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Traveling as a source of inspiration for artistic practice

Viajar como fuente de inspiración para la práctica artística

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Resumen:

Este artículo analiza el impacto de los viajes en la vida académica y artística de pintores y escultores portugueses graduados en la Escuela de Bellas Artes de Oporto, entre los años 1960 y 1970, un período especialmente notable en Portugal por el escenario político y social que se vivió y que resultó en la Revolución del 25 de abril de 1974. Los resultados presentados se obtuvieron a través de entrevistas etnográficas, la mayoría de ellas realizadas en los estudios de los artistas. Esto permitió la observación directa de artefactos y materiales utilizados en sus prácticas artísticas, algunos de ellos obtenidos durante viajes que hicieron, la observación de obras de arte por estos

artistas y, en ciertos casos, una mejor percepción de cómo se reflejaron las viajes en su enfoque artístico.

Palabras clave: Escuela de Bellas Artes de Oporto, artistas portugueses, generación de plata, viajes, transferencia de sabiduría.

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the impact of traveling on the academic and artistic life of Portuguese painters and sculptors graduated at the School of Fine Arts of Porto, between the 1960s and 1970s, a period especially notable in Portugal for the political and social scenario that was lived and that resulted in the Revolution of 25 April in 1974. The results presented were obtained through ethnographic interviews, most of them carried out in the artists' own studios. This allowed the direct observation of artifacts and materials used in their artistic practices, some of them obtained while traveling, the observation of artworks by these authors and, in certain cases, a better perception of how these journeys were reflected in their artistic approach.

Keywords: School of Fine Arts of Porto, Portuguese artists, silver generation, wisdom transfer.



1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the impact of traveling on the academic and artistic life of Portuguese artists graduated at the School of Fine Arts of Porto (ESBAP), between the 1960s and 1970s, a period pre- and post-political, cultural and social Revolution of April 25, 1974. The period pre-Revolution was characterized by the dictatorship regime and the closure of the country, with foreign influences scarce, including in the artistic scene. Access to artistic materials was very limited and the few accessible resources were of poor quality. Hence, traveling abroad, though infrequent, was pivotal in the academic and professional career of Portuguese artists.

The results were obtained within the project *Wisdom Transfer: towards the scientific inscription of individual legacies in contexts of retirement from higher education and research*, which stems from the evidence that there is insufficient inscription, use of individual knowledge and experience of retired art and design artists, academics and researchers. Thus, it is aimed the legitimation of the knowledge resulting from their testimonies as well as its application in pedagogical contexts.

2. Methodology

The contributions of this paper were obtained through ethnographic interviews carried out to Portuguese artists who attended ESBAP, during the 1960s and 1970s. Although most of these artists are retired, they maintain their artistic activity. Thus, whenever possible, interviews were done in their studios, allowing direct observation of artifacts used in their artistic practice (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), including those obtained while traveling (Fig. 1). Between December 2018 and June 2019, 30 interviews were carried out to former students of ESBAP divided mostly across the disciplines of sculpting and

painting, alongside the current director of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (FBAUP, former ESBAP), a person of interest since she has done several studies about Portuguese artists graduated at this school. For the interviews a script with open-ended questions was used (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2008). All interviews were filmed and photographed allowing further scrutiny of the collected observations (Tinkler, 2013). For this purpose, participants were asked to authorize the collection of images and sound, through a consent form (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015).

3. Results

In a pre-revolutionary period, access to art resources was limited, especially foreign material. Cultural institutions of the city were few, only with Soares dos Reis Museum presenting quality artwork, and in other regions of the country, museums with original artworks by renowned international artists were scarce. In 1969, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum was inaugurated, becoming a center of attraction for artists eager to see the contemporary artworks. Given the scarcity of spaces like this, this museum took a leading role in the art scene. Hence, it was common for ESBAP students and teachers to take a bus to Lisbon to visit the Gulbenkian exhibitions. These visits were viewed with great enthusiasm, with one of the informants confessing that a journey to Lisbon to visit Gulbenkian was “of huge importance” for the learning of arts.



Figure 1. C. Carreiro studio, Porto, 2019, Photography Cláudia Raquel Lima.

Art books sold in bookstores were few and expensive, therefore inaccessible to most students and the Public Library of Porto was not oriented to arts. Therefore, the ESBAP library was “a gateway to the world”. Nevertheless, it was also described as having few books, mostly on History of Art and Anatomy, and as an old fashioned library failing contemporary art books. The artworks presented in their books were mainly black and

white reproductions of poor quality, and even those exceptionally reproduced in color were far below the original works.

