

BELMIRO DE ALMEIDA, THE BRAZILIAN MANET?

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ABSTRACT

Whether by the logic inherent of the artistic sphere, centered between Paris and Rome, or by the feeling of foreigners in their own country, artists of more than a generation moved to Europe on successive journeys. In many cases, winning public orders played a decisive role. The article deals with how Belmiro de Almeida managed to sustain an artist's life between Brazil and Europe.

KEYWORDS: *artist travels; Brazil-Europe; orders*

Belmiro de Almeida, Manet brasileiro?

RESUMO

Seja pela lógica inerente à esfera artística, centralizada entre Paris e Roma, seja pela sensação de estrangeiros na própria pátria, artistas de várias gerações deslocaram-se para a Europa em sucessivas viagens. Em muitos casos, a conquista de encomendas públicas teve papel decisivo. O artigo trata de como Belmiro de Almeida conseguiu viver de arte entre o Brasil e a Europa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *viagens de artistas; Brasil-Europa; encomendas*

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Manet brasileiro! Esta gloriola, desbaratada na frivolidade do motivo, chamejava na sua vaidade, deslumbrando-o. Em outros jornais, nas linhas fáceis dos noticiários, respondia-se à prodigalidade louvaminheira com fosforejamentos de promessas. A sua reputação de artista principiava a luzir, sumida e longínqua, renunciando um mundo que se forma.

Gonzaga-Duque, *Mocidade morta*, 1899

Among *fin de siècle* Brazilian artists, Belmiro de Almeida (1858-1935) is always remembered for his familiarity with and assimilation of French and Italian technical and aesthetic innovations (Gonzaga-Duque, 1995; Acquarone, undated; Bardi, 1977; Campofiorito, 1983; Reis Júnior, 1984; Migliaccio, 2000). He is also known for having created a lifestyle of the type found in

Europe's artistic capitals — in other words, he was a habitu  of bohemian settings and smoky newsrooms (Gonzaga-Duque, 1995; Reis J nior, 1984, Schiavinatto, 1990), and also moved in the rarefied circles of the social and political elite. He stood out thanks to his dandyish, unconventional character, for his aesthetic innovations and for working with a vast range of genres and artistic techniques without any regard for hierarchy. He was cited time and again as a capable artist who could be counted as a modernist or as a “modern before modernism” (Moraes, 1984; Schiavinatto, 1990; Herkenhoff, 2002; Simioni, 2005; Simioni; Stumpf, 2014; Dazzi, 2017). Gonzaga-Duque's pen portrait of him in *Brazilian Art* (1995 [1888], pp. 209-14) highlights his easy-going nature, his carefully chosen outfits, which distinguished him from both the common bourgeois and the standard type of local coxcomb, and reveals that Almeida was a unique character as well as an artist, a man characteristic of the time and the environment in which he lived.

Despite being entirely dedicated to Belmiro de Almeida, this article is not intended to be a biography, which would require another type of research and another form of exposition; nor is it intended to be an autonomous chapter on the subject of art history. I consider Almeida as a singular case within a larger framework comprising articulations between artistic environments on an international scale, at a time when education and artistic practices sought to be circumscribed within state/national spaces. This framework exists within the dialectic of localism and cosmopolitanism (Candido, 1980), the origin of what is known in Brazilian terminology as the “Nabuco Disease” (Holanda, 1996; 1983; Drummond de Andrade; Andrade, 2002; Nabuco, 1999; Gomes J nior, 2015). This relates to the problem of cultural transfers between Europe and the Americas and the feeling that the landscape and the country are inadequate, which leads, among those who are exposed to the literate and artistic dynamics of European capitals, to a desire to leave Brazil. In this sense, this research on Belmiro de Almeida is part of a set of studies on the issue of travel within the artistic sphere, at the time when the Nabuco Disease was first diagnosed.

Even though he did not obtain the prize trip to Europe at the end of his training at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts (Aiba), Belmiro de Almeida spent various periods on the other side of the Atlantic. However, if compared to the usual trajectory of the artistic elite of *fin de si cle* Rio de Janeiro, Almeida's was quite erratic in the generation of artists born in the 1850s who came to prominence in the 1880s — such as Rodolpho Bernardelli (1852-1931), Rodolpho Amoedo (1857-1941) and Almeida J nior (1859-1899). This comprised three stages: a) artistic training at Aiba, culminating in the travel prize obtained at the General Exhibition or in a specific contest; b)

complementary training in Europe under the tutelage of an institution, with an exhibition at a local salon and the sending of originals and copies to Brazil as proof of artistic progress; c) return to Brazil, crowned by an individual exhibition or by obtaining a prominent place in the General Exhibition, followed by the establishment of a studio, with the possibility of training private clients and accepting public and/or ecclesiastical commissions.

Two possible later career-paths beckoned: d) recruitment as a professor at Aiba; e) establishment in the capital or in the provinces, with the possibility of exercising a formative role in his studios and interacting via local media with the respective symbolic goods markets. However, *the artists who made their first trips to Europe on scholarships brought themselves up to date by experiencing the notion that the great theater of the arts was in fact in the Old World, as well as the notion that the trajectory followed in the dual training regime did not need to end with the sedentarization of a laurel-wearing artist* (cf. Gomes Júnior, 2019: 2). Some of them, following in the footsteps of Pedro Américo (1843-1905), sought to make other trips to Europe, often made possible by commissions for works with patriotic motives whose purpose was the ornament of the State.

THE ARTIST'S JOURNEYS

Born in the city of Serro, in the state of Minas Gerais, not far from the historic city of Diamantina, Belmiro de Almeida joined the court at the age of eleven, when he also entered the Lyceum of Arts and Crafts (LAO) and later, in 1874, continued his studies at Aiba, where he obtained good results in figurative, life model and landscape drawing (Schiavinatto, 1990). In 1877 he first appeared in the Rio de Janeiro press as a caricaturist in short-lived newspapers or the *Gazeta de Notícias*, with which he collaborated regularly and which made him a well-known public figure. His image has always been linked to the bohemian milieu, where he could be recognized for his unmistakable personal style (Gonzaga-Duque, [1888] 1995) and his life as a fine art student. The impression one gets when reading contemporary newspapers reports is that he was always in the process of completing his training, either in Rio de Janeiro or abroad. In addition to two years at the Lyceum of Arts and Crafts, Iara Schiavinatto (1990), who examined his Aiba enrollment records, tells us that he was a regular student until 1886 and that his final course was in statuary. Ana Paula Simioni, writing about his career abroad, tells us that he was enrolled for three years at the Académie Julian between 1896 and 1899 (Simioni, 2005), where he studied under the likes of Jules Lefèvre and Tony Robert-Fleury.

Almeida's first journey, the means for which remain unclear, happened between August 1884 and May 1885. Previously, in 1883, the

press had made mention of his intention to travel: Aluizio de Azevedo, in an article in *Gazeta de Notícias* (Aug. 31, 1883), praises Almeida, talks about his need for a season in Europe to complete his training and reports on his dealings with the provincial government in search of funds. In any case, the trip was made, but it only lasted eight months, during which time Almeida sent three paintings to the 1884 General Exhibition (idem, Sep. 23, 1884) — *Na fantasia, No ateliê de um gravador* and *Naufração de Montserrat*. He won the silver medal. What does not appear in the secondary literature is the fact that Minas Gerais was Almeida's alternative plan in the absence of competitions at Aiba, which were not held between 1878, when Rodolpho Amoedo obtained the travel prize, and 1887, when it was won by Oscar Pereira da Silva. In October 1883, the *Liberal Mineiro* carried Belmiro de Almeida's request for a monthly pension of 250 milrêis for a four-year period to complete his studies in Paris. Twenty-five days later, the same newspaper reported that the Provincial Legislative Assembly, considering the request a pertinent matter, had granted the artist a monthly pension of 150 milrêis, with an additional 500 milrêis for travel expenses. The pension was modest, but equivalent to those paid by the Imperial Ministry for Aiba prize-winners, the annual amount of which was 1,500 milrêis; it was also equivalent to the annual salary of a permanent Aiba professor, i.e.: 1,600 milrêis (cf. Report of the Imperial Ministry, 1871).

