

## TURNING A SOCIAL PROBLEM INTO A CULTURAL OPPORTUNITY: THE CRIME PREVENTION PROJECT 'SOS AZULEJO'



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**Abstract:** Artistic and historic 'azulejos' — as Portuguese ceramic tiles are designated even outside Portugal — do have an enormously important cultural role in Portuguese cities. In fact Portuguese historic and artistic 'azulejos' stand out in the world cultural heritage for their invaluable richness in quality, quantity, style, materials and techniques. Although this relevance is recognised by art historians, scientists, artists, antique dealers — and burglars — it is not generally acknowledged, favouring the massive plunder it has been inflicted to in the last twenty years. In fact, these 'azulejos' have been so present in Portuguese cities in all kinds of sceneries and for so many centuries that — paradoxically — the average Portuguese citizen no longer notices them: an endless quantity of urban 'azulejos' constructions needs conservation measures badly and the not-protected tiles are easily removed and stolen. Because the Judiciary Police (PJ) has the exclusive competence for crimes related to cultural heritage in Portugal, the PJ Museum decided to implement a crime prevention project against theft, traffic and vandalism of Portuguese historic and artistic tiles which is simultaneously a campaign for the conservation of this cultural heritage. The name of the Project: 'SOS AZULEJO'. With the help of various public Partners (including other Portuguese police forces — PSP and GNR) and Partners coming from different thematic areas, this interdisciplinary project has reached measurable positive results such as a very impressive reduction of registered 'azulejos' thefts.

**Keywords:** crime prevention; Portuguese cultural tile heritage (azulejos); theft and lack of conservation; project 'SOS Azulejo'.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper does not pretend to present a theoretical work nor a totally independent research. Within an interdisciplinary effort concerning the study and protection of Portuguese historic and artistic tiles — or 'azulejos', according to their Iberian designation — the goal of this article consists on presenting a practical case study as objectively as possible, although with specific limitations, as the author of this text and the mentor of the studied case are one and the same person.

Having said that, which clarifies the used perspective, we will go on presenting what we defend as an innovative, interdisciplinary, horizontal and in many ways efficient project and approach to a specific Portuguese cultural heritage problem. The project is called 'SOS Azulejo', its mentor is the Portuguese Judiciary

Police Museum and its target consists of the effective protection of Portuguese historic and artistic 'azulejos'.

### MAIN REASONS WHICH MOTIVATED 'PROJECT SOS AZULEJO': TURNING A SOCIAL PROBLEM INTO A CULTURAL OPPORTUNITY

Portuguese historic and artistic ceramic tiles stand out in the world cultural heritage for their invaluable richness in quality, quantity, style, materials, uses and techniques. Portuguese architecture is known worldwide for its 'azulejos', which cover the exterior and interior walls of



hundreds of thousands of Portuguese buildings, from churches to hospitals, from palaces to railway stations, from monuments to schools, from all sorts of public buildings to entire ancient urban housing blocks.

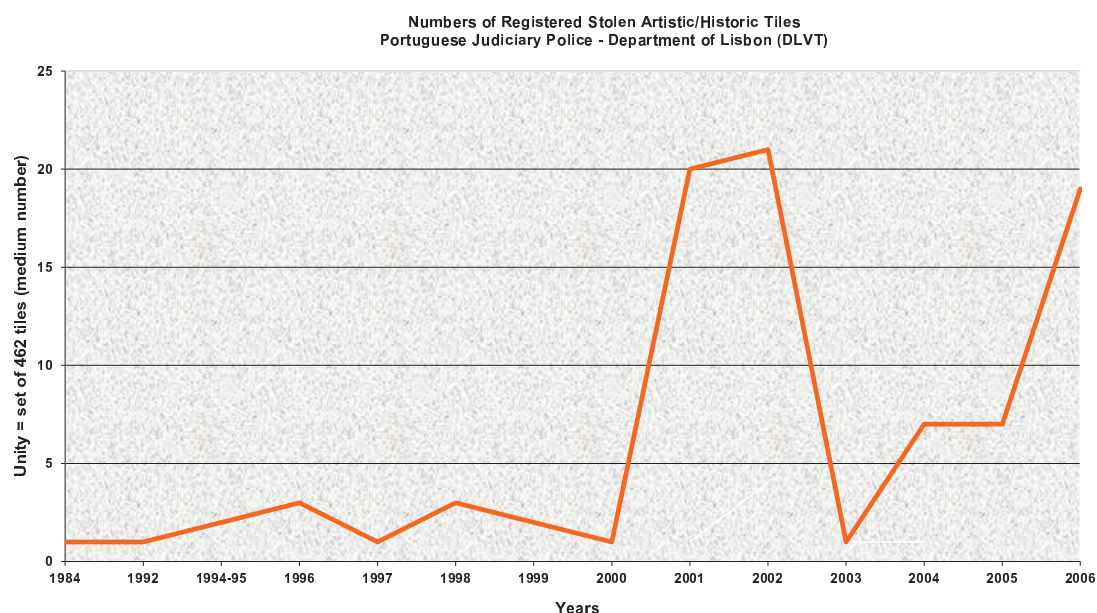
Introduced by the Arabs in the Iberian peninsula in the 14th century and specifically in Portugal in the 16th century through the importation of tiles and ceramists from Flanders — notwithstanding influences from other Iberian producing centres in Andalusia or Valencia — ceramic tiles demonstrate a rich and unique expansion and development in Portuguese soil in the following periods (Meco, 1985 and 1989). They have accompanied and illustrated Portuguese history and behaviours in all its levels and approaches, representing all kinds of themes — from eloquent religious scenes and great historical events to simple stylish decoration, advertising or cartoons. As a result of this systematic use in all kinds of buildings, for all sorts of purposes — with the consequent imprint in architecture, art and atmosphere — Portuguese ‘azulejos’ gained a proper status at an international level.

The first scholar who thoroughly studied and published in Portugal and abroad about

Portuguese ‘azulejos’ was João Miguel Santos Simões (1997; 1990), who was linked to the foundation of the ‘National Museum of Azulejo’. Although today more and more academics and institutions are dedicating their work to this subject and although it is generally accepted that the brilliant colours, glaze, variety of patterns, physical characteristics and different uses of ‘azulejos’ are unique and mark a specific Portuguese architectural, artistic and cultural identity, we defend that this potential is not yet sufficiently and globally recognised and sustained by Portuguese institutions <sup>(1)</sup>. As a consequence of this lack of global strategy and focus concerning historic and artistic ‘azulejos’, a number of negative facts occur, putting ‘azulejos’ heritage at risk, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Indeed, because ‘azulejos’ are increasingly valued by art experts, historians and national and international antique dealers, they are getting more and more tempting for art and antiques burglary and trafficking — and the number of thefts rose accordingly, from the late 1990s on, especially in the area of Lisbon, as we can see in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Statistical data concerning registered stolen artistic/historic tiles in the area of Lisbon within the period 1984-2006.**



<sup>(1)</sup> E.g. the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (Plano Estratégico Nacional de Turismo — PENT, 2007) elaborated by the Ministry of Economy and Innovation enumerates and focuses on various differentiating and ‘identitary’ Portuguese characteristics which should be taken advantage of in this context. Portuguese ceramic tiles’ cultural heritage is not mentioned among them. See: <http://www.turismodeportugal.pt/Portugu%C3%AAs/conhecimento/planoestrategiconacionaldoturismo/Anexos/PENT%20OVER%20INGLES.pdf>.



The figure shows us the number of registered stolen historic and artistic tiles rose significantly in (and around) Lisbon since the late 1990s to 2006. These statistical data show us the registered theft of thousands of 'azulejos' in this geographical area, but empiric evidence shows many other 'azulejos' have been stolen without any information provided to the police <sup>(2)</sup> or other institutions whatsoever. Curiously enough — and paradoxically — apart from some important referred exceptions, artistic urban 'azulejos' seem not to be much valued by common Portuguese people and institutions. These tiles have been so permanently present in Portuguese everyday life for so many centuries that the average Portuguese citizen no longer especially notices or cares much about them. The result is neglect, needless tile-removing from walls, demolitions of tile-covered buildings, vandalism and an endless quantity of constructions with 'azulejos' which need conservation measures badly <sup>(3)</sup>. In fact, although this ceramic material is amazingly resistant, eventually it also deteriorates and needs some conservation care. Furthermore, the deteriorated tiles are easily removable, favouring the massive plunder it has been inflicted to in the last twenty years (Sá, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

As we will see, the 'SOS Azulejo Project' was created in order to contribute to what we defend

should be a global approach and a strategic line to protect Portuguese 'azulejos' and its tradition in the present and in the future.

