

Slavery in the gilt leather trade: the trial of Lourenço da Costa, a “mudéjar” from the ones of Grenada, born in Seville, bought in Cordoba, and slave of the Lisbon gilt-leather master Jerónimo Fernandes.

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Introduction

In spite of the Reconquest in Portugal ending in mid-13th century, the former ways of doing, sitting, riding and ornamenting interiors remained anchored in the tradition of Islam. The legacy of Gharb al-Andalus – the western lands of Islamic rule in Iberian Peninsula – was kept in use several centuries more. The income of the Renaissance in the 17th century started to erase former ways amidst the ruling classes, but, in the country – away from the economic centers -, such tradition remained, changing slowly, and much of it became the folk culture of farmers and shepherds.

Interior decorations made use of tapestries on the walls – during cold weather – and gilt leather during the warm months, besides coverings of the floors and cushions to sit on (both in textile and gilt leather) - a fashion called “sitting in the Moorish way”. These wall hangings were called, in Middle Ages rare documents, “panos de armar”, literally “cloths to hang”; in fact, the wall hangings were removed according to the season – woolen tapestries during cold weather, gilt leather wall hangings during warm times -, or rolled and taken to other palaces as nobility travelled.

This article shows a bit of the background of the gilt leather trade in Lisbon, not many decades before its vanishing days, due to the growing domain of Renaissance fashions; other understanding of interiors’ comfort - where tables, chairs and shelves became fashionable -, eliminated artisans and ways of doing, getting Portugal and Spain away from the Islamic/Moorish tradition and closer to Europe.

Very few data seems to survive regarding the work of slaves – Moors that remained in Iberian Peninsula as the Reconquest progressed, or African natives brought by ship –, as most of the relations, and even the how to’s of the

trades, lived out of an oral tradition. Thus, the existence, at the Portuguese National Archives (Torre do Tombo), of a document of the Inquisition in Lisbon (ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Maço nº 328), dated 1610, opens a small lamp into a rather ignored world.

The Inquisition process

The Inquisition document is centred on Lourenço da Costa, who is a “mourisco”, that is, a “mudéjar”, descended from the Moors that remained on Spanish soil after the fall of the Sultanate of Granada, in 1492. Besides being a “mudéjar”, he is also a slave, most probably because his parents were slaves as well. The text states that he is a “mudéjar” from Granada, but born in Seville; around 1588, aged 11 years old – the document is not precise regarding the dates -, he is bought in Cordoba by a Lisbon gilt leather master. Therefore, it is easy to consider a slave market that provided slaves to other cities that were taken by Christian rule few centuries before.

On 23 March 1610, Lourenço da Costa is brought from the Lisbon prison of Limoeiro – where he had remained for the last 9 months – to the house of “his master”, the workshop “where gilt-leather pieces are made”. He is brought by Lisbon’s Mayor and his clerk, together with another gilt-leather worker (aged 25 years, and single), also working as an artisan with the same master.

At the workshop, the master requires that Lourenço da Costa should be returned to the first storey. Hearing this, the slave shouts “I’m a Jew, I don’t believe in God, I deny the saints and believe in the devils!” The Mayor slams him on his mouth, and Lourenço da Costa goes back to prison. From then onwards the court’s process begins.

In spite of stating and shouting he was a Jew, most of the Inquisition process is concerned with the slave’s Moorish origins. Geographically speaking, Portugal has kept the same borders since mid-13th century, as the Moors were driven from power during two centuries of battles, starting in the middle of the country (Coimbra and the line of river Mondego) and moving to the south (the Algarve). The ones that remained under the new Christian rule (mostly farmers and craftsmen) were kept in separate houses or separate neighbourhoods – with gates closing the entry at night -, gradually diminishing in number and slowly

integrating with the larger Christian community. By late 15th century, Manuel the First, the king of the time, ordered that the remaining Jews and Moors should be baptised or face expulsion. On the Spanish side, all was Christianised after the fall of Grenada Sultanate in 1492, which was followed by a series of firm acts that included the burning of Islamic libraries, the changes in the architecture of the main heritage buildings (like the Alhambra Palace in Grenada), and, finally, the expulsion of the Moorish workers. Nevertheless, this Inquisition of Lisbon's process does show that the fear of the other, or the imprint of Iberian Islam, was still present.

Lourenço da Costa was brought by the Portuguese gilt-leather master Jerónimo Fernandes to Lisbon some twenty years before – somewhere around 1590 –, and, before that, he had been a slave of the same master for 2 years in Córdoba. Aged 33 at the time of this process, he came under the master's power when he was 11 years old. He doesn't know the name of his father, and doesn't know any other relatives; he only knows that his mother, called Paula, was also a “mudéjar” from Grenada, but had been christianized through baptism.

