

CHAPTER FOUR

PROTECTION, PRESTIGE AND AUTHORITY: ON THE FUNCTIONS OF PORTUGUESE MURAL PAINTINGS

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Introduction

The number of Medieval and Early Modern mural paintings that still survive in Portugal today is not large. Despite its relative scarcity, however, there are characteristics and trends that can be detected within the corpus which distinguish them from frescoes produced on other regions of Europe. One of the main differences is the small priority given to narrative images while images of an iconic nature predominate. Another important difference is the emphasis given to ornament and a preference for creative combination of patterns and decorative solutions over large wall areas. This reality indicates that the Portuguese murals were not primarily conceived with a didactic role in mind. Naturally, this specificity must be deeply connected to other functions played by these images, which their donors considered to be more important. By analyzing the typology, style, iconography and topographical display of these paintings it is possible to build an effective framework that permits an understanding of their social functions. Indeed, the interpretation of these features and trends can tell us more about the functions of these images than the analysis of the apologetic literature on the defence of images amassed since the eruption of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Dispute.

The paintings

The oldest Portuguese medieval written record, to my knowledge, which may refer to the creation of a mural painting dates from 1271. The information appears in the will of D. Domingos Peres, the School-master of Braga's cathedral. In his testament, he founded a funerary chapel inside the cathedral,

next to the pillar where the baptismal font assigned to the youths was located, and opposite the funerary monument of the archdeacon D. Pedro Garcia (Carvalho, 1999: 236). In his testament D. Domingos expressed the wish that his funerary chapel should be depicted with the lives of Sts. Magdalene and Martha.¹ The absence of a specific reference to a wooden tabernacle seems to indicate that this painting was intended for a wall or pillar and not for a portable structure.² Despite this and other more explicit written records,³ the oldest mural paintings to survive in Portugal date from the early 15th century.⁴ Unfortunately, these early paintings are extremely rare, and this situation only begins to change at the end of the century.⁵ The increase in the number of paintings observed at this time appears to be connected with the economic growth and prosperity of the country and architectural development promoted under King Manuel (1495-1521)—known in Europe as the «Pepper King». Unfortunately, the large majority of these paintings are poorly preserved owing to their technical characteristics, as Portuguese murals were largely painted with *seco* techniques (Afonso, 2006/I: 51-77). Normally, the fresco component is limited to defining the background colours (one or two) over which the painting was then constructed. Therefore, the *giornate* are scarce and, when present, relatively large. Another reason for their poor state of condition is that very few of these paintings (with some notable exceptions) were maintained for veneration from the time of their inception until the present day. Indeed, the large majority of the paintings were preserved by inertia, namely behind wooden retables, under lime wash and

¹ The testament is in Latin: «In primis mando corpus meum sepeliri in ecclesia Bracarensis propre pilare piam ubi batizantur pueri ad oppositis cum Monumento archidiaconi domini Petrie garsie et mando quod fiat ibi una Capella ad honorem beate marie magdalene et beate marie sororis eius et quod depingatur ibi tota istoria beate Marie magdalene et beate Marte sororis eius et quia homo sum et cineran redigi debeo mando quod corpus meam sepeliatur in foueam terream (...)» (Carvalho, 1999: 236-237).

² It seems that this chapel had a juridical and economical dimension rather than a physical and architectonic expression. Probably, it was materialized by a mere painting and epigraph on the wall or by the erection of a wooden altar.

³ For instance, Saúl Gomes (1997: 113) stressed the quantity of mural paintings that were depicted on the Dominican church of Santarém between the late 13th and the middle of the 14th century.

⁴ The oldest known mural paintings remaining in Portugal are depicted at the vaults of the sacristy of **Batalha**'s monastery, clearly painted in the International Gothic style and dated with some precision by the heraldry that the angels sustain (Afonso, 2006/II: 99-107). There are other examples of paintings that might be slightly earlier than this one, such as the paintings of **Amieira do Tejo** (on this painting see the chapter by Patrícia Monteiro in this volume).

