

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES ON 'THE ALVERCA PALACE' (CASA DO ALENTEJO)

The palace was constructed 'extra-muros', next to the 'Portas de Santo Antão', which made up part of the 'Fernandine Wall', whose walls served to form the south and east facades of this palace.

In the middle of the 15th Century, the site was occupied by a pig-farm, which, in succession, became an abattoir "where one killed cattle", a tannery, and finally the place "where one left large animals found wandering in the street". It was on this soil, that, nearly two centuries later, The Majestic Club took root. The historian Luis Pastor de Macedo, impassioned with Lisbon, reported it in the following manner: "Who could imagine that on these lilac and dark blue nights, costumed in red and green, there once wallowed pigs on this very spot!" More recently the place was given over to a lycée, without doubt the foremost in Lisbon, and at the time of its transformation into a casino, the spot was occupied by the furniture and objets d'art shop 'A Liquidadora'. For reasons that we do not know the Majestic later adopted the name 'The Monumental Club', which, stayed on until 1928, albeit without its luxurious rooms. In 1932 it was rented to the 'Grémio Alentejano' and later became the 'Casa do Alentejo'.

The interior composition dates from its transformation into a casino.

The transformation project (or "appropriation project" as the author prefers to call it), under the name of António Rodrigues da Silva Júnior, one of the most acclaimed architects of the time, was submitted to the Town Hall in 1917. On-site work began in 1919. With construction-work of a quality and a swiftness of execution remarkable even by modern standards, the transformation constituted a mammoth task. It required no less than three master-builders, who had in effect formed a construction company, and dozens of artists and craftsmen, all under the direction of Architect Silva Júnior. As soon as the management of the Club was granted all its rights, Silva Júnior, surrounded by the principal artists of the time, including not only painters such as Júlio Silva, Benvindo Ceia, Domingos Costa, José Bazalisa, but also azulejo tile specialists such as Azulejo Master Jorge Colaço, together with more than a dozen sub-contractors, started this undertaking.

The facades which have undergone least change give us a good idea of how simple the original construction was. Even if the initial composition were not known, probably only the first two stories have changed; that is to say, the lodges which are now situated on the ground floor and the main entrance.

Above the principal window in the corniche of the main entrance, can be found the family crests of the first incumbents: Miguel Paes de Amaral and Meneses Quifel Barbarino.

The old entrance was situated on the Travessa de S. Luis, which passed under the building, emerging onto an open-air courtyard containing the stables ('The Arabian Courtyard').

There probably didn't exist an entrance giving onto the relevantly recent Rua Portas de Santo Antão. Considering its interior, the exterior is very 'discreet', notwithstanding the fact that, at the time, there were plans for a lift so that the casino's clientele would be able to avoid the tiring steps.

This project was abandoned in favour of a "vast marble staircase"; for construction (of the lift) would have meant demolishing an extremely old five-metre thick wall. This wall was clearly part of the Fernandine Wall, and possibly, a part of 'The Gates of Santo Antão'.

Two fragments of the South Wall (containing the staircase and the corridor), and the east of the wall encircling the Palace are still visible. At the top of the East fragment stood a tower which probably made up a portion of the tile room of the 17th and 18th centuries. Even to this day, a water tank still exists in the corner formed by these two portions of the wall.

We begin our visit by passing through the main entrance on the Rua Portas de Santo Antão.

At the top of the staircase, "headed by an arabian decorated-glass door, attended by an impeccably dressed footman, conjuring up visions of The Thousand and One Nights, we then pass into the richly decorated central courtyard reminiscent of pure moorish Spain". It was thus that on the day of its inauguration "Arquitectura Portuguesa" described the courtyard which even today has a surprising effect upon all those entering it for the first time.

In places where once there were low flat arches of stone, there now spring up arches raised with plaster fluting supported on columns of marbled plaster. All the rest of the decoration is in plaster, on the painting of which, although degraded with aging, it is still possible to distinguish seven different tones.

The furniture of this Grand Hall is of wood and tooled leather and in shades that perfectly harmonise with the setting; a care for harmonisation that one also finds in the other rooms.

