte/collections/72157606056616635/> (accessed August 2, 2020).

²⁵ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 138. The mentioned catalogue should be *Algumas obras de arte do Museu das Janelas Verdes*, exh. cat., Lisbon 1937.

²⁶ Smith did not specify the titles of the books João Couto sent to him, but based on his interest in painting and decorative arts, they are likely to have been the titles that the MNAA had published by then on the subject: *Boletim dos Museus Nacionais de Arte Antiga 1* (1939); *Catálogo da exposição de obras de arte francesas existentes em Portugal*, exh. cat., Lisbon, 1934–1939 and *Catálogo da exposição de mobiliário indo-português*, exh. cat., Lisbon 1938.

²⁷ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 141.

warmth with which he had been received in Portugal, thanking Couto for the fraternal welcoming and for the resources he was given to prepare his lectures, held both at the Congress and outside of it. Smith further informed Couto that he had told his Brazilian colleagues, who had been unable to attend, about the success and significance of the event, adding that he was preparing an account on the Congress to be published by the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a professor from 1947 to 1972.²⁸

Preparatory steps for the establishment of the Portuguese chapel

[11] The correspondence that sheds light on the process of acquiring and transporting Portuguese artworks to Philadelphia and the installation of the Portuguese chapel at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial begins in 1957.²⁹ On 24 June 1957, Smith informed Couto that he would be returning to Lisbon for a colloquium in September of that year. He intended to arrive a month earlier to "visit the Portuguese museums" and asked to take photographs at the MNAA to use in his classes and lectures,³⁰ also requesting the director to facilitate contact with the Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation.³¹ The first known reference to Smith's concrete efforts to purchase artworks in Portugal for the chapel at Philadelphia's Fleisher Art Memorial, is a letter dated 6 September 1957. An excerpt of the letter illustrates the process:

[...] I am honoured to inform you that at the request of Mr Julius Zieget, Secretary and Treasurer of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I have arranged the purchase of a fragment of an eighteenth-century altar (camarim [sic] with gilded woodcarving tabernacle door) from the north of the country. The piece belongs to Mr Francisco José de Magalhães Nobre, the owner of Casa Mobrel Lda. in Rua de S. Bento 368. Mr Julius Zieget, in his capacity as administrator of the Fleisher Foundation branch at the Philadelphia Museum, is considering the purchase of said piece for the Foundation's religious art museum at the former church of Saint Catherine of Philadelphia,³² where it would become part of a collection whose purpose is to trace the history of altarpieces in European Catholic Churches. Given the collection's first-rate quality and the Foundation's prestige, as well as the fact that Portuguese religious art is scarcely represented in the United States, I have been keenly interested in this transaction [...].³³

²⁸ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 144. From early on, Smith dedicated himself to divulge Portuguese art in the US, both at the University of Pennsylvania where he taught, and as member of the Hispanic Foundation at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The report he alludes to was probably published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, a bulletin of the University of Pennsylvania, which included articles with different focuses: college life, announcements for congress participations, distinguished visitors to campus, etc. Some copies are available online at <https://archives.upenn.edu/digitized-resources/docs-pubs/gazette-centennial> (accessed December 22, 2020).

²⁹ On the history of the Fleisher Foundation and the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, see <https://fleisher.org/about-us/history/> (accessed July 20, 2020).

³⁰ On Smith's extensive and fertile activity as a lecturer at some of the most prestigious and diverse American institutions (particularly in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington) and also abroad, see Russell-Wood (2000). The archival material bequeathed to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation includes a substantial number of documents that shed light on his travels, lectures and correspondence with various intellectuals of his time; not only art historians, but also scholars of history, geography and cartography, as well as journalists.

³¹ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 145.

³² Smith refers to the church of the Evangelists as Saint Catherine's because of its location on the eponymous street.

This correspondence provides valuable insights into the origin and acquisition process of the centrepiece of the Portuguese chapel: the large rococo tabernacle mentioned in the letter (Fig. 1).



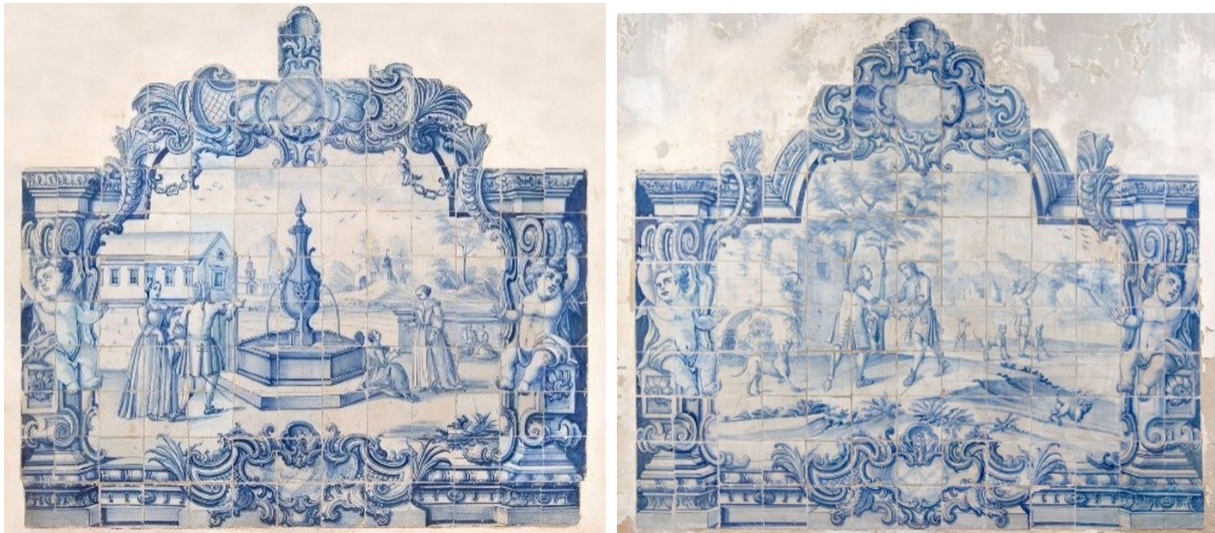
1 Rococo tabernacle from a Portuguese altarpiece, gilded chestnut, c. 1760, 1.68 × 1.47 × 0.33 m. Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, acquired through the Fiske Kimball Fund, 201-1994-1 (photograph provided by the author)