⁵ On these numbers see my study (Afonso, 2006/I: 78-100).

azulejo panels or behind false walls. Finally, in contrast with several Protestant countries, where iconoclastic practices prevented the resurgence of new images



Fig. 4-1. Dispersion of the remaining Portuguese mural paintings (c.1400-c.1550)

for a long period (hiding the previous paintings under lime wash), in Portugal the walls keep on receiving new paintings and artistic interventions, namely *azulejo* panels and wooden retablos. These interventions were particularly popular during the 17th and 18th centuries and caused severe damage to the original plasterwork. The work of an art historian studying Portuguese mural paintings from the 15th and 16th centuries is often comparable to that of an archaeologist, trying to reconstruct original programs from small fragments.

According to my most recent inventory, there are at least 142 monuments with mural paintings produced between c.1400 and c.1550, some of them representing more than one campaign/intervention (Afonso, 2006/I: 78-109). Therefore, the number of actual paintings from this period is considerably higher, rising to at least 203 campaigns. The overwhelming majority of these paintings have religious subjects or are depicted in religious buildings. Only one tenth of these paintings can be dated earlier than 1490 with any certainty. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize that the information compiled and analysed in this chapter is only significant for the period between c.1490 and c.1550. I should also add that these remaining mural paintings are not equally distributed over the entire country (**Fig. 4-1**). The majority are concentrated in the northwest, as well as along the Douro valley and in the northeast border of the country. The first concentration can be explained by major long-term demographic density in the region, where hundreds of churches, chapels and hermits have been built since the Romanesque period, while the large numbers of paintings along the Douro valley and the northeast border is due to demographic and economic decline in these areas since the late 16th century. Therefore, the high conservation of mural paintings in these latter two areas reflects economic decay and atavism rather than a statistically-relevant expression of a large number of paintings produced during the period under study.

The paintings from this period survive on a variety of structures, including two palaces (**Sintra** and **Évora**), one castle (**Amieira do Tejo**), one Court House (**Monsaraz**) and what remains from an impressive and bizarre rock sanctuary («**Os Santos**») (**Fig. 4-2**), while the large majority of the remaining paintings are preserved on churches, hermitages and chapels. Some of the latter are in churches of important institutions, such as the Dominican convent and royal pantheon of **Batalha**, the Benedictine Abbey of **Pombeiro**, the Franciscan convents of **Porto**, **Leiria**, **Guimarães** and **Bragança** or the cathedrals of **Braga** and **Coimbra**, but most are found in small chapels, hermitages and parish churches dispersed throughout rural areas with a low population density. As a result, a large number of them are in buildings which are in state of ruin. Some of the worst cases are found in **Almuro**, **Casais da Abadia**, **Casteição**, **Colmeal**, **Corvite**, **Larinho**, **Mesão Frio**, **Montemor-o-Novo**, **Numão** and **São Jordão**.



Fig. 4-2. «Os Santos» rock sanctuary at Sendim (Bragança). Mural paintings from c.1550

Typologies and functions: theory

Given this context, my aim is to define and reflect upon the main functions of these paintings, focusing on their idiosyncratic aspects, particularly in comparison to contemporary Portuguese easel paintings and contemporary mural paintings produced elsewhere in Europe. The following methodological procedures were involved: first, the identification and presentation of the main typologies of Portuguese mural paintings produced between c. 1490 and c. 1550. The main criteria for establishing these typologies were: (i) the “topography” of the paintings, that is, its placement inside the building; (ii) its narrative or iconic nature (a controversial dichotomy that I will attempt to explain below); (iii) its ornamental or figurative accent; (iv) the presence or absence of donors (which can be identified by inscriptions, portraits, heraldry, etc.). Secondly, in studying the functions of mural paintings, it was also essential to know which themes and figures were represented and to explain the reasons for these preferences. Thirdly, it was necessary to implement a comparative analysis of the created typologies and the identified iconography, asking why some typologies were better represented than others and why the

topographical distribution of the different typologies of paintings was uneven. Finally, the answers and conclusions had to be compared with the main Christian theories concerning the legitimisation of images written until the Reformation. Indeed, it is well known that this apologetic literature developed important arguments concerning the right to represent God and other Holy Persons emphasizing the functions played by religious images.

This chapter is not the appropriate place to embark on an analysis of these writings and I also do not feel qualified to undertake such a task. However, I believe that the most relevant *topoi* of this literature can be summarized as follows in what concerns the functions of religious images: (i) the value of embellishing the churches as homage to God and the saints (Barasch, 1995: 201); (ii) the didactic role of images as a «visual text» for the illiterate, an argument which was particularly emphasized during the sixth century by Bishop Hypatios of Ephesus and by Pope Gregory the Great on his two famous letters written to Serenus, Bishop of Marseille (Kitzinger, 1954: 132; Mariaux, 1993: 2); (iii) the veneration to the prototype represented on the image, a theory that became an integral part of the Byzantine theology of images and that was mainly based on the writings of Saint John of Damascus (Barasch, 1995: 185-253); (iv) the affective, emotional and anagogical dimension of religious images, valued since the Early Christian times by figures such as Saint Gregory of Nyssa and later by figures such as Pseudo-Dyonisius Areopagita, Bishop Hypatios of Ephesus and also Pope Gregory the Great in a little studied letter to Secundinus (Kitzinger, 1954: 132; Menozzi, 1991: 74; Ringbom, 1995: 19-20; idem, 1997: 11); (v) and finally, the importance of reviving and celebrating the Christian history, a perspective particularly stressed in the Middle Ages by authors such as Saint Bonaventure (Menozzi, 1991: 132).⁶

When one compares these arguments with the conclusions that arise from the analysis of the Portuguese mural paintings there are some trends and differences that must be stressed in order to understand the specificity of these murals. Indeed, the great majority of Portuguese frescoes have a decorative emphasis and assume an iconic nature relegating the narrative images and cycles (which were best suited to perform a didactic role) to a minority of situations (Afonso, 2003). Before continuing, however I must explain what I understand here by an iconic image, a narrative image and a narrative cycle, as the literature on this subject is large and the perspective of authors such as Erwin Panofsky

⁶ Besides these arguments, specifically connected to the functions performed by images, there are two other justifications that cannot be omit in a reference to the legitimization of religious images, although they are not related to our discussion. They are: (i) the respect of Church tradition in what concerns the use of religious images; (ii) and the legitimisation brought by the Incarnation of Christ/God, thus revoking the 2nd Commandment.

(1997), Sixten Ringbom (1995, 1997) and Hans Belting (1998) are not always coincident.

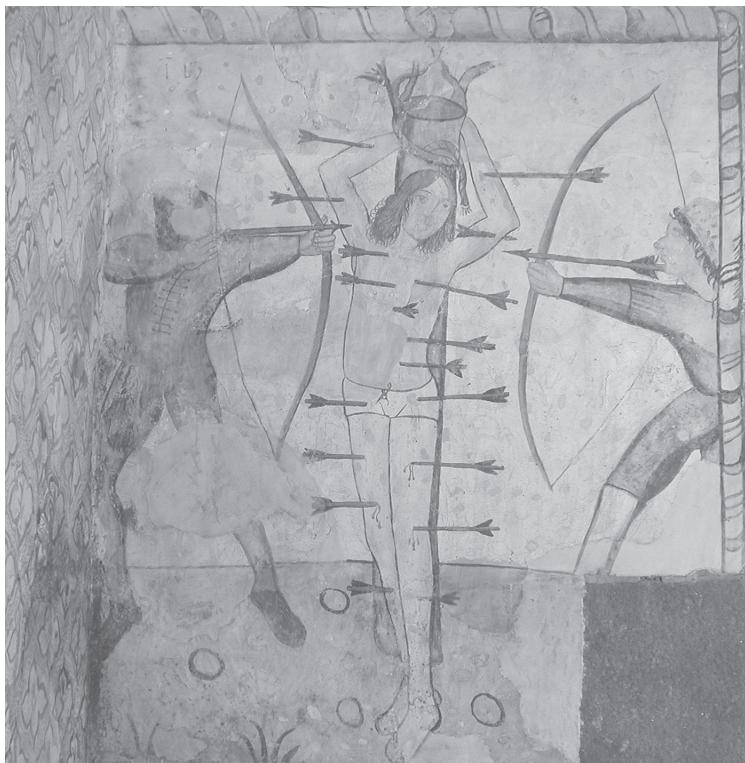


Fig. 4-3. *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*. Bravães (Viana do Castelo), 1510

