
CANVAS SUPPORT AS MATERIALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS-PEDAGOGIC PROPAGANDA

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(Received 23 October 2014, revised 15 January 2015)

Abstract

In Portugal, over the centuries, religion used painting on canvas to evoke its sacred mysteries. Despite that paintings are primarily pictorial, their back can reveal a lot about their contribution for the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Catholic Church. Based on an interdisciplinary collaboration among Art history and Conservation science on the topic of the material and technology of the weaved support in the Portuguese painting, this paper focuses concisely on how canvas appears to be an exceptional medium for visual materialization of such power and glory.

Keywords: canvas, support, painting, weaved structure

1. Introduction

Religion, whose Latin etymology *religare* highlights the role of gathering, tying and binding, has long been recognized as deeply related to art. Over the centuries, religion used painting, as a means of bringing the believer to God. Art painting, on weaved form, gathers an exceptional sensory, emotional and intellectual vehicle for those who want to achieve spirituality [1]. In fact, the words ‘text’ and ‘textile’ both derive from the Latin *texere*, to weave [2]. And weaving can function as a metaphor for many aspects of life, including the religious one. Thus, Christianity, which became the predominant power influencing European culture, after classical antiquity, inspired artists and patrons to evoke the nature of these sacred mysteries in visual terms. One of these terms was the painting on canvas [3].

Despite paintings are primarily pictorial and, consequently, the image is the starting point, the back of it can reveal a lot about its history and function. But what sort of information can be derived from the back of it when dealing with art and religion? Our paper presents results of an interdisciplinary collaboration among Art history, conservation and Science on the topic of the material and technology of the weaved support in the Portuguese painting, since

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its implementation to Portuguese industrial revolution. The particularities of the fabric support used, its dimensions, and whether it is framed, suspended or rolled may help in the interpretation of religious artwork. And it also may enhance the relationship between religion and art. Therefore, in this article, we show concisely and through this comparative study of canvas supports, how it strongly contributed for the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Portuguese Catholic Church.

2. Discussion

2.1. *The use of canvas support in Portuguese religious painting*

In Portugal, by the late sixteenth century, artists began to replace panel to canvas support for oil painting [1]. The cultural circles embraced the Italian art solutions, while not ignoring the artistic influences from Flanders or Spain. Also through the cultural sponsorship, the exchange of artists was motivated, allowing the sharing of experiences, knowledge and documents between Portuguese and foreign artists [1]. The replacement of tempera to oil was driven by technical and expressive possibilities afforded by oil and the canvas support. Dynamic and flexible, they were able to translate a new notion of space, with strong dramatic intensity, typical from the new modern conscience [4]. Nevertheless, paintings were already executed on textile supports during the late Middle Age [3]. Indeed, painting on wood and textiles could even be carried out in the same workshop, but relatively few have survived. The demand increased due to changes of liturgical practice and an upsurge of religious fervour [5]. These early works were practiced for the making of banners, hangings, altarpieces, palls and painting on linen [5, p. 125], and most likely they were not envisaged as ephemeral objects [4]. Treatises of the period such as Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* (c. 1390) [6] or the *Manuscripts of Jean Le Begue* reveal that this practice, principally on linen, but also on silk, was already widespread [7].

Since the transubstantiation was an instrument of special reorganization of Christianity, the ceremony was an extraordinary ritual, surrounded by the highest mystery and solemnity. The place of celebration became the place with the real presence of Christ, which greatly solemnize the memory space and community meeting of Christianity [8]. Gradually, the painted textile support replaced the murals, the heavy panels, the costly tapestries and embroidered pieces [9]. Larger sizes, easy portability, and versatility for religious objects constituted a strong justification for the emerging of fabric as a painting support (Table 1).

In Portugal, few of these early works survived, partly due to their delicate and vulnerable medium of glue-size. Examples are the coarse plain linen altar cloth representing *Our Lady of Rosary* (Figure 1), from the Machado de Castro National Museum, Coimbra, and the distemper paintings *Flagellation of Christ* and *The kiss of Judas*, both in Idanha-a-Nova town. Thereby, due to fabric's versatility and ease portability, new experiences were practice in open spaces

(e.g. for processions) or inside (conserved in a private chapel, convent, cloister) [8]. For instance, the oldest Portuguese oil painting on canvas is, in fact, a portable banner of *Our Lady of Misericord* (c. 1555-60), painted by Francisco de Campos and belonging to the *Misericórdia of Alcochete* (Figure 2) [10].

Table 1. Preference of weaved canvas support for painting.

- Convenience, as it weighed less, was flexible and easily transportable;
- Easier handling;
- Easier application to the intended function;
- Portability, facilitating the transportation and exportation;
- Adequacy several occasions either religious or civil;
- Versatility of functions: one piece procession could be used/exposed, throughout the year, in the Church;
- Ease large-scale production, stimulating trade in small sizes, which are sold in bulk at low prices;
- Possibility of large dimensions, by joining seams for presenting continuous surfaces and less weight;
- More flexibility and ease of housekeeping: parts of certain ceremonies could be stored rolled or folded;
- Speed of execution: a piece of altar painted cloth would be potentially cheaper, lighter and faster than painting on wood;
- In principle, cheaper than tapestries and embroideries;
- Flexibility and three-dimensionality of the screen allow a more vibrant painting;
- The texture that gave the painting met the new artistic taste.
- Durability: preservation for the future, when painted in oil, unlike tempera on canvas.



Figure 1. The altar cloth of *Our Lady of Rosary*, with traces of distemper painting, Machado de Castro National Museum, Coimbra.

Founded in the sixteenth century and still in activity, this brotherhood has on its fabric banner the gregarious symbol of Mary's protective mantle covering the whole society. Along the centuries and during its annual processions, banners like this are a way of marking urban places as sacred, during the Holy

Week. In fact, the fabric support has been employed in multiple ways whether stretched or hanging, or created to be used as processionalals or as a fixed element [5, p. 126]. After the Counter-reform, the art of painting served, as never before, the dogmatic purpose of the decorous precept of *nihil profanum, nihil inhonestum* (nothing profane, nothing dishonest) [11]. From the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, the centralized power of Catholic Church promoted the evolution of a pious and devotion art painting to an apotheosis and strong theatrical content.

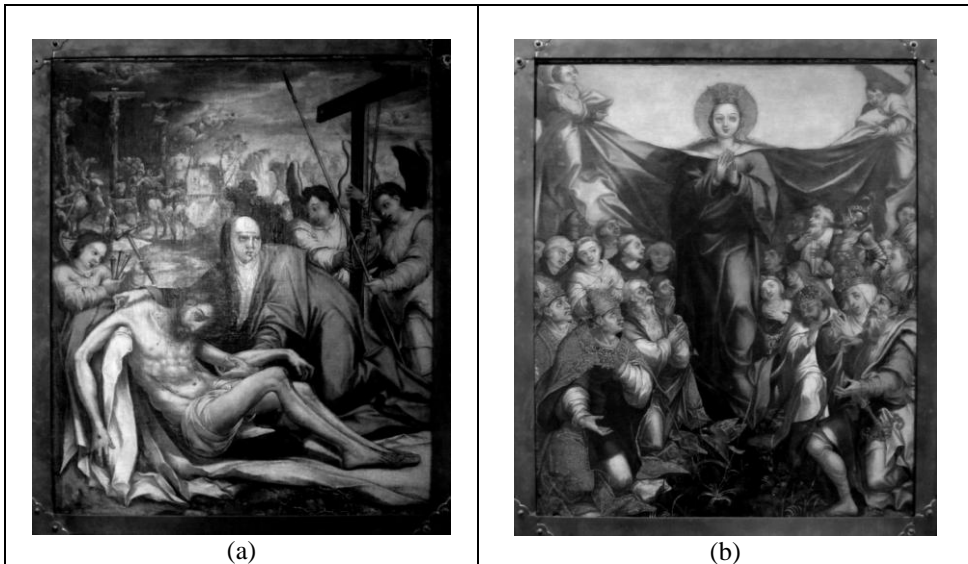


Figure 2. Portable banner *Our Lady of Misericord* (c. 1555-60), painted by Francisco de Campos and belonging to the *Misericórdia of Alcochete*: (a) front and (b) back of the banner. Photography by the author.

Allied to the technical and expressive possibilities of the oil, which allowed working more freely, larger canvases were increasingly used. They materialize the national interpretation of the Council of Trent (1525-1563) principles and are intrinsically associated with the introduction of the Eucharistic throne in Portugal [12]. Thus, beyond the morphological evolution of the altarpiece form, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the most distinguishing features developed was the innovative use of mechanized large paintings within the altar. These larger canvases were not mere paintings, but took part of the whole artistic and symbolic structure of the altarpiece; acting with strong theatrical proposes. Their configurations reflect the proscenium of a theatre stage, whereby a painting on canvas covers the altar, or parts thereof, and can be lowered and raised by a series of ropes and pulleys [13].

Through these large paintings, the church reinforces the image of strong and glorious institution. In fact, in 1676, the Bishop of Oporto, *D. Fernando Correa de Lacerda*, writes “the house of God should be well ornamented with paintings, as those who cannot read, read what is painted and those who can

read, read what is written” [14]. These impressive paintings were usually raised in specific occasions, like the Holy Week, as it has been so ever since. And, still according to the Bishop of Oporto, “they are fundamental as they participate in reading the Church as a set of symbols: its foundations are the basis of faith, the four walls are the four evangelists, the columns are the Bishops and Doctors of the Church, and the windows the five senses” [14]. And meaning to *architect*, among other things, to imagine and build mentally, the architectural space starts to be seen as *cosa mentale* (stated by Leonardo da Vinci about painting) and so an effective communication of theological narrative and a perfect tool for social cohesion [15]. Thus, the pinnacle of this virtual dimension is the transverse dialogue between architectural space, large paintings from altarpieces and painting on ceilings in perspective, giving a more overwhelming impression of illusion, spiritual transcendence and exuberance.

Consequently, alongside the impressive altar paintings, paintings on canvas extended to the ceilings, promoting scenography and the interpretation of the Italian *quadratura* in the Portuguese Churches [15].

The support appears to be therefore an exceptional medium for visual materialization of such power and glory, especially when integrated into architectural space [9].

2.2. Manufacturing history and religious-pedagogic propaganda.

During Middle Age, important technological innovations were carried out in the field of textile manufacture. One of them was the horizontal loom of pedals [15]. It had the big advantage, compared to the vertical loom, of weaving more cloth in a higher speed. Curiously, one of the oldest traces of a horizontal loom known was found in Portugal, in the archaeological ruins of Conimbriga [17].

In the traditional loom, the warp yarns are set up along the length of the fabric with transverse weft yarns at right angles. Plain and twill weaves are the two most commonly found in Portuguese canvas paintings, whether in fine or coarse canvas. Their weave geometry plays a major role in the fabric, as the density of yarns, in each direction, influences fabric’s behaviour and, therefore, of the painting [4]. In a plain weave picks and ends of weft and warp yarns pass alternately under and over each other, creating a homogeneous pattern. When the warp yarn or the weft goes over some threads, whose interweaving makes a diagonal, a twill weave is create.

The establishment of broader looms allowed larger fabrics and more complex patterns. Since these required a time-consuming process to set-up each pattern, they were more prized and expensive [5]. The more complex damask patterns were manufactured for purposes such as ceremonial use. Because twill and diaper fabrics were invested with religious meaning and were also expensive, it is not impossible to think them as being chosen as high-quality painting supports [4]. Symbolic, pragmatic and aesthetic significances may have therefore determined their selection, as it seems to have happened with the

religious work attributed to Francisco Correia (1568-1616) on linen fabric with diamond shape damask (Figure 3) weave whose undulating texture is evident through the paint.

