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

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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.

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

Palavras-chave

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.





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.





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.



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).

**a world famous
monumental shrine**



The Basilica of Bom Jesus where the sacred relics of St. Francis Xavier are enshrined is a world famous monumental shrine. Thousands of pilgrims from far and near visit this place every year.

With a history that stretches as far back as the mythological era, Goa abounds in historical landmarks, ancient temples, majestic churches, picturesque holiday resorts and enchanting beaches.

come to **GOA** for a pilgrimage
or a holiday

DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM
Government of Goa, Daman & Diu, Panjim.

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.

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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
inspire the
forms the
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of its lifeti
hasten its
Basilica to
protecting

Image 9
A miniature rep
for Mini India I
Quelossim, Sou
the unplastered
popular repres
2016. | © Vishv

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Biographical note

Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Architecture at Goa College of Architecture (Goa University) and the Programme Coordinator of the Master of Architecture in Urban Design programme at the college. His research on Goa’s architectural history focuses on early modern church design as well as the evolution of Indo-Portuguese aesthetics from the colonial to the postcolonial period. His writing has appeared in peer-reviewed journals, including *World History Bulletin*, *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *the Oxford Journal of Hindu Studies*, *eTropic*, *the Journal of Human Values*, and *Economic and Political Weekly*.

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