Almeida's busy, worldly life in Rio de Janeiro prior to his eight-month trip and his collaboration with the satirical journals *O Binóculo* and *Diabo a Quatro* consolidated his commitment to painting in dialog with his time, something that was interpreted by critics in Brazil as evidence of his adherence to the school of naturalism. His most important work between his first trip to Europe and his second one, *Arrufos*, fits clearly within this framework.

Almeida's second journey was contingent on the Aiba prize, with the competition scheduled to take place in 1887. However, contrary to expectations, Almeida was passed over in favor of Oscar Pereira da Silva, and the outcome of the contest ended up as a matter for litigation. This reverse was offset by success the following year: *Arrufos*, by now a celebrated masterpiece, was bought for 2,000 milrêis by the Imperial Ministry. This meant that Belmiro de Almeida was able to travel to Europe on July 30, 1888 and to remain there for some time, primarily in Rome.¹ One year later, the Rio de Janeiro press announced that a collection of Almeida paintings produced in Europe would be exhibited in a "pavilion in São Francisco Square" (*Gazeta de Notícias*, Aug. 20, 1890). These paintings had been sent from Rome, where the artist remained. In the period following this first shipment of works, Almeida painted *A aurora* [also known as *A apoteose*] *de 15 de novembro*, an allegorical painting that was sent back to Brazil in 1891 to be

[1] The literature on Belmiro de Almeida features a repeated reference to help from friends in making this trip, which would have compensated for his failure in the competition. Rodolpho Bernardelli organized a subscription to support him with five pounds sterling per month. This was reported in *Revista Ilustrada* in April 1888. A few months later the subscription had failed to reach 20 pounds. *O Diário da Manhã* (in Minas Gerais) reported on March 7, 1891 that "Belmiro de Almeida, whose studies in Rome are ongoing, has made great progress. Dr. Manoel Baptista da Cruz Tamandaré, through the offices of our minister in Italy, has offered to help the artist with 1,200 francs per annum." But there is no evidence that anything came of this offer.

displayed at the *Intendência Municipal* building in Rio de Janeiro. In spite of the praise he had received in the *Gazeta de Notícias*, its critics had their doubts about this particular work: “Belmiro de Almeida has fallen into allegory” — such a painting could hardly be the work of a “disheveled realist” (*Gazeta de Notícias*, Nov. 12, 1891). In another, even more forceful criticism signed by “Eloy, o Heroe” (the pseudonym of Artur Azevedo), in the *Diário de Notícias* (Nov. 15, 1891), it was reported that the painting had been turned away from the Salon de Paris: “I have a great esteem for the talent and willpower of our Almeida, but I strongly abhor his affected disability, which is touchingly indigent as a composition and as realization. The famous naked *caboclo* is supposed to represent Brazil [...] even though it was not allowed into the Salon! God bless the Jury!”

In examining these choices, it is clear that Belmiro de Almeida intended to take advantage of the “Pedro Américo scheme” (cf. Gomes Júnior, 2019) that had been set up to allow for prolonged stays in Europe by means of the production of paintings for the ornament of the State. The time spent painting *A aurora de 15 de novembro*, a large format allegorical picture produced during Almeida’s second stay in Europe, can be understood as an attempt to do what Pedro Américo had done with *A batalha de Campo Grande*, in 1871. *A aurora de 15 de novembro*, just like *A batalha de Campo Grande*, had not been commissioned and only made sense as a possible springboard to move things into higher gear by doing the following: exhibit it in Brazil, sell it and then return to Europe with the funds obtained or other orders coming from the State.

Things did not work out quite as Almeida had hoped. In addition to being poorly received in Rio de Janeiro, the painting produced discomfort among the artist’s admirers. After being exhibited in the capital of the Republic in 1891, it was offered to the government of São Paulo in 1895, according to the *Gazeta de Notícias*. Not finding success among the *Paulistas*, Almeida tried to sell it to the government of Minas Gerais in 1897, with the same result. Not until 1901, when the work was already a decade old, did it find its destination as reported in an article by *Diário de Minas* (Oct. 17, 1901) upon the inauguration of the Secretariat of the Interior building in Belo Horizonte, which mentioned that one of the rooms on the third floor would be the new home of *A aurora de 15 de novembro*.

This episode highlights the problem of instability resulting from a desire to travel whose fulfillment depends on taking stances that might compromise the artist’s efforts to maintain a certain aesthetic and thematic orientation, thereby putting to one side decisions that had led to recognition in the artistic milieu of Rio de Janeiro.

After his return from Rome in 1893, Almeida was appointed interim professor of figurative drawing at National School of Fine Arts

(Enba), in August of that year.² He did not stay long. In June 1894 he was suspended from his duties for failing to show due respect to then (interim) director, Rodolpho Amoedo (Reis Júnior, 1984, p. 86). Still in 1893 he began to collaborate regularly with the *Gazeta de Notícias*. One assumes that it was during this period that he finished the set of paintings he had brought from Italy, as his individual exhibition was not scheduled to take place until the middle of 1894.

With the exception of *A aurora de 15 de novembro*, his Italian paintings depicted everyday life — landscapes, genre scenes, still lifes — and were well received by critics and audiences. These include *Efeitos de sol*, *Bom tempo*, *A vendedora de fósforos*, *A tagarela*, *Vaso de flores*, *Menino com bandolim*. These pieces that were part of both a solo exhibition and the First General Exhibition of Fine Arts, which took place in the wake of reforms promoted by the republican regime. In his solo exhibition, Almeida achieved a large audience and managed to sell some paintings; he was also recognized at the collective exhibition: his *Nuvens* was awarded the 2nd Gold Medal (*Gazeta de Notícias*, Oct. 31, 1894).

This visibility also attracted orders. Portraits of Floriano Peixoto and Afonso Penna commissioned by the city of Rio Novo, in Minas Gerais; a portrait of Commander Joaquim Barbosa de Mello, to be placed in the Varginha City Council; and a portrait of Carlos Santos, owner of *Jornal do Commercio*; a large-format portrait of Dr. Prudente de Moraes. There was also scenography work: the Teatro Apollo hired Belmiro de Almeida to paint the stage scenery for the 3rd Act of the play *OMajor* by Artur Azevedo. All of the foregoing was reported by the *Gazeta de Notícias*, a newspaper that paid great attention to the artist. During this period he also engaged in sporadic collaborations by way of producing drawings and caricatures for *ACicada* and *ABruixa* (Reis Júnior, 1984: 67).

Having completed three years in Brazil, Belmiro de Almeida returned to Europe for a third sojourn, from June 1896 to August 1897. The portraits of Maria and Antonio Seabra and the painting *A má notícia* (in which he repeats himself by reconsidering a richly layered mundane scene of female misfortune) all date from this period. In *Arrufos* the bad news had been given verbally, in *A má notícia*, a painting of a single character, it had come by means of a letter. From the sources available, it seems that Almeida did not even exhibit the painting in Rio de Janeiro, where he arrived on August 31. By September 17 the canvas had already arrived in Ouro Preto, where it was to be exhibited at the Lyceum of Arts and Crafts and honored by the presence of Governor Bias Fortes at its unveiling. From the absence of any reporting about the situation in the newspapers of Rio de Janeiro, it seems clear that Almeida preferred not to show *A má notícia* in the capital, where he instead held a small exhibition of four

[2] The position had been intended for Pedro Weingartner, but with his withdrawal it was taken on by Almeida.

small paintings: *Pronta para a feira*, *Uma parisiense*, *A cabeça* (woman in profile) and *Dor*, as reported by the *Jornal do Commercio* (Sep. 16, 1897). Comment on *A má notícia* was limited to Minas Gerais, which is surprising since Almeida routinely exhibited works produced in Europe in Rio de Janeiro before sending them to another destination in Brazil, as was the case, years later, of *Bárbara Heliodora*, a work commissioned by the government of Minas Gerais. The artist did not want to exhibit a work that repeated both the theme and the feminine posture of *Arrufos*, his most famous painting, in the capital.