[12] Certainly urged by Smith, Julius Zieget instructed him to purchase pieces representative of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese church interiors to be added to others of the same type, but originally from other European churches and already installed in the Foundation's museum of religious art at Philadelphia's Church of the Evangelists. Smith stressed that the installation of the Portuguese pieces in that specific space might be a valuable contribution to the representativeness of Portuguese baroque and rococo art in the United States, and that the Fleisher Foundation could thus enhance its collection of rare art objects from the Portuguese world.

[13] While the documentation on the acquisition, transportation and installation of the large rococo tabernacle is abundant, the same cannot be said of the other elements that made up the chapel. Sources available on the *azulejos* (Figs. 2-3) placed on its side panels only mention that they were bought at the auction of the contents of a house in Serra da Arrábida,³⁴ while there is no clue as to the origin of the remaining elements that formed the set.

³³ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 148.

³⁴ This is mentioned by Smith in "A Portuguese Chapel at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial", in: *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 56 (1961), no. 268, 47-53.



2-3 *Azulejos* (tiles), hand-painted ceramic, c. 1740, 1.66 × 1.83 m. Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia (photo: © Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Philadelphia Museum of Art)

[14] The acquisition of the gilded wood tabernacle appears to have been a complex administrative process. On 9 September 1957 the antiques dealer Magalhães Nobre wrote to the director of MNAA with an attached copy of a letter to the head of Lisbon's Customs requesting authorization for this piece to be taken abroad.³⁵ The process was also delayed due to hesitations on the part of the Fleisher Foundation, as attested by Smith's letter of 11 October 1957 to Couto: "In regard to the altar, I have learned from Mr. Zieget that he is very much interested in it, but because of administrative complications he cannot make a decision immediately [...]."³⁶

[15] From late 1957 to early 1960 there seems not to have been any correspondence between Smith and Couto. This hiatus is, however, bridged by documents in the archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and in the Historic Archive of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Portugal. These include two letters from Smith to Julius Zieget, dated 13 and 28 May 1959, respectively. In the first letter, Smith informs that he is still busy with the installation of the Portuguese chapel at the Fleisher Museum, and that he took the chief curator of the MNAA, Maria Mendonça, on a visit to the chapel's installation works. She was "delighted with the material", says Smith while drawing attention to Maria Mendonça's position at the MNAA: "Since she is the Chief Curator of the Lisbon Museum, I was gratified by her reaction and even more so by her enthusiasm", and also by her recognition of "this work because it will be the first such permanent exhibition of Portuguese art in this country. She told me that the only other she is aware of is a room with furniture at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris."³⁷

[16] The second part of Smith's letter details the installation process (mentioning that he chose to lay old brick flooring, remove the existing false ceiling and plaster the wall), and lists the remaining steps:

³⁵ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 149.

³⁶ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 147.

³⁷ Robert C. Smith's letter to Julius Zieget, dated 13 May 1959, PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

1. Remove a niche on the left wall which is not needed; 2. Install fixtures for hanging two flying angels on the left and right walls; 3. Install the tile at the base of the left and right walls; 4. Install a spotlight over the entrance; 5. Obtain in Lisbon an antique base for displaying the statue of St. Francis [Fig. 4]. I hope to do this myself this summer if you approve; 6. Install the altar piece.³⁸



4 Standing figure of *Saint Francis of Assisi*, painted wood, 18th century, 78 × 31.8 × 36 cm. Formerly in the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, currently in storage at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 229-1979-1933 (photograph provided by the author)

[17] However, a major problem remained, which had to do with building a supporting structure for the large tabernacle: "The choice of someone to design and superintend the execution of this altar table" was urgently needed. Aside from matters pertaining to the support's proportions and its ability to bear the altar, the lining of the altar frontal (Fig. 5) needed to conform with the dating of the objects in the chapel:

*I have chosen this liturgical color because it will blend most handsomely, in my opinion, with the blue, gold and red of the walls and retable. I should like to have the damask made up from some material thought or known to have been used in an 18th century European church.*³⁹

³⁸ Robert C. Smith's letter to Julius Zieget, dated 13 May 1959.

