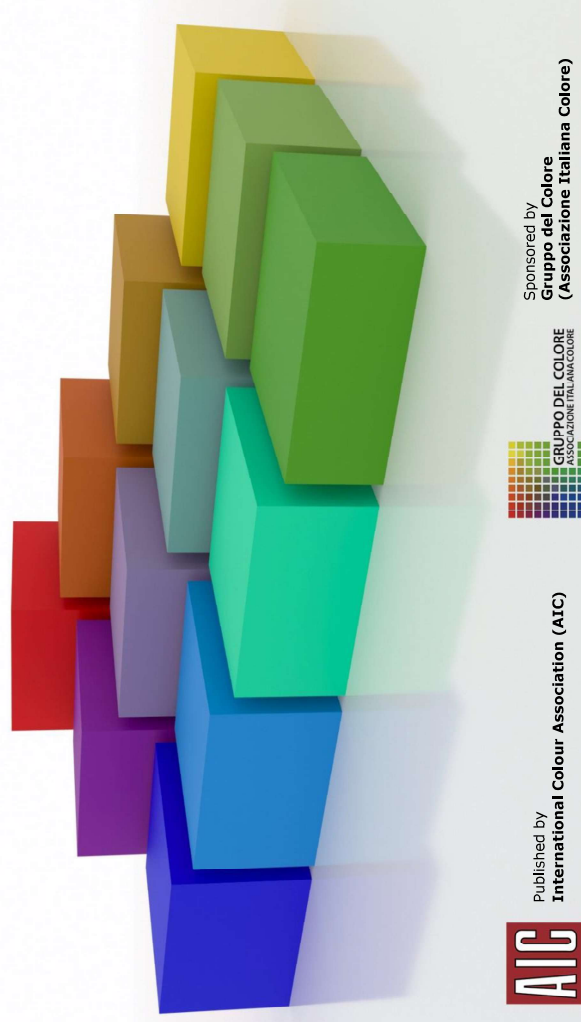




# Proceedings of the International Colour Association (AIC) Conference 2021

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# Color, ceramics and architecture in the Spanish Renaissance. Serlian serial ceramics and their role in the construction of a new spatiality

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## Abstract

In Spain, an important tile industry developed during the 16th century which, based on a fusion of traditional techniques together with motifs and new techniques coming from Italy, spread over the Iberian Peninsula and through the Spanish colonies in America. Polychrome ceramics played an important role in the introduction and dissemination of Renaissance designs in architecture. Architectural color, by means of large full-colored ceramic wall panels, created on the basis of modular geometric designs after Sebastiano Serlio's treatises, became a fundamental compositional variable in the introduction of the new Renaissance aesthetics in the territories of the Spanish Empire. The combination of Renaissance ceramic pieces, designed with a limited number of ornamental motifs expressed with a reduced color palette, created interesting compositions that refer directly to this artistic period. This historical study highlights the direct link between tilework and the Renaissance architecture it covers, accompanying its stylistic reading and enhancing its representativeness.

**Keywords:** *Color, Ceramics, Spain, Serlio, Renaissance*

## INTRODUCTION

Between 1580 and 1640, the Iberian Peninsula became unified under the Austrian monarchy. This fact, together with the expansion of the Spanish Crown over large American territories, generated the political unity of an extensive Empire. The Habsburgs undertook an extensive building program aimed at providing the Empire with a unitary and recognizable architectural image based on the assimilation of classicist architectural forms imported from Italy.

In interior spaces, lacking classical formal elements, the polychrome ceramic panels, widely used in both public and private buildings, were the only element that allowed the formalization of this architectural program. The use of ceramic panels rested upon a pre-designed and easily exportable material, which could be distributed throughout the Empire. Through this strategy, uneducated craftsmen without any knowledge of architectural composition could use ceramic panels to compose murals whose design was ultimately derived from the prints in the main treatises, especially those by Sebastiano Serlio. In this way, classical designs were transferred to all types of architectural spaces in Spain, Portugal or the American colonies, generating an architectural "standard" based on the polychromy of the ceramic panels that guaranteed the transmission of Architectural Classicism at all levels.

