

The interventions on the medieval polychromy of the tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon: the historical sources

As intervenções na policromia medieval no túmulo de Isabel de Aragão: as fontes históricas

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Abstract

Over the centuries, the stone monument of Isabel of Aragon Queen Consort of Portugal (c. 1270-1336), a masterpiece of Portuguese Gothic sculpture from the first half of the 14th century, has been the subject of different types of interventions. They were intended to preserve the integrity and decorum of the sarcophagus which had held the “holy body”, found intact inside the sepulchre, of the queen proclaimed blessed in 1516 and saint in 1625. Through the study of the historical sources (literary and iconographic), it was possible to propose a reconstruction of the sequence and the chronology of various actions, which focused mainly on the pictorial surface rather than on the structure of the tomb; to identify the areas of intervention; to reflect on their motivations, modalities and techniques; and to advance hypotheses about a new reading of the iconography of the queen’s effigy and the permanence of the medieval polychromy.

Resumo

Ao longo dos séculos, o monumento fúnebre de Isabel de Aragão rainha consorte de Portugal (c. 1270-1336), obra-prima da escultura gótica portuguesa da primeira metade do século XIV, tem sido objeto de diferentes tipos de intervenções. O seu objetivo foi preservar a integridade e o decoro do sarcófago que tinha guardado o “corpo santo”, encontrado intacto dentro do sepulcro, da rainha proclamada beata em 1516 e santa em 1625. Através do estudo das fontes históricas (literárias e iconográficas), foi possível reconstituir a sequência e a cronologia de várias operações que incidiram sobretudo na superfície pictórica e não na estrutura do túmulo; identificar as áreas de intervenção; refletir sobre as suas motivações, modalidades e técnicas; e avançar hipóteses sobre uma nova leitura da iconografia do jacente da rainha e a permanência da policromia medieval.

KEYWORDS

Tomb monuments
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The stone monument of Isabel of Aragon, Queen Consort of Portugal

The tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, Queen Consort of Portugal (c. 1270-1336), a masterpiece of Portuguese Gothic sculpture from the first half of the fourteenth century, is housed in the middle of the low choir of the church of Rainha Santa Isabel in Coimbra (Figure 1) [1, pp. 46-48; 2; 3, pp. 258-299; 4]. Currently, the sarcophagus is in a fair state of conservation thanks to its reputation as a “reliquary without relic”. Indeed, the sepulchre had guarded until 1677 the earthly remains of the queen, dubbed the *Rainha Santa*, the Holy Queen, who died in 1336, was proclaimed blessed in 1516, and elevated to the ranks of the saints with the name of Saint Elizabeth of Portugal in 1625. However, over the centuries the funerary monument, which today as then is entirely painted, has been the subject of several interventions aimed at preserving its integrity, a metaphor for the incorruptibility of the queen’s holy body found intact inside the sepulchre, and, as such, object of veneration by the faithful.

This paper traces the sequence and the chronology of some conservational actions which focused mainly on the pictorial surface through the study of the historical sources (literary and iconographic), a close-up observation of the artwork, and a reflection on its materiality. Indeed, the article could be intended as the preliminary art historical study that, according to the good practice of the discipline of Conservation and Restoration, must accompany the execution of the necessary and fundamental diagnostic analyses, in order to reconstruct the monument’s conservation history, contribute to its global reading, and promote its enhancement.



Figure 1. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, ca. 1325-28 (Coimbra, Church of Rainha Santa Isabel, low choir) (photograph: J. C. Vieira da Silva).

The reworkings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Soon after the death of Isabel of Aragon in 1336, the funerary chapel built in the church of the former monastery of Santa Clara and Santa Isabel at Coimbra to house her imposing sarcophagus (292 × 137 × 101 cm) became a pilgrimage destination as word of the Portuguese queen-widow's *fama sanctitatis* spread. In an effort to prevent damage and loss caused by the contact and the actions of the faithful, the bishop of Coimbra in agreement with King Afonso IV, son of Queen Isabel, ordered tall iron grilles to be placed around the mausoleum [5]. Nevertheless, this expedient proved useless against the cyclical flooding of the nearby Mondego River which inundated the church from its earliest years, damaging the building and everything in it. Finally, the religious community was compelled to abandon the medieval monastery and moved to the monastic complex founded in 1649 on the facing hill and named after Rainha Santa Isabel. The tomb monument already lacking the queen's holy body was also transferred at an unspecified date but probably before 24 of June 1696, date of the solemn consecration of the new church. [6, p. 507, sp. note 2]. However, earlier the tomb had undergone some interventions most likely performed at the same time or following the beatification and the canonisation of the queen.

