

MÃE

A Case
of
Outsider
Graffiti

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MÃO

in
Monchique,
Portugal

In August 2021, we decided to visit Monchique to get a feeling for the interior of the Algarve region in Portugal. As we parked the car, we spotted an old (Figures 1–3) convent on the top of the hill where the town is built on. We decided to climb to the monument before it got hotter. Before our trip, we had read some basic information about the site.

Figure 1. The Nossa Senhora do Desterro Convent in Monchique, Portugal, August 2021.¹
Figure 2. The convent as seen from Monchique's cemetery.
Figure 3. Streets in the centre of the town that lead to the convent.



Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro (Convent of Our Lady of Exile)
 Founded in 1631 by Pero da Silva, soon to be Viceroy of India. Manueline style. Franciscan order. Very damaged by the earthquake of Lisbon (1755). Rebuilt and abandoned again. Great views of Monchique from the hill. Worthy to visit. It is on private land but, owners welcome visitors (Unknown, n.d.).

The walk took us through the narrow streets of Monchique. It was a steep uphill climb, but the picturesque white façades made up for it. The last part of the journey was a path surrounded by cork trees. As we got closer to the convent, we started spotting some hand-written signs on the walls.² They had been clumsily executed with red paint and a wide brush. They were uppercase and big enough to be seen from a distance. The crude hand style, aligned with the simplicity of the messages, appeared aimed to keep visitors away. The words 'FAMILIA', 'FAMILY', 'DOG', and 'PRIVATE' were often accompanied by sketches of human figures and a dog (Figures 4–9).



Figures 4-9. Various images of the convent's exterior displaying the hand-written signs 'FAMILIA', 'FAMILY', 'DOG', and 'PRIVATE' along with sketches of human figures.





Despite these warning signs, we hoped that someone would let us in, and as we approached the door, a man in his fifties invited us to enter. The first rooms evidenced that he was living there despite the lack of electricity and sanitary facilities such as running water. The inhabited area was followed by a series of chambers whose ceilings had fallen apart (Figure 10). Some were used as a vegetable garden where hens ran free (Figure 11). Others had preserved the original blue and white tiles of the walls (Figure 12).



Figure 10. Various images of interior areas in Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro.
 Figure 11. Area that preserved the wall tiles.
 Figure 12. Area devoted to the hens.

The convent had passed to public ownership in the 19th century, when Portugal commandeered Church property. After that, some portions were acquired by different private owners. At some point, several low-income families moved there to live. Since that time, the number of owners multiplied as the private fragments of the convent were divided from heir to heir. Some generations later, the lack of official documents left the current convent's ownership unclear (Varela, 2017). There was no doubt that the convent had been inhabited by different families (up to six at the same time) and that up to the day of our visit, the man we encountered was living there. The proliferation of graffiti discouraging visitors from trespassing in the convent may be seen in the images from a blog entry from 2011 (Brito & Silva, 2011). It is clear that these messages have been there for many years.

In the interior of the convent, more graffiti awaited us. But these works seemed made by a different hand. Most of them consisted of obsessive repetitions of the words 'Jó' (*name of a person (author?) or Job from the Bible*), 'DIJÓ' (*unclear, perhaps the author's nickname*) and/or 'Mãe' (*mother*) next to images of hearts and crosses.³ While 'DIJÓ' appeared written in uppercase letters, 'Mãe' was executed with an elegant cursive rounded calligraphy with only the first letter capitalised. This graphic vertical formula was ubiquitous on door lintels and walls, even at heights impossible to reach from the ground level without the help of a long ladder. Another frequent expression was 'Mãe Sagrada' (*sacred mother*), 'Mãe respeitada' (*respected mother*), and 'Da-me a Mão' (*give me your hand*).

Figures 13-18.