Exhibited in Ouro Preto, *A má notícia* was sold for 10,000 milréis, an amount that was included in the budget for moving the state capital from that city to Belo Horizonte. The work was destined for the government palace in the state capital that was inaugurated on December 12, 1897. During his visit to Ouro Preto, Almeida made consistently diplomatic gestures, presenting himself not as a beginner looking for support for his studies in Europe, but as a recognized artist. These included an open letter to Governor Bias Fortes, entitled “For Art in Minas Gerais,” which begins in an imposing fashion, emphasizing the importance of the State in the new [republican] regime and the need to support the arts and ends on a more prosaic note by “requesting, in view of my merits as a painter from Minas Gerais, that [orders for] work be directed towards me” (*Minas Geraes*, Sep. 30, 1897).

Just as sales of paintings from the 1894 General Exhibition of Fine Arts to the Enba art gallery had paved the way for his previous trip abroad, the sale of *A má notícia* provided funds for his return to Paris on a fourth trip that took place between the end of 1897 and March 1899. The main result of this was the painting *Os descobridores*, a large format canvas (260 cm x 200 cm), whose motif was linked to the 1900 quatercentenary of Brazil. *Arrufos* and *A má notícia* made clear reference to Henri Gervex (1852-1929), in particular to *Le Retour du bal* (1879). Simioni (2005) has demonstrated that the model for *Os descobridores* was Puvis de Chavannes, particularly the canvas *Le Pauvre pêcheur* (1887); it is not unreasonable to suggest, however, that *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer* (1879) may also have caught Almeida’s eye.³

On returning to Rio de Janeiro, *Os descobridores* suffered a less illustrious fate than that intended by the artist, who showed it in the hall of the Lyceum of Arts and Crafts, where it remained between April and June 1899, whereupon it was transferred to the house *Ao Preço Fixo* (“The Fixed Price”), in the Rua do Ouvidor (*Gazeta de Notícias*, Jun. 12, 1899). The LAO exhibition was followed with interest by the *Gazeta de Notícias*, whose reports between May and June noted visits to the exhibition of public and eminent figures. The work received a more detailed commentary in the *Jornal do Commercio*, *A Notícia* and the *Gazeta de Notícias*. All highlighted the unprecedented nature of the image

[3] *Le Pauvre pêcheur* had been purchased by the French State and was exhibited at the Luxembourg Museum until 1929. This meant that it was conspicuously visible during Almeida’s varied visits to Paris. *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer* had been acquired by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel and sold to a private individual; it was, however, exhibited at the 1889 Universal Exhibition and twice at the Durand-Ruel Gallery, in 1887 and 1899.

— two characters who had strayed but not far from a New World beach — and the issue of color: memorably described as “faint and thin” (*A Notícia*, Apr. 19, 1899); “The clear and almost luminous painting of the decorative school [...] of admirable effect” (*Gazeta de Notícias*, Apr. 23, 1899). The *Jornal do Commercio* carried the most accurate commentary, accurate mainly because it set out the historical and aesthetic references identified in Almeida’s painting. For the *Jornal do Commercio*’s writer, the most obvious reference made was to the decorative oeuvre of Puvis de Chavannes, a recently deceased painter then at the height of his glory, although reference had also been made to the Pre-Raphaelites and the Quattrocento. The article highlighted the decorative nature of *Os descobridores* and the technical and aesthetic qualities of the canvas. This led to mention of the primitivism current at the time, exponents of which sought to “generalize and soften what is presented in nature.” It also pointed out the chromatic reduction in the image:

The light, clear, soft [...] tone, the near absence of color, the undecided half-ink that awakens the world of dreams already seen in many paintings by Almeida [...] reveal the influence of the 16th century and old, faded tapestries. This deepens the sensation of a dream, of melancholy, of tender delicacy. (Jornal do Commercio, Apr. 24, 1899, no by-line)

Despite these positive assessments, the painting did not find a home in Rio de Janeiro; Minas Gerais once again played the role of an alternative plan. In Belo Horizonte, the picture was equally well received, but not enough to induce its purchase by the state government. It was shown on September 19 in the Senate Hall, a location where it remained until the official decision that it would not be acquired by the government “due to a lack of funds.” This resulted in some clamor. For instance, as the *Minas Geraes* reported (Oct. 16, 1899), three fans of the artist visited the newspaper’s office to tell its staff of their plan to obtain *Os descobridores* by means of popular subscription — a plan which did not come to fruition.

This was Almeida’s second unsuccessful investment in painting for the ornament of the State (the first being of course *A aurora de 15 de novembro*). Belmiro de Almeida had started out with allegory and come in for criticism as other things had been expected of him; now he was giving an unexpected treatment to a historical scene on the eve of the country’s quatercentenary. While Meirelles’ *A primeira missa* of four decades earlier had depicted a happy encounter, in the form of a religious celebration, between Portuguese Catholics and natives of the New World, Almeida had placed two exiles or shipwreck survivors at the heart of his scene, one of them in a state of visible fatigue. Having got some way from the beach, they reveal the landscape in which they

are lost and completely alone. There is no sign of heroism, no human encounter and no promise of a world to be built. The figure who is standing has his eyes turned to the horizon, to the Atlantic, to Europe, which might seem ironic in the context.

Critical commentary on the subject of the *Apoteose de 15 de novembro* contained in an 1891 edition of *Revista Ilustrada* (Issue No. 633) enumerated the artists' failings: "Mr. Belmiro de Almeida is out of his depth in this genre. The characteristic feature of his intelligence is out of place here, and that is why he will always be mediocre and secondary whenever he tries to apotheosize anything". *Os descobridores* is evidence that Almeida got the message that he should avoid allegory and apotheosis and instead follow his inclinations or, as the critic stated, "the characteristic feature of his intelligence." There was a tension that was difficult to resolve. When he opted for the decorative norms related to the genre, he betrayed his artistic intelligence that was of a challenging nature and in tune with naturalism; when he produced the art that was expected of him, he presented a painting whose references, although praised at that time in Paris, were only beginning to be *au courant* in Brazil. This in a work that flew in the face of the celebratory rhetoric with its Nation-State emphasis. Such factors may have influenced the decisions of those who screened artistic productions for the ornament of the State at a time when the young Republic sought to celebrate the "Discovery."⁴

After this failure, Belmiro de Almeida took some time to recover his standing in the Rio de Janeiro art scene. Between 1899 and the middle of the following decade he seemed to be headed for a career as a painter of what Brazilians call *retratos de repartição*, that is to say portraits for display in the noble halls of city council buildings, municipal chambers and ministries, as well as of portraits of leading figures for exhibition in newsrooms or residences of the *nouveaux riches* who came to the fore in the economic fever after the "Encilhamento" bubble of the late 1880s and early 1890s.⁵ Since even this market was uncertain, Almeida made use of one of his well-known resources: he launched a satirical journal, the *João Minhoca* (1901). Between January 1901 and November 1904 the *Gazeta de Notícias*, always generous when reporting about this former collaborator, wrote not a line about him. The silence ended when the news appeared that he was exhibiting pictures in the Latin Quarter in Paris. In May 1905 he was reported to have attended a party held by the Brazilian colony in Paris, full of big shots and distinguished ladies. Here we see Belmiro de Almeida once again in the great theater of the arts, on his fifth sojourn in Europe. The next news report was of another party, this time in Petrópolis, not far from Rio de Janeiro. Clearly his comings and goings between the old and new worlds were becoming a regular activity. A report in April

[4] *Os descobridores* is now part of the collection of the Historical and Diplomatic Museum at the Itamaraty Palace in Rio de Janeiro. The *Correio da Manhã*, Dec. 24, 1916, reported its presence in the "Salão dos Chanceleres" in 1916. I could not find detailed information on how it became part of the Itamaraty collection, but the historian and diplomat Guilherme Frazão Conduru, who directed the museum until 2019 — and whom I thank for the information — is of the view that it happened at the time when the Baron of Rio Branco was foreign minister, i.e., between 1902 and 1912.