Foreign influences during this period were thus practically nil. Scarce access to foreign materials was generally achieved through friends or family members traveling abroad and bringing books or magazines as they returned, and through slides shown by teachers in class. One of the interviewees recalls that many art students gathered at the train stations waiting for news brought by those who had the opportunity to travel abroad. And another one recalls “seeing eagerly the slide passages” shown by teachers with artworks they had never seen before. Although the quality of these slides fell far short of the original artwork, moments like this or those when teachers shared their art books were viewed with great enthusiasm by students.

In a context of scarce resources on art, journeys to European cities were essential in the artistic life of these students allowing direct contact with artworks of great masters. For years, the preferred destination was Paris. In the late 1960s, many students and artists from Porto began to prefer London, and in the 1970s these journeys began to include other destinations such as Amsterdam. The costs, which at the time turned out to be expensive, were supported by funds obtained through auctions that students did with their work.

In these cities where they spent entire days in exhibitions, students acquired a different knowledge and perception of art. Some of the works they saw, they already knew from books but, as they reported, the difference to the original “turned out to be abysmal”. One informant recalls that one of the artists they admired was Bonnard, with many art students trying to reproduce his technique. The fact that knowledge of this artist's work was made through books with poor quality reproductions, led to a misinterpretation of his work, and the results of these artistic experiments were often incipient. She added that only when she saw an original of Bonnard in one of these journeys did she actually realize his greatness and ability for color.

M. Bronze recalls the strong emotions she felt when she first saw the original works by masters of art in London, stressing a work by Van Gogh, a painter whom she didn't particularly admired, but whose chromatic work - “the acidity of that yellow” - deeply impressed her. And I. Cabral remembers similar emotions and the surprise she had when she realized the differences between original artworks she saw abroad and the reproductions she knew from books. She was amazed by Pointillists works since she had no idea what the technique was like and surprised to see a Mondrian for the first time since she thought the lines of his work were very straight and that was not so.

Travels around Europe continued to be done by artists in a post academic phase, many of which possible by the Gulbenkian Scholarships, and proving to be pivotal in the artistic life of the artists interviewed. G. Morais considers that her journey “to face great art” began in Paris when she obtained a Gulbenkian Scholarship. She returned to Paris several times to visit galleries for direct contact with original artworks. She also recalls a month's stay in London with painter Paula Rego, with whom she drew and debated aspects of the art “from morning to night” and with whom she considers to have learned a lot.

For Z. de Carvalho, the post-graduation held in London at Saint Martin's School of Fine Arts, through a Gulbenkian Scholarship, was fundamental in his artistic learning, both for the school's available equipment, for its own structure and pedagogy, and for the sharing of knowledge between students and teachers from different cultures. In London, Z. de Carvalho socialized and worked with avant-garde artists, including Philip King, Anthony Caro, William Tucker and David Annesley.

S. Centeno, who also benefited from a Gulbenkian Scholarship, refers to the importance of his journeys abroad, recognizing his artistic approach has changed since his time at ESBAP, partly due to the influence of traveling, namely the time he lived in Germany, being the characteristics of German School visible in his more abstract artwork.

Unlike many of his contemporary artists, J. Pinheiro had a Gulbenkian Scholarship, not for further study of art, but for the enrichment of his pedagogical activity in the field of arts. By then he was an ESBAP Assistant and he aimed a broader knowledge of arts education visiting those he considered the best European schools of art. For a year, he visited schools in Madrid, Paris, Rome, Milan, Naples and London. The environment of these schools was very different from that of ESBAP. According to him, the Royal College, in London, stood out particularly for not being so academic. And in Naples, he recalls hearing for the first time the concept of semiotics, an area that would become especially important in the teaching of arts in Portugal. These journeys truly learning experiences leading him to review his perception as a teacher of Fine Arts, including his methodology.

E. Leite, also devoted to teaching the arts recalls several travels as true learning experiences. In particular, she recalls a journey to Yugoslavia for an international congress attended by Bruno Munari, an author whom she admired. There she had the opportunity to meet Munari, share working materials carried out with students and establish a professional and friendly relationship, which lasted for decades and has reverted in a continuous sharing of knowledge (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Letters by B. Munari sent to E. Leite, Porto, 2019, Photography Cláudia Raquel Lima.

If in a pre-revolution period, and during the training of these artists, the travels abroad were mostly confined to European cities, aiming direct contact with original artworks of the great masters, in a post-revolution period and at a time when these artists were already trained and working, these travels tend to increase and their perimeter tends to be extended more often to other continents. C. Carreiro mentions journeys to India or Macau from where he brought objects alluding to these cultures and images that are now part of the archives he creates for his artistic practice (Fig. 3). And Z. de Carvalho mentions several trips to Macau, where he developed the monumental sculpture “The Eastern Arch”.