In brief, what I understand by an **iconic image** is an image of a saint or a holy figure represented in isolation and without performing any action besides holding his or her attributes. Normally, this iconic depiction does not have more than two or three planes in order to emphasize the contrast between the figure and background and, concomitantly, to reinforce the *presence* of the figure. For the same reasons, this saint or holy person is usually represented alone, framed and hieratic, in a strict frontal position. In principle, it is created simply as an image offered to the beholders' devotion. Sometimes this figure can be accompanied by others in the same composition, but they are always represented according to the same principles. A **narrative image**, however, is an image that forms part of a specific history. Normally, it is a scene from the

Life of Christ, Mary, or of the saints. This type of image has more than one figure and these figures perform different actions. Usually, it presents more than two or three planes. In principle, it is *not* created as an image of devotion, although it may become such with time. In general, it is possible to establish a dichotomy between these two types of images: the first primarily refers to a state while the second refers to an action. Finally, a **narrative cycle** is the grouping of at least two narrative images belonging to the same history, for example, the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi. I do not consider a narrative cycle the simple opposition of different realities (such as Heaven and Hell) or the contrast between two narrative images belonging to very different moments of the same story. For instance, I do not consider the simple opposition between the Annunciation and the Calvary a narrative cycle, although they represent two of the highest moments of the History of Salvation.

With these criteria in mind, I only identified narrative cycles in **18** of the **142** monuments under study. Narrative images are present in more buildings, but their numbers are far less significant than the large quantity of iconic images which reflect repeated representations of a limited selection of very popular saints. This becomes quite evident when we look at the most represented themes and figures in the paintings of this period (**Table 4-1**).⁷ Indeed, only the Annunciation and Calvary assume an equivalent role to the representation of the most popular saints. These numbers are also in accordance with the data provided by religious visitations⁸ from the same period (**Table 4-2**). Typically, in ten inspected monuments with mural paintings only one or two are described as having a narrative cycle, although a large number of these temples had a depiction of the Calvary or the Crucifix above the arch of the main chapel.⁹ These narrative cycles are usually described as images from the Life of Christ, Mary or a saint, and are painted on the wall of the nave or on the side walls of the main chapel. The paintings, above the altars, described by the *visitadores* («inspectors») seem to have an iconic nature and they are mainly identified as

⁷ This table was based on an empirical analysis of the remaining Portuguese mural paintings from the period under study. For more details concerning this table see Afonso (2006/I: 109-118).

⁸ A «visitation» was a sort of «inspection» conducted by a religious and/or an administrative authority. It comprised two areas. On the one hand, it was concerned with the moral conduct of the religious officials of a given church and with the pastoral care for which they were responsible, and on the other, and possibly even more importantly, it was concerned with the properties and possessions of that church to avoid personal abuses and misadministration.

⁹ This is particularly common on the temples belonging to the Military Order of Christ, where the image of the Cross or the Crucifix also functioned as an emblem of this important and powerful institution.

images of saints. Roughly, the written records make a broad differentiation between *imagem* «image» and *história* «history», which correspond to the distinction that I proposed above between an *iconic image* and a *narrative cycle*. However, an isolated image with a high narrative capacity such as Calvary is also identified as an image and not as a history, a particularity that is more revealing about the main function of this specific image.



Fig. 4-4. *Saint Bartholomew*, painted by Arnaus. Folhadela (Vila Real), c.1535-50

Themes and figures	Total
Saint Sebastian	29
Annunciation	23
Saint Anthony of Padua/Lisbon	18
Saint Catherine	16
Calvary	14
Virgin and Child	13
Saint Peter	12
Saint Michael	11
Saint John the Baptist, Saint James	10 (each)
Saint Lucy, Saint Bartholomew	9 (each)
Saint Francis, Saint Anthony, Saint Martin, Saint Paul	8 (each)
Saint Christopher, Descent of the Holy Spirit, Agony in the Garden	7 (each)
Adoration of the Magi, Angels around a Tabernacle, Assumption of the Virgin, Coronation of the Virgin, Lamentation, Saint Blaise, Visitation	6 (each)
Presentation in the Temple, Nativity, <i>Pietá</i> , Saint Margaret, Saint Benedict, Virgin nursing the Child,	5 (each)
Entombment, Flight into Egypt, Inferno, Last Judgment, Saint Gregory's Mass, Resurrection, Saint Bernard, Saint John Evangelist, Saint Maur, Saint Roch,	4 (each)