[5] By *retratos de repartição* I mean the typical "noble hall" pictures of public institutions such as city halls and ministries, but also of large newspapers and other private institutions. In *Mocidade morta* (p. 198), Gonzaga-Duque uses the expression "retratos de comendador" [commander portraits] to describe the portraits that Agrário Miranda used to make a living.

1906 informed readers that Almeida and other Brazilians had been accepted into the French artists' salon in Paris, which would open in May. The painting: *A dama da rosa*.⁶ *A Gazeta de Notícias* (Sep. 20, 1906) reported a telegram from Paris: French newspapers, including *Le Temps*, criticized the quality of the salon but praised Belmiro de Almeida's painting. *A dama da rosa* was also very well received in Brazil and was bought for 7,000 milrêis to be shown in the Enba art gallery (cf. Reports to the Ministry of Justice, 1911, p. 121). It would be shown alongside *Amuada*, *Beijos* and the bust of the poet Gastão Braga at the 1906 General Exhibition.

During this period, in the second half of 1906, newspapers featured reports of public commissions. For Minas Gerais, there was *Bárbara Heliadora*, and for Rio de Janeiro, the *Caixa de Amortização*. The first resulted from Almeida's relations with the Minas Gerais state government in the late 1890s, and the second was a commission from the national government for the Central Bank building to be inaugurated in November 1906. During the presidency of Rodrigues Alves (1902-1906) and the mayoralty of Pereira Passos, Rio de Janeiro underwent major urban reforms, including the construction of the emblematic Avenida Central, the Caixa building and the Municipal Theater. The painting in honor of Bárbara Heliadora was unveiled in Rio de Janeiro in December 1906 and the order for the Caixa panels was apparently commissioned at the same time. In April 1907 the *Gazeta de Notícias* reported that, after a short stay on the Madeira Island, Belmiro de Almeida had rented a residence/studio in Paris to undertake the work, during his sixth trip. This was the artist's address in Paris for many decades: 7 Rue Bagneux (now 7 Rue Jean Ferrandi). The studio is located on a side street where there are several residences and artists' studios.

According to the *Gazeta de Notícias* (Dec. 1, 1908), the panel, a 72 m² triptych, named *O trabalho, o capital, o progresso material*, with each part representing "a busy port", "abundance" and "the working of the land that bears the golden fruits." A series with historical content and a symbolic key, demonstrating that this time the artist had chosen to situate himself in line with the expectations of the client with regard to the destination of the work. Executed in approximately one year, starting in May 1907, the triptych was exhibited at the salon in Paris in April of the following year. It was brought to Brazil and unveiled in September 1909, at the 10th General Exhibition of Fine Arts.⁷ The painting was purchased for 30,000 milrêis paid in three installments (cf. *Balanço da Receita e da Despesa da República*, 1907).

Since then, everything seems to indicate that Belmiro de Almeida had managed to establish a rhythm of commissions in line with his goals of living from his art between Brazil and Europe. He began to

[6] In a study on *Amuada*, Samuel M. Vieira (2014) made observations of interest on *A dama da rosa*: "Almeida's *dama* is a real, urban feminine type who had appeared in fashion magazines, cabarets and theatrical reviews." He also identifies her similarity with the Belgian actress Camille Clifford, who represented the very paradigm of contemporary women in fashion design and in art.

[7] There was an almost absolute silence in the press about the triptych. Reis Júnior (1984: 51) says nothing about it other than that it was destroyed "without leaving a trace."

practice other artistic genres in addition to painting and entered the field that belonged to the central figure of the arts in Rio de Janeiro, Rodolfo Bernardelli. After painting, in 1910, a portrait of Euclides da Cunha, he competed with Bernardelli and Modesto Brocos in the model contest to create a set of marble sculptures for the tomb of [former Brazilian President] Afonso Pena. Despite an appeal lodged by Bernardelli, the Interior Minister accepted the jury's decision and the contract was signed on February 2, 1911. In April, the artist embarked for Europe for his seventh sojourn; the sculptures were made in one year in Paris and shipped to Rio de Janeiro in May. Their placement in the cemetery was completed in July 1912.

Despite the absence of records in the press until mid-1914, everything indicates that Belmiro de Almeida stayed in Brazil after the delivery of the Afonso Pena marbles. In July 1914, the *Gazeta de Notícias* reported that the Municipal Council had authorized the mayor to acquire an artistic fountain made by him. This was the era of his most famous sculpture, the bronze that became known as *O Manequinho*, which provoked immediate controversy and various inquiries, including about its cost — 20,000 milréis as the artist would later reveal (*A Rua*, Nov. 10, 1915). Inspired by Jerome Duquesnoy's *Manneken Pis*, installed in Brussels circa 1618 and until today a symbol of that city, *O Manequinho* is, together with *Arrufos*, the artist's best-known work and the one with the most popular appeal. Installed in Praça Floriano Peixoto, in the center of Rio de Janeiro, the sculpture was surrounded by the Municipal Theater (1909) and the National Library (1910), in the most prominent *belle époque* site in the capital. There it stayed from 1914 to 1919, whereupon it was removed from the square by the decision of Mayor Paulo de Frontin for violating public decency. After much protest it was put back in place in 1926 under the administration of Alaor Prata, but this time on Avenida Venceslau Brás, in front of Botafogo football team headquarters, thus descending from the symbol of a city to that of a football team.

The following years feature few reports about Almeida. He was in Rio de Janeiro from 1915 to 1917 on account of having been appointed a member of the Higher Council of Fine Arts in 1915 and, that the same year, chaired the Steering Committee of the 22nd General Exhibition of Fine Arts. In 1916 he was once again admitted as an interim professor of life drawing at the Enba, which is of interest in view of subsequent events. This appointment appears to have been contested by other members of the academic staff, as the initial decision was not considered final and a tender was then opened to fill the post according to the formal rules. Others applied and a board was formed by professors, including Corrêa Lima and Morales de los Rios, who were not sympathetic to Almeida's candidacy. In the

final tests only Almeida and Fiuza Guimarães showed up and both were disqualified, as *O Paiz* reported in April, May and June of 1916. Feeling wronged, Almeida appealed to the Minister of Justice, and this was also published in the newspapers. A public debate ensued in which Morales de los Rios defended his decision and accused Almeida of not having performed well in the tests. The result was then confirmed by a ruling of the Minister of Justice.

It can be seen, therefore, that Belmiro de Almeida, an artist acclaimed by audiences and critics, was not a member of the dominant group at Enba, an institution that had twice rejected him when he was there as an interim professor. In 1893, when he was briefly at Enba, he had fallen out with Rodolpho Amoedo; he did so again in 1916 with Morales de los Rios. He had also stepped on Rodolpho Bernardelli's toes by competing with him in sculpture contests. Another consequence of this brouhaha was reflected in the competition for the sculpture works of the mausoleum of Pinheiro Machado. Almeida participated and justified his defeat by saying that some of the same adversaries who had eliminated him from Enba had been on the jury, namely Corrêa Lima and Araújo Viana, sculpture and architecture professors at Enba, respectively.

