

Short notice

The Provenance of the Visitation Panel by Francisco Niculoso: From the Royal Realm to a Public Representation

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hroughout the 'long nineteenth century', Portugal witnessed both the formation and the disappearance of some of the most important private art collections in the country's history. Among these, the collection of Ferdinand Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (1816-1885, fig. 2), king consort to Queen Maria II (1819-1853), stands out not only for its size, variety and quality, but also for the influence it exerted in society, stimulating the emergence of other collections in the country, as well as for its unexpected dispersal.¹ This short notice reconstructs the provenance of a small tile panel created by the Italian ceramic painter Francisco Niculoso (active 1498-1529, fig. 1) that was obtained by the Rijksmuseum in 1902 and was formerly part of this Portuguese collection of objects brought together by the so-called 'Artist King'.2 The panel had different meanings in first its royal context and later its public setting.

On Display in the Private Museum of the 'Artist King'

The twelve tile-panel, bearing the inscription 'NICVLOSO ITALIANO ME FECIT', portrays the biblical scene of the Visitation, depicting the meeting of the Virgin and St Elizabeth. Because there is no evidence supporting Niculoso's presence in Portugal, it is likely that the panel was created

Fig. 1
NICULOSO
FRANCISCO,
Visitation, c. 1504.
Majolica, 52 x 39 cm.
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-NM-11727,
purchased with the
support of the
Rembrandt
Association.

Fig. 2
ANONYMOUS,
King Ferdinand II,
King Consort of
Portugal, 1861.
Albumen print,
86 x 55 mm
Royal Collection
Trust, inv. no.
RCIN 2907952.
Photo: © His Majesty
King Charles III 2023

in Seville, where the renowned artist settled in the late fifteenth century, and that it was subsequently sent to Portugal.³ This polychrome panel bears testimony to the pioneering spirit of Niculoso, who introduced the majolica technique in Spain in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Importantly, it represents the earliest known example in Portugal of a figurative tile panel painted with tin-glaze enamel.⁴

Despite its significance, the first centuries of its existence remain obscure. Indeed, it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that its existence became well known,



when it was included in King Ferdinand II's collection, amongst other ceramics (e.g. fig. 3). Over the years Ferdinand amassed works of art at Necessidades Palace in Lisbon. Formerly a royal residence and convent, the regal abode became the official dwelling of Maria 11 and Ferdinand II after their wedding in 1836. Following the queen's passing in 1853 and the marriage of their eldest son, King Pedro v (1837-1861), in 1858, Ferdinand relocated his quarters to the premises of the former convent. The sprawling five-storey structure, previously transformed into a residence that had remained unoccupied until then, was swiftly turned into the personal museum of the 'Artist King', who had his artworks carefully distributed across all the main areas.

The written testimony of the king's last valet, Ernesto da Silva, as well as the posthumous inventory of Ferdinand's estate, provide valuable insights into the location of the Visitation panel on the second floor of the building.5 According to these documents, a curtain at the end of a waiting room revealed an entrance into the two galleries to the east and south of the former cloister of the convent. These galleries housed an extensive and diverse collection of objects, showcasing the breadth of the king's artistic treasures (fig. 4). The gallery space on the right (on the east side) enjoyed abundant natural light, thanks to three former arcades that had been converted into windows. Its focal point was a splendidly carved oratory cabinet. Surrounding this centrepiece, the artworks were thoughtfully arranged, spanning pre-Columbian artefacts, Roman and Greek amphorae, Delftware, Portuguese porcelain, English pottery, Capo di Monte figurines, Meissen porcelain, weapons and paintings by Portuguese Romantic artists. A Boule-encased Louis XIV clock and a meticulously crafted model of Trajan's column further enhanced its allure.