13: Jó/Mãe (Jó/ mother)

14: (on a blot) and 15: DiJó † heart

16: Mãe (mother) † heart

17: Mãe/ Sagrada/ DIJÓ/ Mãe/ seráje [sic. serás]/ respeitada/ hearts/ Mãe (mother/ sacred/ DIJÓ/ mother you will be respected)

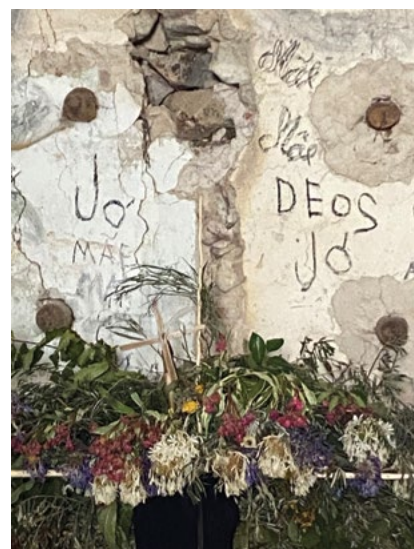
18: Writing on a blot: Mãe/ Sagrada/ DA-ME/ A MAO (mother/ sacred/ give me/ your hand)





This graffiti appeared to have been written with graphite, most likely charcoal (Figures 13–18). Many messages seemed written over previous ones that had left a blot, suggesting a periodic or recent renewal (Figures 14, 18). Another type of message was the number 1631, the year of the foundation of the convent, written with an orange pigment (probably a piece of brick) (Figures 19–21).

Figures 19-21.



On the former altar of the convent, there was an improvised shrine composed of dried flowers and a cross on rusty bed bases (Figure 22). Around the altar, there is a high concentration of graffiti, both on the walls and on pieces of cardboard. Here the messages accumulate: JÓ, Mãe, DIJÓ, 'MÃE DA-ME A MÃO', 'Mãe Sagrada Sempre Respeitada'. To these, apparently, random juxtaposition of words the term 'DEOS' [sic. Deus] (*God*) was also added, along with images of hands printed and sketched (Figure 23). At the centre of the altar are two figures that appear to be a mother and her child, drawn in a childish style (Figure 24).

Images taken earlier, in 2019 and 2020, show the shrine in a much more elaborate state, including plenty of fresh flowers, and hoses or wires hanging on both sides of a photograph of a person placed at the centre of the altar. The symmetrical composition around the photograph and the cross give the impression of an actual altarpiece (Figure 25). These images also show a sort of still-life arrangement on a camping table covered with a crochet doily with bird feathers hooked on it. On the table there was a switched-on lamp, a glass bottle with flowers and a stone — all creating a true vanitas⁴ (Figure 26).



Figure 22. View of the altarpiece in 2021.
 Figure 23. Details of the altar, 2021.
 Figure 24. Central section of the altar, 2021.



Figure 25. Altar in February 2020. Photograph ©TripAdvisor user.
 Figure 26. Improvised altar, February, 2020. Photograph ©TripAdvisor user.



Figures 27-29: Various representations of hands.
27: Signboard: 2018/ 2018/ JUDIÇIARIA/ MATOU SOLÂNJE [sic. Solange]/ DERÁ FÓGE A/ MONCHIQUE VERDADE 2018/ JUDIÇIARIA/ CERE MATAR O DIJÓ/ MAE SAGRADA/AMÁDA/para sempre/ Comente/ Monxique [sic. Monchique]/ JUDIÇIARIA/ PORCOS/ASASINOS/ Á PROVAS GORDADAS/ PALÁVRA SÁGRADA. (2018/ 2018/ criminal police/ Killed Solange/ set fire /Monchique truth 2018/ criminal police wants to kill DiJo/ sacred mother/ loved/forever/[unclear] Monchique)
28: Outlines of a left hand.
29: Shield on the convent façade and decoration in the window with the word 'DAME [sic. da-me]' (give me) and a hand.



The hanging cardboard signs (Figure 27) included more elaborate messages with specific references to an incident that had taken place in Monchique in 2018. One of them is in the future tense, giving the text a kind of visionary tone: '2018/ JUDIÇIARIA [sic. judiciária]/ MATARÀ [sic. matará] A/ MÃE DO/ DIJÓ DEPOIS/ DERÃ FOGE/ A MONCHIQUE/ DIJÓ VIVIADE [sic. vivia] / A MIASEDE [sic. ameaçado]/ DE MORTE/ PELA/ JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária]'⁵ (2018/ criminal police/ will kill/ the mother of/ Dijó after/ setting fire/ to Monchique/ Dijó lived/ under life threat/ by/ criminal police). The offence against criminal police continues in other graffiti throughout the building: 'JUDIÇIARIA [sic. judiciária] MALDITOS' (Damned criminal police), 'JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária]/ PORCOS ASASINOS' (criminal police killers pigs). The other one reads: 'JUDIÇIARIA [judiciária] MALDITOS 2018 FOGUE MÃE' (criminal police damned 2018 Fire Mother).

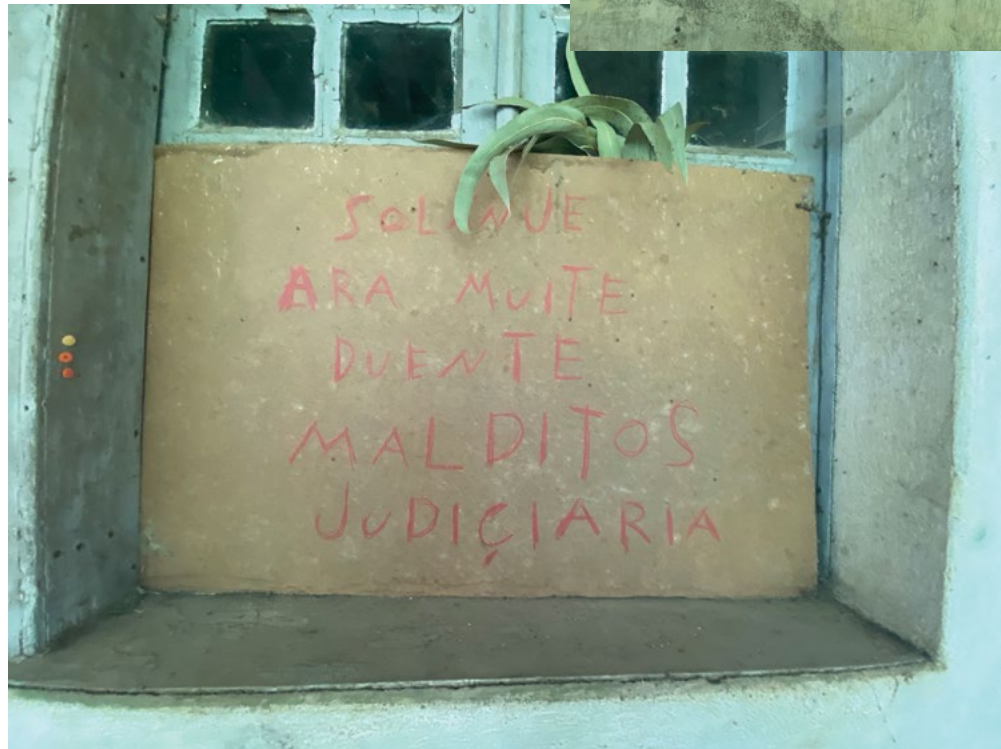
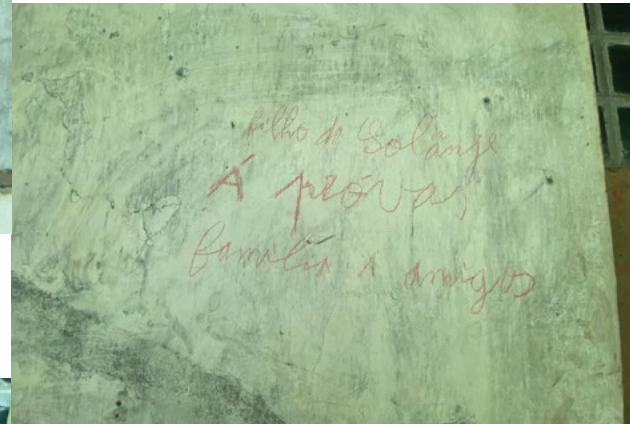