In a pedagogical context, quite different from that experienced in the 1960s and 1970s, J. Paiva, currently professor at FBAUP, former ESBAP, built a project of intercultural relations, working with Portuguese-speaking countries such as Cape Verde, Brazil or Mozambique. This project, initially individual and currently with the participation of his students, allows them to visit places outside their comfort zone and learn from the cultures they meet *in loco*. According to him (personal communication, December 19, 2018) this started from the assumption that “each of us can be a knowledge authority”; we acquire from life experiences a knowledge and interpretation of reality and J. Paiva questions whether this completes us or is part of our incompleteness. If we recognize that what we know is little, then what we need is not to spread our knowledge but to seek what we do not know. This leads to the question of the transmission of knowledge, with J. Paiva advocating that his attitude is not to pass on his knowledge, but to build together the knowledge he does not have. In these cultures, the contrasts are huge regarding what he and his students know, and so there is an effort to look for what they do not understand. So, the Program he currently directs at FBAUP consists of “a collective sharing of the demand for this knowledge”.



Figure 3. Cultural objects brought from Asia by C. Carreiro, Porto, 2019, Photography Cláudia Raquel Lima

If traveling abroad was (and still is) for many artists pivotal in their artistic life, traveling to Portuguese rural locations have also proved to be key moments in providing more isolated spaces conducive to self-reflection and a more intense artistic activity. This was particularly true for artists from less urbanized locations. G. Morais recalls the return to her native village Vieiro, in Trás-os-Montes, where she practiced an intense artistic activity. E. Leite refers journeys to Trás-os-Montes, where she used to spend holidays with her father, recognizing how the people of this region, the houses, the kitchens with clay pots and the dark surroundings were sources of inspiration for the artist whose first paintings, all on Trás-os-Montes, were “very pasty and dark”. And A. Alves refers to the importance of travel to Alentejo, where he was born, sometimes denounced in his own approach to painting, where the characteristic yellowish tones of Alentejo landscapes and the strong blues of the sky often stand out. In his studio we can find small statues alluding to the culture of the region mixed with pieces from other regions (Fig. 4). The connection with this culture becomes more evident in the studio working moments where sounds of traditional Alentejo songs can be frequently listen.

4. Conclusion

Results showed traveling had a strong impact in the artistic learning and approach of Portuguese artists. Reports highlighted the importance of direct contact with artworks, which completely altered students' perceptions, changes in style, ways of painting, and changes in the methodological approach to arts education. All the interviewed artists pointed out travel as a determining factor in their artistic pathways. This was especially notable in the 1960's and 1970's due to the dictatorial regime that resulted in the closure of the country to foreign influences. Findings also showed that traveling to less urbanized places of the country, generally associated with the artist's childhood, were fundamental and had an impact namely in their artistic approach and motives portrayed in their artworks.



Figure 4. Statues from Alentejo, A. Alves studio, Matosinhos, 2018, Photography Cláudia Raquel Lima

Appendices

List of interviewees:

Name	Course	Start	End	Date of the interview
Ana Campos	Communication Design/Graphic Arts	1976	1981	27th June 2019
António Mendanha	Painting	1979	1986	10th January 2019
António Quadros Ferreira	Painting	1966	1971	12th April 2019
Armando Alves	Painting	1957	1962	5th December 2018
Carlos Barreira	Sculpture	1968	1973	8th January 2019
Carlos Carreiro	Painting	1967	1972	16th January 2019
Carlos Marques	Sculpture	1967	1975	11th December 2018
Elvira Leite	Painting	1957	1962	15th January 2019
Graça Morais	Painting	1966	1971	31st January 2019
Haydée De=Francesco	Sculpture	1956	1961	21st January 2019
Helena Abreu e Lima	Painting	1963	1968	23rd January 2019
Helena Almeida Santos	Painting	1961	1966	7th January 2019
Isabel Cabral	Painting	1967	1973	28th December 2019
João Machado	Sculpture	1963	1968	1st March 2019
João Nunes	Communication Design/Graphic Arts	1976	1981	26th February 2019
Jorge Pinheiro	Painting	1955	1963	16th April 2019
José Paiva	Painting	1968	1986	19th December 2019
Leonilde Santos	Painting	1981	1986	14th December 2019
Lima de Carvalho	Painting	1967	1972	31st January 2019
Lúcia Matos	-	-	-	24th January 2019
Manuela Bronze	Painting	1975	1981	4th January 2019
Maria José Aguiar	Painting	1967	1972	14th January 2019
Maria José Valente	Painting	1968	1977	22nd January 2019
Mário Américo	Painting	1962	1972	25th January 2019
Paula Soares	Painting	1973	1978	8th April 2019
Pedro Rocha	Painting	1967	1972	30th January 2019
Purificação Fontes	Sculpture	1964	1972	22th January 2019
Rodrigo Cabral	Painting	1968	1973	28th December 2019
Sobral Centeno	Painting	1969	1978	20th December 2019
Zulmiro de Carvalho	Sculpture	1963	1968	7th January 2019

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