Table 4-1. Most represented themes and figures among remaining mural paintings

Therefore, one must conclude that the didactic function of images does not seem to have been considered very important in Portugal during the period under study—at least for images painted on the church walls. Despite some important cycles (namely the *Creation* cycle of **Malhada Sorda**, the *Life of the Virgin* cycle of **Meijinhos** or even the ruined and briefer *Life of Saint Alexius* cycle in **Santo Aleixo**) it seems that the simple representation of sacred entities by their own sake was considered much more important than the representation of their exemplar lives. In other words, greater importance seems to have been given to the *presence* of that holy entity above an altar, represented in a frontal position, isolated and static, and merely holding its attributes.

If one compares the most represented saints in these wall paintings with the major titular saints of Portuguese temples it will become evident that they do not match. It is true that above the main altar we continue to find a depiction of the saint to whom the church was dedicated—usually an Apostle, a martyr saint of the Early Christian period or a confessor of the High Middle Ages. But the two

altars flanking the main arch of the nave usually possessed images of the most represented saints identified in **Table 4-1**. If we consider the main invocations it is apparent that their major function was connected with the *protection* of the living and the dead. On the one hand, these saints should protect the living from famine, war and, above all, from plague and disease, and on the other, they should protect the souls of the living and the dead, respectively by helping them to avoid the devil and to achieve entry into Paradise. Finally, it should be noted that the difference between the space of the main chapel and the space of the nave also corresponds to very clear social differences and distinct functionalities. The first was the privileged space of the secular or religious donor of the parish while the second one was the space of the lay community of the parish or neighbourhood. Therefore, the payment of ornaments (including murals) and the maintenance of these two spaces had different sponsors and goals, a situation that favoured different sort of images and functions.

Themes and figures	Total
Calvary (or the Crucifix)	23
Saint Catherine	8
Saint Sebastian	7
Saint Bartholomew	7
Descent of the Holy Spirit	6
Virgin (or Virgin and Child)	5
Saint Anthony of Egypt	4
Adoration of the Magi	4
Pietá	3
Saint Lucy	3
Saint Blaise	3
Saint Francis	3
Saint James	3

Table 4-2. Most represented themes and figures in a sample of written sources¹⁰

¹⁰ The data I have analysed to build this table refers to several visitations made over 37 monuments between the years of 1482 and 1554 (Afonso, 2006/I: 118-123). I would like to stress that they represent a small part of the information available at the archives. Therefore, I confined myself to the analysis of sources already published and edited by some researchers, namely: (i) Dias (1979), which refers to visitations made between 1507

Typologies and functions: practice

In the title of this chapter I proposed that the Portuguese mural paintings from the period under study assumed three main functions: protection, prestige and authority. In what concerns the first it is not a coincidence that the saints who are better represented among the remaining frescoes were particularly invoked in matters concerning physical and spiritual protection of the faithful. For instance, St. Sebastian (**Fig. 4-3**), the best represented figure in the list, was very popular during this period precisely because he was supposed to protect people against plague. The same function was performed by St. Anthony (of Egypt) and also by the Late Medieval figure of St. Roch. All together, these three saints occur in 41 representations in the list of remaining frescoes, although St. Roch always appears in the company of one of the previous two. The importance of St. Peter, St. Michael and St. John the Baptist, who comprise 33 representations, seems to be connected primarily to their role at the entrance to Heaven and/or as intercessors (despite some exceptions). Therefore they play an important role as protectors of the souls, both of the living and of the dead. Owing to limits of space here, it is not possible to analyse in detail all of the most represented figures and themes. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that for the most part these saints perform more than a single function. If St. Bartholomew (**Fig. 4-4**) was almost exclusively invoked for exorcisms, St. Christopher already had to perform two tasks. He not only had to avoid the sudden death of those who saw his image, but also had to protect travellers. However, this is not comparable to the tasks of other figures, such as St. Anthony of Egypt. The saint whose temptations served as the central motif to one Hyeronimus Bosch's¹¹ best works, not only offered protection from plague but also from ergotism (or St. Anthony's fire), leper, herpes, syphilis, furuncles and so on. To complete the record, he was also protector of marriages, domestic animals (namely pigs) and his help was also requested during exorcisms and against fires.

