



POTTERY WALL AT THE OLD HOSPITAL DE LA SANTA CREU, BARCELONA

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DECORATED POTTERY

DECORATED POTTERY OCCUPIES A DISTINGUISHED POSITION IN CATALONIA ON ACCOUNT OF ITS LENGTHY TRADITION. THERE ARE TWO BASIC TYPES OF BAROQUE POTTERY WHICH CAN BE DISTINGUISHED ACCORDING TO THEIR PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS: UTILITARIAN AND DECORATIVE. IN BOTH CASES, CATALAN POTTERY BENEFITS FROM ITS UNQUESTIONABLE CREATIVITY AND ORIGINALITY.

MARIÀ CARBONELL LECTURER, AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

Amongst the inaptly named “minor” arts, decorated pottery occupies a distinguished position in Catalonia on account of its lengthy tradition and its acceptance in large sectors of the public. There is also a considerable, well preserved antique production and there has been plenty of research in the subject. Nevertheless, as regards the pottery of the baroque period, there are certain questions it is difficult to find an answer to. The first is the definition of what, in pottery, is baroque (a term which hardly allows a standard definition of the genre). If we accept the conventional characteristics applied to the art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it becomes

difficult to speak of Catalan baroque pottery, although some pieces, especially those of a sumptuous, decorative type, do allow this qualification. Whatever the case, there is less to interest us in the label than in discovering the creativity and originality of our pottery, aspects which can not be denied. A second question is the definition of decorated ceramics, since the most popular items of pottery were sometimes decorated with paint or varnish, while the most sumptuous ceramics also had a utilitarian function. The most popular pottery also has an artistic interest, but this is not central or decisive, so that we can not take it into account here. A third problem is the apparent existence

of characteristics common to all the production of the period in question. In this respect it is worth noting the variety of forms and typologies and the changes that took place over the years, especially in the decoration, which have led experts to establish “series” of different works that make it possible to identify their origin and date them. We can nevertheless speak of an increasing fondness for polychromy, despite an abundant production of blue pottery, a liking for ornamental exuberance and the spread of natural forms. The question of the chronological limits also has to be taken into consideration. For one thing, we have to overcome prejudices as regards dates, as the year 1600 does not



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mark a break with renaissance pottery, especially the pottery with metallic highlights, nor does the year 1700 mark a significant change in local production. Strictly speaking, there is no rococo Catalan pottery so much as a gradual disappearance of the baroque style, coinciding with the arrival of Neo-Classical tastes.

It might be useful to distinguish between two basic types of baroque pottery according to its principal function: utilitarian or decorative. Of the first there are many typologies: plates, bowls, jugs, pitchers, basins, etc. To speak of their practical utility is not to deny their aesthetic value or decorative function. In some cases these are magnificent pieces, but they always denote considerable luxury, as can be deduced from the ornamental wealth, the use of metallic oxides which increase the cost of the item, the presence of coats-of-arms and heraldic elements, the occasional imitation of precious metals, etc. It is symptomatic that in 1601 a pragmatic austerity was promulgated in the Court, forbidding the use of the polychrome tableware of Talavera. Certainly its use must have spread over the years, but by no means everyone could afford it. The most obviously decorative function was reserved for tiles, both those depicting trades and those that form compositions on walls or floors, of which the latter often formed a narrative.

The type I have called "utilitarian" continues the three kinds of decoration that already existed in the sixteenth century: gold, blue and polychrome. The first, which we find in a wide range of items, was produced in Barcelona and Reus, its ornamental repertory is very varied (leaves, flowers, scrolls, heraldic elements, contemporary and mythological figures, etc.), but its production came to an end soon after the "Guerra dels Segadors". In the seventeenth century, the blue ceramics, very common in plates, but also in vases and pitchers, tends to have figurative decoration, though it is usually classified in series according to the type of pattern around the edge: "fig", "tie", "fingerprint", "ribbon and stick", "tulip", "sausage", etc. Some of these motifs survived into the eighteenth century and new ones also appeared: "earring", "lace", "cherry". Polychrome pottery, also known here as "*obra de pisa*", was imported into Catalonia from Talavera by Lorenzo de Madrid at the end of the sixteenth century, and is characterized by its use of blue, yellow, green, orange and purple. During an early phase it adopted a simple polychromy, often with figurative themes showing a definite Italian influence, and subsequently increased the use of colour and the ornamental motifs (animals, vases with flowers, etc.). As well as the Barcelona production, it has been possible to establish specific series from other areas: pharmaceutical jars

from Escornalbou, plates from Segarra (some in blue), plates from Mataró and from Banyoles.

The most obviously decorative function is left to painted or glazed tiles, which are of a good standard, though without equalling that of the Valencian workshops. Nowadays, the tiles depicting trades, generally in polychrome, are very popular, though there are also tiles that reproduce other themes, taken from bestiaries, *auques* (traditional picture stories), etc. There are also mural compositions and altar frontals that stand out for their artistic value. The frontals, needless to say, deal with religious themes, but the murals can illustrate these or other subjects, such as landscapes (Pedralbes Monastery), mythology (Museu Vicenç Ros in Martorell) or battles (Lepanto, in the Capella del Roser in Valls; "cats and rats", in the Museu Vicenç Ros; naval battles, in the Roviralta collection in Lloret). During the eighteenth century there are noteworthy religious representations, but the secular subject matter is on the increase, with ships (for example the *Correu de Mallorca* in the Maritime Museum in Barcelona), hunting scenes (Vicenç Ros Museum), landscapes with figures (friezes in the Museu Ceràmic de Barcelona), genre scenes (the famous "Xocolatada" and bullfight scenes in the Museu Ceràmic, from the Font de la Salut in Alella) and even portraits (facade of the Torre Tavernera in Vallromanes). ●