Figure 30. 2018 Judiçiaría [sic. judiciária] porcos asasinós [sic. assassinos] MIRATE 2018 malditos justisa [sic. Justiça] é lixo" (2018 criminal police killers pigs look at you 2018 damned justice is trash).

Figure 31. SOLANGE [sic. Solange]/ ARA [sic. era] MUITO/ DUENTE [sic. doente]/ MALDITOS/ JUDIÇIARIA (Solange/ was very/ sick/ damned/ criminal police).

Figure 32. Filho da/ Solange [sic. Solange]/ A [há] provas/ família e amigos (Son of/ Solange/ there are proofs/ family and friends)

In another part of the convent, there was a homemade mirror with the sign 'MIRATE' (look at you) surrounded by more writing in pink. This text seemed intended to be read while reflecting on oneself in the mirror (Figure 30). Photographs from previous visitors (TripAdvisor) show that there had been similar mirror-messages in other parts of the convent at earlier times.

When we were leaving, we asked the man who had opened the door to us some questions. He said that he was living in the convent but insisted that he didn't know anything about the writing, that he was not one of the authors of the messages, and that he didn't know who the authors were.

We left the convent and decided to walk around the building on the outside. We observed similar writings and, as we took the path down the hill to return to the town, we spotted a number of small carved stones with hearts, crosses, and the words: *JÓ, DÁ* (*give*). It was striking how hard those rocks (granite or similar) seemed to be and how tiny and discreet these reliefs appeared in the middle of the forest (**Figures 33–36**).



Figures 33-36. Carved stones on the path outside the convent.

As we continued down the path, we came across a man in his late forties carrying a guitar, who was going up to the convent. His glasses were broken. Once we reached the town we asked some people about the graffiti in the convent and the people living up there. Everyone refused to speak or said they didn't know anything. Finally, the owner of a local store told us that there was a man with a guitar who trespassed at the convent everyday causing trouble to visitors, addressing the female ones as 'mother' – along with offensive words – and sometimes behaving aggressively. He said that the people in Monchique thought this man was the author behind the graffiti.

TripAdvisor reviews

NOVEMBER 2016 – Go there if you want an aggressive guy cussing and swearing at you

The lady in the tourist office is great, very pleasant indeed and suggests this walk. It is a pleasant walk until you meet a vagrant in the woods. He has a guitar but is not playing it. He is exceedingly aggressive and curses and swears at you. The aggression could easily turn to violence. I go back to the tourist office so the kind lady in the office can do something about it. Her response is stunning. He has been a problem for some time, the police are aware but can do nothing unless you want to spend time with a formal complaint. Yet she still suggests people go up there! Be warned, protect yourself by not going there.

NOVEMBER 2018 – Terrifying Visit Don't Visit

My boyfriend and I visited the convent or tried to. It was very hard to find and the streets are very tight to drive around, but by far the worst part of our visit was when we eventually found the entrance to the convent, parked up and started to walk up the hill, we were met by a terrifying vagrant with a guitar who swore abuse at us continuously. I felt so scared as though he might get violent at any moment. I would STRONGLY suggest you avoid this place of interest at all costs it is not safe!!!

JUNE 2019 – Dangerous man in cork trees!

