

SHOPPER'S WORLD

Vibrant Tiles From Portugal

By THEODORE JAMES Jr.

LISBON'S ancient Moorish Alfama district is where hanging laundry billows across the narrow labyrinth of cobble serpentine alleys, archways and enchanting little squares. No visitor can help but be dazzled by the profusion of decorative wrought-iron balconies and panels of azulejos, the traditional hand-painted tiles of Portugal. Outside the capital tile-decorated facades are ubiquitous. But, beyond their decorative aspects, azulejos reflect the history of this once-powerful nation.

In 1415 the Portuguese captured Ceuta, in what is today Morocco, ending barbarian rule and assuring their control of the Strait of Gibraltar. It was there that they discovered the beauty of Moorish tiles, which were introduced to the area around the 13th century.

The first dated azulejos were believed to have been made in Portugal in 1565. They can still be seen just south of Lisbon at the Quinta da Balcalhoa, which was built in the mid-15th century by King John I as a hunting lodge and transformed into a palace by King Manuel I for his grandmother, the Queen Mother, Infanta Brites. The tiles at the palace are in blue — azul, in Portuguese — which accounts for the name azulejos.

By the 17th century the local artisans had mastered the craft and began to use yellow, purple and green in their purely geometric designs. By 1650 tile panels representing mythological scenes, hunting motifs and landscapes made their appearance and before long azulejos were decorated with garlands, cherubs and blazons.

A tile craze swept the country, creating so great a demand that tiles were even imported from the Netherlands, replacing the local kind in popularity.

In the early 18th century, in an effort to regain Portuguese control of the market, an artisan named Antonio de Oliveira Bernardes and his son, Policarpo, set up a tile school in Lisbon, creating panels in the ba-



LEFT Sant'Anna tiles being stenciled. They have been made the same way since 1741.

BELOW Detail from a mural made by the Sant'Anna factory.

roque style, primarily of Old Testament themes. By 1740 tiles began to be made on an industrial scale, resulting in a rapid deterioration in quality. Then, after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which destroyed most of the city and many of the factories, quality, hand-made tiles again became popular.

They have remained so ever since.

Perhaps the best known of the tilemakers are those of Sant'Anna, which are handmade from start to finish, exactly as they have been since the company was founded in 1741. Their showroom and shop in Lisbon is at 95 Rua do Alecrim, 1200 Lisbon, where beyond a mosaic of sample tiles, there are also hand-made and painted ceramic bowls, lavabos, lamps, jars, candlesticks, jardinières, fountains, chandeliers and figurines.

Sant'Anna tiles are available in New York at Country Floors, 15 East 16th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003; 212-627-8300, which, by exclusive contract, buys all tiles exported by the company. The tiles sold in New York (and the store's exclusivity applies only to tiles), are not for sale at Sant'Anna in Lisbon, but there is a wide enough selection of others in Lisbon to suit most tastes and pocketbooks. Individual tiles in Lisbon cost about one-quarter as much as those in New York.

Prices in Lisbon range from \$1 to \$12 a tile. A large blue and white plate costs about \$250, a hand-painted soup tureen about \$166.



Photographs by Guilherme Venancio/Associated Press

ABOVE A galleon motif on a tile at the