There are two theories about his failure to be hired as life drawing professor at Enba — and his related defeat in the contest to design the mausoleum of Pinheiro Machado. Either Almeida, then 58 years old and well known to all, did not have enough support to win the position at Enba, and had pre-empted matters by snapping up an opportunity that had presented itself at the meeting in which he was offered the post, or else he went against the school's approach as soon as he took on the post. The first seems the most likely. In any case, it seems viable to postulate that the episode was a kind of dispute between a sorcerer and some priests. Almeida, an outsider with magic gifts, always seemed to be on the lookout for opportunities to upset the applecart in the artistic milieu of Rio de Janeiro, where Enba occupied a central place.⁸

Another fact to be taken into account concerns the fact that, despite Almeida's great visibility, both in the Rio de Janeiro press and in the official media, the elite of Enba professors did not hesitate to block his entry into the institution. It may be that his very public visibility and acceptance are among the reasons for his disqualification. The same group did not hesitate to eliminate him from the competition to select an artist to design the mausoleum of Pinheiro Machado. Three reports in the *Revista da Semana*, between 1912 and 1915, covered the inauguration of the mausoleum of Afonso Pena in 1912, the unveiling of the *Manequinho* in Praça Floriano Peixoto in 1913 and the opening of the 12th Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1915. Each article featured Belmiro de

[8] The opposition between sorcerers and priests seems suggestive to me and makes a reference to Weber (2014: 69), which in the second chapter of *The Sociology of Religions* defines the opposing terms: "chamasse 'sacerdotes' aos funcionários de um *empreendimento* permanente, regularmente organizado, para exercer influência sobre os deuses, por oposição à intervenção individual dos feiteiros". As is well known, this opposition has been assimilated by Bourdieu in his studies of the artistic field (Bourdieu, 1999; 1968).

Almeida photographed side by side with the President of the Republic, Hermes da Fonseca, ministers of State and other important figures. This attests to Almeida's unequivocal prestige.

As if the two setbacks described above were not enough, Almeida also failed to win first place in another contest, this time in Curitiba, where he had hoped to erect a monument to the Baron of Rio Branco, deceased in 1912. This episode had no repercussions in the capital, but the Curitiba press made a big deal out of it. This was provoked by an open letter from Almeida, who accused the judging commission of being in collusion with Rodolpho Bernardelli, who won the competition (*A República* [Paraná], Sep. 16, 1912).

The reports from 1916 published in *O Paiz* are suggestive: on November 2, Almeida is identified at a humorist's party; on November 8 he is present at the *Salão dos Humoristas*. Belmiro de Almeida is, then, a humorist who makes tombs as well as large-scale paintings for the ornament of the State.

There is little news about his next steps after these setbacks, but it is known that, despite the war in Europe being at a crucial stage, with all its consequences for artistic life, Belmiro de Almeida returned to Paris in September 1917, where he remained for eight uninterrupted years, on his eighth and longest journey (*A Razão*, Sep. 26, 1917), a period in which there was little to be read about him in the Brazilian press. The silence was almost complete between 1917 and 1921, when he submitted a work for the Enba General Exhibition of Fine Arts and obtained the "great gold medal" for a painting that, despite the prize, obtained no critical recognition then or since. It is mentioned in light comments in the newspapers, which indicate that it was an encomium to Brazil's participation in the Versailles Conference of 1919. According to the *Jornal do Brasil* (Apr. 15, 1921), the painting represented the Palace of Versailles. *Ilustração Brasileira*, in a long article on the 1921 salon, went into detail about the persons represented in the work: Pandiá Calógeras, Raul Fernandes and Rodrigo Octavio, *Os plenipotenciários* [The Plenipotentiaries] being the title subsequently given to the painting — at that moment it was not yet defined.

Another piece of news from 1923, entitled "Brazilian Art in Paris" (*O Jornal*, Nov. 21, 1923), referred to a portrait of the Duke of Luynes painted by the artist, a painting that, before being handed over to the duke, was unveiled at the Salon of the Society of French Artists — proof that Belmiro de Almeida had managed to penetrate a distinct circle of clients from the former French nobility. There is no evidence, however, of any other orders from this circle. In any case, it is important to note that there is a contiguous relationship between the Duke of Luynes, the owner of the chateau of Dampierre and its gardens, and the village with its forest surroundings. From 1918 to 1925 Almeida

painted many pointillist landscapes, some of which came to Brazil and appear in books and collections (cf. Reis Júnior, 1984) as well as the many other works that currently circulate in the European art market.

His return to Brazil in August 1925 had been thoroughly planned. There had been talk of Almeida since his departure from Europe on board the steamer *Massilia*. In just a few days he started paying visits to newsrooms, notably *O Paiz*, which resulted in a statement about the artistic life of Paris featuring harsh words about futurism and cubism, both seen as great regressions. Later, he visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where, at the request of Félix Pacheco, the minister, he was tasked with painting the portrait of Admiral Cândido Guillobel, a great naval figure since the War of the Triple Alliance, a statesman and a recently deceased diplomat. Not long after he collected 41 volumes from customs, all tax free. Among these would certainly be the 185 works — including some marbles — that would form part of an individual exhibition in April of the following year.

Within the scope of painting for the ornament of the State, Belmiro de Almeida presented a large format painting entitled *Ato da demarcação do distrito da vila de Curitiba em 1755*. The details of this picture, which is now on display at the Palácio 29 de Março, the town hall of the city of Curitiba, are quite uncertain. Because Almeida had been in Europe for eight years and because there is no indication of previous relations with the political and cultural elites of Paraná, it is unlikely that the work had been commissioned. But it seems clear from the historical theme that it is in tune with a localist current known as the “*Movimento Paranista*” that was in vogue in the 1920s (Salturi, 2009).

During the period in question there are two noteworthy episodes that concern Almeida’s versatility and his oft-overlooked openness to exploring the most varied opportunities within the scope of the demands of Brazilian elites for symbolic goods. The first is quite unique: being in Brazil at the time of the election of Washington Luis, he planned to design a gold pen to be used at the inauguration, accompanied by a scroll illustrated with illuminations by the artist, a message and a list of the signatures of the leaders of the state of Mato Grosso in honor of the new president.⁹

The second episode constituted a kind of confirmation that the attempts of Bernardelli and the Enba professors to put a stop to Almeida’s attacks on the field of sculpture had been in vain. After winning the commission for the mausoleum of Afonso Pena, Almeida was blocked in other public competitions for projects in the same genre. Then a commission came from the private sector. He was invited to design the tomb of Irineu Marinho, a businessman who had already made a name for himself as the owner of the newspaper *A Noite*, and who founded another newspaper, *O Globo*, just before his death. Thereupon, Almei-

[9] The *Jornal do Brasil* (Aug. 8, 1926), under the title “An expression of thanks to Dr. Washington Luis,” makes it clear that this was an initiative of the “*Centro Matogrossense*,” whose members decided in the end to opt for Casa Rezende’s proposal for the “artistically decorated” pen.

da interrupted his commitments in Brazil and went to Europe again, on his ninth trip, to buy the marble and execute the work in Carrara. On September 3, 1927, *O Jornal* reported thus: “Paris. Coming from Carrara, where he recently finished his monument to the late Irineu Marinho, the painter and sculptor Belmiro de Almeida has returned to Rio de Janeiro. The monument to Irineu Marinho will be shipped from Genoa to Rio de Janeiro on the 12th.” Almeida, therefore, did not return to Brazil to install the sculpture.