³⁹ Robert C. Smith's letter to Julius Zieget, dated 13 May 1959.



5 Sample of the fabric used for the altar frontal in the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, silk, 20th century. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, archive (photograph provided by the author)

[18] Smith kept Julius Zieget updated on all the installation details. In the second letter, that dated 28 May 1959, he informed Zieget of the ongoing undertakings by himself and other employees of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from the purchase of material for the altar table (and its construction at the museum's workshops) to the *azulejo* tiling and the consultation with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to verify the "chapel" was installed according to Catholic liturgy. Smith was thorough in ensuring that his beloved project be a success.⁴⁰

[19] On 22 January 1960, João Couto resumed his correspondence with Smith, thanking him for his letter of 6 January, in which the latter had provided an updated account of the installation and details on the upcoming inauguration of the Portuguese chapel. Judging from Couto's reply, Smith had asked the MNAA director to loan a baptismal font from the museum storage.⁴¹ As he had promised Smith, Couto contacted the director-general of Higher Education and Fine Arts on 22 January 1960, telling him of the American professor's request:

I am honoured to send Your Excellency a photocopy of the letter from Robert Smith, Art History Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, informing us of the upcoming inauguration of a Portuguese baroque chapel

⁴⁰ Robert C. Smith's letter to Julius Zieget, dated 28 May 1959, PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁴¹ MNAA, Lisbon, archive, under "correspondência com João Couto, Janeiro a Junho de 1960, L.º 46, 8-M-1".

*at the Philadelphia Museum. For the chapel, Prof. Smith asks the Portuguese State to loan him a baptismal font identical to one in storage at this Museum, which was brought to his knowledge by former curator Maria José de Mendonça during her visit to America. Prof. Robert Smith deems that such an offer would greatly contribute to consolidate Portugal's good relations with American scientific institutions.*⁴²

This excerpt of João Couto's letter evidences one of Smith's strategies in his professional relations with Portugal: the clear expression that all his actions were aimed at a higher awareness and appreciation of Portuguese art in his country, as well as at making it a subject of study by "American scientific institutions". To bring the art of the Portuguese baroque and rococo to America and divulge it there, where it was all but unknown, could serve to expand interactions between art historians in both countries and, consequently, to promote the international perception of Portuguese art from that period.

[20] Back to the correspondence between Smith and Couto, there appears to be a new hiatus lasting until Smith's letter of 14 November 1960, in which the professor enquired after the objects he knew had been packed, "with the utmost care by master Adriano", in early September. Smith went on to express his concern at the fact that they had not yet arrived, asking whether they had been sent and when, and lamenting their delay: "It is a shame they did not arrive yet, since there is no time left to include pictures of them in the article that the Philadelphia Museum Bulletin will publish on the Portuguese chapel."⁴³ Replying to Smith on 3 January 1961, Couto informed him that he had in hand the receipt of the order to deliver the baptismal font to Philadelphia, adding that the object had been shipped on the steamship *Grete Skow* on 17 November 1960.⁴⁴ Smith wrote again to Couto on 9 January 1961:

*I am delighted to tell you that the two precious objects⁴⁵ arrived in good order one week before Christmas and that the font has been installed at the chapel. It was officially delivered yesterday by Mr José B. Henriques, the Portuguese Consul in Philadelphia⁴⁶ in a ceremony attended by the Directors of the Portuguese Institutes of the Universities of New York and Wisconsin and by a group of Portuguese language teachers from other institutions.*⁴⁷

The inauguration of the Portuguese chapel

[21] The public presentation of the Portuguese chapel, on 25 February 1961, was a grand, solemn event that celebrated the commitment of everyone who had been involved in the process. A number of documents held at the Diplomatic Archive of the Portuguese Ministry for Foreign Affairs attest to the

⁴² MNAA, Lisbon, archive, under "correspondência com João Couto, Janeiro a Junho de 1960, L.º 46, 8-M-1".

⁴³ MNAA, Lisbon, AJC, under "correspondência com o estrangeiro-EUA". Robert C. Smith, 1939–1961, Ui.37-P1, Doc. 154. Smith (1961), 47-53.

⁴⁴ MNAA, Lisbon, archive, under "correspondência com João Couto, Processos, 1961, 8-M-1".

⁴⁵ Although the letter mentions "two precious objects", it only accounts for the arrival of one baptismal font. The other piece might be a small case with an image of the Virgin that, according to its sheet, was part of the set of the Portuguese chapel that was transferred to the PMA.

⁴⁶ "From 1948 to 1986, José Bernadino Henriques was the Consul. He was a veteran of the United States Army, serving during World War II. A businessman in the export/import trade, he organized and co-founded Philadelphia Lodge 48 of the Portuguese Continental Union, "Bartolomeu Dias", in March of 1939. For many years, the Consulate was located in front of Independence Mall, the location of the Liberty Bell, in the historic Bourse building"; quoted from: <https://www.consularcorpsofphiladelphia.org/portugal/> (accessed January 3, 2021).

