The Adoption of the Art Nouveau Movement by the Local Bourgeoisie

The appearance of Art Nouveau works in Aveiro dates from the beginning of the 20th century, more specifically 1904-1920. The construction of such new style buildings was often reported in local newspapers. It was then known as the Aveiro Style, as the broader Art Nouveau movement in Europe, along with its philosophy and applications in architecture and the decorative arts, was not fully understood. Indeed, the term Art Nouveau was applied in Aveiro in a somewhat naive fashion, concentrating mainly on the decorative aspects of façades. We have to understand that the Art Nouveau style was imported by a conservative bourgeoisie and wealthy emigrants to Brazil, who, upon returning to Portugal, focused on expressing their social and economic power. Art Nouveau elements were thus present in the main façades of buildings, while the rest of the construction and interiors followed a conservative structure and decoration. The underlying concept of this phenomenon is ostentation, one of the main characteristics of Art Nouveau in Aveiro.

The nineteenth century in Aveiro began with serious economic and social problems caused by bottlenecks resulting from the silting up of the river bar, which seriously affected the movement of goods and people. The situation was only resolved in 1808, but the desired economic recovery did not follow as quickly as expected. The national scene at the time reflected a serious lack of confidence, owing variously to the independence of Brazil, the spread of liberal ideas, the civil war, and successive economic crises. To repair the river bar it became necessary to carry out various sorts of work that would make it possible to control the tides and enable accessibility. In this project, it was decided to use the stone obtained from the demolition of the remains of the late-medieval wall.
However, though the work on the bar facilitated the movement of goods, it negatively affected the local marine fauna, with significant decreases in profits from fishing. Moreover, the lack of communication to the interior and the shortage of local industries led to the progressive economic decline and decay of the city, visible in the decrease of population and migration to the neighbouring cities and rural parishes.

Against this background, a radical policy to improve communications was seen to be fundamental to the recovery of the region. Since 1864, the city has been able to rely upon the rail system that allows rapid connections with Coimbra, Lisbon, and Porto. Simultaneously, some industrial development took place, especially in the field of ceramics, and the Fábrica da Fonte Nova, with its production of Art Nouveau tiles, was established in 1882. The rise of Aveiro as the regional capital would also cause new concerns about the management of urban space, with the building of modern facilities for the military (two barracks), for health care (Hospital da Misericórdia) and for administrative purposes. This outbreak of construction would ultimately benefit the field of education with the building of a school (1851, currently the Escola Secundária Homem Cristo) and the School of Industrial Design (1893), directed for forty years by Francisco Augusto da Silva Rocha, one of the exponents of Art Nouveau in Aveiro.

The advent of Art Nouveau buildings in the city is related to this period of urban growth and prosperity. The first expression of the new style in Aveiro was the construction of the Cinco Bicas fountain, which dates from 1880. However, the style only clearly made an impact on the city from around 1904. The adoption of Art Nouveau taste in Aveiro can be traced in terms of the local newspaper reports carried by Campeão das Províncias. In 1903 the paper speaks of … a growing fever of buildings throughout the county. There is no meeting of the City Council in which does not appear a dozen or more applications requesting licenses and permits for works, large and small, and thus we have no means of coping with the manufacturers of Esgueira adobe nor the factories of Marseillaise tiles. …

These stories suggest the outbreak of urban construction Aveiro experienced at this time and, two years later, the same paper reported new and more specific news concerning the construction of the Residência Francisco Augusto da Silva Rocha, and in 1908, of the Casa Mário Belmonte Pessoa: — [Aveiro] is taking on a more civilized garb, because, lately, houses have been built of beautiful appearance.}

The Art Nouveau-influenced buildings of Aveiro employ the systematic use of decorative stone and wrought iron, but above all, the tile, which made the region unique since the local Fábrica da Fonte Nova produced various tile panels in this style.
example can be seen in the Lilies House, in the traditional fishermen’s neighbourhood of Aveiro. Looking at this small house, we can see how local people would have appreciated the floral motives, even without understanding what Art Nouveau was or that the chosen tiles and panels were Art Nouveau in style.

The Art Nouveau movement in Aveiro is characterised by:

- Diversity in the formal quality of the house designs.
- "Application" of Art Nouveau façades in otherwise conventional buildings - there is a clear distinction between the innovative fronts and the conventional interiors.
- Art Nouveau decoration expressed through tiles, ironwork, and stone work.
- Symmetry.
- Persistence of traditional decorative elements, continuous influence of the aesthetic from eighteenth century revivalism.
Lack of knowledge in the use of new building materials and techniques - the houses were built in "adobe".