Lourenço da Costa was baptised in Seville (where he was born), but doesn't state at what age. In Lisbon, he received communion. He says he's a good Christian, believing in God, he knows how to bless himself with the sign of the cross, and can say a couple of prayers; and that is all he knows. He is married to a white woman, Ana Maria, “old Christian”, which is, born into a traditionally Christian family. In Portugal, the ones – Jews and Moors – that were forced to convert are referred as “new Christians”. They have a 6 years old son. He used to meet religious people and people of honour, and goes to church regularly on Sundays, when he wasn't having work to do – this means he might work on gilt-leather on Sundays as well.

In the text, he is said to be “white”. Dated 28th April 1610, a page, entitled “Genealogy” describes Lourenço da Costa as being “pardo”, which is, having a tanned or darker colour of skin. Being a “mudéjar” slave and having Moorish parents, why does Lourenço da Costa have a clear Portuguese name? Probably the original, and Spanish, name was Lorenzo, and, when bought at the age of 11 by the Portuguese gilt-leather master, his name was changed to the Portuguese version, and the surname added.

We come to know that the gilt-leather master has a prison at home, on the first storey of his workshop. Lourenço da Costa remained there for long periods (4 and 2 years) or shorter ones (fifteen months, eighteen months), with chains. He had to paint gilt-leather pieces, and quickly, otherwise he would be beaten by the owner. So the slave's words against Christian faith are an attempt to avoid going back to this home-made prison. Several times he asks for forgiveness, stating that he had no intention of hurting or attacking Christian faith through his words, which were said while going astray, and not because he had them in his heart. Being called by the Inquisition, the master's testimony does show some light at the slave's life.

The age of 14 years old was given by his Portuguese master in Cordoba (birth documents didn't exist). In that city – under Christian rule since 1236 – he remained for 2 years a slave of the Lisbon gilt-leather master; it's therefore possible to imagine that the actual master was in Cordoba studying in other master's workshop, before returning to Lisbon and open his own place. So, around 1588, Lourenço da Costa came under the rule of Jerónimo Fernandes; he must have been born somewhere around 1577, in Seville (as the text states), amidst “mudéjar” slaves originally from Grenada. As a teenager, Lourenço da Costa had a mark branded (by a heated metal stamp?) between his eyes.

Strange (and awful) as it seems, a mark on the face wasn't rare by then. In the famous thick catalogue “Cordobanes and Guadamecíes”, by Ferrandis Torres, published in 1944, there are other references of marked slaves working in the gilt-leather guild of Grenada; it's easy to consider that such trade – as well as the fashion for gilt leather uses – had Muslim workers during the Sultanate, that became slaves under Christian rule after 1492. Between 1558 and 1564 – more than 60 years after the fall of the last Islamic kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula –, there are references of the selling of three slaves: one with 12 years old, of dark skin colour; a white one, aged 30, with a mark on the face; and another, aged 40, also marked on the face. Probably other slaves existed, but left no references in written documents. This also means – besides the obvious cheap working force – that the knowledge of the craft didn't follow the trilogy of master-artisan-apprentice; the slave remained always a slave, and he wasn't allowed to teach others or to open his own shop.

Back to the testimony of the gilt-leather master Jerónimo Fernandes, we are told that, in Lisbon, the slave got together with a “public woman” (a prostitute); he stole materials, and his master put him in the jail at home. Lourenço da Costa abused women, whether single or married, and got into jail again. He managed to escape from the jail at night, and the master beat him. He had sent the slave to the Lisbon prison of Limoeiro, for 6 months (a decision, it seems, needing no court). Two priests asked the master to have the slave arrested at home, but, once again, Lourenço freed himself and entered other women’s homes. Jerónimo Fernandes gave him a place to live, but the slave remained “depraved”. His wife wrote to the Bishop, complaining about the home jail facilities. Once he escaped to Madrid, where he was arrested because he was selling stolen objects. On returning to Lisbon, his master had him in jail once more.

At one of his stays in the home-made prison, Lourenço da Costa tried to take the branded mark between his eyes off, with some herbs; his master said that “now he is to be branded”, which indicates that the mark was to be put again on the slave’s face. Jerónimo Fernandes had used Lourenço da Costa as a painter of gilt-leather, because he saw the slave had a natural ability for it. Considering the perfection required to paint gilt-leather – whether simple patterned surfaces, details or figures of the early Renaissance fashion –, one can image that the slave was good at this work, since his early times with his master.

Lourenço da Costa had the right of a defence attorney and of fifteen witnesses; besides the Lisbon Mayor, his clerk, a captain and a former mayor, he asked for other craftsmen: four gilt-leather workers, and two others that work in the same workshop as himself (one a servant, the other – aged 25, and single – an artisan), under the rule of Jerónimo Fernandes as well; there are also three workers that gilt metal (“dourador”), and one that turns gold into gold foils; the Portuguese and Spanish names of this trade (“batefolha”, goldbeater in English) both indicate that the work means to beat gold (between parchment) until it turns to very thin gold foils, so thin that a simple breath destroys the foil; these workers also produce silver foil through the same process. All these ten witnesses that use gold or silver foil live and work at the “Rua dos Douradores” (Street of the Guilders), that still exists at downtown Lisbon. As happened in many cities in Iberia – even during the Islamic rule –, many guilds had the

streets where they worked named after their craft; the streets weren't specific, though. The only witness – a craftsman - not living in this “Rua dos Douradores” is a metal worker. Nevertheless, only five craftsmen were called to give their testimony to the Inquisition.

A gilt-leather worker – the one that worked with Lourenço da Costa and that had come along with the Lisbon mayor, to bring the slave from the prison up to the master's house – was also enrolled as a witness. He knew that the slave worked in the house's prison (which he never saw) on paintings; he also knew that the master of both used to put handcuffs in the slave, but he had never seen them.

Another gilt-leather worker knew about the “dark place” at the master's house, where the slave was kept day and night, even on Sundays and holidays; once he saw the slave with a self portrait, with a legend saying “Lourentius Costa ismaelita me ferit Ulisippone”; as he knew that “ismaelita” meant “mudéjar”, the slave felt embarrassed and sweaty, as he couldn't imagine that his colleague understood that much. It's quite possible that the reference to a self portrait – a rarity in early paintings – was done on sheepskin covered with silver foil, that is, the basic material of gilt-leather; it was the material that the slave had at hand. It's also strange that the slave knew how to write, but all the pages he had to sign only have an X instead of his signature.

Another witness said that the slave was not present at the mass as he was under arrest at the master's house prison. Another gilt-leather worker knew about this prison, and had seen the slave with chains on the feet. All agreed that Lourenço da Costa connected with honoured and respected persons, and that he was a good Christian.

From the Inquisition point of view, Lourenço da Costa should say the whole truth: if such words – “heretic blasphemies” – were said, it was because the slave had them in his heart. He had “great daring and scandal” when he said those words, therefore he must tell the truth, to be treated “with mercy and have his soul saved”. He is asked several times if he had done anything against the “Holy Mother Church of Rome”, if he believes that the “law of the Jews is good to save the soul”, and if he does “the chalice ceremonies”. He states he doesn't know nothing of such law, nor does he performs any type of ceremony.

The Inquisition court says the slave is from the “mudéjar” nation of Grenada, which people of “the perfidious sect of Mafamede” (Muhammad) are prone to ceremonies and rites, all against “our Holy Faith”. The Inquisition insists that the slave should open “the eyes of the soul”, so that mercy is used with him, the mercy that the Church “gives to the good and real believers that convert with a pure heart”.

Finally, in January 1611 – 10 months later –, the Inquisition court gives the verdict. Lourenço da Costa was told he should take care regarding his words; if not, he would suffer a hard punishment. He received several “spiritual penances”, like confessing in some main dates of the Christian calendar, praying with the rosary every Saturday of that year, and having the behaviour of a “faithful Catholic Christian”. He had to hear this sentence in the church he used to go to, on a Sunday; that day he had to go in with a gag on his mouth, head with no hat, and holding a candle. The 10 months he remained in prison – one can imagine the conditions of it – and the pressure of the Inquisition ended with a public sentence, where the slave was easily identified. He had his life spared at a time when attacks against the Christian faith often ended in expulsion or death.

We don’t know anything more of the story of the “mudéjar” slave Lourenço da Costa.

Most probably, as in other cities of south Portugal and Spain, the gilt-leather workshops were a heritage of the Moorish times, now under Christian rule; the lack of references to gilt-leather of Moorish production probably means the technique was expanded later on, during Christian rule of the 15th and 16th centuries; the makers had to adapt their patterns and pieces to the new rulers, that is, the church (asking for gilt-leather altar fronts and devotional wall framed pieces, with Christian figures) and the nobility (asking for coats-of-arms, Antiquity history scenes or Christian figures in wall hangings and large door frames).

Gilt-leather making became extinct in Portugal in late 17th/early 18th century, due to changes in fashion.