## THE EMERGENCE OF 'SOS AZULEJO'

In 2002 the Portuguese Judiciary Police Museum (from now on referred to as PJ Museum) started mentoring the idea of 'SOS Azulejo' for the abovementioned general reasons and also motivated by the following institutional and practical circumstances: first of all, the Portuguese Judiciary Police (PJ) is the law enforcement agency in Portugal with the exclusive competence for crimes related to works of art and cultural heritage <sup>(4)</sup>; secondly, the PJ Museum — which belongs to the 'Escola de Polícia Judiciária' (EPJ) — possesses a collection of stolen historic tiles which have been recovered by the police but not returned to their owners because their origin remains unknown up to this day. This situation is not completely unexpected in the context of the above mentioned neglect. These 'azulejos' have been exhibited on several occasions by this museum for educational purposes (Figures 2 and 3).

*Figures 2 and 3. Exhibition of collection of stolen historic tiles by the PJ Museum.*



<sup>(2)</sup> The Directorate of the Judiciary Police from Porto did not register a single complaint for theft of historical and artistic 'azulejos'. Direct testimony from local municipal authorities however denies there are no thefts. A simple tour through the city is also elucidative about this matter.

<sup>(3)</sup> Apart 'SOS Azulejo', artist Eduardo Nery and investigators Margarida Almeida Bastos and Fernando Lopes are among the few authors who explicitly mention these problems concerning theft and neglect of 'azulejos' (Nery, 2007, pp. 101-105; Bastos and Lopes, 2007).

<sup>(4)</sup> Article 7, Law 49/2008 of 27 August 2008.



Linked to these educational purposes is the fact that from its very beginning in 1993 the PJ Museum decided to choose 'Crime Prevention' as its 'Social Function' <sup>(5)</sup>. In fact and as already mentioned, crime prevention constitutes one of the explicit competences of the Judiciary Police, although taking a secondary role in PJ's priorities (which concern crime investigation). In this context, the PJ Museum pretends to play a dynamic and complementary role in crime prevention through informative and educational exhibitions, projects and programmes which can be of direct interest and service to the community. As the PJ Museum does not have permanent exhibition rooms yet, its actions have been limited and scoped by this fact and have consisted up to now on 'out of the walls' museological actions (Malraux, 1954).

In this sequence, the PJ Museum decided to create a 'crime prevention project' to protect Portuguese 'azulejos' cultural heritage from growing theft, traffic and vandalism. Because of its museological perspective and functions however, this institution considered 'preventive conservation' as a major factor which could not — or at least should not — be discarded when approaching cultural heritage, and so this 'conservation' perspective was included in the project. Furthermore, the PJ Museum considered most important to add a third perspective — raising people's awareness to the problem — so that the project could be more truly effective.

This global perspective meant absolute need of partnerships which would enable the project to proceed in the various necessary directions. (Sá, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). After some time, the PJ Museum managed to involve several prestigious Portuguese organisations which embraced all thematic vectors of this problem, namely a representative of the Ministry of Culture, universities, a local authorities' association and other police forces. On the whole, these are the current seven Partner institutions of PJ Museum (represented by EPJ) in the 'SOS Azulejo' Project:

- Associação Nacional de Municípios Portugueses (ANMP)

- Direção Geral do Património Cultural (DGPC)
- Instituto Politécnico de Tomar (IPT)
- Universidade de Lisboa (UL)
- Universidade de Aveiro (UA)
- Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR)
- Polícia de Segurança Pública (PSP).

In 2007 a protocol was signed between the PJ Museum (represented by EPJ) and five of the mentioned partners, officially creating the project. The project's site [www.sosazulejo.com](http://www.sosazulejo.com) was launched some months after and in 2010 and 2014 two other Partners (FLUL and UA) took the initiative of joining the project by signing an addendum to the original protocol.

The functioning of this unusual and multidisciplinary partnership is light and flexible. The Partners have regular general meetings every 3 months and are coordinated by the PJ Museum, which invests a lot of effort in communication with the Partners. At this point, the Project has no budget. Each Partner performs its specific skills within its institutional budget, giving the project a multidisciplinary and global performing capacity. Occasionally sponsors are enlisted for actions that cannot be covered by the Partners.