Without excluding the possibility of other previous interventions, during the sixteenth century, a Latin epigraph was added along the edge of the four sides of the lid. It was a sort of poem which is still perfectly legible today:

*Elisabela iacet sacro hoc regina sepulchro que meritis nitidi fulget in arce poli nempe ita dum vixit
ceco se gesit in orbe virtute ud morum vixerit omne genus quo fit ut a sumo diva hec selecta tonante
regnet et angelico nos iuvet usque choro*

«Queen Isabel lies in this sacred sepulchre she shines for her merits in the high and brilliant heavens certainly as long as she lived she behaved in the mundane world with virtue so that she cultivated all kinds of good morals because of which it happens that from the heights of heaven this divine chosen one reigns and always helps us with the choir of angels»

The inscription was transcribed in the report of the first opening of the queen's sarcophagus in 1612 as part of the enquiry launched in the diocese of Coimbra with the aim of achieving the canonisation of the already proclaimed Blessed Isabel [7, pp. 848-852]. This means that it had been added previously. Moreover, the encomiastic tones of the epigraph as well as the fact that it is not a biographical note, but rather a "hymn" to the virtues and sanctity of the deceased, not justifiable in the fourteenth century – all the more so that Isabel of Aragon commissioned and assisted in the making and setting up of her sepulchre – lead to the claim that it dates from a later period, referable precisely to the sixteenth century because of its courtly style combined with the use of Latin. This assertion can be verified by comparing the tone, style and terminological choices of the offices, poems and prayers [8, pp. 37-42, 45-57, 67-69] composed during the sixteenth century in the occasion of the beatification of Isabel of Aragon, already called the Holy Queen).

In addition to transcribing the text, the record mentions that the *letreiro*, i.e. the «inscription», was written in *letras grandes*, i.e. «capital letters» or square capitals, which were *pretas*, i.e. «black». This remark suggests that the epigraphy was not necessarily engraved, but painted, just as it presently appears (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tomb Monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the inscription.

This circumstance supports the high probability that it was placed on a smooth surface properly prepared to receive it. However, more intriguing is the detailed description of the mausoleum in the report:

Esta caxa e a arca se cobre com huuma soo pedra da mesma grandeza, na qual da parte superior esta esculpida do relevo inteiro a imagem e figura da mesma Rainha que se entende ser ao natural. Esta vestida do habito das freiras de santa Clara e com veu preto, e sobre elle na cabeça huma coroa dourada, e esta cingida com cordão da mesma ordem, e nelle da banda esquerda pendurada huma bolsa e sobre ella lavrada huma concha de Santiago dourada, e as mãos postas huma sobre a outra sobre o corpo, e de baxo da direita hum livro, e da esquerda, hum bordão da mesma feição, de outro bordão ebolsa que se achou dentro da sepultura sobre o ataude. E a cabeceira da dita Rainha estão dous Anjos hum de cada parte com seus toribulos prateados nas mãos encensando o corpo da dita rainha [...] A qual imagem de vulto da dita santa, esta encarnada e pintada a oleo e representa en si grande Magestade e veneração. [7, p. 849]

«This casket and ark is covered with a single stone of the same size upon whose upper part is carved the image and figure of the Queen herself, which is understood to be lifelike. She is dressed in the habit of the nuns of St Clare and wears a black veil, and above it on her head is a golden crown, and she is girded with a cord of the same order, and on it [the cord] on the left side hangs a purse and on it is designed a golden shell of St James, and her hands are placed one on top of the other on her body, and under the right hand there is a book, and under the left [hand] there is a staff of the same type as another staff and purse which were found inside the tomb on the coffin. And at the grave headboard of the said Queen there are two angels, one on each side with their silver thuribles in their hands, cradling the body of the said Queen [...] The effigy of the said Saint is in flesh and painted in oil and represents great majesty and veneration.»

The report reminds us that, at the time, the tomb monument was sustained aloft by eight lions, two more than the current six. It is also stated that Queen Isabel was “portrayed” *ao natural*, i.e. «life-like», and her statue was *encarnada e pintada a óleo*, i.e. «in flesh and painted in oil», wearing the habit of the Order of Saint Clare with a black veil secured by a golden crown around the head.