⁴⁷ MNAA, Lisbon, archive, "correspondência com João Couto, Janeiro a Junho de 1961, L.º 48, 8-M-1".

solemnity given to the inauguration ceremony and the rank of the figures involved in it. This is particularly evident in the correspondence between the Portuguese ambassador in Washington, Luiz Esteves Fernandes (1950–1961), the president of the PMA, R. Sturgis Ingersoll, Robert C. Smith, and the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marcelo Matias (1958–1961).⁴⁸ Their letters reveal that the Portuguese ambassador's attendance to the event was formally requested, with strict adherence to protocol, both by the PMA president and by Smith himself. Smith also sent the ambassador a copy of the speech he was planning to give at the chapel inauguration. According to Smith's wording this was meant to facilitate the ambassador's own intervention while giving him the chance to suggest any changes to Smith's speech that he may deem necessary. The ambassador's stay in Philadelphia and the social programme for him and his wife were carefully planned. Afterwards, Luiz Fernandes wrote to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Portugal, reporting on the event and attaching a clipping of the piece that the *New York Times* ran on the chapel inauguration on 5 March.

[22] The ceremony was preceded by the publication of a booklet by the PMA contextualizing the pertinence of the installation and its meaning to the neighbourhood:

*located not far from the historic structures of Old Philadelphia [...] the Portuguese chapel at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial will serve as a reminder of the distinguished Portuguese who lived and worked in this area in the early years of the Republic.*⁴⁹

In the booklet, the Museum offered a detailed description of the pieces that formed the chapel (both in terms of their aesthetics and their relevance to Portuguese baroque and rococo art) as well as explaining the choice for their spatial arrangement.

[23] There was also a press release about the opening of the chapel titled: "Decorative Portuguese chapel opened at Fleisher Art Memorial", which reinforced the justification for its installation by emphasizing its absolute novelty. This was the first time that the work of musealizing a purported Portuguese chapel was being carried out outside of Portugal or Brazil.

This has been done to emphasize the peculiar beauty and distinction of the contribution made to religious art by the Portuguese craftsmen of the eighteenth century, whose use of gilt woodcarving and polychromed tiles has a character quite different from that of the contemporary art of Spain or of any other European

⁴⁸ Diplomatic Archive of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Lisbon, Portuguese Embassy in the United States of America, box 281, S1. E11. P4/68868.

⁴⁹ Booklet for the opening of the Portuguese chapel, PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document. The booklet refers to Hipólito José da Costa, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1799, on a Portuguese government mission. Costa left a journal in which he described in great detail his life in the city. See Robert C. Smith, "A Portuguese Naturalist in Philadelphia, 1799", in: *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 78 (1954), no. 1, 71-106; see also Thais Buvalovas, "[O 'Diário da minha Viagem para Filadélfia'. Impressões de um ilustrado luso-brasileiro na América \(1798–1799\)](#)", MA thesis, University of São Paulo, 2007. Another prominent figure of the time was Father José Correia e Serra, Portuguese minister in the United States, and a member of the American Philosophical Society. See Richard Beale Davis, *O Abade Correia da Serra na América (1812–1820)*, Lisbon 2013. See also <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jos%C3%A9-correia-da-serra> (accessed January 3, 2021). According to the portal dedicated to the diplomatic relations between Portugal and the US, "Portugal was one of the first nations to recognize the United States and the two countries maintain diplomatic relations since 1791, sharing common values and strong bonds of friendship"; quoted from: <https://www.portaldiplomatico.mne.gov.pt/relacoesbilaterais/paises-geral/estados-unidos-da-america> (accessed January 3, 2021).

*nation. This kind of decoration, which the Portuguese took wherever they had settled [...] has always been greatly admired by travellers to distant places ever since its creation in the eighteenth century.*⁵⁰

The chapel's opening was also highlighted in the context of Portuguese celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), who had "opened the way to the great discoveries of the Portuguese including the sea passage to India, which contributed so much for the civilisation of the Renaissance".⁵¹

[24] The text made it clear that the new space opened at the Fleisher Art Memorial did not consist of a chapel removed from any church in Portugal, but that its composition was the result of various pieces acquired and gathered by Smith in Portugal. Indeed, as already stated above, it was common practice in Portugal and Spain to merely transfer entire chapels or to gather pieces from disparate origins to recreate museological or sacred spaces in museums or private residences. The re-assembling of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chapels or oratories in private spaces and museums had seen a marked increase in Portugal in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵² These were made of old altars and other leftovers of gilded woodcarved pieces (mostly bought at auction by antique dealers) from convents and monasteries that had been shut in the wake of the 1834 decree for the dissolution of religious orders,⁵³ the 1911 decree for the Separation of Church and State⁵⁴ (which effectively closed down some churches and hermitages), and the appropriations by the Direcção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais (General Directorate of National Edifices and Monuments) that took place from the 1920s to the 1950s.⁵⁵ Their buyers belonged

⁵⁰ Press release, almost certainly written by Robert C. Smith. PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁵¹ Press release, as in footnote 50. The triumphalist notion of an imperial nation, with the Infante D. Henrique as a banner-figure of the Portuguese discoveries, was built on a historiographic discourse now deemed obsolete and seen as serving a certain idea of nation cultivated by the State which still held on to its African colonies. The revision of this period in the history of Portugal has been carried out in recent years by historians such as Charles Boxer, *O império marítimo português*, Lisbon 2018 or Diogo Ramada Curto, *Cultura imperial e projectos coloniais (1415–1800)*, Campinas, Brazil 2009; Diogo Ramada Curto, "The European Expansion during the Early Modern Period", in: *Mare liberum. Revista de história dos mares* 20 (2000), 23-32.

