

A Short Visual History of the Long Life of Goa's Basilica of Bom Jesus

Uma Breve História Visual da Longa Vida da Basílica do Bom Jesus em Goa

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Abstract

In this photo essay, we offer a variety of representations of the Basilica of Bom Jesus, the structure which famously houses the remains of St. Francis Xavier, highlighting its aesthetic transformations historically. Through this visual journey, we intervene in ongoing debates about the Basilica's appearance, these having arisen over the necessity to alter the building's iconic look. Such visual education may then hasten its replastering, a restoration that returns the Basilica to its original form and will extend its life by protecting it from climate-related damage. Goan Architecture | Simulacra | Climate Change | Portuguese Post/Colonialism

Keywords

Resumo

Neste ensaio fotográfico, oferecemos uma variedade de representações da Basílica do Bom Jesus, a estrutura que abriga famosamente os restos mortais de São Francisco

Xavier, destacando suas transformações estéticas ao longo da história. Através desta jornada visual, intervimos em debates em curso sobre a aparência da Basílica, surgidos pela necessidade de alterar a aparência icônica do edifício. Tal educação visual pode acelerar sua reconstituição, uma restauração que retorna a Basílica à sua forma original e prolongará sua vida protegendo-a de danos relacionados ao clima.

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Palavras-chave

Arquitetura Goesa | Simulacros | Mudanças Climáticas | Portuguesa Pós/Colonialismo

Image 1

Likely the earliest photograph of the Basilica, this image (taken c. 1855-62 by British photographers Johnson William and William Henderson) shows the structure in its original plastered form | Source: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.



“If looks could kill...,” the expression goes. If this were the case, then the sixteenth-century Basilica of Bom Jesus, one of Goa’s most iconic monuments, may well be a victim of its famed appearance (Ferrão 2021). In this photo essay, we enlist a visual history of the structure, which famously houses the remains of St. Francis Xavier, to evidence how its look has evolved over the longue durée of its existence.

This visual recounting intends to intervene in ongoing debates about the Basilica’s appearance, these having arisen over the necessity to alter the building’s iconic exterior. To withstand further damage from Goa’s annual monsoons, the external surface of Bom Jesus requires plastering. At the same time, this may suggest that the building’s look will transform beyond recognition; its history, when rendered visually, advises otherwise.



Image 2
A 2021 Photograph showing
the Basilica of Bom Jesus as it
appears now, sans plaster
| © Lester Silveira.



Image 3

A 2016 tourist souvenir featuring a likeness of Bom Jesus. The monument is juxtaposed with the image of a beach, combining two contemporary attractions of Goa. | © Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar.

The monument's present-day unplastered aspect, fixed in the popular imagination by tourism-related visual culture, has cemented the iconicity of the building while simultaneously relying on its historic acclaim as a symbol synonymous with Goa (Kandolkar 2020). To counter such fixity, our visual essay demonstrates that how the Basilica is viewed is as much a product of deliberate alterations as it is of that view being influenced by the power of representation itself.

Image 4

This is Not the Basilica! (2021), a digitally manipulated photograph by Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar highlights the monsoonal damage sustained by the Basilica. From the exhibition *Goa: A Time That Was* (2021), curated by Leandr  D'Souza at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts, Panjim.



Image 5

An 1890 photograph of
the Basilica by Souza & Paul
| Source: Central Library,
Panjim.

As Baudrillard influentially contends, the real only exists in the possibility of its representability (1988). In the case of the Basilica, that contemporary Goans believe its current unplastered look has always been its only reality derives from specific political manipulations and historical occlusions. Today, a generation of Goans has grown accustomed to seeing the Basilica's exposed laterite walls, but this is not how it appeared until about 70 years ago.

FOTO. SOUZA & PAUL
NOVA-00A



Image 6

These contrasting images demonstrate the changes wrought upon the Basilica between the late-nineteenth century and the contemporary moment. In juxtaposition, the Basilica of Bom Jesus in 2022 (© Lester Silveira) and the plastered surface of the church as it looked two centuries prior in the Johnson William and William Henderson photograph of c. 1855 (Source: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University).

The former Director of the Department of Monuments in Portugal — architect-restorer Baltazar da Silva Castro — appointed by the colonial government to Goa in the 1950s brought about the dramatic transformation of the Basilica by having its external plaster removed. Only from that point on was the underlying laterite stone left exposed.

Intended to “age” the look of the already ancient building (the construction began in 1594), the renovation took place during a period of rising anti-colonialism globally and was politically motivated. Attempting to provide ocular proof of the longevity of the Portuguese presence in Goa, the ageing of the Basilica was also meant to indicate the long-standing aesthetic influences of Iberian culture on Goan architecture. However, the Basilica is uniquely Goan in its genesis, even as it remakes European design elements (Kandolkar 2020).



Image 7
Image of Bom Jesus in an advertisement by the Department of Tourism, Government of Goa, published in the magazine *Goa Today* (Oct. 1966) | Source: Central Library, Panjim.



Image 8
Image of Bom Jesus in an advertisement published in the newspaper *O Heraldo* (Dec. 22, 1974) | Source: Central Library, Panjim.

Significantly, the Basilica's present image has been frozen in time by its simulacral and recursive use in a slew of representative objects and advertisements, most having to do with promoting Goa as a holiday destination. This surfeit of latter-day representations could be countered by institutional authorities making the public aware of the visual history of this building in its earlier plastered manifestations.



Resurfacing older images of the Basilica could inspire the Goan public to see that, of the many forms the building has taken, its latest unplastered appearance has only occupied the shortest period of its lifetime. Such visual education may then hasten its replastering, a restoration that returns the Basilica to its original form and will extend its life by protecting it from climate-related damage.

Image 9

A miniature replica of Bom Jesus constructed for Mini India Park (a real estate project in Quellossim, South District, Goa) highlights how the unplastered church has been replicated as a popular representative symbol of Goa. Photo from 2016. | © Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar.

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