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Documental Survey of Project Prim'art - Portugal Rediscovering Mural Art: Historical and Scientific Study Of Archiepiscopal Évora

Abstract

The importance of documentary research for art history studies in Cultural Heritage is unquestionable to ascertain the date of a masterpiece, confirmation of authorship and acknowledgement or dismissal of its historical theories. Most of the research pertaining to paintings and painters has been conducted by art historians, but what kind of novel information can be obtained from the historians' point of view? This was the main goal of the survey conducted into the lives of painters who have worked over 400 years ago in the town of Évora during the so-called "golden age" of mural paintings in Southern Portugal and described in this paper. Furthermore, this paper presents a brief overview of the methodology used and shows that it is possible to reconcile the computer language of today with the language of notaries and witnesses of the "De genere" inquiry process of the 16th century.

1. Introduction

In order to study the valuable pictorial heritage of mural paintings in the Alentejo region, the *PRIM'ART* project was created from a partnership established by several institutions including HERCULES Laboratory and the History Department of Évora University; the Art History Department of Faculty of Humanities, University of Lisbon (ARTIS-FLUL); the Atomic Physics of University of Lisbon (CFAUL) and the Regional Directorate of Culture of Alentejo (DRCAlent).

PRIM'ART: Portugal Rediscovering Mural Art: Historical and Scientific study of Archiespiscopal Évora (1516-1615), was a multidisciplinary project that combined

different approaches ranging from history, history of art, technical and material studies of mural paintings. The main goal of this project was to redefine the stylistic and material corpus of mural paintings of Évora region through new historical studies and scientific analysis.

One of the tasks carried out under the project framework was a documentary survey on Évora's painters from the 16th to the 17th centuries. The aim was to validate and gather further information about the painters lives and works that could be used as an auxiliary tool for scientific studies of mural paintings. Among the research questions, we wanted to know who were these men, where they came from, how they lived, which painting genres they exercised and how they organized their work. This was of particular interest since in the town Évora there wasn't anything resembling "The Brotherhood of St. Lucas" which was the responsible entity for regulating all the activity of painters in the city of Lisbon. To collect as much data as possible, it was necessary to use various forms of documentary research. In the following sections, the methodology will be presented followed by some examples of the obtained data.

2. Bibliographic Research

The first step carried out was to gather all the documentation already published on the subject. For many years the scientific community has been researching documents to gain a greater appreciation from the lives of painters, and to offer greater certainty of authorship to the works of art. The data reported by the authors are spread across various types of publications from different chronological periods. Most of them can be found in the local libraries (e.g. in the town Hall, in Public Library of Évora, in Évora University, DRCAIent documental department), online in digital libraries (e.g. www.bdalento.net) or in academic repositories.

From the town of Évora, the manuscripts of Pe. Manuel Fialho are among the oldest [1]. Manuel Fialho was a Jesuit priest, who lived in Évora in the 18th century and recorded some curious physical particularities of the artists that have worked in town. One of them was Francisco Lopes, the painter of the Church vault of "Colégio do Espírito Santo", about whom he wrote: «the painter who started, and ended up all this,

(...), was Francisco Lopes “the lame”, because he could only walk with one foot and two crutches, but what he missed by not having the right foot, he made up by having both right hands . [He was ambidextrous].(...) And it was to see him climb the stairs on his knees and walk up the scaffolding, like there is no impediment».

Already in the 19th century, the Director of the Portuguese National Library and Inspector of Portuguese Libraries and Archives, Gabriel Pereira, made two of the most important compilations of historical documents from the city of Évora – “Documentos Históricos e Estudos Eborenses”- that were published between 1884 and 1894 [2,3]. Among his writings, Gabriel Pereira reports on several painters in Évora from the 16th century and comments on their work (mostly easel paintings). Another important author is Sousa Viterbo, a medical doctor and a journalist with an interest in erudite historical and archaeological researches [4]. In 1906, he published an extensive book named “Notícia de alguns pintores portugueses e de outros, sendo estrangeiros exerceram a sua arte em Portugal” where following a description of the state of the Art in Portugal, he presented the biographies of 105 painters from the 16th century, both Portuguese and foreigners, which included some who had worked in Évora (e.g. Francisco Henriques in the convent of São Francisco).

The first years of the 20th century were especially productive for the history of painting. The extinction of the religious orders brought to light an important pictorial collection which led to the first studies in the field of conservation and restoration. Túlio Espanca, a self-taught historian of Évora and a member of the Portuguese Royal Academy of Arts, was the author of the Artistic Inventory of Cultural Heritage for the districts of Évora and Beja which is still regarded today as a work of reference. In 1947, he published "Notes on Painters" in “Évora in the 16th and 17th centuries”[5] which contains the first of its kind overview of twenty-nine painters using documentary references and biographical notes. Five decades later, in 1998, Art Historian Victor Serrão then added a significant contribution to the biographies of the 16th and 17th century painters from the town of Évora. He wrote one particularly important essay concerning the painters of Évora, based on an extensive collection of data from the Portuguese historical archives, which he dedicated to painter Francisco Nunes Varela [6]. Still in 1998, Joaquim Oliveira Caetano, Art Historian and the Director of the Museum of Évora from 1999 to 2010, published some new documents

describing the activities of Diogo Contreiras [7], a 16th century easel and mural painter in the of Convent S. Bento de Cástris.

3. Documentary Research

The main set of documents about painters is located in the District Archive of Évora, but records can also be found at Municipal Archives of Montemor-o-Novo, Beja and Portalegre. The Public Library of Évora and the Cathedral Archives both hold monastery files. Most of the records were found in parochial books or baptism certificates, marriage and death certificates. The books contain notarial records of purchase (sale and rent), painting work including information on student tuition. Of particular interest is the agreement between José de Escovar (one of the most productive mural painters of the Archdiocese of Évora from the late 16th to early 17th centuries) and the vineyard Domingos Fernandes. In this contract, dated from 1585, the painter agrees to take for apprenticeship in the arts of oil, tempera, fresco and gilding, Pedro Álvares (the son of Domingos Fernandes) aged twenty one, during a period of five years. As an apprentice, Pedro Alvares was required to shadow his master in every detail relating to the craft of painting, including supporting him in his work and private affairs [8]. José de Escovar in turn had to provide bed, food and clothing to his young apprentice. These kind of contracts focused more on legal aspects, such as delivery time and payment methods, rather than in the description of the artistic work. In the end, few new material surfaced by revisiting those files, because they were already thoroughly investigated by the authors mentioned above. However, the District Archive of Évora recently received “De genere” inquiry processes and wills, and these have hardly been studied so far. These documents are crucial to impart more certainty the information already known about the painter’s lives.

3.1. “De genere” Inquiry Processes

The process "De genere et moribus" was an official document to ascertain and confirm blood purity. It was established in Portugal in the mid-17th century and had as objective to verify if the candidates to religious life lived under the precepts of the

Catholic Church and if their ancestors had no Jewish, Moorish, Indian or Mulatto blood[9]. The documents usually contained information that could trace three generations as far back as the grandparents. Often detailing the painter's family lineage and income, the information contained allows us to gain new insights into the biographies of painters and their economic and social status (Figure 1).

The “De genere” inquiry process of the painter Manuel Fernandes' sons [10] is an example of how this kind of documents can provide crucial information about a painter's heritage. The life of this painter is well documented most likely because of his connection with the Portuguese Inquisition. In the files of the Court of the Holy Office, it is possible to appreciate his artistic activity, with documents showing that he used to paint the scenes of the condemned by the Inquisition [11]. Although, the documents about this painter are well known, it was possible to add some additional information through the “De genere” inquiry process of two of his sons, Manuel Fernandes and Padre (Father) Moreno.