The fact that the recumbent figure was life-like, coloured and painted «in oil» – generic words most likely the result of considerations by the author Tomás Nunes, who was a notary,

and the witnesses to the act, mostly religious neither professionals nor experts in arts – is confirmed by the Franciscan writer Manuel de Esperança (c. 1585-1670) in a passage of his *História Seráfica da Ordem dos Frades Menores* (1666). More specifically, the chronicler wrote that the sarcophagus had lost its original colour at some undefined moment in the past and therefore had been recently repainted:

Toda esta obra esteve descolorida, somente com uma alvura natural da mesma pedra, e nesta nossa idade lhe forão dada sas cores: a o hábito, de pardo, a o véo, de preto; e tudo o mais conforme são as figuras. [9, pp. 310-311]

«The work was discoloured, save for the natural whiteness of the stone itself, and in our time it was given its colours: the habit, brown, the veil, black; and everything else as the figures are.»

Considering the date of the chronicle, it is legitimate to assume that the action was carried out at the time of the beatification, when the black epigraphy was added, or at the latest at the time of her canonisation. The repainting affected especially the statue of the queen, focusing in particular on the robe and veil, applying the colours proper to the habit of the Order of Saint Clare. We find confirmation of this hypothesis in the description contained in the *Jardim de Portugal* by Luís dos Anjos, religious of the Order of the Hermits of St Augustine (c. 1580-1625), published in print in 1626, but written earlier. In fact, the author dwells on the detail of the «black veil of the nun of Saint Clare that she never wore» [10, p. 240], evidence that, in his opinion, the colour black had been added to the queen's effigy. The intervention referred to by Luís dos Anjos dates clearly from before the canonisation, which occurred on 25 May of 1625, after the friar's death on 8 January of the same year.

The purpose of this operation was to ensure that Isabel of Aragon could immediately be associated with the Poor Clares represented on one of the long sides of the tomb chest. In any case, certain precious details were preserved, and perhaps even revived, such as the gold embroidery on the edge of the sleeves and the tunic, the white outline of the veil which, according to Manuel de Esperança, was originally intended to be entirely white, and the six-knot rope: “Repara mais no véo preto, quel he vemos na cabeça, o qual nunca trouxe [...]. O certo he que a Santa se mandou figurar com o véo branco, que ella trouxe em vida” [9, p. 312] («Look at the black veil we see on her head, which she never wore [...] What is certain is that the Saint had herself represented with the white veil she never wore in her life»). All these elements allowed Queen Isabel to be identified as a tertiary, not as a professed nun, a historical truth also emphasised by Luís dos Anjos.

Taking advantage of the discolouration of the sarcophagus recorded by the Franciscan chronicler, in the seventeenth century, on the occasion of this intervention, or more probable as early as the sixteenth century, Queen Isabel was “restored to life” by painting-in the pupils of her eyes, complemented with eyelashes and eyebrows (Figure 3).

There are several stylistic and formal arguments that persuade me to formulate such a hypothesis. First, the solemn composure and gravity of the figure, the position of the arms crossed under the chest, with the left hand clutching a small, closed prayer book, the presence of two thurifer-angels looking upwards, incensing the body of the deceased, are all features suggesting that Isabel of Aragon originally had her eyes closed, being displayed “asleep” awaiting the Resurrection. Furthermore, the recumbent effigies of her husband King Dinis (1261-1325), her brother King Jaime II of Aragon (1267-1327), and her sister-in-law Queen Blanche of Anjou (1280-1310), carved in a very close time frame, are all portrayed with eyes closed (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the effigy (photograph: J. C. Vieira da Silva).

This circumstance reinforces my conviction that the queen's effigy, frequently attributed by the historiography to the same Catalan-Aragonese Master Pero who crafted the Queen Blanche statue [11], likewise originally presented closed eyes. The recumbent effigy of Archbishop of Braga Gonçalo Pereira, whose tomb monument was commissioned in 1334 and saw Master Pero at work, displayed closed eyes. Moreover, from a purely technical point of view, if we compare the treatment of Isabel's eyes with the treatment of the eyes in certain coeval sculptures, such as the fragment of the Virgin Mary, the Saint Martyr, proceeding from the former monastery of Santa Clara, or the Saint Agatha, all three of which are attributed to Master Pero and/or his workshop, and are now in the Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro in Coimbra, we can observe that the definition of the eyelids and ocular orbit are crafted in a very different way. Similarly, focusing on the treatment of the eyes of another recumbent figure, that is the authentic effigy of King Pedro I of Portugal (1320-1367), dating from the second half of the fourteenth century and displaying open eyes, it is noticeable that the engraving of the disc of the iris is perfectly visible as opposed to the case of Isabel. Finally, there is one last detail that leads me towards this iconographic proposal: Isabel's gaze is not focused on an indefinite frontal point, as in the case of King Pedro, but is clearly turned upwards (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Tomb effigies of: a) Isabel of Aragon (ca. 1325-28); b) King Dinis of Portugal (ca. 1319-24); c) King Jaime II of Aragon (ca. 1311-15); d) Blanche of Anjou (ca. 1311-15).



Figure 5. Tomb monument of King Pedro I of Portugal, ca. 1360-67 (Alcobaça, Church of Santa Maria).

The pupils are drawn in such a way that one has the impression that the eyes are turned to heaven, just like those of the angels accompanying her, despite the fact that the head, resting on a double pillow, is raised and slightly inclined forward, indicating an opposite movement from the gaze and thus suggesting an unnatural posture.

Only precise diagnostic analyses of the pigments could confirm or disprove my hypothesis, since the written sources examined did not dwell on this specific aspect, and for obvious reasons. Nevertheless I believe that (i) the iconographic elements and technical aspects noted above, (ii) the comparisons with coeval funerary sculpture, which specifically testifies to how the royals queen's relatives showed themselves in their effigies, as well as in non-funerary sculpture, and (iii) the background of celebrations for the newly proclaimed saint against which the decision must have matured to proceed with such an intriguing reworking of the *Rainha Santa*'s statue – already certified at the level of the robe and veil – are persuasive in advancing this new reading of the iconography of Queen Isabel's effigy.

The overpainting of the eighteenth century

A date still clearly visible on one side of the sarcophagus lid at the end of the Latin epigraph informs us that the tomb was repainted again during the eighteenth century. The year – 1782 – is accompanied by some words this time added in Portuguese. Transcribing the text as it appears, it reads:

HEC SELECTA TONANTE REGNET & ANGELICO NOS IUUVET USQUE
CHOROFOIPINTADANAERAD1782 (Figure 2)

The sentence in Portuguese continues on seamlessly from the last Latin word (*choro*) being written in the same font type, size and colour used for the inscription. This means that: either the text recorded as early as 1612 was repainted in the eighteenth century at the time of the addition of the Portuguese words, and the person charged with the task miscalculated the space and was forced to “squeeze in” the Portuguese text to the partial detriment of its reading; or that only the Portuguese words were added in the space left available by the Latin epigraph (about 20 % of the entire strip). If this was the case, it provided *a priori* for an empty space, not aesthetically pleasing, unlike on the other sides of the lid where the inscription fills the entire strip. However, the use of the Portuguese instead of the Latin indicates that, through this expedient, there was a clear intention to mark a difference in substance and chronology between the two texts.

The Portuguese sentence *foi pintada na era d 1782* can be translated into «it was painted in the era of 1782». It is particularly interesting the use of the feminine form *pintada* (*pintado* masculine) of the past participle of the Portuguese verb *pintar*, i.e. «to paint», referring to the implied subject. Whatever it was, it would have been a Portuguese feminine noun, not a masculine term. In fact, the Portuguese nouns *túmulo*, *monumento*, *sarcófago*, *sepulcro*, i.e. «tomb», are all masculine nouns. Continuing this line of reasoning, another aspect to reflect on is that a generic impersonal form, which in Portuguese would take the masculine, was not used to describe the action. To sum up, in my opinion this means that the implied subject of the passive form of the verb «to paint» – *foi pintada* – was clearly a feminine noun: the *obra*, i.e. the «work»? The *rainha*, i.e. the «queen» herself?

In absence of records or reports revealing who was responsible for the overpainting, it is not immediately clear why it was decided to undertake this intervention in 1782. Indeed, unlike the other years reported – 1516, 1612, 1625 –, this date does not seem to have been a particularly relevant moment either in the history of the monastery or for the cult of Saint Elisabeth of Portugal. However, after studying the historical context, I have found two possible explanations, one somewhat less intriguing than the other, it has to be admitted.