Niculoso's panel hung on the wall to the left of the cabinet, in an oak frame, described by the king's valet as a 'beautiful azulejo by the celebrated Italian Nicoloso [sic]'.6 In harmonious symmetry, on the other side, a copy of another panel from the same artist, also depicting the Visitation, bore witness to the care invested in curating the collection. The copy was made by a Spanish painter on canvas and was 45 cm wide by 50 cm high.7 The records in the king's ledgers provide concrete evidence that this artwork was acquired from a Spanish dealer named D. José Lerdo de Tejadas on 10 October 1872, at Pena Palace, the king's estate in Sintra.8 Lerdo de Tejadas shared with Fernando 11 the

Fig. 3
RAFAEL BORDALO
PINHEIRO,
Álbum das Glórias.
Com-Sorte,
caricature of
King Ferdinand II
depicted as a
collector of
ceramics, 1880.
Paper, 39.7 x 28.7 cm.
Lisbon, Museu
Bordalo Pinheiro /
EGEAC, inv. no.
MRBP.GRA.1074.





Fig. 4
LUCAS DE
ALMEIDA MARÃO,
Gallery of the
Cloister of the
Apartments of
Ferdinand II
(Necessidades
Palace), C. 1870.
Albumen print
(stereograph),
17.9 x 8.8 cm.
Sintra, Palácio
Nacional da Pena,
inv. no. PNP3646/I.

passion for collecting, and his private collection of paintings, housed in Seville, was acclaimed as one of the finest in Spain. The fact that this painting reproduced another panel of tiles created by Niculoso for the chapel of the Royal Alcázar, the royal palace of Seville, must have held particular fascination for the king. The interest, however, would have been unlikely if the panel of Portuguese provenance was not already part of his collection. This leads us to consider the possibility that the acquisition of the tile panel may have taken place prior to 1872.

What is certain is that ten years later, in 1882, it became publicly known that the panel was owned by Ferdinand II. In that year, the Exposição Retrospectiva de Arte ornamental Portuguesa e Hespanhola was held in Lisbon, for which the king loaned approximately two hundred artworks from his collection.10 The Visitation was displayed in Room F alongside Talavera de la Reina pottery, Alcora faience, figurines from the Real Fábrica do Rato and Hispano-Moresque ware. This display underscored the king's enthusiasm for ceramics, showcasing pieces from various origins, periods and techniques. The 1882 exhibition

marks the first occasion when a reproduction (lithography) of the tile panel was made available to the public in an illustrated catalogue, thus entering both the national and international art circuits."

Indeed, in that same year, the Portuguese art historian Sousa Viterbo (1845-1910), while discussing the history and influence of foreign artists in the production of *azulejos* (glazed tiles) in both Portugal and Spain, made reference to the signed panel by Niculoso Francisco that was loaned by Ferdinand II to this major exhibition.12 In his view, the artwork that was said to have been discovered on the wall of a building, likely a religious one, provided evidence of the Italian artist's presence in Portugal - assuming the tiles would have been made in situ as well as in Spain. This idea was later refuted for lack of strong documentary evidence.13

The news swiftly spread across borders, and in 1903 the Spanish historian José Gestoso y Pérez (1852-1917) announced the existence of the previously unmentioned artwork by Niculoso in Portugal.¹⁴ Additionally, Gestoso published, for the first time, a photograph of the panel, which he



Fig. 5
JABEZ HUGHES,
Antónia, Infanta of
Portugal, hereditary
Princess of
HohenzollernSigmaringen, 1866.
Carbon print,
8.3 x 5.5 cm.
Royal Collection
Trust, inv. no.
RCIN 2800861.
Photo: © His Majesty
King Charles III 2023

considered to be inspired by but not as elegant as the one in the Royal Alcázar. The image had been sent to the author by the politician and art collector Guillermo Joaquín de Osma (1853-1922), with a note saying that the panel, which had previously been owned by King Ferdinand II, was now in the Rijksmuseum. Furthermore, Gestoso asserted that after the king's death, the panel was taken to Sigmaringen Castle, as part of the share inherited by Princess Antónia of Hohenzollern.¹⁵

