
RESEARCH ADVANCES ABOUT PAINTINGS ON COFFERED CEILINGS IN THE NORTH OF PORTUGAL

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Abstract

Paintings on coffered ceilings are a set of compartments in a ceiling with images inside that can be decorative or figurative. Mostly in the Portuguese Baroque style, some churches and chapels have paintings on coffered ceilings, typically of rectangular or square format. The paintings on coffered ceilings usually focus in religious aspects, relating the lives of Jesus, Mary or Saints. Occasionally, the themes are connected to a particular place or church, describing the life of a saint. This artistic genre fits in the religious spirit of the XVII and XVIII centuries, when the churches were a truly scenic space, covered in diverse artistic forms, intended to sensitize and move the observer.

This investigation provides a better understanding of the paintings on coffered ceilings, typologies, themes, conservation diagnostic, and points out some aspects which ought to be taken into consideration for their technical and material characteristics. It is through exams and analysis that the conservator clarifies techniques and materials in works of art which also allows a correct diagnostic in order to achieve proper intervention methodologies.

Keywords: paintings, coffered ceilings, materials, conservation

1. Introduction

The use of paintings on coffered ceilings begins in the classical origins, Ancient Greece and Rome, but earned particular interest in the creativity and originality of the techniques and materials characterized by the Portuguese style.

Both the concepts and forms of the Greco-Roman Art were based on rationalism, harmony and proportion. Coffered ceilings were used too in the Etruscan tombs, while searching for the right balance between symmetry and harmony [1]. The first ones were made of stone without the use of decoration or painting.

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Afterwards, with the Renaissance Art, a period of rediscovery and reevaluation of the cultural classical values arouse. These elements reflect the influence of Greco-Roman Art, both in architecture as in painting and sculpture which is common in the Baroque Art, although with a different structure.

This form of artwork spread from north to south of Portugal since the end of the XVI century to as late as the beginning of the XIX century.

In the mid-XVIII century, the decoration on coffered ceilings reached its peak. It can be found in palaces and domestic buildings, churches and chapels, representing situations of ornamental, allegorical character or, more commonly, religious scenes. Besides the intrinsic decorative function, the cycles of paintings on coffered ceilings have a catechetical function, conveying a visual message to believers and also seeking a decrease in the illiteracy that marked that period. This painting genre emerges in times of serious illiteracy, using the pictures as illustrative books with an educational purpose. In the Mannerist period, and until the end of the Baroque, images were seen as the 'Bible of the illiterate'. The paintings were a primary instrument of the Counter-Reformer in propagating the Catholic faith. Thus, these paintings of sacred ceilings of churches, obey the widespread thought of the Baroque art in which Heaven comes down to Earth, showing images to believers. For example, in the interior of the Carvalhal's Church, the symmetry and the alignment of the coffered ceilings gives a sensation of continuity, converting all perspective to the altar (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Interior of the Carvalhal's Church, in Guarda.

The Council of Trent (*Concilium Tridentinum*) reorganized the Church, which became more rigid but also more cohesive, endowing with greater critical spirit, forbidding heretics or the impure aspects that could suggest misinterpretation on the part of the believer or evoke questions. The first half of the XVII century reflects this, trying to present religious themes more objectively.

They blend seamlessly in the baroque spirit of this period, in which the churches were a true theatrical space lined with different artistic forms like altarpieces, tiles, pulpits and numerous sculptures. All of this reflects the true essence of this style, trying to raise awareness and move the observer. The main purpose of this research is to clarify issues related to the paintings on coffered ceilings from several perspectives, such as historical places, themes, forms, materials and techniques, and their relation to conservation.

By identifying the causes of conservation problems, it is possible to improve, not only the methods for the maintenance of coffered paintings, but also the techniques of conservation and restoration.

2. Work methodology

An exhaustive research was made on large number of coffered ceilings, and a database was developed with locations, themes, shapes, types of ceilings, materials and techniques of execution. Then, the most interesting paintings for tests and scientific analysis were selected. The working methodology was based on the visual observation of the paintings, on the information gathered from the available documentation on the subject and also on the results obtained from several scientific analyses, such as infrared photography, ultraviolet fluorescence photography, energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (EDXRF) or cross-section examination of samples collected from the paintings using optical microscopy. Microchemical and staining tests were also performed for the identification of pigments and binders as well as Fourier transform infrared microspectroscopy (micro-FTIR analyses).

EDXRF analyses and photography techniques using ultraviolet and infrared lights were done only in some paintings to characterize pigments, varnish types and preparatory under drawings, because of the access difficulties to the paintings, which are, generally, displayed at 5-9 meters high. The microchemical tests and spectroscopic analyses were relevant as they brought new information of techniques and materials employed in this artistic style.