One hypothesis is that the overpainting was not carried out in 1782, but in 1744, since quite strangely the date of the intervention was indicated on the lid not according to the Christian Era, but to the Hispanic Era, or the Era of the Caesars. This was the antique reckoning of the years in use in the Iberian Peninsula which started counting from 38 BCE. The Portuguese formula *na era d* used to introduce in Medieval times the Iberian computation seems to allude to this circumstance. Otherwise, it would not have been necessary to insert any words before the date. In contrast to 1782, the year of 1744 was a key year in the spread of the cult of the *Rainha Santa*. In fact, at that time King João V of Portugal (1689-1750) addressed a petition to Pope Benedict XIV and the Congregation of Rites in order to obtain permission to celebrate the solemnity of Saint Elizabeth of Portugal (4th July) throughout the territory of the kingdom and the dominions of the Portuguese Overseas Empire. On 26 August 1744, the pontiff agreed to the monarch's plea [8, p.341]: from that moment on, the cult of Saint Elizabeth became "global". Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the repainting of the tomb could be one of the initiatives commemorating the concession of the prestigious apostolic decree enhancing the Holy Queen.

Another explanation, less erudite and more banal, is a very short notice which I intend to research further in the near future. It says that in 1782 the Abbess Ana Mariana de Lancastre ordered the repainting of the vaults and the walls of the low choir. Inside, a commemorative inscription written in gold on stucco is still visible today: "*Este coro mandou pintar a Ilustríssima excelentíssima Senhora Dona Ana Maria de Lancastre em 1782 no seu 6 ano de abadessa*" («This choir was painted by the illustrious Dona Ana Máxima de Lancastre in 1782 in her sixth year as abbess») [12].



Figure 6. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, Photo-type [7, est. III, p. 57].

Reflecting on this circumstance, one can speculate that she ordered also the repainting of the tomb which had been housed in the low choir since the end of the seventeenth century.

As in the past, the intervention did not affect the structure of the sarcophagus, despite the fact that some parts were damaged, especially at the ends, due to its various displacements. It is probable that on the occasion or upon completion of this operation, the tomb was placed on a platform with two steps along one wall of the room, resembling a kind of altar. Bearing witness to this arrangement are two photo-types included in an article by the historian António Garcia Ribeiro de Vasconcelos transcribing the report of the first opening of the tomb and published in 1891 [7, est II, p. 54, est III, p. 57]. These images also clearly show the damage suffered by the canopy and the edges of the tomb chest (Figure 6).

In both pictures we can notice that the funerary monument rests on four lions – not six or eight – and that the position does not allow us to see one of the long sides of the tomb chest (the one where Saints Francis, Louis of Toulouse, Clare and the Poor Clares are displayed). Furthermore, the photo-types show that, after the last opening of the sepulchre, the lid was mounted incorrectly, i.e. the opposite of how it was described in the report of 1612.

The repurposing of the beginning of the twentieth century

The sarcophagus retained this arrangement until 1921 when a new act of conservation was carried out, as a result of the pressure exerted especially by the world of culture since the end of the nineteenth century. Again, we do not possess a record but this time we know who was responsible, inferred from a very short news report published in a local newspaper [13]. This was João Machado, a famous sculptor from Coimbra [14-15], who accepted to work on the tomb of the city's patron saint despite not being a great admirer of Gothic art. By comparing the photo-types previously analysed with some current images of the monument, we can deduce that the artist intervened on the sepulchre in various ways. First, he correctly repositioned the lid agreeing with the 1612 description of which he was evidently aware. To do this, he had to chisel off the edge of the chest and then grout it again. Furthermore, considering how the tomb looked in 1891 and the time span between this date and 1921, it is reasonable to believe that he could also add two lions displaying a different type of work to provide the sarcophagus more stability, thus arriving at the current six supports. Finally, he arranged to move the monument from the side wall to the centre of the low choir to promote better lighting and, in general, a better visibility of the artwork. It is not known whether and to what extent Machado intervened on the polychromy, but it is certain that the edge of the lid was, at least, partially repainted. All the sculptural actions focused mainly on the repurposing of the tomb within the space that housed it: despite being gifted and possessed of the skills to carve the stone in the manner of the ancient masters – reasons why he and not another artist was chosen –, João Machado preferred not to reconstruct the damaged parts of the tomb, but limited his intervention as much as possible. In fact, the sculptor did not rebuild the splintered edges nor the canopy nor the pillow, all currently looking broken and chipped in different spots exactly as they did in the 1891 photo-types.