It is a point worth noticing in other locations throughout; that the furniture was expressly conceived and rigorously chosen to harmonise with the decoration.

Where in bygone days there once stood the stables, there now remains today the luxurious "ladies' toilet rooms" in Louis XV style, together with a mens' hairdressing salon (actually a reading room) decorated with paintings by José Ferreira Bazalisa.

Still on this floor, where one can today find the administrative offices, there are a series of little rooms, called at the time 'boudoirs', certain of which have been decorated in art nouveau style.

To gain access to the upper floor, utilising a staircase that already existed in the palace, Architect Júlio Silva, filled with imagination, sought to recreate a setting with "sumptuous effects in a strictly oriental style". Having only a limited space at his disposal, he totally eliminated an exterior wall, supported the large opening with two green plaster columns and projected onto the top of an interior courtyard a wide landing which opens onto three large decorated-glass windows. It is there that is displayed the arabian style furniture inlaid with nacre. The panelling also bears inscriptions in arab and some azulejos in hispano-arab style.

The hall on the second floor provides a new surprise. We suddenly abandon the moorish style and pass into the neo-doric which can be noticed on the capitals of the columns and on the walls decorated with friezes of female heads. Its designer was the painter Júlio Silva.

At the time of the inauguration there was a plaster pedestal in this room, formed with bronze inlays of the architect himself, Silva Júnior.

To the left of this hall, we enter into the largest salon in the house; the Louis XVI, or 'Dining Room'. This was formed by the demolition of several rooms and a service staircase of the old palace. To obtain the effect of large rococo windows, without altering their embrasures, Silva Júnior once more displayed his genius. He achieved the transformation by means of double glass-filled doors to hide the exterior and a profusion of mirrors and well-placed decorative motifs.

One can notice on the ceiling, exactly above the centre of the room, a large fresco by Benvindo Ceia, the instigator of all the decorative painting in the room.

At the far end, and serving as a separation between this room and the gaming room is a scene flanked by allegorical figures, the work of the sculptor José Isidro Neto. Originally this scene did not have the same form as today; it nowadays provides the means of access to the two rooms which it separates. A canvas by Júlio Silva is still noticeable in the little entrance hall to the bar at the side of the main facade.

Once past this scene we arrive at the gaming room, itself smaller than the preceding room and completely decorated with motifs depicting gaming; this constituted the heart of the casino (roulette and other classic games of chance).

The decoration is "In a free style, a neo-Renaissance (...) which seeks to emancipate itself from the formulas, conventions and preconceptions of other epochs." All of the oil paintings, including that on the ceiling representing 'Fortune' were carried out by the hand of another painter of the period, Domingos Costa.

The rooms situated to the right of the hall provide further surprise. The architect abandons the "styles" he was using to emphasize the sumptuousness of the previous rooms and chooses instead the austerity of the "medieval and gothic style". After the walnut screen which separates it from the hall, one reaches the reading or 'waiting' room, on whose panelling, also in walnut, we find an azulejo frieze, by Jorge Colaço, illustrating allegorical songs from the Lusiads (by Luis Camoes).

Next to this room, and splitting up the windows giving onto 'The Arabian Courtyard', there was at the time a room for 'bridge and other games of chance' decorated with azulejos, by the same artist, representing scenes of 'The Fair of Santa Eulalia', in the form of a remarkable panel of naturalist inspiration which is, without doubt, one of the most successful works of the great master of azulejo.

The chandeliers and the rest of the furniture were custom-designed by the architect Guilherme Rebelo de Andrade.

The adjacent room containing azulejos of the 17th and 18th centuries was a courtyard of the old palace whose roofing was erected in the nineteen-forties.

In the hall next to the reading room we can see 'arte nova' azulejos with subjects relating to card games; the work probably being attributable to Jorge Colaço.

This hall gives access to the men's toilets and to 'the billiard room' of the time as well as to another small room. In the billiard room, 'medieval' in style, the same artist has depicted hunting scenes (a corrida, etc.) employing the same techniques used on the earlier-mentioned panels.

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