Insofar as painting is concerned, the works returned with Almeida in 1925 were his last paintings of great importance and were exhibited in an individual show that opened in April 1926. Some were also exhibited in the General Exhibition of Fine Arts of the same year. If, as in 1921, the General Exhibition did not result in his winning any prize, Almeida did obtain pecuniary compensation: his *Nu de mulher*, which was said by the press to constitute “almost immoral realism” (*O Jornal*, Aug. 15, 1926), was approved for purchase for 10,000 mil-réis by Enba and can be seen today at the National Museum of Fine Arts. Almeida also brought back his portrait of Pereira Passos, painted many years before, the decorative friezes for the residence of the industrialist Antonio Ribeiro Seabra (cf. Reis Júnior, 1984: 62), who may well have been the artist’s most loyal customer¹⁰ and the landscapes he had painted in France, especially in the Dampierre region, in which he settled on the latest version of his technical and aesthetic experiments in divisionism, which were already present in his Italian period between 1888 and 1893.

At the same time, during the 1920s, and in a somewhat mixed-up way, Almeida was engaged in producing large format paintings for the ornamentation of the State (*Os plenipotenciários, O ato da demarcação da vila de Curitiba*), tomb sculptures (the Mausoleum of Irineu Marinho), small format experimental sculptures with sacred themes (Santa Maria), portraits for a diverse clientèle, from the decadent French nobility to the rising Rio bourgeoisie, as well as *retratos de repartição*, such as the one he produced for the Itamaraty Palace when he arrived from Paris, and even the pen and illumination project to honor the president-elect. In painting, from a technical and aesthetic point of view, he moved gallantly from landscapes inspired by the Italian divisionists or Seurat to naturalist nudes in the manner of Courbet. And he almost always made time for caricature in ephemeral newspapers in Rio de Janeiro or even in Paris, where he published in *Rire, Vie Parisienne* and *L’Assiette au Beurre*, and where it was said that his caricature was at its funniest and most pleasant (France-Brésil, 1904).

After leaving for Europe in 1927, Belmiro de Almeida returned to Brazil a few times for periods of uncertain duration. He arrived in Rio de Janeiro in May 1928 and was thus able to be present at the death of

[10] In addition to the friezes of 1925, there are two portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Seabra from 1897, the painting of Abigail Seabra at the age of 12 in a landscape in Teresópolis, from 1900, and the portrait of the boy Antonio Lartigau Seabra from 1903 (Reis Júnior, 1984).

his mother, aged 87, on June 4. In September he presented yet another unsuccessful proposal to a model contest organized by the *Associação Cearense de Imprensa* to design a statue of José de Alencar. His arrival date (May 11, 1928) is known but his departure date remains unclear. He returned in 1929, but this was only reported in the Curitiba press on the occasion of his presenting the canvas *Ato da demarcação do distrito da vila de Curitiba em 1755*. His visit to Curitiba was reported in the local newspapers and the canvas was exhibited at the town hall. His return is unlikely to have lasted more than a few months.

Between 1930 and June 5, 1935, when he died in Paris, there are scattered reports that indicate his presence in Rio de Janeiro, but it is not possible to know how long these sojourns were. Despite the paucity of available detail on the last phase of his comings and goings between Europe and Brazil, it is possible to infer that Almeida crossed the Atlantic toward Europe at least twelve times in his long career as an artist.

PEDDLER OR PART-TIME PUBLIC SERVANT

Unlike Pedro Américo, who sought to restrict himself to the high genres of great international painting, Belmiro de Almeida structured his artistic life between Brazil and Europe by taking every opportunity, even when these could be seen as contradictory from the aesthetic point of view or with regard to his image (which could never be confused with that of a peddler). In that same year of 1926, when Almeida was making his lightning visit to Brazil, Rodolpho Amoedo commented on his own life story in an interview with *O Jornal* (Jun. 20, 1926), and sought to distinguish himself from those who, being of the same generation, competed with him in the artistic sphere. Asked if he had made trips to various Brazilian states in search of commissions, he replied haughtily: "I don't peddle my art. I haven't left here and I have no plan to. [...] I never spent my time traveling around to hawk my wares, just as I never sought commissions through any connections." Amoedo's veiled criticism was aimed squarely at Antonio Parreiras, of whom he later mentions in the interview and who had gone through from state to state in search of commissions. There can be no doubt that he also saw Almeida as one such peddler, given that in June 1926 he was the most fashionable figure getting coverage in the Rio de Janeiro press. In so saying, Amoedo made the case for the nobility of artist untainted by money. That of an artist concerned with nothing but great art, which falls into their lap unpredictably.

Belmiro de Almeida also gave suggestive interviews while in Rio de Janeiro between 1925 and 1926, one to *O Paiz*, another to *Jornal do Brasil*. They are very good sources for an understanding of the art-

ist. The first places the artist in square opposition to the trends that shook the arts during the first decades of the 20th century — cubism and futurism in particular. In the words of the interviewer, Almeida declares himself to be

a traditionalist who preaches the consecrated canons of classical art and has nothing but brickbats to offer the futurists with their ultra-modernism. He claims not to understand them and that they lack any kind of discernible internal consistency. Wanting to be new, they reproduce the primitive, revisiting the initial stages of the birth of the artistic sense of man as he left the mouth of his cave. It is an anachronistic movement. (O Paiz, Sep. 9, 1925)¹¹

[11] The artist's words are not literally transcribed, but transliterated by the interviewer.

This is consistent with the fact that he graduated as an artist during a time of turbulence and that, while he may have taken on the anti-academic postures of the Italian divisionists and the impressionists, he did so in an eclectic way by making “contradictory borrowings”, to quote Baudelaire’s criticism of the 1846 Salon. For Baudelaire, the problem of “borrowings” appears at the moment when great schools of art are coming to their end and are followed by a rising tide of individualism, this being the case at the time and increasingly so in the second half of the 19th century. While in the great tradition there were students united by common principles, obeying the rule of powerful leaders, in contemporary times each artist abandons himself to himself.

But outside this family circle stands a whole crowd of mediocrities, apes of different races and cross-breeds, a loosely-knit nation of mongrels, who move daily from one country to another, carrying away with them from each those customs that suit them, and try to build up a character for themselves by a system of contradictory borrowings.

From which it follows that there are those who “change over from white to black in a single day: yesterday they were *chic* colourists, colourists without passion or originality, tomorrow they will be sacrilegious imitators of M. Ingres, without finding more taste or faith there” (Baudelaire, 1981: 102-3). This seems to me to be Almeida’s path.

From a technical and aesthetic point of view, Almeida was able to promote both a chromatic reduction, in the manner of Puvis de Chavannes, without assuming his melancholy and ineffable character. (Puvis de Chavannes was one of the most influential artists of the last decades of the 19th century.) Almeida tends towards laughter and anecdote, which would be unthinkable in Puvis, whose painting hovers as if in eternity. Almeida also made use in many of his works of a chromatic acceleration that reflects naturalist tendencies, for example, in

Velho artista (c. 1897 or 98) or *Nu feminino* (1924 or 1925, also known as *Manuela*), which reference naturalism and ultimately Courbet. What Almeida borrowed were, above all, thematic, aesthetic or technical fragments of currents that had preceded his formative years, trends that were already stabilized in his early years, when he realized that pictures like *Le Retour du bal* (1879) by Henri Gervex (1852-1929) — a student of Cabanel — could be successful in Brazil; and this led him to *Arrufos* and *A má notícia*. Just as Italian and French divisionism was an established trend, or the pointillism of Seurat and the variations thereof, or the technique of small strokes with short brushes, typical of Henri Martin (1860-1943)¹² in landscape and genre scenes. In around 1890 Almeida began to use techniques of this nature, first in Italy, then in France. With regard to the futurist and cubist avant-garde of the 20th century, Almeida had already settled into art, even if he had to go to some extremes to maintain his routine of living as an artist between Brazil and Europe. In any case, he did not lack curiosity and restlessness, as revealed by some experiments of uncertain origin that are situated on the threshold of the transition between human representation and the geometric shapes that marked the art of the European avant-garde and led to Braque, Picasso and many others in the first decades of the new century. He could dabble, perhaps making a joke with cubism, like when he painted *Maternidade em círculos* (1908) and *Mulher em círculos* (1927).

