

From exotic materials to hybridism: the indo-portuguese decorative arts collection from Museu do Oriente

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The Indo-Portuguese nucleus of the permanent exhibition “Portuguese Presence in Asia” from Museu do Oriente, Lisbon, Portugal, is made up of around 60 objects dated between the 16th and 20th centuries, regarding different typologies, such as furniture, textiles, pieces in silver and ivory, engravings and other decorative art objects that witness the encounter between these two cultures, the Portuguese and the Indian, first materialized with the inaugural voyage made by Vasco da Gama from Lisbon to Calicut in 1497-98 in search “of Christians and spices” and how, following the conquest of Goa by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1510, a new chapter was opened in the “Luso-Asian” decorative arts in the territories of India.

For over 300 years, Goa would remain an important centre for exports of precious and artistic works, exotic to the eyes of the West and especially to the Portuguese, replete with an unique hybridism that reflects evidence of, in the majority of cases, the transposition of Western models taken to the Orient (serving as prototypes) and the specialisation by indigenous artists, for example Goans and Gujaratis, based upon the utilisation of exotic raw materials, local techniques and traditional Indian aesthetics.

These Indo-Portuguese Art objects sought to meet the demands and needs for the production of portable, practical and functional works, not only for daily utilisation in India, but also for the export market, to the metropole and other European capitals, testifying the extraordinary, long lasting and irreversible impact that the *other* had upon us, changing us forever.

At the beginning of the 16th century, Lisbon was already the centre of a universal commercial empire that interconnected the West and the East, from Africa to the Far East and over to Brazil.

On Rua Nova dos Mercadores, the main commercial street in Lisbon, where gathered in warehouses the most extremely rare and precious products brought in from the most diverse parts of the world, imported along the Carreira da Índia (Indian Run) and stored in the Casa da Índia. In just a short period following the establishing of a Portuguese commercial empire on a truly global scale, Lisbon evolved from being a medieval city into a global capital, rivalling with cities like Seville, Antwerp, Venice or Genoa. A saying common at the beginning of the 16th century used to say “*whoever does not see Lisbon, does not see anything good*”.

Goa, the capital of the State of India from 1530 onwards, the head of the Oriental Empire, seat of the Government and the residence of the Governor or Vice-Roy, was a great commercial emporium, the political-military centre and the political-administrative capital and the headquarters of the Portuguese Patriarchate of the Orient, the point of arrival and departure for the missionaries belonging to their different Religious Orders (Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and Augustinians) that preached throughout East Africa and Asia and that earned the city the title of the “Rome of the Orient”.

The cosmopolitanism of the Goa Market, with its traders and their goods arriving from the most diverse locations scattered across the Orient, was well portrayed

by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten¹ in his work “The Market in Goa”, which shows us Rua Direita, the most important street of commerce and where an “Auction” would be held daily apart from Sundays and public holidays. This was the site for the sale of the most diverse goods, ranging from foodstuffs and pieces of furniture through to the goods of deceased Portuguese persons or assets confiscated by the authorities.

The 16th century sources that document the arrival of Western models or decorative objects in India are extremely rare. Many of the surviving inventories of this period are also extremely vague in their descriptions of shapes and materials. The very concept of “India” remained imprecise and confused from the 16th century onwards with references to objects being “oriental” whether or not they had been produced on Indian territory.

At the end of the 15th century, the furniture in use among the Portuguese displayed very little diversity. The range was limited to chests, caskets, tables, chairs and beds while other objects such as writing desks and writing-boxes did not even exist in the pre-Portuguese India. Such pieces were taken, in the majority, as personal and utilitarian possessions of the more privileged classes and occasionally serving as presents gifted to local leaders and chiefs.

In turn, the locally produced pieces, not only in Goa but also in other Indian states, in materials as different as mother of pearl, tortoise shell, silver filigree, lacquered and ivory, were produced as presents for family and friends, the authorities and the religious institutions that turned Goa into a centre for the dissemination of a vast set of devotional objects and small works of art to give whether to those they sought to convert to the mission itself or to those who had already been converted².

The first work in the collection that we shall analyse is an Armchair dated to the 17th century and normally designated as an “Afro-Indo-Portuguese” or “Indo-Afro-Portuguese” chair. While the models are undoubtedly of Portuguese origin (European chairs or “*fraileros ibéricos*”), in an upright and rectilinear style, with separable pieces to facilitate its transport (e.g.: a removable back reflecting the importance of the portable character of the piece), taken to India by the Portuguese in the 16th century, in fact they also display similarities to Luso-Mughal art.

While the Indian tradition was to sit on the floor, on carpets or flat stools, low level beds or rests to lean back on, recent studies have identified how some of these examples may also have been produced on the African East Coast, specifically in Zanzibar and Mombasa - the classification attributed to this object - and also in Mughal territory. The bar for resting your feet on, for example, is a feature that appears on many Indian chairs and right across the Orient, as far as Cairo.