From Lisbon to Sigmaringen

Antónia, *Infanta* of Portugal and Princess of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (fig. 5), was one of Ferdinand's three living children at the time of his death and a rightful heir to his estate. However, the distribution of the inheritance proved to be a complex and contentious process. Despite Ferdinand 11's lifelong dedication to safeguarding and promoting art, heritage and culture, he did not bequeath his art collection to the nation or provide any other legacies to public institutions. Instead, he opted to allocate the entirety of the portion of his estate over which he had full legal discretion to his second wife, Elise Hensler (1836-1929), the Countess of Edla. As a result, the division of the art collection in the inheritance was set to be shared between his widow, a Swiss-born American actress and singer whom he married in 1869, and his legitimate heirs.16

Public opinion regarded the almost universal (and very public) dislike of Ferdinand's second wife as one of the reasons for the king's retaliation against the royal family and the nation. ¹⁷ *Infanta* Antónia, for instance, was very open about her dislike of the Countess of Edla, whom she saw as an opportunist. This opinion intensified after Ferdinand's death, as the countess was about to inherit what Antónia believed rightfully belonged to the family, concerns she expressed to her brother, King Louis I (1838-1889), on various occasions. ¹⁸

As Antónia resided in Sigmaringen with her husband, Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1835-1905), she entrusted her power of attorney to the renowned counsellor and politician Hintze Ribeiro (1849-1907).19 However, less than a year later, presumably due to his appointment as minister of foreign affairs, Ribeiro transferred these powers to a colleague, Luciano Monteiro.20 Simultaneously, the princess sought the assistance of Baron von Waecker-Gotter, the German ambassador to Portugal from 1888 to 1891, to monitor the progress in the case and safeguard her interests.21

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Following the lengthy legal procedure of inventorying, describing and valuing the assets, Ferdinand's heirs were granted the opportunity in 1889 to examine the inventory and express their intention to bid on specific assets in order to come to equal shares.22 Additionally, it was agreed that any assets not claimed through bidding would be auctioned off, and the proceeds would be divided among the heirs, who also had the option to join in the public auction.23 As a result, the bidding by the heirs took place from 24 February to the end of July 1892,24 while the public auctions were held between 3 January and 30 August of the following year.25

The panel by Niculoso did not make it to the public auction, as it was successfully acquired by Princess Antónia during the private bidding. It was described in the posthumous inventory of Ferdinand II as 'An Italian picture of azulejo depicting the Visitation Renaissance era, marked with the number one hundred and forty-nine',26 and valued at 135\$000 réis. Additionally, Antónia seized this opportunity to secure ownership of the painting that replicated the panel created by Niculoso for the Alcázar of Seville, thus continuing the connection intentionally established between the two artworks by her father.

The reasons behind this preference remain unclear, but it seems likely that Antónia was already familiar with the panel, at least since her last visit to Portugal in 1887. What is clear is that the princess trusted the choice of the artworks that would make up her share of the inheritance to Johann Gröbbels (1853-1940), curator of the art collections amassed by the House of Hohenzollern, specifically at Sigmaringen Castle.27 He was dispatched to Lisbon at the request of Princess Antónia, who had great confidence in Gröbbels and his expertise in art.28 Upon his arrival at Necessidades Palace, Gröbbels meticulously assessed the collection and compiled a series of lists and reports.²⁹ In these documents, he offered advice to the princess regarding the selection of artworks to constitute her portion of the inheritance. To fulfil his task, Gröbbels openly relied on an essay on Portuguese painting written by the art historian Carl Justi (1832-1912).³⁰

The Visitation panel is included on one of the earliest lists of objects to be bid on in the name of Princess Antónia. The significance of the artwork is clear: Niculoso was identified by Gröbbels as the creator of a series of notable works, ranging from the portal for the monastery of Santa Paula in Seville and the altar of the Royal Alcázar to the panel of the convent of São Bento de Castris in Évora.

