

# **FIRE, CORRUPTION AND THE POLITICAL NEGLECT DESTROYING PART OF BRAZILIAN ART AND HISTORY: THE GENERAL SITUATION AND THE SPECIFIC CASE OF RODOLPHO AMOÊDO'S DECORATIVE PAINTING**

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## **Abstract**

*At the beginning of XX century some Brazilian cities tried to renovate their architecture by emulating a Parisian atmosphere and that included the painting decoration for public buildings. Rodolpho Amoêdo was one of the famous Brazilian artists of that time commissioned to decorate several public buildings. However now, around 100 years later, the institutions that houses these paintings have a lack of information about them and some of these paintings are suffering because of bad preservation. This situation might be explaining in part by the political and economic crises Brazil have been facing since 2015. This paper will highlight this connection.*

**Keywords:** Brazilian art, Rodolpho Amoêdo, Art history, Decorative painting.

## **1. Introduction:**

This is a study about the actual situation of the decorative work the Brazilian painter Rodolpho Amoêdo has done for some public buildings on several Brazilian states. Analyzing the conservation state of these paintings, historical documents about them and the posture of the institutions where we find them we can realize a connection with Brazilian politics: Some paintings need restoration and some need more studies about them; Brazil faces a several political crises with strong economic effects and the authorities doesn't act as if culture is a relevant matter. The government funding for culture has been reduced to something close to zero and some catastrophic events are happening.

## **2. Rodolpho Amoêdo:**

Just recently some serious studies have been accomplished at the pos-graduation program of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro about the biography of Rodolpho Amoêdo (see figure 1). Amoêdo was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1857. In 1874 he entered the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. Conquered in 1878 a prize to complete his studies in Paris. There he studied at the Julian Academy and the École des Beaux-Arts where he took classes with Alexandre Cabanel, Paul Baudry and Puvis de Chavannes. He participated in the Paris Salon of 1882, 1883 and 1884.



Figure 1: Rodolpho Amoêdo, self-portrait, oil on card board, 62,6 x 41,5 cm, Museu Histórico Nacional, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil

In 1888, when returning to Brazil was named honorary professor of Painting at the Brazilian Imperial Academy of Fine Arts and by 1934 was retired at the same institution then called Brazilian National Academy of Fine Arts.

The artist died in Rio de Janeiro on May 31, 1941. In 1942 his widow Adelaide Amoêdo donates part of his work to the Academy Museum and receives in return a pension for life from the federal government.

Rodolpho Amoêdo played an important role in Brazilian art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both as an artist and as a professor of several generations of famous artists at the teaching institution of greater relevance in the national scene in that period, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, then capital of the Brazilian Republic.

### **3. Decorative works:**

As a definition for the concept of Decorative Art applicable to the works that we study, we consider a work of art is decorative when functionally decorates certain environment in harmony with its architecture and its theme relates to the functionality of the building that houses it. This thematic relationship is clear to the public, for example, when Rodolpho Amoêdo paints justice at the hall of the Supreme Court and presented important moments in the history of the city of Rio de Janeiro at the hall of the city councilmen.

This concept for decorative art was exposed in the academic art history field since the mid-nineteenth century. The harmony with architecture and the choice of a theme related to the functionality of the environment were the major concerns of the artist who proposed to perform a decorative work. Decorative art played an important role in Brazilian art in the early twentieth century when decorative paintings in public buildings exposed the works of

artists who in many cases were hired by politicians or authorities for being renowned and in many cases professors of the National Academy as Elyseu Visconti, Henrique Bernardelli and Rodolpho Amoêdo himself.

From the 1920s, with all the peculiarities of Brazilian modernism's self-assertion, the term “academic”, which could be applied to all the artists we have just listed, began to be used by avant-garde artists with a pejorative stamp. Even more ignored was the decorative production of these artists since they generally applied the precepts established by the French academy of the nineteenth century, where the Brazilian artists who produced these paintings had studied. Only as we approach the transition from the XX to the XXI century these paintings received renewed attention like the one we are now providing.

We will analyze the decorative art of Rodolpho Amoêdo by addressing two main problems: (1) the lack of attention paid by theand institutions that houses them with respect to their historical data and (2) physical deterioration, a kind of problem we consider even more serious than the first. To exemplify the first problem we will use the two panels for the Brazilian National Library. For the second problem we will use the images that adorn the gallery of the Itamaraty Palace, the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### 3.1 At the National Library:

Approaching the two Amoêdo's paintings for the National Library we face a very complicated situation. These were placed at the Library Main Reading Room (see figure 2), on the third floor of the building. This was the reading space for visitors, but over time this became the institution's Room of Rare Books. This happened, according to the institution, ‘due to the increase in the collection of the building’ that started to use this space, previously designed for public use of books consultation, now as a ‘Safe Room’, so named by the institution itself. The room now has its interior surrounded by trellises (see figure 3) that hide of the public the walls and consequently the paintings of Amoêdo and Modesto Brocos, another artist who also painted two other panels for the room. Only the institution's staff and people with special permissions can access the murals. In practice we have two large paintings made by an important artist that are hidden from the public, locked in a space that we can call a closet and the institution has no plans of changing this situation. