

SGRAFFITO in Portugal: a contribution to its study and preservation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recognition of architectonic surfaces as an important dimension of architectural heritage and as an integrated and inseparable part of material authenticity in buildings is a recent research development, in the practical discipline of heritage conservation, as well as in history of art and in architecture.

Recent research led to the discovery of an unknown and wide presence of sgraffiti in some urban and rural Portuguese ancient architecture; most of them are now at risk, since they are often forgotten or confused with other mural decorative techniques.

This study is part of a PhD research on sgraffito in architectures surfaces in Alentejo (South of Portugal) and intervention methodologies to safeguard the sgraffiti aesthetic and material authenticity.



Castelo de Vide



Elvas



Crato

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of our research were:

- to identify and discover non-known architectonic surfaces in Alentejo;
- to identify their origin, dates, themes;
- to map systematically sgraffito architectures surfaces;
- to identify specific regional techniques;
- to compare with other techniques from other regions;
- to propose protocols for its preservation.

3. RESULTS

Our research on sgraffiti in Alentejo has highlighted that the majority of the listed and studied sgraffiti ornaments have been painted over so many times, that today we can hardly identify its original aspect, its chromatic values or its textures.

Quite often the application of painting layers invert the traditional syntax's of sgraffito (what was dark becomes whitish, what was whitish becomes a new and often stronger coloured) causing loss of the building aesthetical and historical values and, ultimately, loss of authenticity of this technique.

We can identify the causes of the non-recognition of the value of sgraffito, into four clusters:

- lack of expertise in maintaining or repairing sgraffito technique;
- confusion or a poor knowledge of other decorative techniques similar to sgraffito like graffito, stucco or decorative plasters simulating stone or brick masonry;
- deficient legal protection and absence of preservation policies;
- gap between the academic conservation praxis and the world of construction.



Almodôvar



Montemor-o-Novo

4. CONCLUSIONS

Since the result of interventions on sgraffiti depends not only on academic expertise and on previous studies (conservation project) but also on cultural policies, programs, town planners, operators and designers, these interventions should involve all the stakeholders in the community and should include:

- Plans to manage and monitor existing sgraffito and other lime decorated surfaces need to be implemented;
- Funds to safeguard would surely have impact on local economy, like cultural tourism;
- Professional qualification and certification should be required for any intervention on decorated surfaces;
- Campaigns, workshops, awards, partnerships with schools or curriculum designers in order to change and promote preservation of sgraffito should be developed in the whole community.

To conclude we would say that the cultural value of the sgraffito, such as the dual colour variation and the aesthetical tension, given by different textures and colours which are intrinsic to the nature of this mural covering, must not be forgotten. It is also important to promote a "conservation culture" to take care of sgraffito, restoring, preserving the historical and material authenticity.