Following the arrangement in the low choir – an *ante litteram* act of enhancement, the tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, revived in colour, definitively assumed the status of a “reliquary without relic” which, rather than extolling its value as a masterpiece of Gothic art, magnified the aged and precious sacred urn that served to nourish the local, national, Iberian and global cult of the *Rainha Santa*.

The interventions on the tomb over the centuries: between moral imperative and identity value

In 2009, random diagnostic tests were conducted on the polychromy of Isabel of Aragon's monument, the results of which, however, have not been published but only presented publicly within a seminar in 2010 [16]. Years later, in the context of investigations into physico-chemical aspects, new sample analyses were carried out [17-19]. These analyses have revealed that the sarcophagus has at least five layers of colour, if not more. Thanks to the study of the historical sources, it was possible to propose four if not five paint layers applied during different interventions. Proceeding from last to first: the 1921 layer, located in the edge of the tomb chest which was repainted when the lid was repositioned; the eighteenth-century layer documented by the Portuguese inscription (possibly locally subject to overpainting in 1921); the layer applied during the seventeenth century, reported in the Franciscan chronicle of 1666, and/or the sixteenth-century layer recorded in the minutes of the 1612 tomb opening and to which the Latin epigraph bears witness; and the layer of the original medieval painting of which the sarcophagus still retain vestiges. Traces of medieval colour might be found in all those spaces difficult to reach by the brush during the various reworking and repainting, i.e.: inside the canopy, on the back of the red double pillow ornamented by an articulated golden embroidery (Figure 7); in the lower edge of the tomb chest (Figure 8). I think also that the backgrounds of the aediculae housing the images of the Poor Clares and the apostles in the long sides (Figure 9), the painted landscape behind the Calvary scene visible on one of the two short sides of the chest, and the shields of the kingdoms of Portugal and Aragon also might retain traces of the original colours (Figure 10). These statements are based on a close observation of the artwork as well as on considerations with respect to the possible difficulty of paint application. As an example, to fully repaint the double cushion would have required disassembling the canopy. Likewise, it was not to be deemed particularly useful to repaint the bottom edge of the sarcophagus because it was not immediately visible anyway.



Figure 7. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the canopy (photograph: J. C. Vieira da Silva).



Figure 8. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the lower edge of the chest.



Figure 9. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the decoration of the aedicule (photograph: J. C. Vieira da Silva).



Figure 10. Tomb monument of Isabel of Aragon, detail of the painting behind the Calvary scene (photograph: J. C. Vieira da Silva).

All the interventions – relocation, reworking, repainting and restoration – carried out on Queen Isabel's tomb monument have been reconstructed mostly through written sources, often indirect, or even fleeting mentions, in which, except in the last case, the names of those responsible were missing. However, I have reason to believe that the artists-restorers were

active or resident in the region of Coimbra, not only because of the undoubted validity of the local art school, but also because their choice amounted to a precise strategy related to skills and knowledge of raw materials, starting with the famous Ançã stone from which the tomb was carved.

Nevertheless, I think that this choice was also dictated by other, deeper motivations of a cultural nature. Indeed, it would hardly have been allowed for a non-native artist to intervene on an artwork that is fundamental to local tradition, history and devotion. In fact, it is still considered as much a religious symbol as an identity symbol of Coimbra, being representative of the material and intangible heritage of the place and its city community.

In this regard, over the centuries the various interventions mainly affected the polychromed surface more than the structure to the point that it could be said that those in charge operated on the tomb as if it were a *retábulo pintado*, a painting, thus referring to the centuries-old and proven Portuguese tradition of pictorial restoration [20-21]. The Franciscan chronicler Manuel de Esperança himself, reporting on the reworking and repainting carried out on the effigy of the queen, attributed these operations to a “painter” not otherwise identified [9, p. 312]. This circumstance was due not only to the not particularly critical state of the structure of the tomb monument as opposed to the painted surface, which was deeply damaged since the fourteenth century due to river flooding, but perhaps it was related to the symbolic value of the object on which the restorative artists were called upon to apply their skill. Indeed, it was the medieval sepulchre that had kept for centuries the ‘incorrupt and incorruptible’ body of the Holy Queen, the same funerary monument which in the past as in the present is considered an extraordinary relic to be offered “intact and intangible” to the veneration of the faithful.

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