Shortly after the end of the heirs' bidding, in April 1892, the panel and all the other objects chosen by Antónia were entrusted to Heinrich Dähnhardt (1836-1902), consul of Germany in Lisbon and as such a convenient acquaintance.31 Between private bidding and the public auctions, the princess acquired around three hundred artworks, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, enamels, silverworks, ivories, furniture, prints and more. The selection was likely based on the assessment made by Gröbbels, but it was also driven by Antónia's personal attachment to specific artworks.32 Some of these pieces held sentimental value, serving as cherished mementos of her childhood and her late father. Either way, not all the objects were meant to stay with the princess, as they were promptly put up for sale. The prints, etchings and woodcuts chosen by Antónia were presented in a sale of the Kupferstich-Sammlung of the late King Ferdinand, held by J.M. Heberle (H. Lempertz) in Cologne on 29 November 1893.33

Entering the Public Realm in Amsterdam

The Niculoso panel remained in Sigmaringen Castle for a little while longer before it was sold. There could be various reasons for the sale,



Fig. 6

MARINUS VAN DER

MAAREL, Adriaan

Pit (1860-1944),
1880-1900.

Oil on canvas,
49.5 x 31.2 cm.

Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
sK-A-4063, donated
by Salomon Bernard

Slijper (1884-1971),
Blaricum, 1961.

such as financial needs or the object not being deemed interesting enough to be retained in the Hohenzollern collection. Regardless of the underlying motives, the panel changed ownership, as it was acquired in 1902 by Adriaan Pit (1860-1944, fig. 6), the director of the Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst, one of the forerunners of the Rijksmuseum situated in the Rijksmuseum building from 1885 onwards. He bought it from the art dealer Brauer in Paris.³⁴

Originally from Hungary, Godefroy Brauer (1857-1923) became an art collector and dealer, primarily operating in Florence and Paris. He had connections with some of the most influential figures in the art market of his time, including John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) and Stefano Bardini (1836-1922).35 It is not surprising that this dealer eventually acquired the Visitation panel before selling it to Adriaan Pit. Italian Renaissance ceramics held a special place in late-nineteenth and early-twentiethcentury art collecting. Initially Brauer's focus was on tableware, serving vessels and sculptures rather than tiles, but he soon followed this trend and specialized in Italian majolica, as evidenced by his notable sales and donations to the Musée du Louvre.36 However, the nature of Brauer's relationship with Princess Antónia - or with her husband – remains unknown, making it impossible to characterize Bauer's mediation between the former owners and Adriaan Pit.

During his tenure, Pit made a significant impact not only on the layout of the Nederlandsch Museum but also on the acquisition policy.³⁷ The purchase of the sixteenth-century tile panel by Niculoso was made possible with the support of the Rembrandt Association. Along with other purchases during the same period, it should be viewed within the broader context of Pit's museum strategy, particularly his efforts to address various gaps in the collection. Ceramics held a significant priority for the director, alongside the furniture department. However, the focus was not on amassing a large quantity of objects, but rather on achieving a comprehensive and representative overview of pottery production throughout history.³⁸ This was particularly evident in the case of Delftware, the native tin-glazed earthenware technique, which Pit believed to have been adopted by Dutch potters from Italian ceramists, as it is very similar to their majolica technique.³⁹ The panel allowed Pit to

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demonstrate that influence. In his view, this would strengthen the museum's representation of the history of the iconic blue and white Delftware. Furthermore, he established a historical connection between the origins of Delftware and Seville, where Niculoso had settled and had introduced the Italian majolica tradition, in which some Dutch artists were also schooled.⁴⁰ This presentation was not to last. Around 1955, the tile panel was photographed in a display case

showing the development of Italian ceramics, amidst other kinds of items celebrating Italian art but without a direct link to Dutch pottery (fig. 7).41 It is currently held in the museum's depot in Amersfoort where it is accessible for research purposes. Nevertheless, the multi-coloured painted majolica panel by Niculoso remains to this day one of the few examples of its kind in the Rijksmuseum collection and unquestionably the most exquisite.

Fig. 7
Display case with Italian ceramics including the Visitation panel, c. 1955.
Photograph.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. HA-0012373.