### Spanish Renaissance architecture and the new spatiality

Within Spain, it is traditionally established that the use of this type of Renaissance ceramics originates in Seville, through the figure of the Italian ceramist Francisco Niculoso (Gestoso 1904). The new technique gave the clay support a pictorial treatment, using a wide chromatism called the palette of great fire (Menéndez, 1991). In Seville, and from a tradition of massive use of Muslim tilework, a symbiosis will develop between traditional tilework and Renaissance tilework that will be massively used in the characterization of interior spaces in order to create a new spatiality. The rooms of the

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Alcázar of Seville, the *Casa de Pilatos* (Figure 1), or the Palace of the Countess of Lebrija used the chromatism of ceramic canvases on a large scale to characterize both the most representative spaces and smaller spaces, creating a model frequently replicated in smaller buildings or in rooms of private homes (Pleguezuelo 1989).

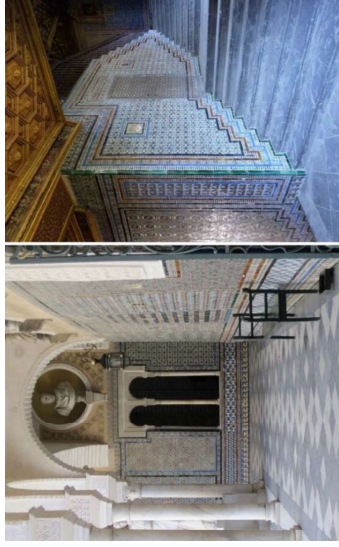


Figure 1: *Casa de Pilatos* (Seville).

Technical innovations will spread from Seville to the other major hub of Hispanic ceramic production, located in Talavera. Among the most recognized figures of Talavera pottery stands out the Flemish ceramist Juan Flores or Jan Floris. Appointed by Felipe II in 1563 and raised as a "master of tile-making" (Martínez 1991), he will have an important role in the introduction of the motif of the *ferroneries*.

The third formal influence that will define the ceramic panels of the 16th century derives from the assimilation of classical forms as base tiles for their subsequent combination in larger panels. This assimilation traces back to the survey of the classical orders carried out in Italy and transmitted by the treatise writers; especially in the Spanish translation of Sebastiano Serlio's Books III and IV. Their massive use of images at the expense of text turned them into ideal, easily interpretable formal compendiums for the use of potters, as they made extensive theoretical knowledge of architecture unnecessary (Llopis et al. 2014).

All this set of influences gave rise to a standardized tilework used almost indistinctly in all the regions of the Empire.

The present paper aims to verify the direct link between Renaissance tilework and the architecture of that historical period. The combination of those ceramic pieces, designed with a limited number of ornamental motifs embodied with a reduced color palette, leads to interesting compositions that refer directly to the Renaissance architecture it covers, accompanying its stylistic reading and enhancing its representativeness.

## METHODOLOGY: COMPOSITION AND COLOR ANALYSIS OF SERIAL CERAMICS OF SERLIAN ORIGIN

In order to verify the relative formal uniformity and the reduced color palette of the Renaissance tile designs, we present an annotated selection of the most representative samples of this period below. To determine the chromatic characteristics that define this architectural ceramic, we have carried out



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a color measurement in Natural Color System (NCS) notation of one of the tiles that make up the baseboards of the Corpus Christi Church in Valencia, using a "NCS Color Scan" contact colorimeter.

The formal origin of the designs

Due to their abundant presence and wide geographic dispersion, the inverted pyramid and the pointed pyramid shaped tiles –also known as "nail" or "diamond-tipped tiles"– stand out among the first standardized designs (Panels Tiles No. 1 and 2 respectively, within Figure 2 above). They seem to be original from Talavera, and frequently combine with each other. Their design stems from various prints in Serlio's treatise, where they appear in various contexts. Panel Tile No. 1 appears, for example, in Book III, folio XLIII, on the back of a cornice, and is made up of a truncated pyramid with a central flower. Panel Tile No. 2 takes the shape of a nail, and appears, for example, in a print on folio XLVIII from Serlio's Book IV, having its origin in masonry wall designs. A third Panel Tile model is No. 3, which, unlike the previous ones, originated in the Flemish *ferronneries*. It traces back to engravings by authors such as Cornelis Bos, who were very successful at the time.

