



## A blue-chip investment

*Palácio Fronteira, near Lisbon, Portugal*

More than 60,000 tiles have gone into the creation of this extraordinary 17th-century garden, which has survived kings and earthquakes, and they still gleam as bright as on the day they were laid, says Gerald Luckhurst

Photographs by Taylor Moore





**T**WO pavilions, glowing in the bright sunshine of the early morning, stand out against the clear-blue Portuguese sky. Today is one of those days on which winter seems to have succumbed to the onset of the coming spring and the garden at the Palácio dos Marqueses de Fronteira, the Lisbon home of Dom José de Mascarenhas, sparkles with a brilliance that belies the 3½ centuries that have passed since it was first built. Such is the magic of the *azulejos*: the glazed painted tiles that are so characteristic of Portuguese gardens from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Fronteira is perhaps the supreme example. Unchanged by fashion, untouched by the 1755 earthquake that destroyed so much of Lisbon's built heritage, the tile panels at Fronteira can make a visit to this historic house and garden a walk into a scene of everlasting vitality.

‘The blue-and-white ceramic discs came from a dinner service that was deliberately broken after one use,’

More than 60,000 tiles have survived almost unblemished from a building campaign initiated in 1665 and completed by 1678. In fact, the remarkable thing about Fronteira is that the 17th-century garden has come down to us in its entirety, practically unaltered since this time.

Of course, some things have changed: the house was extended in the 18th century, trees have come and gone, box hedging has almost certainly been renovated and grown fat, the 17th-century Dutch lead statuary has suffered from severe metal fatigue and the fountains may not run with quite the same exuberant enthusiasm of their youth, but everything is still there and, with respect to the tiles, looking as if brand spanking new.

The Gallery of Kings, a raised walk between the two elevated pavilions, exhibits a gallery of the sculpted busts of the kings of Portugal from the 12th century until 1672, the probable date of the gardens' inauguration.

Below the walk, next to a large water tank, there are 14 large tile panels in an arcade that displays equestrian portraits of military ➤

**Exuberant blue-and-white decoration echoes the sky on a walk, paved in coloured marbles, that leads from the Sala das Batalhas (Battle Room) to the chapel built in 1584. The 17th-century portico is covered with grotto work that includes fragments of late-Ming Chinese porcelain**





**The Gallery of Kings set in cobalt-blue glazed tiles is supported by 14 heroic equestrian portraits of Portuguese noblemen and military commanders, with the goddess Fortuna balanced precariously in the centre. The two pavilions are roofed in copper lustreware tiles**

commanders and members of the Mascarenhas family alongside Dom João, Duke of Braganza. These portraits are the most striking elements of the garden and are painted in blue and white and manganese glazes. The arcade is punctuated by three grottos and colourful della Robbia-style garlands of fruits surround the arches.

The garden celebrates the restoration of Portuguese independence in 1640 under the Duke of Braganza, who became Dom João IV, founder of a new dynasty of kings. The message here is nothing subtle and serves as a reminder to the Braganzas of their dependence upon their supporters and equals in the Portuguese aristocracy for their own success as rulers.

From 1640 until 1668, Portugal was at war with Spain and there were many battles fought on the borderlands between the two countries. Dom João de Mascarenhas received his title as Marquês de Fronteira (Fronteira is a frontier town in the Alentejo) in recognition of the part he played in this war of independence.

When he began to build his house at Benfica, on the outskirts of Lisbon, it had been conceived as a hunting lodge—it was only to acquire its palatial gardens as he rose in favour at Court and with his military successes in the war. The interior of the house has a salon decorated with panels of *azulejos* that detail the Marquês's participation in numerous battles.

The Gallery of Kings is only one of the main elements that make up the garden. Facing north, it provides a strong counterpoint to the east-facing façade of the house, which is painted with a dark-red lime wash. Between the two is a parterre of dense boxwood hedging cut into four squares and containing five splashing fountains, dark-green yew pyramids and lead statues of athletes, gladiators, dancers and musicians, some of which are now on their last legs.

The lower walls of the house are covered in polychromic glazed tiles. This was the earlier style of tile painting that was succeeded by the blue on white with black-manganese tracery used on the gallery. The scale of this work is much more intimate





Polychrome tiles show the first Marquês de Fronteira hunting and a noble woman from Lorraine copied from the engravings of prolific French artist Jacques Callot (1620–23)

and invites close inspection. It shows some of the everyday activities of the palace, such as riding and hunting, but also pastimes such as card playing, drinking and eating. As this façade was originally built over another water tank, there are also scenes of fishing, with some surprisingly lewd pairs of mermen and mermaids.

Stepping down below the house, three walls surrounding the parterre display even more *azulejos*. They're decorated with themes taken from the cosmos: on one wall, there are stellar constellations and planetary gods, together with the four elements of air, fire, water and earth; on the next are the 12 signs of the zodiac; and, on the third wall, coming back to Earth, the 12 months with their seasons of the year, complete with a calendar of rural activities.