This document reveals that Manuel Fernandes was legally married to Sebastiana Varela, and two of his eleven children followed the religious life. Antonio Moreno was baptized on the 20th of March 1602. He was a priest of the order of St Peter in Terena village, but by the time this document was made Antonio Moreno was already deceased. The other son, Manuel Fernandes, was baptized on the 13th April 1612, attended the University of Évora and “earned” the first degree of religious life, the “prima tonsura”. Manuel Fernandes (the father) was a painter-gilder which settled with his family in Ancha Street with the earnings from his painting craftsmanship of 200.000 reis/year and sometimes even more (Figure 1). The painter even left a house at Ancha Street to his religious son as a dowry.

It was not uncommon for foreign painters to hide their cultural origins by marrying Catholic Portuguese women and giving their children typical Portuguese names. As the vast majority of painting commissions were made in a religious context, it would have been advantageous to the painters not to raise questions about their faith specially at such a time when people could be easily arrested by the Inquisition, indicted and charged with the crime of Calvinism. This was particularly true and a real threat for painters originating from Northern Europe. One example is José

Antonio, a member of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri of Estremoz village. From his “De genere” inquiries process [12], we learn that he was the son of Pedro António Vignali, a painter born in Milan, who came to Portugal and married Teresa Maria, a native of Lisbon. His paternal grandfather was also a painter who was born in Monaco whose wife was a native of São Martinho, city of Genova. This document is very interesting, not only because it reveals at least two painters so far unknown, but also because it makes us wonder if they brought with them artistic influences from their native countries.

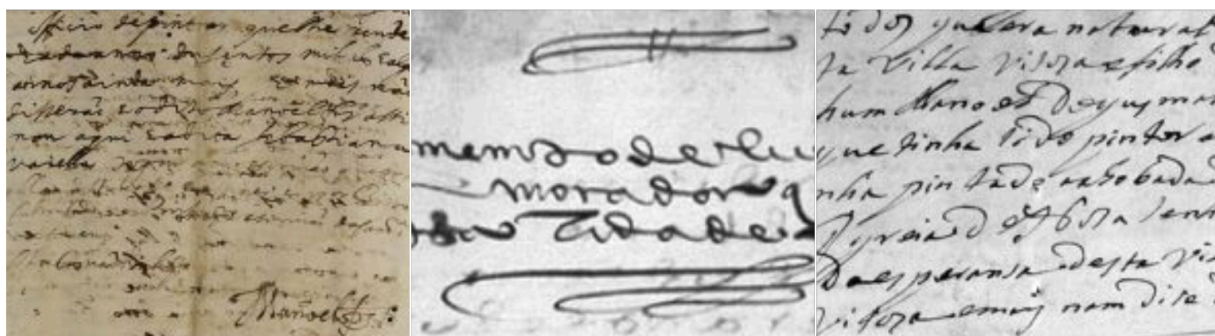
Another example is Bartolomeu Sanches, a painter well known by art historians even though his biography was rather incomplete due to the lack of data about his personal life. From the “De genere” inquiry process” of Valerio de Madureira [13], a student from Évora University and the son of the painter Pedro Lopes Valerio, we find out that Bartolomeu Sanches was his paternal grandfather and that he was born in Spain at las Pennas, San Peter the Kingdom of Murcia. Additionally, Bartolomeo Sanches was married to Margarida Correa, from Matosinhos (northern Portugal) and that he was a “very good man and Christian”.

Left to right:

Figure 1. Manuel Fernandes, Transcript: «with his craft of painter earned two thousand reis each year, and in some years even more». The signature of Manuel Fernandes can be seen at the right bottom.

Figure 2. Transcript detail of the will of Luis de Escovar: “Testament of Luis de Escovar painter, resident of the city of Évora”.

Figure 3. Transcript: “(...) Manoel de Gusmão had been a painter and had painted the vault of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Esperança (...)”.