and 1510 in different *comendas* («properties») of the Military Order of Christ; (ii) Santos (1969), which refers to the visitations made between 1510 and 1533 in three *comendas* of the Military Order of Saint James; (iii) Cavaco (1987), which refers to the visitations made on Eastern Algarve between 1518 and 1554 by the same military order; (iv) Cavaco (2005), which refers to the visitation made in 1518 by the same military order on the *comenda* of Cacela (in Algarve); (v) Lameira and Santos (1988), which refers to the visitations made by the same military order in 1554 all over Algarve; (vi) and finally, Barros *et al.* (1996), which refers to the visitations made by the same military order in the *comendas* of Mértola and Alcaria Ruiva between 1482 and 1515.

¹¹ I am referring to *The Temptations of St. Anthony*, exposed in Lisbon at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.

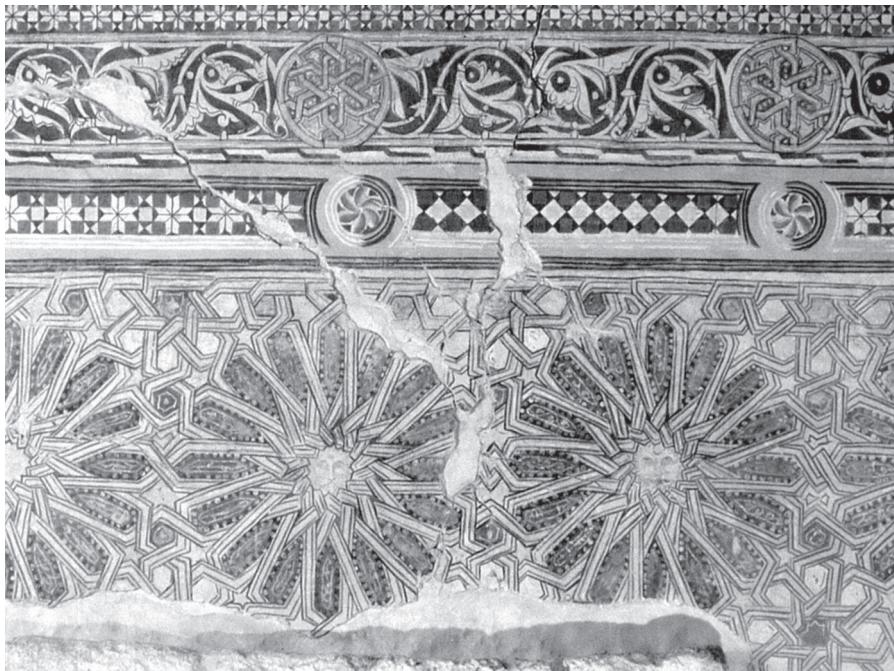


Fig. 4-5. St. Francis church (Leiria). Detail of the paintings on the nave, c.1490-c.1510

Among the many functions of artistic works, the importance of art as ornament is often missed, even though the embellishment of the House of God was one of the primary and older justifications for religious images. Furthermore, ornaments also can have a spiritual function. For example, the role attributed by Abbot Suger to the ornamentation of the church in the anagogical process is well known, repeating some ideas from previous authors such as Hypatios of Ephesus and, in particular, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita.¹² Even without any reference to the anagogical process, the *Libri Carolini* emphasized the role of art and the importance images possessed as ornaments in the House of God (Menozzi, 1991: 103-110). In these writings the embellishment of temples was guaranteed by the global artistic intervention and not by the

¹² It seems that Abbot Suger's knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius writings was not as deep as art historians had previously thought (Rudolph, 1990). Nevertheless, what is important to stress is that Suger used the argument that ornamentation was a spiritual aid in the polemics against the Cistercians and other similar religious movements that criticized the luxury of the churches.

specificity of the ornaments that usually accompanied the panel or panels with the representation of the sacred figures or of the narrative scenes. In other words, the value of painting as «ornament», in its broadest sense, was much greater than the sum of the specific ornamental motifs used, that is, the «ornament» in its narrowest sense.