These tiles were freely combined to generate complex wall panels, to which the color provided a strong volumetric effect. They were completed with a wide range of borders that finished off the edges, closing the composition. Although floral and even anthropomorphic designs were occasionally used, potters often resorted to purely architectural designs that, once again, had its origin in the prints of Sebastiano Serlio's treatise. Border Panel nº1 stands out as an example. It is a tile made up of parallel bands, in which eggs and leaves, waves, spirals and palmettes are arranged, respectively. Serlio uses the original motif in classical entablatures such as those drawn in Book III, fol. LXXIII and in Book IV, fol. SLV. The tendency to partial and decontextualized use of these motifs in the tiles can be seen in the individual use of the *ovais* in independent tiles in the case of Panel Border nº3. Serlio frequently uses this element in combination with other moldings, such as the Ionic capital in Book IV, fol. LXXVI. In fact, Serlio himself, in an image from Book IV, fol. LXXXVI, offers moldings to be freely combined according to specific needs, several of which were used by 16<sup>th</sup>-century tile-makers so as to formalize the tiles of the architectural panels of Serlian origin that we are discussing here (Pérez, 1996).

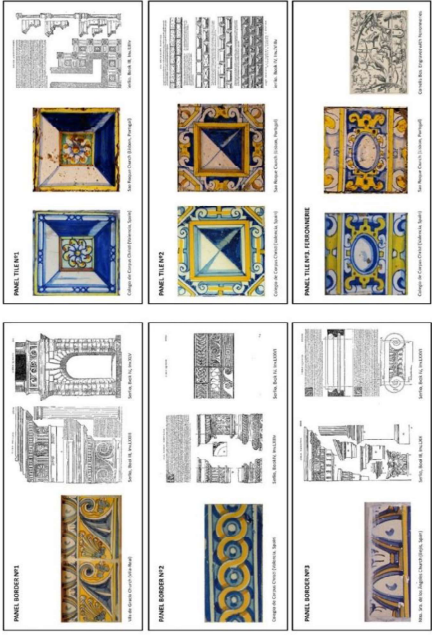


Figure 2: Panel Tiles of Serlian origin.

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The color palette

Although the morphological-ornamental repertoire is small, the possibilities for combining these tiles were almost endless, since the possibilities of variation in the distribution of the modular pieces could give rise to very diverse formal and chromatic effects (Figure 3). However, we can say that there was a standard compositional pattern, originated in Italy and invariably repeated in places as geographically remote as the Corpus Christi College in Valencia and the Church of São Roque in Lisbon.



Figure 3: From left to right and top to bottom: 1. Church of São Roque (Lisbon); 2. Old Saint Paul's College (Valencia); 3. Corpus Christi College (Valencia); 4. Chapel of the Roser (Valls); 5. Church of São Roque (Lisbon); 6. Corpus Christi College (Valencia); 7. Convent of Saint Dominic (Uma); 8. Sanctuary of the Holy Cave (Altura, Valencia) y 9. San Juan de Ribera College (Burjassot, Valencia).

In the case of tile panels of Serlian origin, dominant ranges were established and repeated almost without modifications over time. Their basic colors are obtained with a constant and reduced number of pigments, to which three main colors correspond. First, a cobalt blue pigment, which corresponds to a slightly reddish blue hue, of a certain blackness and medium chromaticity S 5040-R80B. In second place, a lead antimonate yellow pigment, corresponding to a very pure and chromatic yellow coloration that some authors describe as "lemon yellow" (Pérez 1996: 62) S 1060-G90Y. Thirdly, a tin white pigment, used for backgrounds, and to which a coloration close to S 0505-Y10R corresponds. From the mixture of these three main pigments, the ceramic color palette broadens, with the presence of blues of less blackness S 0530-R80B to delineate some figures, and a light greenish background S 2040-G40Y for the flower central. A light orange iron oxide pigment, slightly saturated and close to the other S 2060-Y10R, draws some isolated geometry (Figure 4). Other pigments were also known (copper for green, manganese for purple, orange and ferruginous brown), but the blue-yellow pairing clearly predominates (Pérez 1996).



Figure 4: Color notations in NCS system referring to blue, yellow, white, green and other tones. Measurement made on one of the tiles that make up the baseboards of the Corpus Christi Church in Valencia.

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Thus, the contrast between a very dark cobalt blue and an intense yellow is sought. The colors are flat, only the blue color presents two tones to emphasize the volumetry of the designs, (*ovas*, diamond points or incisions) simulating shadows that provide a sensation of three-dimensionality. This profiling can be found with manganese, albeit occasionally. The other base color was antimony yellow, which was used mostly in backgrounds to highlight the volumetry of the architectural elements, usually made in blue. Occasionally these two base colors were reversed, using blue for backgrounds and yellow to define the designs (Border Panel # 2), and sometimes white was used to define highlights in the designs that expanded the volumetric sensation (Border Panel # 3). As Pérez (1996: 62) points out, "the homogeneity of the chromaticism reaches the point that its link to the basic drawing is total and constant: each bounded area in a tile receives always the same color; these are neither altered nor exchanged". The white color is not used as a background. It rather gives the drawing physicality, with the dark areas acting as proper background instead.