The ownership history of the Rijksmuseum Visitation panel is not fully documented. However, this essay provides a more comprehensive understanding of its historical narrative, going beyond previous approaches that primarily focused on names, dates and places. By exploring the various contexts of acquisition and collecting, it sheds light on the interest sparked by the panel among the different owners, as well as on their unique experiences of the artwork. Furthermore, the panel's journey from Lisbon to Amsterdam vividly illustrates the remarkable fluidity and permeability

that defined the boundaries of art markets and museums around the turn of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the panel's arrival at the Rijksmuseum represents a definitive shift from the exclusive realms of royalty and privacy to a publicly accessible and highly coveted setting.

NOTES

- I Vera Mariz, 'Tracing the (Unexpected)
 Dispersal of the Paintings Collection of Ferdinand II of Portugal, the "Artist King", Getty Research Journal 17 (2023), pp. 55-80.
- 2 'Rei Artista'. See António Feliciano de Castilho, 'O Rei Artista', Revista Universal Lisbonense 7 (1848), pp. 78-79. Ferdinand II became renowned for his devotion and commitment to the protection and promotion of art, heritage and culture, earning him the endearing nickname of the 'Artist King'.
- 3 Alfonso Pleguezuelo Hernández, 'Niculoso Pisano y Portugal: Nuevos datos y algunas hipótesis', in Fernando Quiles García, Manuel Fernández Chaves and Antónia Fialho Conde (eds.), La Sevilla Lusa: La presencia portuguesa en el Reino de Sevilla durante el Barroco, Seville 2018, pp. 170-83.
- 4 José Meco, O Azulejo em Portugal, Lisbon 1989, p. 100.
- 5 Vila Viçosa, Arquivo Histórico da Casa de Bragança (Historical Archive of the House of Bragança, hereafter AHCB), Secretaria de D. Fernando de Saxe-Coburgo Gotha (Secretary of D. Fernando of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha), inv. no. NNG 3647, Ernesto da Silva, Apontamentos sobre as preciosas coleções de Sua Magestade El-Rei o Senhor D. Fernando no Real Palacio das Necessidades (Ernesto da Silva, Notes on the precious collections of His Majesty the King D. Fernando at the Necessidades Palace), 1886.
- 6 'bello azulejo do celebre italiano Nicoloso'. See ibid.

- 7 Lisbon, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (National Archives of Torre do Tombo, hereafter antt), Tribunal da Boa Hora (Boa Hora Court), Inventário orfanológico de D. Fernando II (Posthumous inventory of Ferdinand II, accession no. PT/TT/JUD/TCLSB/B-X/OOI), 1885, vol. 3, fol. 2180r.
- 8 AHCB, Secretary of D. Fernando of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Ledger 24, inv. no. NNG 3530, 7 November 1872.
- 9 José Amador de los Rios y Serrano, Sevilla Pintoresca, Ó Descripción de sus Más Célebres Monumentos Artísticos, Seville 1844, p. 61.
- 10 Catalogo Illustrado da Exposição Retrospectiva de Arte Ornamental Portugueza e Hespanhola. Texto, exh. cat. Lisbon 1882.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Francisco Sousa Viterbo, 'A Exposição d'Arte Ornamental (Notas ao Catalogo)', Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa 9, 3rd series (1882), p. 546.
- 13 Alfonso Pleguezelo 2018 (note 3), p. 171.
- 14 José Gestoso y Pérez, Historia de los barros vidriados sevillanos desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días, Seville 1903, p. 272.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Vera Mariz 2023 (note 1), p. 58-62.
- 17 One example is José Fialho de Almeida, Os Gatos, vol. 1, Lisbon 1889, p. 46.
- 18 Luís Nuno Espinha da Silveira and Paulo Jorge Fernandes, D. Luís, Lisbon 2011, pp. 90-93.
- 19 ANTT, Boa Hora Court, Posthumous inventory of Ferdinand II, Authorization, 25 June 1889, vol. 4, fol. 3043r.