Independent of this discussion, it is evident that ornaments added value and prestige to the churches where they were painted. In comparison to sculpture or easel painting—that was usually confined to the representation of figures and scenes—the murals of this period gave great emphasis to decoration: either by adding panels only occupied with ornament (as happens in **Santa Leocádia**) or by exploring the margins of the compositions and the frames with ornamental motifs (as happens in **Penacova**). Inside a church, mural paintings are able to occupy a greater area than sculpture and easel painting, two artistic forms that in small churches are usually confined to the area above the altar. A great number of the paintings studied here extend well beyond the area of the altar, not with new figurative panels but with ornamental panels. The Late Medieval paintings at the Franciscan church of **Leiria** (**Fig. 4-5**) and at the Glory Chapel of **Braga**'s cathedral are perhaps the best examples of this situation in Portugal.

The two most popular ornamental languages used at this time were what was known as «Roman work», which broadly corresponds to the Renaissance grotesque, and to what was called «mourisco» (Moorish), which corresponds to what is currently classified as «mudéjar». Of the two, the first was much more common and inventive. The decorative «Roman work» was composed of a heterogeneous group of motifs, usually painted in grisaille over a deep red background. In the rural areas and small villages of the country the «Roman work» painted on walls and vaults would have appeared as something modern, sophisticated, and exquisite. For the majority of this audience, this was as close an experience as possible of Renaissance art. In the great majority of cases, the ability of the mural painters to follow Renaissance models was limited to this decorative language. The fact that it was an ornamental language from «Rome» was conveniently ambiguous, because it simultaneously represented both the ancient pagan Rome and the new catholic Rome, the orthodox headquarter of the Pope. I believe that the massive use of this ornamental language in mural paintings produced during the first half of the 16th century—much more prevalent than its «Moorish» counterpart—was intended to make the interiors of the churches more attractive and to give prestige both to the donors and to the temples (and by extension to their parishioners). The presence of inscriptions and heraldry allusive to the donors (either noble families or bishops and abbots) emphasized their generosity, piety, and prestige. Apparently, not only did the donors look after their obligations to decorate and embellish the church, but they

also did so by offering a modern and sophisticated language to the eyes of an illiterate audience.

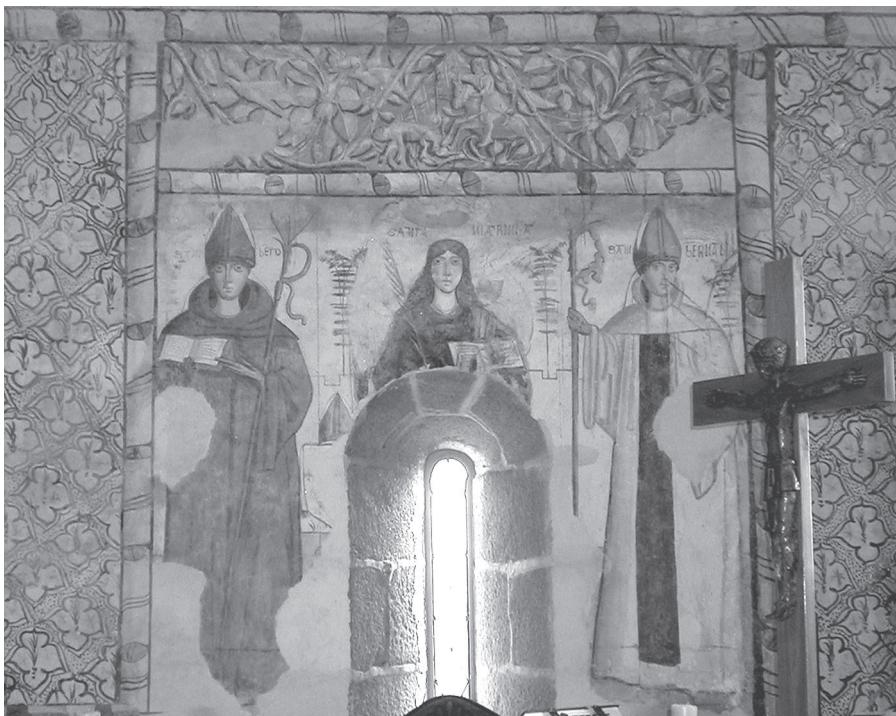


Fig. 4-6. *St. Benedict, St. Marinha and St. Bernard*. Vila Marim (Vila Real), c.1510

