

# Tiled Style: Home Design in Portugal

by Laura Esculcas





Portugal is an 800-year-old country with design influences that date back at least 2000 years to when it was known as the Roman territory of Lusitania. The design influences of Roman mosaics are still seen today in the elaborate stone mosaic patterns of Portugal's cobblestone sidewalks. Despite being a small country on the periphery of Europe, or perhaps because of this, it was Portugal that launched the age of discovery, which brought European ships to Asian shores and Asian aesthetics to European design.

Both the practicality and the adaptability of the Portuguese people can be seen in Portuguese home design to this day. It is difficult to point to one predominant style in Portuguese home design, because homes are constructed in response to the various microclimates across the country and adapted to the taste and needs of the occupants. Just like in most countries, there is a wide range of design preferences among the Portuguese, whose homes range from sleek, modern city apartments,

to functional farmhouses surrounded by orchards and vineyards, to elaborate “palacetes” stuffed with art and antiques. Yet within this wide range of styles and tastes, a few common design elements emerge.

---

*In recent decades, popularity of azulejos has risen again and many homes are decorated with painted tiles both inside and out.*

---

#### Hearth

Sharing meals with family and friends is at the heart of Portuguese culture. Portuguese kitchens, no matter the size, are fully equipped with all the spices, herbs and kitchen tools needed to serve a multitude. Families gather around the kitchen table for daily meals, but Sunday afternoons are reserved for big family gatherings at the dining room table. Hospitality is one of the most treasured values among the Portuguese people, and no occasion is too small to celebrate. For these reasons, every Portuguese home is equipped with a large, sturdy, extendable table, traditional table linens and an abundance of earthenware or porcelain serving dishes in all shapes and sizes. In Portuguese homes, there is always room for one more person at the table, and everyone leaves a gathering with a very full belly.

## Tiles

One of the most unique aspects of home design in Portugal is the use of hand painted tiles. On a stroll down any historic street in cities like Lisbon, Portugal's capital, one of the first things you'll notice are the ceramic tiles covering the facades of homes and buildings. These tiles, called azulejos in Portuguese, are a cultural heritage and an important part of Portuguese home design for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Azulejo comes from the Arabic word for "polished stone" and use of azulejos in Portugal originated with the Moors. Following the Christian conquest of Portugal in the 13th century, colorful, geometric tiles were imported from

interiors of churches and palaces. In recent decades, popularity of azulejos has risen again and many homes are decorated with painted tiles both inside and out. The tiles serve a practical as well as aesthetic function, protecting walls and surfaces, and making it easy to keep a house clean enough to meet the exacting standards of most Portuguese homeowners. Beyond the painted azulejos, many other types of modern tiles are used throughout Portuguese homes, including cement hydraulic tiles, which are also handmade in Portugal. Kitchens and bathrooms are tiled from floor to ceiling, and nearly all Portuguese homes have tiled floors throughout, allowing floors to be easily swept clean and keeping homes



factories in Moorish Seville. During the Renaissance, a method of handpainting pottery developed in Italy was imported to Portugal and applied to tile design, local tile factories opened, an influx of Flemish artists brought fresh perspectives and delicate painting skills, and geometric patterns were replaced with floral and nature-inspired motifs, giving rise to uniquely portuguese azulejo designs.

Tiles became tools of storytelling as well, as mythical and religious scenes began to adorn the facades and

refreshingly cool during the hot summer months.

## Saints

Portugal is a predominately Catholic country and the importance to Portuguese culture of saints such as Our Lady of Fatima cannot be overestimated. Many Portuguese homes are adorned with sacred art, such as images of Our Lady as well as other saints that hold particular significance to the homeowners. When entering a Portuguese home, you will often see saints depicted on azulejos, which are mounted beside gates or over

the front door of the home. Within the home, you may encounter a home altar adorned with candles, flowers, photos and keepsakes, and upon which most commonly stands a statue of a favorite saint, but which may also hold a holy image from any number of traditions held sacred by the homeowners.

Portugal is a little more than half the size of North Carolina, yet for such a small country it is a place that centuries ago greatly influenced countries around the globe, and which today continues to contain an amazing diversity of cultural style, taste, and tradition, reflected and yet somehow unified in the design of homes.

For more from Laura visit [mysticalportugal.com](http://mysticalportugal.com)

**1/2 PAGE  
AD HERE**