- 20 Ibid., Transfer of powers, 14 January 1889, vol. 4, fol. 3062r.
- 21 Stuttgart, Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg (hereafter LABW), Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen, inv. no. FAS HS 1-80 T 7_R 53-107, Letter from Johann Gröbbels to Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, 5 April 1891.
- 22 ANTT, Boa Hora Court, Posthumous inventory of Ferdinand II, Note on the division, 1889, vol. 4, fols. 3017r.-3019r.
- 23 Ibid., fol. 3019v.
- 24 Ibid., Record of the heirs' bidding, 24 February 1892, vol. 5, fol. 3080r-3080v; Record of the heirs' bidding, 30 July 1892, vol. 4, fol. 3815r.
- 25 Ibid., Record of the public bidding, 1893, vols. 6 and 7.
- 26 'Um quadro italiano de azulejo representando a Visitação época da Renascença, marcado com o número cento e quarenta e nove'. See Ibid., 1885, vol. 2, fol. 39 ov.
- 27 Walter Kaufhold, 'Die Genesis der Zuschreibung zu den altdeutschen Tafelbildern im Fürstlich Hohenzollernschen Museum Sigmaringen', Nachrichtenblatt der Denkmalpflege in Baden-Württemberg 10 (1967), pp. 91-93.
- 28 Hugo Xavier, "Propriedade Minha": ourivesaria, marfins e esmaltes da coleção de D. Fernando II, Sintra 2022 (Coleções em Foco, vol. 4), pp. 293-97.
- 29 LABW, Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen, inv. no. FAS HS 1-80 T 7_R 53-107, Disputes over the inheritance entitled to Princess Antónia, 1872-1894.
- 30 Carl Justi, 'Die portugiesische Malerei des xvi Jahrhunderts', Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen vol. 9, no. 3, 1888, pp. 137-59.
- 31 ANTT, Boa Hora Court, Posthumous inventory of Ferdinand 11, Delivery terms, 25 April 1892, vol. 4, fols. 3731r-3731v.
- 32 Luís Nuno Espinha da Silveira and Paulo Jorge Fernandes 2011 (note 18), pp. 90-92.
- 33 Die Kupferstich-Sammlung aus dem Nachlasse Sr. Majestät des Königs Ferdinand von Portugal, Herzogs zu Sachsen, sale cat. Cologne (J.M. Heberle), 29 November 1893.
- 34 A.L. den Blaauwen, '1902: Francisco Niculoso Pisano. Tegeltableau met de Visitatie', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 31 (1983), no. 3, p. 204.
- 35 Jennifer Tonkovich, 'Discovering the Renaissance Pierpont Morgan's Shift to Collecting Italian Old Masters', in Inge Reist, A Market for Merchant Princes: Collecting Italian Renaissance Paintings in America, Pennsylvania 2015, pp. 38-47; Machtelt Brüggen Israëls, 'The Berensons

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- 36 Françoise Barbe, 'Godefroy Brauer, antiquario e collezionista a Parigi, all'origine della collezione di maioliche arcaiche del Louvre all'inizio del xx secolo', in Lucio Riccetti (ed.), 1909 Tra Collezionismo e Tutela: Connoisseur, Antiquari e la Ceramica Medievale Orvietana, Florence 2010, pp. 209-16.
- 37 Jan Frederik Heijbroek, 'Adriaan Pit, directeur van het Nederlandsch Museum: Een "vergeten" episode uit de geschiedenis van het Rijksmuseum', Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum 33 (1985), no. 4, pp. 233-65.
- 38 Ibid., p. 247.
- 39 Adriaan Pit, 'D. Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst', Verslagen omtrent 's Rijks verzamelingen van geschiedenis en kunst 25 (1902), pp. 34-35.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 See also inv. nos. RMA-SSA-F-00778-I and 00779-1: Room M248 with display of Italian art in 1952 (Zaal M248 met opstelling van Italiaanse kunst in 1952).