The last of the functions I have proposed to analyse in this chapter concerns the idea of authority. Judging from the remaining paintings, this function seems to have been far less important than the previous two. Furthermore, up to a certain point, this function might have been included in the prestige function. Most of the Portuguese temples with mural paintings belonged to an institution or noble family that was responsible for the care of more than a dozen small monasteries, churches and hermits. These institutions usually added the images (and presence) of their founding saints to the mural painting programs they ordered, even when the church and the altars were not devoted to them. For instance, churches under Benedictine rule included images of Saints Benedict and Bernard. Churches under the rule of military orders, namely the Order of Christ and the Order of Saint James, respectively included images of Christ

(either the Crucifix or Calvary) and images of Saint James (either as a pilgrim or as a mounted warrior). Churches under the direct rule of bishops or Pope's representatives («*nuncios*») usually included the holy pair of Peter and Paul. I have already stressed that Saint Peter seems to have been a highly popular saint (he is represented 12 times), while Saint Paul followed him relatively closely (he is represented 8 times). But it should be noted that in 5 of these representations we see Peter and Paul together, flanking the patron saint of a given church or chapel. Therefore, if it were not for Saint Paul's role as a column of the Church, together with Peter, he would not have been represented to such an extent. Not surprisingly, all of these combined representations appear in temples under the rule of the secular church, reinforcing the authority of the Church and, above all, the authority of its agents (usually the same individuals who paid for the murals).

The Benedictine abbey of **Pombeiro**, for example, had a considerable network of parish churches under its control (Afonso, 2003a). Although it is perhaps not surprising that the founding fathers of this monastic order were represented on the church of the main monastery (namely, Saint Maur and Saint Placidus flanking a lost sculpture of Saint Benedict), it is interesting to note that several of their satellite temples in different parishes also had images of Saint Benedict and Saint Bernard above the main altar. This was the case in two campaigns of frescoes painted on the main chapel of **Vila Marim** (Fig. 4-6) and in the main chapel of **Vila Verde**. In both cases, the two monks flanked the saint to whom the church was dedicated and these compositions were always accompanied by the personal heraldry of the abbots. Therefore, the spiritual and secular authority of the Benedictine monastery was emphasized through the murals painted in the parish churches under their control.

Conclusion

The majority of the Portuguese mural paintings produced between c.1490 and c.1550 have an iconic nature and they mostly represent saints, who were expected to help and protect both the bodies and the souls of the parishioners. These more recurrent saints were usually represented on the walls of the two altars located on the nave, flanking the main arch. Normally they assume an iconic typology and their main concern seems to be the manifestation of the *presence* of that specific holy entity above the altar. The number of narrative images from this period is far less significant than for the previous one, which means that the didactic purpose of religious images was not a primary concern at this time. Another important feature of Portuguese mural paintings of this period is the emphasis on the ornamentation of the walls. Large panels totally occupied with ornamental paintings were much more common than narrative

cycles. This situation offers a sharp contrast to the reality found in Italy and elsewhere during the same period, where we find an emphasis on narrative cycles (particularly in the most dynamic centres) or on iconic images (particularly in rural areas).

It should also be noted that ornamentation covered the side walls and not the altar walls—except at the margins, either above or under the level of the saints' representation. Naturally, these ornamental paintings made the House of God more beautiful while at the same time they enhancing the prestige of the donors. On a second level, this prestige was extended to the whole community of the parish if it succeeded in matching or surpassing the beauty of the churches of neighbouring villages. Finally, the rhetorical speeches that emphasized the authority of certain donors, religious orders or ecclesiastical lords were also explored, but apparently not with the same intensity that we find in other regions of Europe during the same period.

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