In a second interview, this time for the *Jornal do Brasil* (Jul. 7, 1926), Almeida talks less about art and more about his life as an artist. The interviewer, Gastão Penalva, gives an initial summary of the conversation and then transcribes the final dialog:

[...] when Almeida gets bored with the monotony of life in Rio, he moves to Europe and goes to Paris, where he settles in the same apartment on the Rue de Baigneux that he has occupied for over twenty years. There he works, produces and exhibits. One day he misses his friends and things from Brazil: he takes a steamer and soon he's back on a Brazilian street spreading his air of a bon vivant in the circles that esteem and admire his usual intangible good humor. It really is worth being an artist in Brazil — when you can live in Europe. [emphasis added]

“Will you be staying here?”

“No, I go back to Europe on the 12th. I live well there: I am known, I work, I promenade, all in the most complete independence.”

“Do you have a specific plan? What do you intend to do?”

“Work.”

“As an artist, do you have any dreams?”

“As an artist? I would very much like to be taken on as an auxiliary to the consulate in Paris.”

[12] The technique of pointillism in the style of Henri Martin was known to the Brazilian critics of the time. Mariano Filho talks about it when commenting in “Impressions of the Salon” (*O Jornal*, Aug. 26, 1925) on the marine scenes of Navarro da Costa, an adept of “pointillism”. The primitive, pasty technique, largely spattered, did not seem to be agile enough for the great light effects targeted.” Almeida’s relationship with pointillism was identified by FR (*O Paiz*, Apr. 18, 1926) in the article “Exposição Belmiro de Almeida: duas expressões de um temperamento”: “There can be no other explanation for this vivid reflection of the Impressionists on their technique, primarily in the divisionism of Seurat and the final phase of Henri Martin.”

In awe, I bade farewell to the dear author of O Manequinho. When one hears lines like that from the likes of Belmiro de Almeida, one cannot but deeply regret the sad luck of national art.

And congratulate the consulate.

It is not possible to know with certainty what Gastão Penalva meant by his final comment. Congratulate the consulate for not hiring Almeida, thus confirming the sad luck of national art? In any case, one notes the artist's desire to be a public servant... in Paris. We have already seen that Pedro Américo, when representing the state of Paraíba in the National Congress in the 1892 legislature, was involved (without much explicit reason other than the *national interest*) in the debate on the reform of Brazil's delegations in Italy, in which he demanded the opening of a consulate in Milan. I interpret this as a desire on the part of the artist to occupy a post, at the moment when the chances of obtaining orders in Brazil for paintings for the ornament of the State were exhausted. Here Almeida explicitly evokes the same desire without transfiguring the intention.¹³ His intention appears transfigured when he justifies his visits to Brazil out of a longing to see friends and in answer to the question about what he would do on his return to Europe, when he replies curtly: *work*. Yes, work, but on a commission from the Marinho family for yet another tomb monument. In other words, Almeida returned to Brazil in search of commissions. If he were an employee of the consulate he wouldn't have financial worries.

Both Pedro Américo and Belmiro de Almeida spent decades traveling back and forth across the Atlantic, to maintain their residences in Florence and Paris and make a living from art between the two worlds. Although Almeida was considered by critics to be the very opposite of Pedro Américo, to which hasty readings of the novel *Mocidade morta* contributed substantially, Almeida's career follows in the footsteps of Américo's. Just as one career was drawing to a close, the other was starting out on the hustle and bustle of travel. Belmiro de Almeida began his travels in 1884, at the age of 26. From then until his death in Paris, in 1935, he spent approximately 26 years in Europe.

THE PROPHET AND THE WIZARD — A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

Mocidade morta (1899) is seen by critics and literary historians as a *roman à clef* (Eulálio, 1995)¹⁴ that revolves around three characters: Agrário de Miranda, Camilo Prado and Telésforo de Andrade: respectively, Belmiro de Almeida, Gonzaga-Duque and Pedro Américo. Despite playing a secondary role in the narrative, Telésforo is a key figure, a kind of cameo in the structure that organizes the book. Everything revolves around a group of friends — *Os Insubmissos* — almost all

[13] It is not unlikely that Almeida had in mind the case of Navarro da Costa (1883-1931), painter and diplomat, who traveled around Europe by way of the Brazilian legations in Naples, Lisbon and Munich, where he also completed his training. His landscapes were well received at the 1925 Salon, at which Almeida also presented works made in Europe. Cf. *Dicionário de artistas do Brasil*. Available at: www.brasilartescienclopedias.com.br/nacional/navarro_da_costa.htm. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2020

[14] Eulálio bases this on an article by Múcio Leão, published in his column "Authors and Books" in *A Manhã* on Nov. 15, 1942, in which the critic writes an article entitled "News about Gonzaga-Duque" mentioning names that appear to have been transfigured — "they almost all have some symbolic value" — among the dramatis personae of *Mocidade morta*.

artists, led by the critic Camilo Prado. He is the one full of ideas and projects for starting a rebellion against the Academy and the dominant standards of the artistic milieu of Rio de Janeiro. Between the Academy and *Os Insubmissos* there is Telésforo. He had escaped the mediocrity of the local art world and produced great works in Paris that were brought to Brazil and received by a fervent audience of authorities and others who were ignorant of the artistic transformations shaking the Old World academic environment. A confraternity of rebels, *Os Insubmissos* had not produced anything of relevance that would serve as a reference for any confrontation. That is to say, they were all outsiders in painting, sculpture, criticism, journalism; and although they reproduced the patterns of the French artistic bohemian world, they had barely ever left Rio de Janeiro.

Prestigious imitation is a useful notion for interpreting the book. Agrário was the Brazilian Manet; Camilo, the literate companion of artists, à la Flaubert or Zola; and as for Sabino Gomes, “before he started producing any work, he wanted to change his name,” to something like Courbet or Delacroix, because his own seemed vulgar. And when the group recognized itself as such, they chose the word “zut” as their watchword. It was a slang term daily used by Henriette, a young French seamstress at the Notre Dame de Paris store on the Rua do Ouvidor, a simple, poor woman who was desired by everyone. In the book, the *zut* is treated as an imprecation of unknown meaning, but they take to it anyway. It was any old *merde*.¹⁵

Camilo, who originally intended to write a book, ends up producing an article that he hopes will give rise to events involving paintings and exhibitions, which would provide visibility to *Os Insubmissos* in their fight against academia. But the paintings, whose themes are animatedly discussed, do not make it beyond the sketch stage, or the idea stage. Agrário, the most talented of all, seems excitable, but displays an erratic character, almost never ends an argument and, every now and then, disappears for many days in entanglements of the heart, both before and after seducing Henriette. Camilo’s actions aimed at attracting supporters among well-known artists, such as the sculptor Cesário Rios or the printmaker and typographer Antônio Forjaz, all fail due to their prudent skepticism, whether in terms of the medium’s ability to assimilate new currents, or the capacity of *Os Insubmissos*.

In fact, *Os Insubmissos*’ great feat was to create confusion with irony and sarcasm at the unveiling of Telésforo’s *Rendição de Uruguaiana*, a huge canvas painted in Paris. This gained them some notoriety, but also subtle counter-attacks in support of Telésforo in the newspapers where he was well regarded.