The recourse to dried vegetal fibres like straw, both for the seat and the back, in a hot and humid climate, allow better circulation of the air over the body, for being cooler than leather or fabric.

This Mughal writing desk dated from the 17th century represents a fine example of hybridism congregating various influences: if formally its origins are Luso, the manufacturing technique and the very decorative theme (with historied human and

¹ Stayed in Goa between 1583 and 1588.

² In the beginning of the XVI century Indian artisans have produced also works at the Portuguese court. An example is the goldsmith Rauluchantim that have worked in Lisbon, at the King’s Manuel service between 1518 and 1520 (SILVA, Nuno Vassallo e (Coord.), *The Heritage of Rauluchantim*. Lisbon: Museu de São Roque, 1996, p. 17).

animal figurations), stands out among that observed on Indo-Portuguese furniture, generally more schematic and standardised.

However, it is above all the decoration that provides the greatest degree of differentiation, with the representation of courtly scenes interspersed with hunting scenes in gardens filled with trees, flowers and animals, much to Mughal taste. Highlighted on the cover is the representation of a female and a male figure sat on a characteristically Indian, low and broad bench.

In some examples, there are also representations of the Portuguese, armed with rifles hunting lions or deer, on foot or on horse, or even on elephants. In this case, figures wearing Mughal clothing are holding falcons.

This kind of furniture was used to store documents, jewels, coins and other precious objects.

Gujarat was for the first time referenced as a production centre for objects in mother of pearl in 1502 when Gaspar Correia, in *Lendas da Índia*, refers to how the King of Melinde presented Vasco da Gama with “a bed of Cambaia decorated with gold and mother of pearl, a very beautiful item”.

Decorated with fragments of *turbo marmoratus* shell, resistant, elastic and iridescent, an optical phenomenon that stems from its lamellar structure, these objects came from the North of India (regions of Gujarat (Ahmedabad), Surate), Bay of Cambaia and the Bay of Coromandel.

The typology of this kind of caskets, known as “mosaic or scale”, imitated the shape of the Portuguese caskets in wood, covered in leather. Everything suggests they were purchased without their mounts (only with their clasps and hinges in brass), which were then added in Goa (handles, wings, feet and closing locks) or in other cities under Portuguese rule in Concão or in Malabar, such as Baçaim, Chaúl, Diu and Cochim, or even by goldsmiths in the courts to which they were dispatched (for example: Europe)³.

The caskets were very common in Portuguese houses for storing items of value, whether money or jewels, documents or as Eucharist caskets (as boxes for the hosts), reliquaries or other recipients for the transport of the Holy Sacrament on Good Friday.

Designed to contain odorous substances, this type of casket was highly appreciated in Europe both for the exoticism of its materials and for the quality of its execution. In formal terms, this object dates to the 16th or 17th centuries and finds its inspiration on European furniture models (feet and flaps very similar to the Portuguese trunks of the 16th century) but the laced type of decoration, of notably fine quality, with its motifs including rosaceas, scrolls and arabesques, places its manufacture location in Portuguese India, probably Goa.

The main production centres of silver filigree were Goa, Orissa, Diu and Karimnagar, in Decan region.

More recent studies have also identified locations including China, the Philippines or Ormuz, in the Persian Gulf.

³ The simple examples took squared or lozenge patterns while the more elaborate featured motifs in scales, circles and a greater decorative combination in the same piece, for example conjugating mother of pearl with turtle shell and silver.

The lizard shaped latch would have been a Portuguese influence and not of Indian origin. Lizards or salamanders, symbolically associated with fire and immortality and, according to some authors, similar to the reptiles applied to lock surfaces on Portuguese leather caskets in order to evoke a sense of danger or punishment in efforts to deter any illicit trespassing within (GSCHWEND, Annemarie Jordan; LOWE, K. J. P., *A Cidade Global. Lisboa no Tempo do Renascimento. The Global City. Lisbon in the Renaissance*. Lisboa : Catálogo da exposição, Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 2017, pp. 164-165).

In the belief that they held medicinal properties in addition to their magical and miraculous attributes, coconuts, at the time known as *nuts-of-India*, were used to make chalices and drinking cups, since it was believed that they would destroy the action of any poisonous liquids.

In order to enrich their decoration, they were set in gold filigree, golden silver or silver, featuring minute and finely traced vegetal motifs, flowers and phytomorphic scrolls.

According to the sources, Catherine of Austria, wife of King John III and youngest sister of Emperor Charles the V, purchased one such piece, probably made in Goa, in 1558.

This powder flask, dated to the 17th century and in the shape of a canteen, is entirely covered with ivory cut into the form of petals and scales laid out from the centre in successive concentric circles, composing a lotus flower associated with purity and perfection.

