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BELGIAN INFLUENCES ON SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE TILE PRODUCTION OF THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

The enormous popularity of the decorated industrial wall and floor tile in Belgium from the 1880's onwards, and especially in the period 1896-1914, is strongly linked to the Art Nouveau style that was put on the map by such – even internationally – prominent architects and artists as Victor Horta, Henry van de Velde, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy or Privat Livemont who all experimented with ceramic tile material.

More than in neighbouring countries the Belgian Art Nouveau architecture is characterized by the abundance of colourful tile panels in façades, loggias and porticos, and in often very sumptuous interiors. Stylistically, Belgium takes its own place within the Western European tile production around 1900. The influence of the literary symbolism and theosophy is clearly identifiable in the main part of the total production. Beautiful floral decorations were very popular, as well in Belgium as abroad, especially in France, Spain, Portugal and Latin-America (e.g. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, etc.). Yet the more abstract geometric line – popular in Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria – is also regularly present.

The presence at various World Fairs was for most of the Belgian tile factories of vital importance because it was there that international professionals and the general public could become acquainted with the quality and range of their tiles and tile panels. The many awards gained at these international exhibitions strongly supported the export of their products, and for a small country as Belgium export was vital for the industry.

The Belgian Art Nouveau tile – both floral or geometrical in design – was thus worldwide exported, within Europe as well as to Latin-America and Asia. A network of foreign sales representatives increased significantly the export opportunities. In the archives of Gilliot Hemiksem for instance, we can find information on their French sales representative G. Martin in Paris as well as on their representatives M. Penalosa de Acevedo in Madrid and M. Verdussen in Rio de Janeiro. The Helman firm on the other hand was represented in Buenos Aires by the Compañia Comercial Sud. Business trips from Manises in Spain towards Belgium even lead there to the production of “azulejos finos sistema Belga”.

The international success of the Belgian Art Nouveau tile is also made visible by the fact that many Belgian tile designs were copied by tile manufacturers in Portugal, Spain and even Japan, just as was the case for English tile designs. In this, the wonderful lithographed trade catalogues of the Belgian tile manufacturers were very effective not only to convince potential clients all over the world. Through the many colourful images a foreign customer could get a good idea of what was on offer. It also led to many adaptations of Belgian designs in other countries, an influence that can be precisely documented through sales catalogues in other countries and through tiles and tile panels still in situ.

The tile panel design “Electricité” by Jacques Madiol for Helman Céramiques was adapted in 1907 by the Portuguese tile artist M. Quiriol for the exterior decoration of the well-known Animatógrafo do Rossio building in Lisbon. “Iris”, another tile panel design by Helman – also in use by the Manufacture de Céramiques Décoratives de Hasselt that shared the copyrights on this design – was adapted by the Cerâmica Artística Arcolena. A tile panel with a sailing ship in 1912 painted by Licínio Pinto for the Fábrica da Fonte Nova is very close to a standard tile design by Gilliot. Several other tile designs of Gilliot, La Dyle at Wijgmaal and Boch Frères were copied by the Fabrica Cerâmica das Devezas Antonio Almeida da Costa & Ca. A design of the Société Générale de Produits Réfractaires et Céramiques de Morialmé was produced by the Cerâmica Lusitânia. Finally, the Real Fábrica de Louça em Sacavem Gilman & Ca seems to have copied at least one Gilliot design.

In Spain Gilliot designs were copied by the firms of Viuda de Segarra Bernat in Castellon and Hijos de Justo Vilar S. en C. of Valencia. Designs of Gilliot as well as some of Boch Frères were copied by Dominguez Hno y Trigo of Valencia and were still present in their 1967 catalogue also by Azulejos Cedolesa Cerámica Dominguez de Levante S.A. of Manises and Onda, Valencia. The firm Luis Vila Hijo copied at least one design made by the S.A. La Céramique Poulet of Forges-lez-Chimay.

These, and many more examples document a strong and until now virtually unknown important foreign influence on Iberian tile production.

KEY WORDS

Art nouveau ; Tile design; Belgian stylistic influences; Iberian tile production

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mario Baeck (b. 1958), post-doctoral researcher in Art History, took his doctoral degree in Art Sciences at Ghent University, Belgium, in 2015 with a thesis on the development of the Belgian industrial wall and floor tile 1840-1940 in a European context. Published and lectured widely in different languages on various aspects of tile history (see for some papers: <http://independent.academia.edu/MarioBaeck/Papers>). Wrote together with Bart Verbrugge a ground breaking study on Belgian Art Nouveau and Art Deco wall tiles (1880-1940). Was curator for national and international exhibitions in which the Belgian industrial floor and wall tile is put in the spotlight. As a member of several scientific societies he regularly advises public heritage institutions in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia on tile restoration projects. Was co-promoter of several master's theses in the field of conservation / restoration of ceramics and on Monuments and Landscapes (Royal Academy of Fine Arts & Henry van de Velde Institute, University of Antwerp).