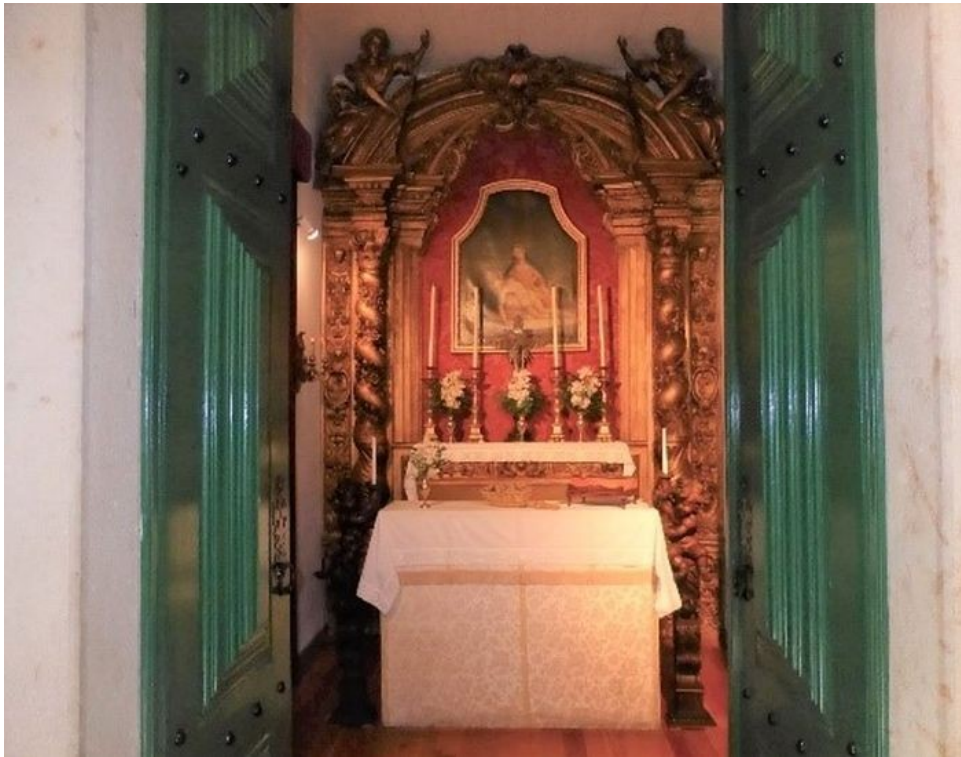
⁵² Sílvia Ferreira, "From the Convent to the Museum: the Displacement and Exhibition of Baroque Gilded Woodcarving Altars in Portugal", in: *Museen – Orte des Authentischen? Museums– Places of Authenticity?*, eds. Dominik Kimmel and Stefan Brüggerhoff, Mainz 2020, 117-125, <https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/proplaeum/catalog/book/745?lang=en> (accessed January 3, 2021); Sílvia Ferreira, "Reshaping the Law. Nineteenth-Century Anticlericalism in Portugal and its Impact on Religious Art: The Case of Gilded Wood Carving (Talha Dourada)", in: *Art Antiquity and Law* 21 (2016), no. 3, 258-269.

⁵³ Decree of D. Pedro, Duke of Bragança, on the Extinction of Religious Orders in Portugal, May 28, 1834, published by the Minister and Secretary for Ecclesiastical Affairs and Justice, Joaquim António de Aguiar, May 30, 1834. See *Collecção de Decretos e Regulamentos, Mandados Publicar por Sua Magestade Imperial o Regente do Reino desde a Sua Entrada em Lisboa até à Instalação das Câmaras Legislativas*, 3. série (1835), 134.

⁵⁴ Law on the Separation of State and Church, issued by Decree of the Provisional Government of the First Portuguese Republic of April 20, 1911, published in the *Diário do Governo* No 92 of 21 April 1911, 1619-1624.

⁵⁵ The interventions of the Direcção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais (General Directorate of National Edifices and Monuments) in the restoration of iconic national monuments, mostly from the Romanesque to the Late Gothic, were characterized by the removal of layers and traces added over time, which were deemed spurious, including woodcarved altars, *azulejos*, stuccos and other arts of the baroque. See Maria João Neto, *Memória, Propaganda e Poder – O Restauro dos Monumentos Nacionais (1929–1960)*, Porto 2001.

to a moneyed elite who saw these acquisitions as enhancing their power status and prestige.⁵⁶ Among the many examples of this practice are the chapel at Refúgio Aboim Ascensão in Faro⁵⁷ (Fig. 6) and the Casa-Museu Fernando de Castro in Porto⁵⁸ (Fig. 7).



6 Baroque altar, 18th century, gilded wood, Refúgio Aboim Ascensão, Faro, Portugal (photograph provided by the author)

⁵⁶ At a different scale, these practices were similar to those of American millionaires, as we have seen above. On this subject, see Raquel Henriques da Silva, "Colecionismo de arte no Portugal de oitocentos", in: *Henri Burnay. De banqueiro a colecionador*, ed. Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, Lisbon 2003, 11-21; Ricardo Manuel Mendes Baeta, "Coleções e colecionadores de arte na revista *Ilustração Moderna* (1926-1932)", in: *Ensaios e Práticas em Museologia* 2 (2012), 218-232; Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos and Maria de Sousa Holstein Campilho, eds., *Uma família de colecionadores. Poder e cultura*, Lisbon 2001.

⁵⁷ Sílvia Ferreira, "O património reinventado: o processo de alienação (1930) e de remontagem do espólio artístico da igreja de Nossa Senhora da Estrela de Lisboa (1946)", in: *Atas do Congresso Ibero-Americano "Património, suas matérias e imatérias"*, eds. Marlucci Menezes, José Delgado Rodrigues and Dória Costa, Lisbon 2016, 1-19.

⁵⁸ See Raquel Henriques da Silva, "A Casa-Museu Fernando de Castro: das coleções e das fantasmagorias", in: *MIDAS. Museus e estudos interdisciplinares* 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/midas.1978> (accessed December 15, 2020).



7 Decoration of a room, 18th century, gilded wood, Casa-Museu Fernando de Castro, Porto, Portugal (photograph provided by the author)

The (now disassembled) chapel at Burnay Palace in Lisbon's Junqueira district⁵⁹ (Fig. 8), the chapel at the Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida, also in Lisbon⁶⁰ (Fig. 9), and the Santa Maria de Lamas Museum, in Lamas,⁶¹ are also excellent examples of this practice of extensive reassembling of gilded woodwork salvaged from religious houses, churches, hermitages and chapels.

⁵⁹ Henriques da Silva (2003).

⁶⁰ The chapel was built with some of the gilded woodwork bought by Medeiros e Almeida at the auction of the Burnay family. See *Catálogo dos quadros, objectos de arte, porcelanas e mobiliário que pertenceram aos 1.ºs Condes de Burnay e a cujo leilão se procederá no Palácio da Junqueira em 1934*, Lisbon 1934. I am grateful to Maria Bruges Mayer, the director of the Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida, for her kindness in providing information on the chapel.

⁶¹ <https://museu.colegiodelamas.com/> (accessed July 15,2020).



8 Chapel at Burnay Palace, Lisbon, gilded wood, textiles, paintings, 17th to 20th centuries, in: *Catálogo dos quadros, objectos de arte, porcelanas e mobiliário que pertenceram aos 1.ºs Condes de Burnay* (1934)



9 Chapel at the Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida, Lisbon, gilded wood and tiles, 17th to 18th centuries (photo © Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida, Lisbon)

The chapel's fortunes to date

[25] Following its grand inauguration in 1961, and despite its stated purpose of raising awareness of Portuguese arts in the US, the chapel attracted relatively little scholarly attention. A rare instance of interest came from a Portuguese historian active in the US, Manoel da Silveira Cardozo, from the Azorean

island of Pico.⁶² In a letter of 28 August 1974 Cardozo asked the head of the PMA's Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture about the nature of the chapel and the circumstances of its transfer from Portugal to the United States:

*I understand that the Philadelphia Museum of Art owns and has on display a Portuguese baroque altar. Would you kindly let me know the provenance, when you acquired it, who gave it to you (if indeed it was a gift), when it was opened to the public, etc.? I am writing a book on the "Portuguese in America" for the Ethnic Chronologies series of Oceana Publishers, New York, and I would like to mention the altar in my work.*⁶³

Manoel Cardozo's letter was answered on 18 September of that year, confirming his assumptions and clarifying the chapel's history. The letter also contained the bibliographical references of two scholarly articles on the chapel written by Smith around the time of its installation, in the October 1960 issue of *Escultura Portuguesa*,⁶⁴ and in the above-mentioned *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* of winter 1961.⁶⁵

[26] In 1994, more than thirty years after the installation of the Portuguese chapel, the recognition of the significance of its pieces and a concern with its preservation led Dean Walker, the Henry P. McIlhenny Senior Curator of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the PMA, to request Thora Jacobson, director of the Fleisher Art Memorial, to loan the gilt tabernacle that was part of the chapel: "We would like to have it here for safekeeping and to evaluate it for possible exhibition in the third phase of the reinstallation of the Museum's European collections."⁶⁶ The planned opening of a new museum wing dedicated to European decorative arts was the reason behind this request, which was certainly based on the recognition of the quality of the Portuguese piece and its uniqueness in the set of pieces intended for this new wing. Thora Jacobson not only agreed to the loan as she manifested a measure of relief and joy with the fact of placing the piece under the care of the PMA: "It is frankly a great relief to have it out of the way of roof leaks, and wonderful to think that it might find greater visibility at the Museum." Jacobson added that the piece would be delivered the following day at the PMA, together with the fabric that Smith had purchased, concluding her letter: "Let me know what plans you have for the azuelos [sic]!"⁶⁷

⁶² On Manoel de Oliveira Cardozo see Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, "Manoel da Silveira Cardozo (1911–1985), um historiador picoense nos Estados Unidos", in: *Boletim do Núcleo Cultural da Horta* 22 (2013), 123-136. In this article, Onésimo Almeida systematizes the information available on the life and work of Silveira Cardozo: He earned a PhD in history from the University of Stanford and lectured at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. He was director of the Oliveira Lima Library, which holds a Brazilian collection donated to this university, see Russell-Wood (2000), 41 and 63, note 34.

⁶³ Letter from Manoel Cardozo to the directors of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, dated 28 August 1974, PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document. The book mentioned by Cardozo is *The Portuguese in America, 590 B.C.–1974: a Chronology & Fact Book*, Dobbs Ferry, NY 1976.

⁶⁴ Robert C. Smith, "Uma capela portuguesa em Filadélfia", in: *Colóquio. Revista de Artes e Letras* 10 (1960), 14-17, <http://coloquio.gulbenkian.pt/al/sirius.exe/numero?10-212> (accessed June 22, 2020).

⁶⁵ Smith (1961), 47-53.

⁶⁶ Letter from Dean Walker to Thora Jacobson, dated 26 May 1994. PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

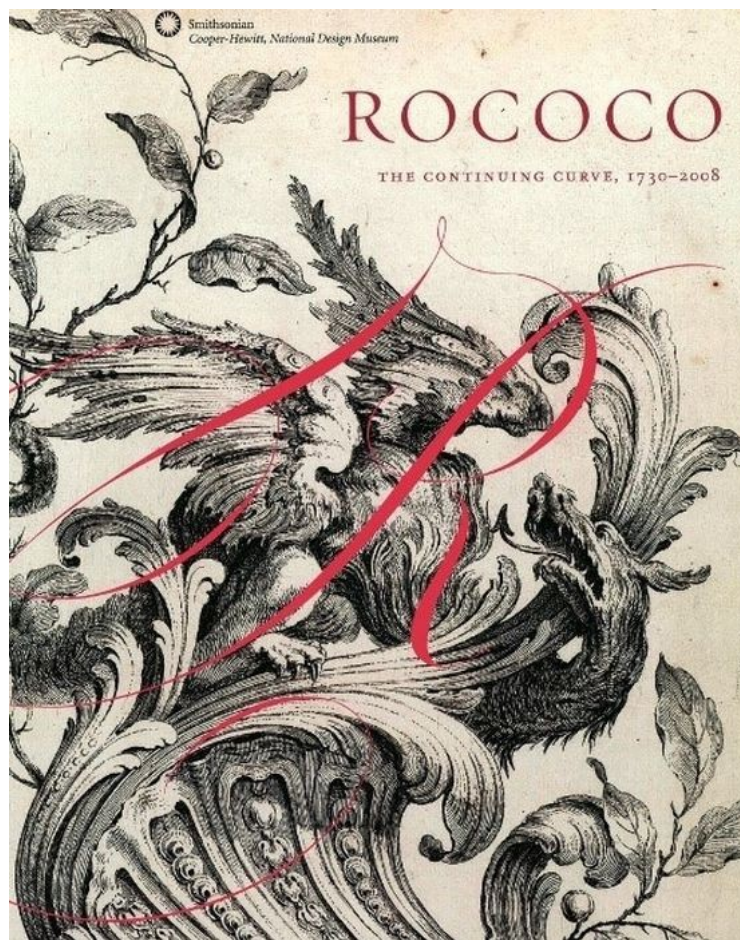
⁶⁷ Thora Jacobson letter to Dean Walker, dated 26 May 1994. PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document. As to the fate of the *azulejos*, which so worried Thora Jacobson, they remain in place in the chapel at the Fleisher Art Museum.

[27] The documentation related to this transfer also includes a 1994 report by the PMA conservation and restoration technicians, describing the constructive structure of the piece, its decoration, gilding and condition: "Condition: Poor, both in terms of structural integrity and surface condition".⁶⁸ They list the conservation issues and the measures to be taken for its restoration, in particular:

1) *Disassemble joined areas*; 2) *Remove modern nails*; 3) *Consolidate loose gilding*; 4) *Clean the surface*; 5) *Replace lost structural elements and reinforce as required*; 6) *Adjust the door to close properly*; 7) *Fill cracks*; 8) *Add replacement carving where the losses are visually disturbing*; 9) *In-paint or in-gild the surface*; 10) *Realign columns and fix in position*.

After the intervention, since 27 February 2003, the rococo tabernacle has been on display at the museum.

[28] Four years later, it drew the attention of the curators preparing the exhibition *Rococo: The Continuing Curve* at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York in 2008⁶⁹ (Fig. 10).



10 Cover of the catalogue of the exhibition *Rococo. The Continuing Curve, 1730–2008* at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, New York City, 2008 (photograph provided by the author)

⁶⁸ Report by Alexander M., David DeMuzi and Dean Walker. PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁶⁹ Gail S. Davidson, Ellen Lupton and Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, eds., *Rococo: The Continuing Curve: 1730–2008*, exh. cat., New York 2008.

Loan procedures began in mid-2007.⁷⁰ On 27 December of that year, after consulting with loan managerial staff at the Fleisher Art Memorial, the PMA sent a confirmation to the Cooper Hewitt for the loan of the various pieces that had been requested for the exhibition, including the altarpiece. The document listed ceramic and silver pieces, as well as furniture, and stipulated precise conditions for exhibiting the altarpiece.⁷¹

[29] On 31 January 2008, Jack Hinton, Assistant Curator of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the PMA, sent a fax to Matthew Braun, Director of the Fleisher Art Memorial informing him that:

*[...] in deinstalling the altar in order to pack and ship the piece for loan to the Cooper-Hewitt's exhibition Rococo: The Continuing Curve, the conservators noted some minor areas of loss and flaking on the object's surface. Peggy Olley, our Mellon Fellow in Furniture and Woodwork Conservation, proposes to stabilize the vulnerable areas and to in-paint the few bright areas of loss that are most visible [...].*⁷²

This restoration proposal included a brief description of the altarpiece in terms of materials, dimensions and state of conservation; although the piece was considered to be in a relatively good condition since the 1994 intervention, minor measures were recommended so that the piece could travel.

[30] In order to find out more about the altarpiece following its loan, on 18 March 2008 Jack Hinton wrote to the shop Bricabraque Mobrel in Lisbon. In the letter, Hinton asked whether the company was in any way related to Francisco José de Magalhães Mobrel's company Mobrel Lda., which had the same address and which had sold an eighteenth-century gilded woodcarved altarpiece to Smith in the 1950s. Hinton mentioned that he was researching that very same altarpiece and succinctly described the piece, as well as the formalities involved in bringing it to the United States. He stressed that the query stemmed from the altarpiece's historical significance; the issues of authorship, time of purchase and the formalities involved in the entire process were equally relevant to the PMA curator. Hinton never received a reply to his inquiry.⁷³

Closing remarks

[31] Smith's activities in Portugal to purchase objects that would allow him to install the so-called Portuguese chapel in Philadelphia took place in a set of specific circumstances. First and foremost was his appreciation for the uniqueness of baroque and rococo art in Portugal, as well as the acknowledgement that it was little-known both in the US and abroad. The "excitement of the hunt", as Russell-Wood noted in

⁷⁰ Kathryn Hiesinger's email of 1 June 2007, PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁷¹ "We require it be displayed at least 36" out of the public's reach or in a case [...]. The temperature should be maintained at 68-72 degrees Fahrenheit and relative humidity should be between 48-52% with light levels at 50 footcandles or less with 100% ultraviolet light filtration [...]." PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁷² PMA, Philadelphia, archive of the Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, loose document.

⁷³ After consulting the documents in the PMA's Department of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, and in order to obtain further information on Mobrel, Lda., I established contact with José de Magalhães Nobre's daughter who explained that her father kept all the records of sales and purchases in order and that the process pertaining to the rococo altarpiece was no exception. While at first there was great openness, with time contacts proved fruitless and one of the heirs of Casa Mobrel went back on her decision to make her father's written records available.

a text dedicated to Smith for the catalogue of the Calouste Gulbenkian exhibition in 2000,⁷⁴ was one of the driving forces behind his research. He was spurred on by the absolute novelty that he would bring to the US. In addition, one could mention the following aspects: his well-known desire to become the first to 'discover' and reveal new objects of study while extolling these and his own scholarly feat; the fact that Philadelphia had a long-standing relationship with historical Portuguese figures, hosting a well-integrated immigrant community with which Smith kept in contact; the good relations that he always cultivated with Portuguese leaders and distinguished figures during the *Estado Novo* regime; his contacts with the world of museums and long-established families in Portugal, which quickly led him to the antique dealing world and greatly helped him to purchase the pieces for the chapel and take them to the US.

[32] For its part, the composite nature of the chapel itself, made up of sundry pieces, also played a role in its exhibition trajectory. While the large rococo tabernacle, which stands out for its centrality, dimension, artistic quality and originality, was the focus of attention and deserved pride of place in exhibitions outside the city, the other components of the chapel did not merit the same consideration. The *azulejos*, which display hunting and gallantry scenes, the statue of St. Francis of Assisi, the candle-holding angels or the small case for the image of the Virgin, did not receive the same degree of attention and intervention. Now stored in the PMA reserves, away from the eyes of the public, their initial function is compromised and their future fate uncertain. A plan was being considered to reverse this situation. Jack Hinton was planning on reinstalling the Portuguese chapel in a wing of the PMA, probably the same already containing its altarpiece, but progress on this project was halted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

[33] For over three decades the Portuguese chapel that Robert C. Smith was so committed to assemble in a deconsecrated church, fulfilled its purpose to offer Philadelphia visitors glimpses of the uniqueness and artistic quality of the baroque masters of *azulejaria*, gilded woodwork and sculpture in Portugal. From 1994, the small chapel was de-installed and its components gradually moved to the PMA. Today, the altarpiece has pride of place in the European Decorative arts gallery, where it still awaits to fulfil the function it was given by 20th century collecting and exhibiting practices: to be the centrepiece of a set designed to show Portuguese baroque and rococo sacred interiors to an American audience.

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⁷⁴ Russell-Wood (2000), 36.

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