## ‘The goddess of luck, Fortuna, is the presiding deity at Fronteira’

Another area of the garden, between the house and the chapel, is a terrace that is also decorated with statues representing heavenly bodies: Diana for the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Apollo for the Sun, Jupiter, Mars and Saturn. This is called the Gallery of Arts and is named after the blue-and-white tile panels between the statues that represent the Liberal Arts and Poetry.

The different tile panels that decorate Fronteira were installed during a period that covered a transition between three different styles of tile painting. The earliest are the polychromatic tiles, with glazes of blue, yellow and green plus a black glaze, shading to purple, derived from manganese dioxide.

There was then a shift in taste towards a simpler, more graphic presentation, in which designs were first drawn in the glossy black manganese on a white background. These lines were then filled and shaded with blue. This technique has a greater legibility and was effectively used on large figurative panels.

Towards the end of the 1670s, the tiles were painted simply with blue and white glazes, a taste that was to last well through ➤





**Cigsiopaea, a star-spangled personification of Cassiopeia, Queen of the Night Sky: one of the representations of the Cosmos painted on azulejos that surround the parterre**

### 'Glorious Eden': the COUNTRY LIFE Boxwood Tour to the Romantic Gardens of Sintra and Lisbon, September 24–28

Join Dr Gerald Luckhurst to explore the gardens of palaces and quintas in Sintra and around Lisbon in Portugal. Highlights include a special tour of the gardens and interiors of Palácio dos Marqueses da Fronteira, with its outstanding *azulejos* (decorated glazed tiles); a tour with the curator of the Museu Nacional do Azulejo; a fine-wine tasting at Quinta da Bacalhoa; an evening meal in a Lisbon *palacio* and guided tours to the key gardens of Sintra: Quinta da Regaleira and Monserrate, as well as a special invitation to lunch in a beautiful private garden.

The town of Sintra in the foothills of the eponymous mountains is surrounded by natural luxuriant vegetation and set among giant rock formations, waterfalls, atmospheric, twisted moss-covered boughs

and ferny dells. It's not surprising that, in the 18th century, Lord Byron immortalised Sintra by calling it 'Glorious Eden'.

The group will stay at two splendid hotels: the Palácio de Seteais in Sintra, an elegant, late-18th-century neo-Classical palace, with interiors of frescoed walls and tapestries and its own formal gardens, and the wonderful Art Deco Four Seasons Lisbon Ritz.

The tour price of £3,890 includes return flights from London, all garden entries, most meals, two nights at the Palácio de Seteais in Sintra and two nights at the Four Seasons Lisbon Ritz. For more information, please telephone Boxwood Tours on 01341 241717, email at [mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk](mailto:mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk) or visit [www.boxwoodtours.co.uk](http://www.boxwoodtours.co.uk)

the 18th century. This style evolved under the influence of Chinese porcelain imported directly by Portuguese merchant adventurers and indirectly from Dutch ceramics bought from Delft. Chinese porcelain was one of the prime symbols of wealth in 17th-century Portugal and is to be found throughout the garden at Fronteira as part of the scintillating decoration used to cover the grottos and some of the fountains.

Although the decorative taste for grottos was initially introduced from Italy, the Portuguese created a distinct national identity for these incrustations through the incorporation of blue-and-white ceramics alongside the usual bits and pieces of marble, crystal, shells and beads. The porcelain lent a greater intensity to the sparkling effect and was

widely available as shards, as so many precious plates and vases arrived broken after their long sea journeys from China.

Here at Fronteira, the blue-and-white ceramic discs came from a complete dinner service that was deliberately broken after one single use. This was an ostentatious display that commemorated the presence of the Prince Regent, Dom Pedro de Braganza, at the inaugural feast of the palace.

The celebration of the restoration of independence from Spain is repeated throughout the garden. This message has a Machiavellian foundation, as the rulers of Portugal were dependent upon the support of the aristocracy. The thematic treatment of the Gallery of Kings, together with the tile panels of the walls around the parterre, develops



these ideas further: the cycle of the year and the movement of the heavens painted on the tiles represent the unchanging destiny of Man as understood by contemporary astrologers.

In his book *The Prince*, Machiavelli argued that this destiny controlled just over half of the lot in life of both individuals and governments. The other half was down to luck. He demonstrated that, when fortune presents an opportunity in life, one has to seize upon it without hesitation.

The goddess of luck, Fortuna, is the presiding deity at Fronteira and her statue stands high above the Gallery of Kings on the central axis. The supporters of the Duke of Braganza were presented with such an opportunity in 1640, when the occupying army was removed from Lisbon to help quell





*Above:* The **azulejos** on the stairway to the Gallery of Kings depict Neptune's triumph, a river god and the musical contest of Apollo and Marsyas judged by Midas and the Muses. *Right:* The central panel at the head of the Gallery of Arts shows an allegory of Poetry flanked by statues of Apollo and Marsyas after their contest

a rebellion in Catalonia. They seized the moment and took power by mortally defeating the Spanish governor and declaring Dom João de Braganza King of Portugal.

He, together with the 14 horsemen riding below the Gallery of Kings, assured Portuguese independence until the end of the monarchy in 1910—and that's what the garden at Fronteira is all about. 🐦