3. Case studies

The research focuses mainly on the north of the country, where paintings on coffered ceilings proliferated with greater intensity. Some ceilings are copies of others and the similarities are very present, especially when painted by artistic groups. The districts analysed in the present investigation are: Bragança, Vila Real, Porto, Braga and Viana do Castelo.

Most of the studied paintings have the authorship of several painters (i.e. artistic groups). In the district of Bragança, for instance, many churches and chapels were found, lined with paintings on coffered ceilings with similarities to each other, regarding both theme and compositions, but also the shape of the ceilings.

It was noticed that there had been several artistic groups responsible for implementing the ceilings. However, the presence of the painter Damião Bustamante was prevalent mostly in places like: Miranda do Douro, Mirandela, Bragança and Macedo de Cavaleiros. Damião Bustamante was a Spanish painter who settled in the north of Portugal and worked in numerous churches along with his son, João António Rodrigues Bustamante, whose job was to gild. It is very likely they had an artistic group accompanying them in the carpentry works and paintings, due to the large number of paintings of some churches, like the Sacristy of Outeiroin Bragança with a total of 88 paintings both on walls and ceiling [2].

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Paintings themes: decorative or figurative

For better comprehension of the themes of this type of paintings it is important to understand the relationship between the paintings and the church or chapel, but also other conditions such as the context of the artistic creation, their location or the monument's typology.

With this, a duality of themes of coffered ceilings in the north of Portugal was outlined: decorative and figurative. However, in some ceilings it is possible to see a combination of these two typologies.

To understand the distribution of the coffered ceilings in Portugal, an exhaustive inventory was made which led to the creation of a map with all the locations and identifications of its main themes (Figure 2).

Regarding the decorative typology, many floral ornaments were found in sacristies' ceilings and naves of churches, from north to south of the country.

Paintings on coffered ceilings with floral ornaments, volutes and turns are less common. The ceiling of the *Saint António of Capuchos* Convent's sacristy in the city of Guimarães is an excellent example of this typology. This division has a coffered ceiling with phytomorphic decorations in shades of white, green and gold. It is decorated with thin red line plant forms painted on a white background. The marbled frames contrast with the white background of the paintings. In some ceilings, these elements are combined with sacred themes, usually portraits of apostles and saints or catholic symbols, as seen in the ceiling of the *Saint Apolinário Church's* sacristy, in Urros, Torre de Moncorvo.

Another example of the decorative typology can be seen in the main Church of *Arcos de Valdevez*, in Viana do Castelo. The ornamental paintings are located on the coffered ceiling in the side-chapel of the *Virgin of Our Lady of*

Sorrows. Wood original paintings were found hidden under these easel paintings.

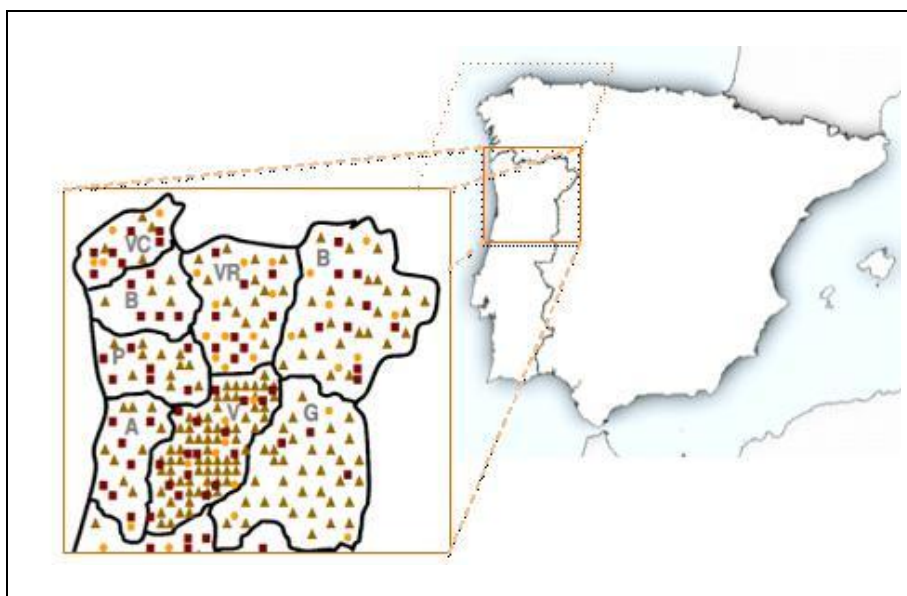


Figure 2. Map of the north of Portugal with the location of the coffered ceilings:
▲ figurative paintings, ■ decorative paintings, ● combination of both themes,
the letters – represent the districts.