These objects serving as powder flasks are similar to the “saddle powder flasks” or the canteen shaped models carried by Arabian mounted soldiers.

The petal type of decoration laid out in concentric strips to form a flower is characteristic of the workshops of Gujarat, and whose influence extended to the North of India.

Portable objects designed for personal devotional practices with images of the Baby Jesus, the Good Shepherd represents one of the more interesting dimensions of Christian art in Indian lands, in its combination of the aesthetics and iconography of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

The origins of this art interrelate with the Portuguese missions in the Orient which, faced by the shortage of pieces arriving in the colonies for devotional purposes, found the necessity of commissioning pieces from local artists for religious uses. This in turn precisely reveals the importance of the functional role played by ivory sculptures in facilitating the transmission and learning of the Christian message and conveying themes that would otherwise have been more difficult for the newly converted Christian to understand.

The vast majority of these images underwent adaptation and enrichment with local contributions have been inspired not only from the sculpture models brought in from the metropole, especially sculptures of Flemish origins⁴, but also in accordance with one of the most powerful means of dissemination of this period, the engraving.

Contrary to the embroidered monochrome dominated textiles produced in Bengal, those originating in Gujarat (and cities such as Cambaia and Patane), stand out for their chromatic exuberance while simultaneously abdicating from historied scenes in favour of predominantly floral and vegetal motifs⁵. These themes recall the Persian art that had such an influence from the 16th century onwards in the artistic production of the North of India.

These display textiles with their fairly diversified technical-material characteristics and usages, as they were both for usage in the civil domain – over wooden bedframes, but also over tables, as carpets, wall hangings or even as bedspreads –as well as having functions in the religious context.

⁴ For example: the Baby Jesus of Malines (late-Gothic models) and later other Rococo and Neoclassical models.

⁵ Similar to this example with a markedly floral ornamental program of great botanical diversity that features genuine species such as cloves, roses, plum flowers and hyacinths, with others of fantastic origins (FERREIRA, Maria João, “Alcatifa” in, *Presença Portuguesa na Ásia. Testemunhos. Memória. Coleccionismo*, p. 47).

At the end of the 16th century, textiles constituted between 18% and 25% of the total goods unloaded in Lisbon. One part would remain in the country while the other would be exported to Europe and with the worst quality pieces going to America and Africa. Among them, bedspreads, door cloths, bed sheets and embroidered Bengal carpets (where was abundant the cotton and silk), from Gujarat and Deccan, liturgical pieces and items of clothing, many of them resulting from specific commissions made by members of the nobility and ecclesiastic institutions.

The opening of the maritime route to India changed the arts, the aesthetics and the techniques in a deep and irreversible way.

Many of these objects were keenly sought after by members of the European royalty⁶ that would collect them for integration into their cabinets of curiosities and chambers of wonders, the Medieval *Schatzkammer* and the Renaissance *Wunderkammer* (repositories for extraordinary objects) and the *Kunstammer* (chambers for artistic objects), which would be at the origin of the modern museums (for example: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna or the Schatzkammer Residenz, Munich), where they have been preserved down until contemporary times.

Sometimes with a systematic organisation and on other occasions as a simple pile of goods, these objects were accumulated by taste, desire for ostentatiousness and also as a form of holding wealth, justifying the position, the function and the personality of whoever owned them.

They were believed to be imbued with innate meaning and their miraculous properties and magical powers conferred on them great value and as such were worthy of preservation and maintenance with all due reverence (bezoar stones, rhinoceros' horns, tortoise shell, coconuts, coral, quail eggs, rock crystals, etc)⁷.

Catherine of Austria, established an extraordinary network of contacts made up of traders, merchants, agents and other royal officials that guaranteed access to the best and the rarest products and that kept her informed about everything that was available in Goa. She not only became the owner of the most extensive collection of curiosities from the Orient but also founded the very first Renaissance *Kunstammer* on the Iberian Peninsula before even the mid-point of the 16th century⁸.

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⁶ Spain, Tuscany, Saxony, Tyrol and Rhineland (In, DIAS, Pedro, *Mobiliário Indo-Português*, p. 12).

⁷ According to the medieval aesthetic, art and nature reflected the ideal beauty of God and the relationships between natural and artificial phenomena were rationalised through symbolism and allegory (GSCHWEND, Annemarie Jordan, « Rarities and Novelties » In, *Encounters – The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800*. London: V&A Publications, 2004, p. 34).

⁸ At Paço da Ribeira. Other collections of Asian curiosities and exotica in Europe: Maximilian II and Ferdinand II of Tyrol (sons of Ferdinand I Habsburg, Catherine's brother), Rudolf II of Prague and Philip II of Spain) (Idem, p. 40).

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