Although Telésforo is the favorite target of the young people’s bitterness, there is a lot of ambiguity among them about the significance

[15] *Zut* is interjection of spite, of anger, of resentment. It can be used like *merde*, as an exclamation to call upon when something goes wrong; *zutiste* was the term applied to those in the Charles Cros circle, to which Rimbaud and Verlaine were close (*Le Petit Robert*, 1967).

of the acclaimed artist. Divergent positions can be seen. These separate such characters as Camilo Prado and Artur de Almeida, a character who initially has a discreet presence, but grows in importance at decisive moments in the novel. In a heated debate before the exhibition, Camilo, exasperated, describes Telésforo as an epidemic, a bacillus; in addition to numerous advertisements in the newspapers about the unveiling of the *Rendição de Uruguaiana*, the whole city awaits him: “The neighbors, the tavern clerk, the butcher boy, the cook and the peddlers.” But at that moment the narrator *whispers*: “Until now *Telésforo had deserved their respect, he was the Messiah who would reach the city gates with the green branch of reform and the sound of the hallelujahs of the believers*” (p. 136, emphasis added),¹⁶ and thereupon Artur de Almeida enters the scene, opposes Camilo with a sharp comment, in which he encapsulates, on the one hand, the rustic character of Brazilian society and, on the other, its link with Western civilization, which spreads luxury and spiritual refinement around the world:

What is certain is that we were waiting for someone and asking for something. And Telésforo appeared! And he appeared at a time that chance made happy. There were no fearful competitors ahead of him, it is he alone, he is the only one! There are certain times that produce caricatures of geniuses; in the history of the arts such cases are not uncommon. That is his merit. In itself, his effort was small, everything else resulted from favorable circumstances — the lack of serious competition, imperial protection, the apathy of the milieu... even the need to make resonate the faded patriotic fiber, competing for the prestige of the monarchy, when republican aspirations enter the realm of realities... Consider these things well and you will see that the truth is with me. (p. 139, emphasis added)

Unlike Camilo, Artur is more analytical. While Camilo’s head is in Paris and his desire is to try to replicate in Brazil the artistic figuration that resulted from the revolt of Manet and the impressionists, Arthur recognizes the importance of Telésforo, taking as a rule the medium itself and the circumstances that produced it: it has merit, but it is the caricature of genius.

The debate over Telésforo later reappears, setting Camilo against Antônio Forjaz, who had been the salvation of many “unprotected and needy artists” — including Agrário — who were given work preparing prints. In the face of the jeers of *Os Insubmissos*, Forjaz says that Telésforo is a winner. To which Camilo replies proudly:

Telésforo may be a winner in life but he’ll never be a victorious artist. And if you disagree, please tell me what originality is developed and presented in his work and which school does he lead. Everything that we see in this

[16] The campaign of praise for Pedro Américo on the occasion of the exhibition in 1870 of *A batalha do Campo Grande*, included a biography written by Guimarães Júnior, and press coverage describing him as “one of the glories of today’s youth” and continuing: “The national character has set out on its march with Pedro Américo as its leader and Guimarães Júnior as its herald” (*A Reforma*, Sep. 13, 1870). There are many interventions with prophetic pretensions, but it is important to mention his articles published in the *Correio Mercantil* in 1864 under the title “Philosophical Considerations on the Fine Arts among the Ancients” (Melo, 2006), and his speeches and projects as a deputy, at the dawn of the Republic in 1892.

picture, everything, without the exception of a single stroke, has already been done, has already been reproduced, is no more than a compound of the usual, accepted rules. All the illustrious Telésforo had to do was to put together what he found at hand and imitate others, to whom he directed not the merest compliment. (p. 159, emphasis added)

These arguments gave rise to no discord, just a comment from Forjaz: “But, Mr. Camilo, by that doctrine those who have the right to glory are rare” (p. 160).

What matters in the course of the novel is that *Os Insubmissos* do not follow Camilo’s leadership and do not engage in his projects. The movement wilts without producing results, each following a different path, some more pragmatic, others with more tragic fates, such as alcoholism, madness and suicide, or, in Camilo’s case, tuberculosis. Only Agrário remains in the artistic world on an ascending trajectory, finally making a trip to Paris. Before leaving, he jilts Henriette with the intention of passing her to a friend of his; but she, tired of dealing with the hesitant and introverted Camilo, moves to Pernambuco with Mr. Heraclitus, another guest at the boarding house where part of the plot unfolds and who is a conventional type and very sure of himself. And so it was that Camilo ends up with no France, no Henriette and, above all, no artistic revolution such as he had planned for Brazil, in which he and his friends would each play a role.

And what happened to Agrário? “He had definitely settled in Paris, after wandering around Lisbon and Madrid. According to reports, he attended the *atelier* Gérôme, but wanted another teacher and by the end of the year he would move on to Cormon or Rochegrosse” (p. 322). The three French masters are well chosen and are perfect representatives of the opposites of the artists whose works Camilo spoke of with enthusiasm, namely “Manet, Pissarro and Caillebotte. The names of Claude Monet and Mme. Morizot were invoked as shining between circles of fire, resistant to the unconditional, isolated from the cheers of the crowd” (p. 49).

To keep his *secret*, Gonzaga-Duque chose Gérôme as Agrário’s first reference in Paris, instead of Jules Lefebvre and Tony Robert-Fleury, who were Almeida’s professors at the Académie Julian along with Rodolphe Julian, the founder of the academy, all of whom were part of a universe whose greatest exponents were Gérôme, Cabanel and Cogniet.

As the narrator says, Agrário won in the end “not because of the resistance of his merit but because of the persistence of his interest” (p. 339); because he belonged “to the class of those who are born molded to live, of those who know no obstacles. It is from this fortunate medium that the Telésforos of all times arise, where officialism finds its

[17] Alexandre Eulálio (1995), in an accurate interpretation, rescues the book's reputation and is largely concerned with its deeper themes of "inevitable isolation of the introspective who seeks without concession the 'ideal'" (p. 278). He treats the artistic quarrels of *Os Insubmissos* as a scenario — the opposite of my intention.

[18] Translated into English by Matthew Richmond.

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substance, its regularity, its establishment and its sanction — and it is where its resistance begins" (p. 341).

Whether *Mocidade morta* is a good novel is a question to be answered by the critics,¹⁷ but, written as it was, in 1899, it is one of the most lucid sources on Brazilian art. Despite his fictional nature, if Agrário is indeed Almeida, Gonzaga-Duque spoke of him with greater freedom and propriety than he had in *Arte brasileira*, written in the year following the fictional events of *Mocidade morta*, which occur between 1886 and 1887 in Rio de Janeiro. The years of *Arrufos*.

Almeida did not make his first trip to Paris to confirm his nickname of "the indigenous Manet" (an moniker also applied to Agrário) but to bring the artist Henri Gervex to Brazil. Gervex fitted in easily in the milieu of Rio de Janeiro and the government palace in Belo Horizonte, where *Amá notícia*, the second borrowing from Gerveux, found its final resting place. Agrário set out on a career that converged with that of Pedro Américo (Telésforo) not as a supposed prophet of a new era but as a skilled sorcerer, with surprising gifts, who left behind a bewildered priestly caste at the National School of Fine Arts. Moving with ease through the offices of ministers, mayors, governors and presidents, newsrooms and salons, Almeida circumvented all established precedents, peddling his art where necessary, learning to deal with client preferences without worrying about the relevance of a commission nor with the self-proclaimed specializations of his competitors; he published caricatures in the newspapers while sculpting solemn or entertaining marble monuments; he moved from one genre to the next and treated art without the reverence of Pedro Américo, that herald of great schools, at a time when great schools were already *passé*.

In so doing, Belmiro de Almeida lived by his art between Brazil and Europe. What he recorded in the annals of the "Nabuco Disease" is what mattered most.¹⁸

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