Regarding the figurative typology, the paintings with representation of images were grouped into four distinct categories according to their themes:

- 1) figurative paintings with only one saint or figure,
- 2) paintings of historical episodes,
- 3) themes of either symbolical or allegorical paintings,
- 4) paintings of profane themes.

The first theme (figurative paintings with only one saint or figure) is the most popular and it was usually used in the sacristies or naves of churches. The paintings are mainly half-body portraits and rarely full-body representations. The style of the compositions is simple, without motion, due to its static characteristics. This figures, generally saints or apostles, are represented accompanied by their representative element. Hence, these images with attributes are a consistent communication of Faith and Devotion. Either behind the figures or in their hands objects can be seen in order to help identifying them.

The distribution of the figures usually depends on images present in the iconographic scheme of the ceiling. The first paintings are the most important, usually representations of Virgin or Christ. Apostles or other saints can be found in the back of some paintings.

The second theme (paintings of historical episodes) is normally arranged by cycles mainly in the naves of the churches' ceilings because they allow a better distribution of the scenes. The most common themes are the story of the life of Christ, scenes from the Bible and the lives of saints composing hagiographic narratives.

The ceiling of the *Salvador Convent's* nave, in Braga, consists of forty paintings in the late mannerist style [3], picturing the lives of Christ and Saint John The Baptist, and may well be one of the first ones ever made in the country (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The paintings on coffered ceilings in the Salvador Convent's nave, in Braga. Photograph by Luis Ribeiro/QREN.

The third theme (themes of either symbolical or allegorical paintings) is not often used in paintings on coffered ceilings especially when isolated, in other words, in only one painting. Regarding the symbolical theme it can be divided into three types: isolated, with phytomorphic motives and symbolical with narrative pictures. The ceiling in the nave of the *Custóias's Church* is an example of an isolated symbolical theme.

The fourth theme (paintings of profane themes) regards all the paintings that represent historical figures, popular motives or other forms, usually in domestic or civil buildings. Coffered ceilings were also used on palaces in the XVIII century. For instance, the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa includes two spaces: the Duke's Room and the Virtue's Room, representing the glorification and the exaltation of the nobility.

4.2. Materials and techniques of paintings on coffered ceilings

The paintings on coffered ceilings have different support materials: wood, canvas and stone. The most common material used for both the support of the

coffered paintings and the structures is wood. The internal structure of the ceilings is usually made of metal beams supported by stone foundations.

Good examples of support diversification are: the ceiling of the *Salvador's Convent* in Braga (Figure 3) which is composed of paintings whose support is wood; in Porto, in one of the rooms of the *Porto Cathedral*, the coffered paintings are painted on canvas. Less often stone was used as a support and a good example are the paintings of the *Santa Barbara's Chapel* in Felgar, Torre de Moncorvo.

Depending on their format, there are three typologies of ceilings: rectangular, octagonal or polygonal. The rectangular ones are more frequent.

The materials and techniques used in coffered ceilings paintings may vary, depending on the client, the artist, the model used and also the types of materials most abundant in the region. There is still a lot to study and many doubts to be clarified as the paintings on coffered ceilings can be either of authorship or made by artistic groups.

The brushstroke technique should be understood according to the purpose of the paintings, because, in addition to the decorative function, it has a strong means to catechizing. It was found that it was common to use a base, *imprimitura*, in many ceilings in order to assist the composition.

Underdrawings, scientific characteristics of pigments and varnishes and some restorations were found during the investigation (Figure 4). On the ceiling of the side chapel in the *Arcos de Valdevez's Church* the existence of an artistic renewal in which a canvas painting was put over the original support was found, which is composed of several planks of wood, at least five. The well-defined shapes of the original decorative features may indicate the use of decal techniques.