Also in the larger altar paintings from seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the weaving loom limitation on the fabric width was surmounted by sewing canvases together. Ancient and overcast seams appear to have been the most widely practiced, and a trend towards coarser canvases has been observed for larger works.

Regarding the constituent materials, in the pre-industrial period, linen was the main fabric for religious paintings, but also hemp and ramie were used, as it happened with Bento Coelho da Silveira's (1617-1708) paintings [18].

Furthermore, in the study of the religious Portuguese canvases, in addition to visual assessment, observation by optical microscope is being carried out, for the identification of fibre morphology, through longitudinal view and cross section [19].

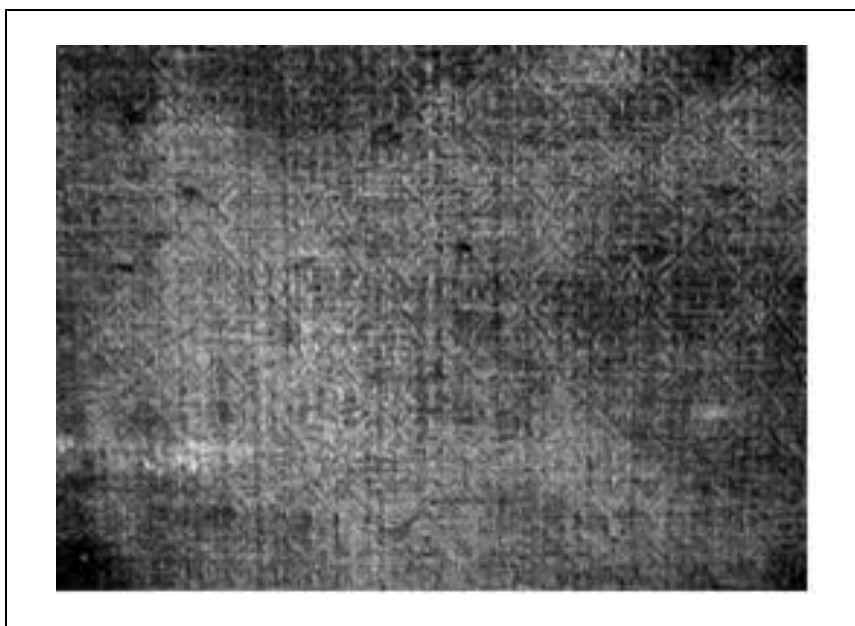


Figure 3. Reverse of the painting *Anuntiation*, attributed to Francisco de Campos (1568/1616), on linen with diamond shape damask.

3. Conclusions

It is a fact that paintings are primarily pictorial. Nevertheless, their back can reveal a lot about their contribution to the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Catholic Church. In Portugal, this strong relationship between religion and art was implemented along the centuries. Product of transubstantiation and later based on the Counter-Reform, this weaved support was used as an exceptional medium for visual materialization of religious power and glory. The replacement

of tempera by oil allowed producing a new notion of space, with dramatic intensity, typical from the new modern conscience. Portability, versatility and larger sizes for religious objects constituted a strong justification for the emerging of fabric as a painting support. And the pinnacle of this overwhelming illusion of transcendency is giving by the architectural space with the mechanized large painting and the *quadratura* on the ceilings. Most of the time, the weaving loom limitation on the fabric width was surmounted by sewing canvases together. The development of textile technical and material aspects allowed producing fabrics with religious meaning.

Symbolic, pragmatic and aesthetic significances may determine therefore their selection since they represent an important way to evoke the nature of the sacred mysterious of the Portuguese Catholic Church.

Acknowledgment

The study was supported by an FCT research grant (SFRH/BD/70937/2010) for the first author's PhD research 'Materials and techniques of canvas support in the Portuguese painting, since its implementation to the Portuguese industrial revolution'. To CITAR for all the support for the presentation of the paper proposed. Also to *Machado de Castro National Museum, Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Alcochete* and to the *Mosteiro de S. Miguel de Refojos*.

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