Travellers to the convent should beware of a man in a blue shirt, thick black rimmed glasses, late forties with a guitar and bag with coins in it. I assume he is a busker although I never heard him play an instrument. Instead, he swore profanely (in broken English) at my adult daughter and I as we approached the quite isolated convent. This was unprovoked and very intimidating as we were the only people around. On the way back down the same path he responded to my "Bom Dia" with another highly agitated, foul-mouthed tirade. I could see he had been cutting cork bark from a tree with a knife and now my daughter and I were seriously concerned that things could escalate out of control. Fortunately two people came up from the town and the man retreated from the path, back into the trees. I warned the newcomers that this guy was clearly a nutter, and we left pronto. This was a bizarre and unsettling experience in a beautiful and serene part of Monchique. If I could have found a policeman in the town, I would have reported it. Take care up there!

MARCH 2020 – Unpleasant Experience

We walked up to the convent ruins where there were 4 men milling around outside. The place was festooned with plastic flowers, graffiti, and spray painted "private property". It also smelled of urine. It appeared that they were living in the ruins and trying to get money out of tourists. We turned around, went back down the road and encountered a man playing a guitar expecting money. When we did not give him any we were sworn at (he knows some English!). All in all, what should have been a quiet rural experience was quite disconcerting. One might expect to encounter this type of thing in an urban slum but not at such a lovely rural spot. There are many interesting sites around Monchique and until something is done about the people hanging around the convent, I would suggest it be avoided.

AUGUST 2022 – Sad

Very sad end of a very nice hike in Serra de Monchique. This place is abandoned and in really bad conditions. I consider it dangerous to go there. My only recommendation is to the Portuguese authorities to assume their responsibility.

Fire in Monchique, 2018

The fire started on August 3, 2018 in the area of Perna Negra in Monchique and was later described as the largest of the year in Portugal and Europe, having raged for one week. Over 27,000 hectares of land and 74 houses were destroyed, 30 of which were primary residences. (Bruxo, 2020)

Right before the fire, the city hall of Monchique passed a plan long awaited by people and the local authorities. The project involved arriving at a negotiation with the last two brothers who claimed ownership over a part of the convent, providing them with a housing facility and restoring the monument. The restoration plan included a luxury hotel, a space for festivals and exhibitions as well as the recuperation of religious worship (Varela, 2017).

In a news article from August 2018, right after the fire in Monchique, Rosa Ramos interviewed António and Vidaúl, the two brothers who had grown up in the convent and who had saved it from the flames, an enterprise regarded as a miracle in the eyes of the town's population, the authorities, and the media:

Mas os irmãos ganharam: o fogo queimou tudo, mas não se atreveu a entrar no mosteiro. Mesmo assim, no dia a seguir os jornais e as televisões anunciavam, com pesar, que nada tinha sobrado do Convento de Nossa Senhora do Desterro. As fake news tiveram razão de ser: o lume desceu a encosta com tamanha vontade que não era possível que o monumento tivesse escapado. (*But the brothers won: the fire burnt everything but it didn't dare to enter the monastery. Nevertheless, the day after, newspapers and television programmes announced with regret that nothing was left of the convent. The fake news was justified: the flames went down the hill with such strength that it seemed impossible for the monument to have been saved*) (Ramos, 2018).

The article explained how Vidaúl lived in the convent on his own most of the time, while António spent time between his own house in Monchique, the convent, and in the psychiatric hospital where his mental problems had forced him to stay for a while. He seemed inclined towards magical thinking in relation to the convent: 'É que aqui dentro aconteceram sempre coisas muito misteriosas' (*'Mysterious things have always happened here inside'*) (Ramos). This is the only article that sheds some light on the meaning of the graffiti: Solange was the name of their mother, who had recently passed away (2018). She used to ask to be taken by the hand to avoid falling. One of António's sons had been named João (Jó?). That was also the name of the last official owner of the convent. António also confessed to the journalist that he was out of his mind and bluntly acknowledged his problems: 'Sou só um pobre diabo que aqui ando, sempre fui. Tenho uma vida de merda [...] A única coisa que eu gostava era que me ajudassem e me levassem a um bom médico de cabeça, que seja especialista' (*'I'm just a poor devil around here. I always have been. I have a shitty life [...] The only thing I wish is to be helped and to be taken to a good doctor to examine my head'*) (Ramos). At the time of this interview, he had started putting signs made of cardboard around the convent. Based on the dates of the images posted on Tripadvisor and in newspapers, and the date of our own trip, we think most of the graffiti analysed was done between 2020 and early 2021, after the death of Solange and the big fire in Monchique (2018), and during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Reflections: A singular space?

The convent could productively be read as a 'singular space' as coined and studied by curator and professor Jo Farb Hernández (2013). These are spaces, generally the home, where owners develop a long-term creative project reflecting a symbolic world that escapes classifications, schools, or periods. Usually referred to as outsider, folk, or environmental art, these interventions tend to affect the whole space and must be approached in their totality.

The sites [...] are full of personal stories, connections, and experiences, and this fusion of art⁶ with life becomes a total synthesis, generally unmatched in any other circumstances. The art environments reveal not only complete commitment to the work and blurring of divisions between art and daily living, but an open reflection of the marker's life and concerns... 'life-specific', not just 'site-specific' (Farb Hernández, 2013: 19).

This type of creative practice is very often rejected or not well understood by the community. In the case of Monchique, the argument was the need to repair the convent to make it safer for tourists and open to everyone:

Neighbours or passersby, who may be unprepared for the edgy audacity and open accessibility that these publicly available sites proffer, may base their disapproval, at a fundamental level, on a perhaps unconscious conservative sense of property that upholds the idea that certain aspects of life simply need to be kept more private. Also potentially of concern may be that the sites may reveal built, written, or even implied critiques of, or commentaries on, general cultural, ethnic, historical, or political issues, and these judgements may challenge or confront what may have been glossed over to archive superficial civil accord (Farb Hernández, 2013: 21–22).

Reflections: Topoanalysis

In *The Poetics of Space*, philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) addresses the deep and unconscious psychological relations that humans develop with spaces – *topophilia*. As adults, we might find shelter and put down roots elsewhere, but it is the childhood home that triggers our deeper emotions and memories, the one that conjures our fears, ghosts, sense of protection and belonging. House, temple, cave as well as mother wound, the convent is a personal place for intimate mourning rituals as well as a sacred place to transcend grief.

Biological or fictional (mother or Virgin – Nossa Senhora) houses and domestic interior spaces are conventionally gendered as feminine – as maternal places that provide protection (*mother, family*) much as hands do (*give me your hand*). As such, as well as being a symbolic extension of our body, we are ever alert to unwanted trespassers and defend these inner spaces from the external forces that threaten it: here, unknown visitors and fire. As Bachelard states:

In the life of a man [sic], the house thrust aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. (Bachelard, 1994: 6–7).

These compulsive gestures – the names of the departed scratched over and over in the cataclysmic confusion of grief – are at once quotidian and domestic. For it is at home that we all *write* our memories by living – existing, being, inhabiting – though usually by furnishing, decorating, and customising them, and not in expecting our words on the walls to be read in the here and now, and in the hereafter or afterlife.

- 1 All photographs by ©Isabel Carrasco Castro unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 This text is not an exhaustive and rigorous empirical study of the graffiti encountered. On the contrary, it is an experimental and subjective visual essay with the intention of sharing my impressions, as a graffiti researcher and lover, during a trip to Monchique.
- 3 All transcriptions are reproduced as written on the walls leaving incorrect spelling and grammar. Translations from Portuguese by the author. Thanks goes out to Toño Trenado, Pedro Soares and Ana Gariso for their help. Review of the text in English: Allen Hoppes.
- 4 Historically, vanitas paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries involve 'moody' still life imagery of transitory items, to show the transience of life and the certainty of death.
- 5 Many words are spelt incorrectly and grammar and syntax don't follow a logical or normative pattern.
- 6 In our case, the graffiti can also be approached as a visual creativity process. We take the term 'art' in a broad sense as a visual intervention in the space it aims to modify.

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