3.2. Wills

Another important documental source are the wills. Not all of them are as rich as the document shown below, but wills usually contained very important information about the painter's life and work, lists of movable and immovable property, manumission of slaves, inheritances, debt claims identification, donations to churches and sororities. The will of the painter Francisco Lopes [14] is one of the most extraordinary documents found because it contained several facts of his personal life, his family, households, even a detailed account of his daily life. Due to the name similarity, another will was also discovered, that of the painter Francisco Lopes Mendes, dating from 1721 [15]. Francisco Lopes was a painter who lived in Évora in the late 17th century and early 18th century. In 1720 he was seriously ill and had his will drafted by the notary Manoel Pinheiro de Carvalho. In the first part of his will, Francisco Lopes states that he wants to be buried in the S. Francisco convent, dressed in a St. Francis costume. He requested that thirteen Messes should be celebrated for the benefit of his soul and one Mass for the benefit of his parents' soul. The painter was so weak that he was unable to sign his own will. We assume that his illness was sudden because Francisco Lopes had to abandon his work and leave it for his son to finish. Documents on file confirm Francisco Lopes was a resident of Raimundo Street in Évora, and, more importantly, that he was working in the Church of S. Vicente do Pigeiro. Due to his illness he couldn't finish the work that was budgeted in 80.000 reis. Reportedly he received five gold coins and the remainder would be paid to his son upon the completion of the work. Furthermore, this document also refers to an interesting detail so far unknown: the existence of a public square where painters could buy paints in Évora from a man named Manuel Marques.

Francisco Lopes also declared that he owed the sum of two thousand five hundred reis to the Secretary of the University. The painter also states that he left chickens and other food items with a woman who apparently did the cooking when he was working at S. Vicente do Pigeiro Church. It is also stated in the documents that a stonemason, by the name of Manoel Gomes who lived on Raimundo Street, had in his possession some paintings that Francisco Lopes had done for 12.000 reis and only lacked the

black frames. Yet, the most important piece of information contained in this document was the possibility to date and assign the authorship to Francisco Lopes of the paintings that adorn the dome of the Church of S. Vicente do Pigeiro (a rural parish located about 31 km east of Évora, towards Reguengos de Monsaraz). These paintings are similar to other coeval murals whose authorship is unknown, and for this reason a study of their form and style could be used for comparison.

4. Documentary Research Online

The use of digital databases can increase the speed of research and allows the cross-checking of information on different types of documents. DIGITARQ is a repository where a catalogue of documents from the main Portuguese historical archives can be found. It provides information about documentary collections, and in some cases, it is even possible to visualize and download documents. Another useful online database is FUNDIS created in 2009 by the University of Évora, a repository of documentary descriptions of archival collections on institutions from the south of Portugal. In this database, we found the information on the Public Library and the Cathedral of Évora.

However, some considerations must be taken into account in order to make online research fully viable. First, we must to conciliate the language of the 21st century with the old writings of the notaries of the 16th century or the witnesses in the “De genere” inquiry processes of the 17th century. Nowadays, the documents are often difficult to read due to damages caused by insects, humidity stains and even hard to read handwriting (Figure 2). When the archivist makes the paleography in order to make the description of the document, some errors may occur, which can be seen in the case of the will of the painter Luis de Escovar (son of José de Escovar), wrongly miswritten as Luis de Tovar [16].

It should be also noted when conducting online research that chronological boundaries are often outdated, depending on the individual characteristics of each document. Some may contain information of the painters’ ancestors, often their grandparents, and as seen in the following example, even their great grandparents. In the “De genere” inquiry process of José António de Carvalho and João Batista de

Carvalho [17], from the Archbishop of Lisbon, a document dating from 1746 reports facts relating to several decades before. Contained within a few simple lines of text, a “process witness” offers the most extraordinary revelation about the authorship of the mural paintings of the dome of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Esperança in Vila Viçosa. He points out that the great grandfather of the boys was the painter responsible for this work of art, located in the town of Alentejo where Bragança’s Palace is situated, the seat of the Portuguese royal family at the time (Figure 3).

5. Final Notes

With many years of documented research, Túlio Espanca and Vitor Serrão are the two main authors who provided a rich insight into the lives of painters from Évora in the 16th and 17th century. Nowadays, we have the research available in important digital platforms, such as the FUNDIS and the DIGITARQ, facilitating the access to documents located in the physical archives. The Archive for the Évora District offers exceptionally clear and detailed file descriptions in this respect. From studying the archives, one realizes that the work and lives of many painters were shaped by rigid family ties, and often carefully selected inter-marriage and sponsorships.

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