Despite these occasional variations, the basic bichromy defined by yellow and blue was applied to define a base architectural frame, which was used to define the wall plan. It occasionally served also as a support for other panels inserted in the frame, as for example in the Church of São Roque in Lisbon (Figure 5.3), in which independent panels, responding to different compositional and chromatic criteria, were freely inserted into the Serlian ceramic panels that framed them. On further occasions, other tile pieces of different designs were inserted, displaying floral and geometric motifs, in which the chromatic continuity was enriched by using the ochre and green ranges of the floral motifs, as in the Sanctuary of the Holy Cave in Altura (Figure 3.8). Finally, the modular nature of the pieces allowed their free play, and so they were used to frame doors and openings by means of designs that decomposed the base structure to adapt to the geometry of the covered walls, maintaining the bichromatic character of the original design.

## SERLIAN CERAMICS AND THE NEW SPACIALITY

The support of the Crown to this strategy of wall ornamentation based on modular tiles of Serlian origin guaranteed its wide dissemination. The use of tile panels turned into a plan to "decorate" spaces according to the criteria of architectural classicism without resorting to classic orders properly. In this scheme, color became paramount to define the architectural spatiality of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Serlian tile designs, created in Talavera from Italian influences arrived through Seville and from Flemish influences promoted by Felipe II, spread all along the Hispanic territories through a double channel: direct exportation and the training of a staff already familiar with tile techniques, who moved and settled in new territories, establishing local schools that perpetuated iconographic and chromatic models. This diffusion strategy was carried out almost from the beginning, so that by the year 1596 Serlian architectural tiles were used in the Church of São Roque in Lisbon, probably imported from the Sevillian workshop of Hernando de Valladares (Simões 1969) (Figure 5.2). Almost simultaneously, the same tilework, based on identical designs and with identical chromatic patterns, was used in the Corpus Christi College in Valencia (Figure 5.3) by Antonio Simón, "*maestro de hazer obra de Talavera*" [master in tilework of Talaveran style] (Benito 1980). Summoned by the Patriarch Juan de Ribera, Antonio Simón settled in Burjassot near Valencia, where he had his ovens working between 1602 and 1608. Tilework is used in both cases to emphasize the wall panels, and so the spatial definition strategy relies almost entirely on the color of the tiles.

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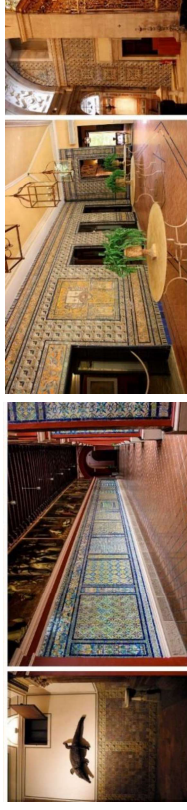


Figure 5: From left to right: 1 Palace of the Countess of Lebrija (Sevilla); 2. Church of São Roque (Lisboa); 3. Corpus Christi College (Valencia); 4. Monastery of San Francisco (Lima).

This strategy will soon spread throughout the peninsular territory, becoming a constant in the spatial definition of Spanish architecture of the time, and reaching America without almost any modifications. And so, the tiles that arrived to the Monastery of San Francisco de Lima in 1620 were almost identical to that imported from Seville to Lisbon by Valladares (Frothingham, 1969) (Figure 5.4).

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study allows us to verify how throughout the 16th and 17th centuries ceramics became a fundamental element in the definition of the new Mannerist architectural spatiality in the territories of the Spanish Empire. Defined both from formal models extracted out of the treatises of Sebastiano Serlio, as well as from the adoption of Italian techniques and models imported by the Seville tile industry, such a tilework was based on techniques and color palettes typical of Talavera ceramics, and spread throughout all the Spanish territories extremely quickly.

Its distribution was a conscious strategy, aimed at implanting Classicism as the language of the Spanish Monarchy. These ceramics allowed the transposition of forms and criteria of classical architecture into disorganized spaces without resorting to the ornamental elements typical of the classicist language, using only color and the sensation of three-dimensionality provided by the ceramic panels. This way color, through ceramics, became the main theme of Spanish architectural space between the 16th and 17th centuries, shaping the spaces according to a uniform pattern recognizable throughout the Spanish Empire, and becoming its hallmark somehow.

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