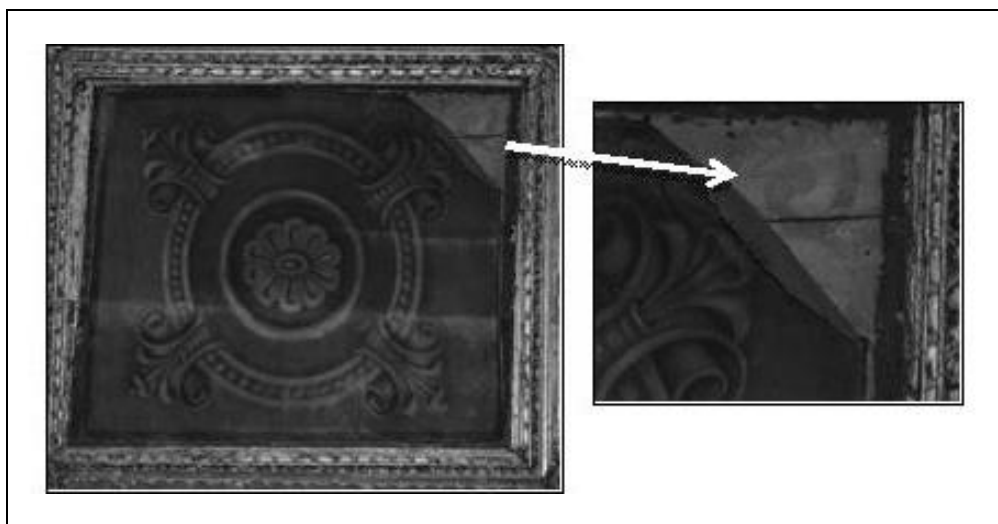


Figure 4. Chapel of the church of Arcos de Valdevez's: the canvas painting was put over the original support.

In the *Porto Cathedral*, a coffered ceiling is distinguished in one of the rooms. This ceiling, commissioned directly to the artist, is one of the most interesting examples of authorship due to its octagonal shape. The paintings inserted into the coffered ceiling belongs to Giovanni Battista Maria Melchior Pachini, an Italian artist who has painted fifteen canvas inspired by Cesare Ripa iconology between August 1719 and March 1720. The carpentry work that sustains the ceiling paintings was done by Salvador Martins a year earlier [4]. The Roman painter Giovanni Battista Pachini went to Porto, where he worked as a painter, probably in 1709 and died in 1740. Pachini also restored some paintings, among which stands out the work on paintings of the Chapel of Our Lady of Agonia, whose restoration dates the year 1727 [5].

The coffered ceiling paintings ordered to artistic groups are usually very big and cover entire naves of churches. The nave of the church of the *Old Salvador's Convent* (Figure 3) is a prime example, probably one of the first to be made in Portugal.

The nave is covered by a barrel vault, which adjusts the magnificent ceiling covered by a set of hagiographic paintings, forming forty coffered late-Mannerist style wood paintings. This entire framework has an admirable size, about 17.20 m long by 8.60 m wide and more than 9 m high. The oil paintings on the wooden ceiling of the church of the former monastery, according to historian Vitor Serrão, should be accredit to the artistic group formed by Domingos Lourenço Pardo, Manuel Machado de Sousa, Luís de Abreu, Manuel Lopes and Pantaleão Lopes, and were hypothetically executed between 1622 and 1623 [3, p. 306; 6].

The paintings represent scenes from the lives of Christ and saints, based possibly on the works of engravers such as Cornelius Cort, Adriaen Collaertor Jan Sadeler, but still deserving future iconographic studies. The entire scenography framework is relevant in iconological and iconographic terms. At that time, the circulation of engravings and prints was eased to artists, so that they could know the new artistic and iconographic trends. This set of coffered paintings defines the beginning of the XVII century, season where this type of ceiling started to be used with both catechizing and decorative character motives.

Inside the Chapel of Santa Bárbara there is a granite ceiling on coffered ceilings, containing twelve paintings representing passages of her life and martyrdom. They date back to 1754 and the artist may have used *Flos Sanctorum* as a source of inspiration, which tells the story of the life of Santa Bárbara, as represented on the paintings on the ceiling. The paintings are arranged and numbered according to some of the major passages of her life. The numbers were painted in white on each painting allowing viewers to follow the right order, as well as the date. It is supposed that these may have been ordered during the construction of the chapel, so that the work could be completed simultaneously.

The worship of Santa Bárbara spread in Felgar, Torre de Moncorvo, because this was a little town of miners and blacksmiths, which explains, partially, why the Chapel was built on a place of residual ironworks.

The paintings represented in the coffered ceiling are probably a unique example in Portugal of a full and detailed historian cycle of the life and martyrdom of Santa Bárbara. Monitoring through the images on the ceiling eased the believer to understand the life of the Saint. It is important to remember that in the XVIII century masses were given in Latin, with the aggravating circumstance of high illiteracy prevalent at the time, especially in the interior region.

5. Conclusions

The paintings on coffered ceilings are very rich historical and iconographic sources. They are based on specific characteristic themes of easel paintings, however differing slightly in some forms and models.

The database created was fundamental for the investigation. It is the result of an exhaustive research about paintings on coffered ceilings in the north of Portugal providing a better organization of many topics and consequently allowing paintings to be categorized, for example, by themes, materials and techniques.

The typology of paintings on coffered ceilings in the north of Portugal can be decorative or figurative. However, there are multiple themes inside these categories.

Regarding materials and techniques, several cases of study show that the presence of an initial pictorial layer similar to preparation, *imprimitura*, is crucial in this type of paintings because it allowed artists to give an overall tone. Only by knowing the characteristic of techniques and materials is it possible for conservation science to evolve and find appropriate forms of treatment according to criteria of compatibility and stability.

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