Narrow façades due to the construction of the houses in the city centre caused a vertical development of the decoration.

The production of Art Nouveau tiles occupies a relevant place in the context of the Art Nouveau movement in Portugal, and especially in Aveiro. Between 1903 and 1920, the ceramic factories produced several Art Nouveau tiles, destined to embellish the façades of several buildings, and in some cases the interiors as well. This phenomenon of the Portuguese Art Nouveau was ignored by art historians for many years, with very scarce references being made to the tiles and mainly referencing the presence of some examples from other countries. However, if the Art Nouveau movement found some resistance in Portugal, the Art Nouveau tiles soon were a popular phenomenon, and we can find Art Nouveau tiles in houses with no other Art Nouveau characteristics. We can, therefore, conclude that it was through the Art Nouveau tile production and use that the Art Nouveau movement acquired increased visibility in the country.

The motives that were used in the tiles were the ones mainly used in the Art Nouveau movement: plants and flowers, birds, insects, female figures. Although, in Portugal, Art Nouveau maintained a naturalistic tradition, in the tile production the influence from abroad was more relevant, mainly in the production of the Sacavém Factory. The flower motives are by far the best represented. A very popular representation at the time was the flower seen from behind, showing the connection between the stem and the chalice. The floral motives showcase different levels of stylization, frequently linked with the painting technique used. The tracing and hand painting give the drawing a more naturalistic approach, while the stamping and airbrushing confers the motives a more graphic and linear interpretation, with clear contours and where the colour prevails over the details.

With regard to the articulation of the tile use with the building architecture, the Art Nouveau movement became popular at a time when it was common to cover the building façades with tiles, so in many cases the factories just had to adapt the motives of the tiles to the new taste. When a building was being conceived by a designer such as Ernesto Korrodi, Silva Rocha, Ventura Terra or Norte Junior there was a concern in harmonizing the tiles with the stone and ironwork, and with the general outline of the façade. In this scenario, the tiles are made to order, and are normally...
signed and dated. However, the more common scenario is to use Art Nouveau tiles in buildings of very simple design, just choosing the tiles from the factory catalogues. In this case, normally, the tiles are adapted to pediments, friezes, and small panels surrounding windows or under the balconies.

Of all the factories producing tiles in Portugal, only some produced Art Nouveau tiles. In Lisbon, Manuel Joaquim Afonso founded the Sacavém Factory in 1856, but its acquisition in 1861 by the Englishman John Stott Howorth would influence all of the production. Howorth and the succeeding owners (James and Raul Gilman, Herbert and Clive Gilbert), all of English nationality, maintained strong commercial partnerships in England, from where they imported materials and machinery, but also paints, catalogues, plates, moulds, etc. The factory Minton & Co, located on Stoke-on-Trent, also influenced the Sacavém production, as there was a strong collaboration in terms of information and technology. It is not surprising that the Sacavém production would go on to display a strong English influence. The tile production initiated in 1890, and thanks to its mechanical production, the Sacavém factory produced tiles used in the façades all over the country. The tiles were produced by pressing a mixture of white clay and ground quartz. Through this process a white square was obtained, over which the designs were applied and later covered with transparent glass.

Concerning the Art Nouveau tiles, besides several flat patterns or with half-relief, this factory produced a great variety of decorative panels and friezes. A substantial number of these compositions, especially those of strong naturalistic influence, were hand painted, and the contours were sometimes obtained through stamping. This factory also used airbrushing and tracing techniques. The mechanical stamping required the use of an individual stamp for each colour, while the tracing technique permitted the application of a single polychromatic stamp, which allows for an easier and faster production. The relief tiles were obtained through pressing the ceramic material in a mould. They could then be painted under the glaze, or more frequently glazed with coloured glass. The coloured glass would sink into the depressions of the tile, thus adding to the relief effect.

The most original Art Nouveau tiles were without a doubt produced in the Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro Factory, in Caldas da Rainha. They used a handcrafted technique of pressing red clay into moulds and then applying, also by hand, coloured glazes and enamels. Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro’s position regarding Art Nouveau was quite ambiguous, because
after mocking the movement, he later came to adopt it, producing some of the most original Art Nouveau tiles.

Founded in 1882 by the Melo Guimarães brothers, the Fonte Nova Factory in Aveiro was the main tile producer in the Aveiro district. This factory developed an individual style, with very specific designs (the main painters were Francisco Pereira and Licínio Pinto) and use of colour - predominantly green, purple, yellow and pink. The more frequent compositions were purple lilies over a yellow background. A fire in 1937 destroyed this factory. The preferred technique used by the Fonte Nova factory was hand painting and stamping with hand painted finishing touches.

References:


