

# EPHEMERAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE BAROQUE PERIOD FESTIVITIES: AESTHETIC OF ENCHANTMENT DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focus on ephemeral architecture and design constructions associated to the urban celebrations in Portugal, in the Baroque period. This is a field of knowledge where there are still many gaps. The paper seeks to contribute to deeper understanding of the Portuguese cultural heritage. From the research and collection of documents, some unpublished, we proceeded to its interpretation in the light of Baroque culture. We seek to trace the typology of these events and summarise the main characteristics of the major shows-parties of that period. Special attention is granted to triumphal arches and pyrotechnic machines and fireworks displays, which embellished the streets and squares of Lisbon to celebrate special occasions, such as the weddings of members of the royal family. The paper analyses some of such artifacts, reflecting on their aesthetic, conceptual and ideological sense. Bringing together ephemeral architecture, engineering, pyrotechnics with narrative fiction, dramatic performance, literature and mythological characters, symbols, and images, triumphal arches and fireworks apparatus draw over the city a fantastic geography where dream and wonder rule, configuring an aesthetic of enchantment scoped within the principles of the Baroque culture.

**Keywords:** Portuguese cultural heritage; Baroque period; ephemeral design; triumphal arches; fireworks displays

The attention of art and literary scholars has been drawn, with renewed interest, to the urban celebrations which have mobilised interdisciplinary artistic programmes in historical past. We are referring to parades and fireworks displays that would take place on some festivities, such as the birth or wedding of the royal family members.

Documented by the several reports and descriptions accumulated in libraries, as well as by drawings and imprints that portrait them, the festive celebrations of the Baroque period have exercised strong fascination on contemporary imagination, due to their beauty, illusion, and grandiosity.

In the last decade, a set of studies have been casting light on the mechanism and sense of such festive manifestations in Portugal in the Baroque period. Regarding this subject, see for example the works of J.M. Tendim, A. G. Couto, J. Castel-Branco Pereira, A. Xavier, A.C. da Costa Gomes, A.P.R. Correia<sup>1</sup>. However, this is a field of study where there are still many gaps. Following those works, this paper aims portraying the typology of the street festivals in the Baroque period as well as the ephemeral design artifacts such festive events mobilised.

Based on literary descriptions, reports and drawings of that time, many of them unpublished, two types of artifacts are analysed — ephemeral triumphal arches and fireworks displays — which incarnate by excellence the spirit of Baroque aesthetics with all its sublime, excessive and magnificent nature.

We chose a literary hermeneutics approach<sup>2</sup> trying to read these ephemeral structures as text. The argument is that such temporary artifacts abide by an aesthetic of enchantment scoped within the principles of the Baroque culture. This is a work of “archeology” which aims to make a contribution to the knowledge of cultural heritage and understanding of the human being in general.

### ***Festivities in the context of the baroque culture***

Corresponding to three typologies, baroque festivities would mainly occur in three different spaces: the church, the royal palace, and the street<sup>3</sup>. We focus on the great street show-parties which main characters would be the kings.

Several aspects come together to make this Baroque urban festivities a factor of unique interest. First of all, the beauty and the ability of those celebrations to cause enchantment. In the great show-parties of the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the daily appearance of Lisbon is transformed, and the city becomes an immense theatrical scene, where performances encompassing all forms of artistic manifestation multiply. As underlined by Jean Duvignaud<sup>4</sup>, utopia shapes the urban area and an ephemeral, yet blazing, architecture overlaps the usual layout of the city, erecting triumphal arches, temporary shrines, columns, trophies, that can be found almost everywhere. Filled with colour, the streets show richly decorated ephemeral constructions; pinpointing the courses of royal parades, huge triumphal arches in painted wood are erected, mimicking marble and rare stones, adorned with sculptures, paintings and ribbons with literary quotes. The atmosphere in the city is complemented by precious clothes and sumptuous coaches that catch the eye of the audience as the parade goes by. In the river, royal brigantines show off their golden luxury and bridges of fanciful architecture rise, ephemeral, during the festivities. The fantastic designs of fireworks displays resort to sophisticated machinery and a wide variety of special effects producing real prodigies for that time: Cupids descending from the sky, Venuses raising from the water, exploding hills, lead the crowd to delirium. Sophisticated pyrotechnics combining fire with theatre, painting, music and dance, create an aesthetics of enchantment suggesting the crossing of the borders of reality.

The aesthetics of enchantment design presiding such festive events is in line with the aesthetics of the very Baroque period, which objective is to dazzle, move through affection, and persuade, as Maravall underlines<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, from their design to execution and materialisation, everything in those artifacts fits that aesthetic of enchantment.

Starting from the logic of excess the design of such artifacts follows. The immoderate character typical of festivities in general is, in that period, taken to paroxysm<sup>6</sup>. Beauty, luxury, dazzle, superb effects, ostentation, high costs, monumental scale, the number of forces and resources involved in such manifestations, everything is an essential factor of the attraction and enchantment these events produce in the people.

The most beautiful and magnificent they would be in terms of resources, the most waste of money they involved, the more magnetic and breathtaking these festivities and its artifacts would be in the eyes of the audience. This excess is frequently of a numeric nature. It is not by chance that one of the common topics in the description of the festivities of the time show a quantitative obsession, apparent in both the references to exact measures of the apparatus, of huge proportions, and in the mention of the high numbers of participants, or even in the thorough reference to the high costs involved. For example, regarding the festivities of the wedding of King João the 5<sup>th</sup> with Mariana of Austria, José Soares da Silva states that the fireworks have cost the exorbitant amount of seventy thousand *cruzados*, and the royal family coach has cost the none the less exorbitant amount of forty thousand *cruzados*. The author does not hide his unease regarding the high cost of the forty thousand *cruzados* ephemeral bridge, built to facilitate the passage of the future Queen from the boat to the harbour,

“(…) Para que agora a coma o mar! Com muito menos se poderia fazer uma ponte de pedra”<sup>7</sup>.

Another fundamental aspect of this type of festive manifestations is the presence of elaborate mechanisms of power display. Beauty, dazzle, ostentation, excess, are structural aspects of Baroque festivities which fulfill a political intention: to represent the splendour of royal power and ensuring social cohesion. With their emblems and symbols pointing at an imaginary of triumph and their enchantment dynamics, these festivities correspond to important games of statement of power and consolidation of political bonds between different social forces. A rhetoric of praise is underlying them. On the one side, the royal power becomes a spectacle to show off its strength and conquer social adherence, sweeping the audience of its feet and persuading it through emotion and enchantment. On the other, the community must commend and pay homage to the kings, expecting protection from them. Form of ostentation to persuade, as underlined by Maravall in *La Cultura del Barroco* [The Culture of Baroque], Baroque festivities are therefore, the occasion to reinstate and consolidate certain political values that should reunite the entire society around them, and to which the society should relate to, like pointed out by F.B. Álvarez<sup>8</sup>.

Finally another important element must also be mentioned: the enclosed structure and programming of the festivities. In the stratified and codified society of the Ancient Regime, where everything had a defined place, also festivities were subject to such stratification and boundaries. The performance of the celebrations is carefully developed, corresponding to a ritual which parameters are clearly determined. The participants in the parades, the order in the processions, decorations, narrative, symbols, they rigorously abide by a strict programme. Nothing is left to chance. Everything reflects the same social structure, everything fits in the logic of power ostentation, everything follows a strategy of persuasion.

Amongst the several manifestation of street festivities of that period — bullfights, parades — fireworks and triumphal arches may be considered the *ex-libris* of the time.

## Triumphal arches



Figure1 - Triumphal Arch: Visit of King Filipe the 2<sup>nd</sup> to Portugal in 1619

Triumphal arches, invoking the imperial Rome and associated to fully affirmative values such as the coronation of the winners, entirely satisfy the pleasure with grandiosity, the demonstration of power, and the cult of the heroes practiced in that period, expressing the most ostensible side of the Baroque. Suffices to see the beautiful illustrations of the book by Lavanha, *Viagem da Catholica Real Magestade del Rey D. Filipe II ao Reyno de Portugal* [Visit of the Catholic Royal Majesty King Filipe the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the Kingdom of Portugal]<sup>9</sup> representing the different Arches for the entry parade of the monarch in Lisbon, in 1619 (see figure 1). Or the drawings (see figure 2) of some of the triumphal arches erected for the celebrations of the wedding of King Pedro the 2<sup>nd</sup> to Maria Sofia Isabel, inserted in «Cópia dos Reais Aparatos e Obras que se fizeram em Lisboa na ocasião da entrada e dos desposórios de Suas Magestades» [Copy of the Royal Apparatus and Works built in Lisbon on the occasion of the entry of Their Majesties and Their wedding]<sup>10</sup>.



Figure 2 – Triumphal Arch, Wedding of King Pedro the 2<sup>nd</sup> to Maria Sofia Isabel in 1687

Those Triumphal Arches of huge dimensions were built in painted wood, using the *trompe l'oeil* technique, richly decorated with garlands, paintings, emblems, sculptures, and ribbons with literary quotes.

These ephemeral constructions follow a superiorly defined ideology, resorting to conventional decorative solutions based on the imaginary of the classical literary works and to codified images repertoires, such as, for example, *The Book of Emblems* by Alciato (*Emblematum Liber*, 1531) and the *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa (1645). Entrusted to the several corporations of merchants, traders and the most powerful associations in the realm, triumphal arches were a way to pay homage and praise the royal family while simultaneously allowing to show off the power of each social group represented therein<sup>11</sup>.

We must pay closer attention to one of the many ephemeral triumphal arches erected to pinpoint the parade to celebrate the arrival of Queen Maria Francisca Isabel de Sabóia, coming from France, married by proxy to King Afonso the 6<sup>th</sup>. The public and solemn entrance of the Queen in Lisbon, covering the area from Alcântara to the Cathedral, on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1666, was marked by great celebrations described in detail in a manuscript of the Lisbon National Library «Relação da Chegada a Lisboa de Maria Francisca Isabel de Saboia» [Report of the arrival of Maria Francisca Isabel de Saboia to Lisbon]. According to the information provided by Manuel do Borralho in *Poética Descriçiom de los Festivos Aplausos*<sup>12</sup>, the triumphal arch representing Italian merchants was

built close to the Church of Our Lady of Loreto. Topped by the pontifical coat of arms, the arch includes a group of sculptures representing six Roman emperors, several paintings with the presence of elements connected to Liberal Arts and Sciences and several ribbons and emblems, partially reproduced in the codex *Festas que se fizeram pelo casamento del Rey Dom Afonso VI [Festivities to celebrate King Afonso de 6<sup>th</sup> wedding]* of the Library of the Ducal Palace of Vila Viçosa.

Involved in the rhetoric of affirmation and joy, the triumphal arch is, in itself, especially fit to translate the values and feelings that should preside such a magnanimous and happy event as the celebration of royal weddings. The affirmative nature that characterises it shows in itself a triumphal reality. The arch is a symbol of the triumph of the sovereigns, and the triumph of love. Love as a feeling that should not only consecrate the union between the spouses, but also the union between kings and subjects. The emblems shown in the arch clearly consecrate that type of encomiast stance, as we may ascertain through figure 3.



Figure 3 – Emblems appearing in the Italian triumphal arch, King Afonso the 6<sup>th</sup> wedding

## Fireworks

Fireworks displays, which have in the Baroque achieved unprecedented sophistication and grandeur, have the ability to synthesise the fascination existing at the time about the ephemeral, the glow, the prodigious, and appearances.

Consider, for instance, the design of the pyrotechnics show organised in Terreiro do Paço, Lisbon, in the festivities to celebrate the wedding of King João the 5<sup>th</sup> to Mariana of Austria, from the document: *Relação dos artificios do fogo, que se fizeram no Terreiro do Paço, em obséquio dos felicísimos Desposórios dos Sereníssimos Senhores D. João V e de D. Mariana de Áustria, Reis de Portugal* [Report of the fireworks displayed in Terreiro do Paço to honour the happy wedding of the Serene Kings of Portugal João de 5<sup>th</sup> and Mariana of Austria].

The Count of Villa-Verde, Financial Superintendent of the Realm, was in charge of organising the show, involving the considerable amount of 70000 *cruzados*, according to information by José Soares da Silva in *Gazeta em forma*

*de carta* [Gazette in the form of letter]. The artistic signature is probably of Carlos Gimac, and counted on foreigner and Portuguese artists.

Novelty, grandiosity, and magnificence will become hallmarks of the show, exemplifying the old rhetoric principle of suitability of the matter to the style: for a sublime matter, a sublime style is needed. Great manifestations are expected from celebrations of kings.

This is a fireworks display with theatrical performance. There is a fusion between representation and pyrotechnics, painting, music, in an integral work of art.

The characters and plot of this fabulous fireworks machine resort to Greek-Latin mythology, as in the major shows of Paris and Rome<sup>13</sup>.

The scenario is set between the Temple of Venus and Mount Etna. The Temple of Venus is about 8 meters high by 12 wide, with a façade of composite Roman order. It is decorated with “Faux marbles”, and enriched with gold. The architrave, frieze and cornices, decorated with shells, roses and myrtle, are supported by six columns. Statues rest on top of pilasters. Mount Etna is a huge fire machine raising on the top of a hill with cliffs, emanating loud growls, and casting smoke and flames. It opens up in four huge mouths, showing the workshop of Vulcan in the interior. The furnace of Vulcan’s workshop is fired by a system of concave mirrors pointed at the sun.

A narrative is enacted with dramatic action, also integrating dance and music. Since it is a party to celebrate a royal wedding, love is the dominating figure. Venus comes out of her temple in a triumphal cart pulled by swans and conducted by Cupid all dressed in gold, escorted by Graces and surrounded by Geniuses dressed in Moorish style, and Tritons playing. She moves towards mount Etna, where Vulcan and the Cyclops produce an arrow, not of war, but of love, able to hit both spouses. It must be built in the presence of the sovereigns, so that it is invested of the power of their glance. The arrow is then offered to the royal groom and bride, singing and dancing. Such an arrow is of a unique nature: “Vulcan, casting a lightning over the Mount burst the entire machine into flames,” reaching the highest point of the fireworks display.

Several different languages: pyrotechnics, theatre, singing, dance, painting, ephemeral construction conjugate to create a feast for all five senses.

Here, as in the triumphal arches, symbols are used; metaphors coming from a literary and symbolic tradition of love. As scenic resource, the fire is, by excellence, the symbol of love. Decoration elements — swans, daffodils, hearts, arrows, doves, wedding ribbons — also suggest love and its power. At the door of Venus Temple “amorini” throw arrows towards the sky and the earth. In Venus cart, four globes are symbols of the four elements and the power of love over the entire creation. Cupid, driving the cart, is standing tall, since love never rests. Spectacle to glorify love, all elements composing it become a sign of the rhetoric of courteous love: The six Geniuses following the triumphal cart are the allegories associated to love: Delight, Laughter, Satisfaction, Joy, Pleasure, and Content. Those following outside the cart and kindling the fire in Terreiro do Paço are: Heat, Fire, Blaze.

Underlying this lovely sense, another one can be perceived: the deification of the power and magnificence of the kings. The kings not only elevate to socialise with the Gods — Venus and Vulcan — but they also surpass them in importance and dignity, since the very Gods are at their service.

Similarly to the triumphal arches, also here the aesthetic of rapture and enchantment of the show is notorious.

All this fantastic performance appeals to the emotion and imagination of the audience. All this apparatus appeals to communication. All this apparatus appeals to persuasion: spread an ideological message through emotion, delight and enchantment.

## CONCLUSIONS

In short, bringing together ephemeral architecture, decorative elements, engineering, pyrotechnics with narrative fiction, dramatic performance, literature and mythological characters, symbols and images, both the triumphal arches and the fireworks apparatus draw over the city a fantastic geography where dream and wonder rule, configuring an aesthetic of enchantment. Far from exhausting in the intentions to rapture a mob in delirium, the beauty and spectacular nature of such artifacts become intentional elements of a strategy to consolidate political and social bonds, which is included in such aesthetic of enchantment.

From documents filed in Portuguese libraries, we carried out a reconstruction and interpretation of a set of ephemeral manifestations, able to deepen the clarification of a domain for which there are still many gaps. In this way, we contribute for a better understanding of the Portuguese heritage in the field of ephemeral art.

The complexity of such festivities implied the use of industrialized elements, assembled to an extent that anticipates set-design in cinema and contemporary urban art forms. The study of such elements contributes to clarify the emergence of design processes during the Baroque period characterised for formal organisations subdued to rhetorical purposes.

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## Notes:

1  
See, among others: BORGES, N. C., *A Arte nas Festas do Casamento de D. Pedro II*, 1984; BEBIANO, R. D. *João V. Poder e Espectáculo*, 1987; COUTO, Anabela G., "A paixão do excesso" in *A Festa*, 1992; XAVIER, Angela, Cardim, P., F.B. Álvarez, (eds) *Festas que se fizeram pelo casamento do Rei Dom Afonso VI*, 1996; COUTO, A. G. "Jogos de poder e de deslumbramento: a presença de mercadores italianos na Lisboa festiva do período barroco", *Case commerciali banchieri e mercanti italiani in Portogallo*, 1999; GÓMEZ, F. J. P., *Arte y espectáculo en los viajes de Filipe II*, 1999; TEDIM, J. M. *Festa Régia no tempo de D. João V: poder, espectáculo e arte efémera*. Ph.D. Thesis, 1999. PEREIRA, J. C.B. (Coord.), *A Arte Efémera em Portugal: Catálogo*. 2000. VALE, Teresa, *Lisboa e a Festa: Celebrações Religiosas e Cívicas na Cidade Medieval e Moderna — Actas do Colóquio de História e de História de Arte*, 2009, pp.143-154.

2  
See GADAMER, *Verdade e Método: Traços Fundamentais de uma hermenêutica filosófica*, 1997.

3  
See LOPES, A., Paulo Guinote, "Os tempos da festa: Elementos para uma Definição, Caracterização e Calendário da Festa na primeira metade do século XVIII", *A Festa, Vol.I*, 1992, pp.365-389.

4  
See DUVIGNAUD, *Fêtes et Civilizations*, 1980, p.63.

5  
See MARAVALL, *La Cultura del Barroco*, 1982.

6  
See COX, H., *La Fête des Fous*, 1970.

7  
"(...) to be eaten by the sea! With much less a mason bridge could have been erected. SILVA, José Soares da, *Gazeta em forma de carta*, 1715, p.179.

8  
See ÁLVAREZ, F. B. "Memória visual dos afectos na política barroca" and XAVIER, A. B. "Imagens das festas de casamento de D. Afonso VI" in *Festas que se fizeram pelo casamento de D. Afonso VI*, Lisboa, 1996.

9  
LAVANHA, *Viagem da Catholica Real Magestade del Rey D. Filipe II ao Reino de Portugal*, 1622.

10  
«Cópia dos Reais Aparatos e Obras que se Fizeram em Lisboa na Ocasão da Entrada e dos Desposórios de Suas Magestades». Manuscript of the Lisbon National Library: ACT 317.

11  
DUVIGNAUD, op.cit., p.64.

12  
BORRALHO, Manuel do, *Poética Descripción de los Festivos Aplausos*, 1677, p.2.

13  
See MONIN, E., "The construction of fantasy. Ephemeral structures and urban celebrations in France during the eighteenth century", *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Construction History, Madrid, 20<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> January 2003*. DELL'ARCO, M. F., Carandini, S. *L'effimero barocco, strutture della festa nella Roma del '600*, 1977.

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