## 'SOS AZULEJO': ACTIONS AND RESULTS

Since 2007 the Project has been implemented through various actions according to the following different thematic focuses.

### FOCUS 1: PREVENTING AND DETERRING THEFTS

Although it is the result of a global approach to the protection of historical and artistic 'azulejos', the

<sup>(5)</sup> The concept of the 'museum's social function', which emerged for the first time in the 'Declaration of Santiago/Chile' at the Round Table of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1972 ([http://www.bermuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Publicacion\\_Mesa\\_Redonda\\_VOL\\_1.pdf](http://www.bermuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Publicacion_Mesa_Redonda_VOL_1.pdf)) and was consolidated at the 'Declaration of Québec — Basic Principles for a New Museology' in 1984, was afterwards largely disseminated in museums' studies, bibliography and actions. Regarding PJ Museum's social function and its museological programme, see Sá, 2005, p. 5.



first priority of this Project consisted of fighting and preventing one of its most acute problems: rising theft and national and international traffic.

The first 'SOS Azulejo' action towards this goal therefore consisted of disseminating systematised information and images of stolen figurative tile panels through its website (and Facebook). Easy access to these images aimed at:

- a) making the identification and recovery of stolen historic tiles easier;
- b) therefore making the circulation of stolen historic tiles in the market difficult;
- c) in this way discouraging and deterring this kind of crime for burglars and fences.

Indeed before this 'SOS Azulejo' action, we have direct information that even figurative stolen 'azulejos' panels circulated very easily in the legal market, art circuits and even state museums. With the launching of SOS Azulejo's site this situation completely changed. Good faith buyers — whether antique dealers, curators or other professionals — now have easily available information and buyers in bad faith can no longer claim ignorance.

The results of this 'SOS Azulejo' measure were immediate and encouraging. The very first day after the launching of the website, a stolen tile panel (Figure 4) was recognised, identified and recovered by the police (Sá, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

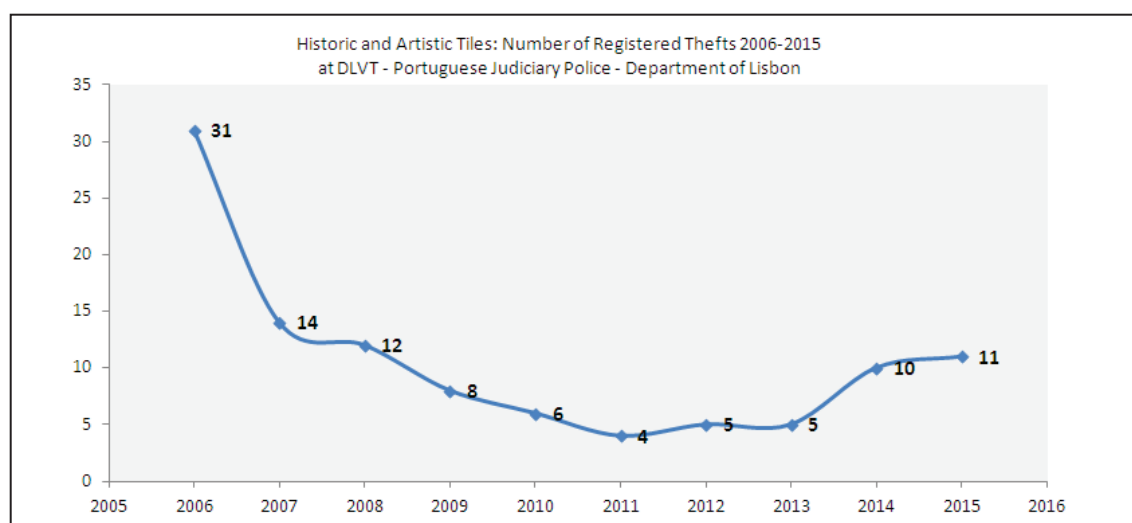
*Figure 4. Figurative Panel of 'azulejos' from the beginning of the 20th century, by Leopoldo Battistini. It had been stolen from Palácio da Rosa in Lisbon in 2001.*



Over the long run, statistics concerning registered thefts of 'azulejos' in the area of Lisbon from the 1990s until 2015 were especially encouraging

and showing impressive positive measurable results until 2013 (Figure 5).

*Figure 5. Statistical data concerning registered thefts of artistic/historic tiles in the area of Lisbon within the period 2006-2015.*





Considering the fact that 'SOS Azulejo' was created in 2007, we can see there is an important decrease of registered stolen 'azulejos' precisely from that year on, in the area of Lisbon. To be more precise, since 2006 until 2012 and 2013 the registered thefts decreased more than 80 per cent in and around Lisbon. As we can see in the chart, in 2014 and 2015 the thefts of 'azulejos' rose again — meaning the decrease of registered tile thefts since 2006 is now not so dramatic but still quite impressive, at a level of 65 %. The new rise of thefts concerns especially pattern tiles and not figurative tiles. Indeed, the figurative tiles can be recognised on the internet but not the pattern tiles, which repeat themselves in various buildings and cities, making it difficult to identify its source and to deny sellers who allege demolitions as the origin of their product. The coordination of SOS Azulejo has been studying this problem and proposed a new measure to its Partners which has been accepted. This new proposal deals with controlling sales of old tiles and was presented by the coordination of 'SOS Azulejo' to the 12th Parliamentary Commission in February 2016. We hope it will be discussed in Parliament and implemented in the near future.

## FOCUS 2: PREVENTING NEGLECT AND DESTRUCTION AND ENCOURAGING CONSERVATION

Fighting and preventing neglect and visible lack of conservation of ceramic tiles (which encourage vandalism and theft) also constituted a priority of this Project. Among the measures taken by the project towards this goal, we will mention the ones with more positive measurable results.

### MEASURE 2.1

Directly contacting the local municipal authority of Lisbon (CML) putting the potential of 'SOS Azulejo' at its service and raising its awareness to the problem.

After a long process, some positive results emerged. In May 2009 CML (Department of Culture) and Polícia Judiciária signed a protocol and organised a joint seminar, both aiming at the protection of historic and artistic 'azulejos'

in Lisbon; in this sequence CML created a work group concerned with the issue of the safeguard of 'azulejos' in Lisbon.

In November 2010 a Recommendation was approved in the Municipal Assembly of Lisbon for the creation of a municipal plan for the protection of 'azulejos' in Lisbon, explicitly recognising the 'truly remarkable' role of 'SOS Azulejo' in this process.

By the end of 2010 the referred CML work group in the Culture Department presented for the first time its new plan for the protection of 'azulejos' in Lisbon. It is called 'PISAL' — 'Plano de Investigação para a Salvaguarda dos 'azulejos' de Lisboa' ('Investigation Plan for the Safeguard of Lisbon's "azulejos"'). The presentation was made at the 'Centro Nacional de Cultura' — 'CNC' ('National Center for Culture') proceeded by a presentation of 'SOS Azulejo'.

The CML's initial efforts in creating a work group (which later turned into the 'PISAL') were recognised and given a prize by 'SOS Azulejo' in 2010. Important inventory work concerning Lisbon's 'azulejos' has been done by PISAL since then. We hope to see more practical positive results of 'PISAL' in the near future.

### MEASURE 2.2

By the end of 2011 'SOS Azulejo' proposed an important measure to be incorporated in the new regulations of the Urbanism Department of CML <sup>(6)</sup> that has been accepted and implemented in Lisbon since 2013 <sup>(7)</sup>. It consists of prohibiting the demolition of buildings' façades covered with 'azulejos' and/or the removal of 'azulejos' from the same façades. This means a full 180 degree turn in the protection approach of this kind of heritage in the capital: historical and artistic 'azulejos' in Lisbon are now regarded and protected as a whole and not only in cases of exceptional architectural value, and the *enormous amount of demolitions of tiled buildings in the last 30 years in Lisbon has been stopped* (Sá, 2014a, 2014b). At this point, 'SOS Azulejo' is trying to implement these new rules to the whole Portuguese territory. A single measure and input will have an enormous potential output in

<sup>(6)</sup> The regulation is called 'Regulamento Municipal de Urbanização e Edificação de Lisboa' and is usually referred to as 'RMUEL'.

<sup>(7)</sup> MUNICÍPIO DE LISBOA, Aviso n.º 5147/2013, Alteração ao Regulamento Municipal de Urbanização e Edificação de Lisboa, art.ºs 13º e 14º, Diário da República, 2.ª série — N.º 74 — 16 de abril de 2013.



terms of the global protection of the Portuguese historic tiles' heritage. It will also be an important basis to the application of Portuguese 'azulejos' to World Heritage, as it will be the only way of guaranteeing their effective preservation.

### MEASURE 2.3

Disseminating useful, valuable and information not available elsewhere on its website (complemented by Facebook) concerning a global approach to the protection of Portuguese Historic and Artistic Tiles for public access. The available information includes:

- practical advice concerning:
  - a) theft and vandalism — crime prevention;
  - b) conservation care — preventive conservation;
- useful information on good practices and how to accede municipalities' 'Tiles' banks' for public free use;
- academic works, information and news about all sorts of (educational) events and activities concerning historic and artistic tiles.

### MEASURE 2.4

Creating effective prevention tools concerning hospital buildings in Lisbon (ancient convents and palaces) with very important tile collections. These buildings were sold and will become vacant and very vulnerable in the near future. Experience tells us the precious 'azulejos' from vacant buildings are very easily and systematically stolen. 'SOS Azulejo' identified this risk in these hospital buildings and developed three levels of preventive actions:

- a) making an inventory of all concerned tile collections (through Partner UL);
- b) promoting guided visits to these buildings and raising awareness of the outgoing board of directors and people in general;
- c) meeting and convincing the new owner to order and implement a security plan for the

first vacant building. This security plan has been implemented in May 2011. Until then Partner PSP patrolled the area. 'SOS Azulejo' intends to replicate this model of procedure as soon as other hospital buildings become vacant.

### FOCUS 3: DISSEMINATING AND AWARDING GOOD PRACTICES

Departing from a focus on negative information — linked to the repression and prevention of thefts, vandalism and degradation, — 'SOS Azulejo' soon started to realize the importance of enlarging its perspective and adding a positive and rewarding scope of action. In this sequence, 'SOS Azulejo' developed a series of actions targeting a positive message, focused on <sup>(8)</sup>:

- Disseminating and encouraging good (conservation) practices (including inventories);
- Encouraging and awarding academic studies, artists and community actions: Annual 'SOS Azulejo Awards' were created in 2010, allowing SOS Azulejo to publicly recognise individuals and institutions whose work related to 'azulejos' is remarkable and contributes not only to their safeguard, but also to their study, dissemination, fruition and continuity in contemporary art. These awards have given visibility to works of excellence in many different fields, and are meant to have an encouraging role. The ceremonies have taken place at the emblematic Fronteira Palace (built in the 17th century and covered with tiles) and have been most gratifying for all the involved;
- Disseminating love for 'azulejos' especially in school children: 'SCHOOL ACTION SOS AZULEJO' has been taking place annually during the first days of May since 2011. The 2016 edition will count with the participation of more than 75 schools groups and schools and almost 9 500 participants. The event has been a growing success, for pupils and teachers participate with great enthusiasm and we are certain to be raising awareness to this kind of cultural heritage in many children and their families, aiming at a better faith for 'azulejos' in the future.

<sup>(8)</sup> The following list does not include biannual seminars and other actions of the Project.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Several projects aiming at 'azulejos' protection have emerged after 'SOS Azulejo' (although more focused in specific sectors and not so multidisciplinary), which might be seen as a probable consequence of this Project's actions and contribution to the cause of 'azulejos' in Portugal. Also, institutional services awarded by this Project were afterwards given better conditions and means by their managers. This seems to be a good sign in terms of the Project's results — although not completely measurable — considering SOS Azulejo's initial aims in terms of raising institutional and people's awareness to the importance of Portuguese tiles.

Furthermore, at the end of this article we consider our initial proposition to be materialised and proven, that is, we hope to have shown 'SOS Azulejo' has achieved measurable positive results

regarding the protection of Portuguese 'azulejos' (especially in Lisbon) by developing innovative, preventive and positive actions within a strategy of global approach, through unusual partnerships and a multidisciplinary perspective — trying to turn a problem of theft, vandalism and neglect into a cultural opportunity for the dissemination of Portugal's cultural heritage.

This was recognised at a high European level in 2013, when 'SOS Azulejo Project' was awarded the Grand Prix of the European Union for Cultural Heritage/EUROPA NOSTRA in Category 4: Raising of Awareness, Education and Training.

'SOS Azulejo' considered this important award as an encouragement to continue, for there is still a long way to go until the cultural heritage of Portuguese 'azulejos' are protected — as they truly deserve to be.

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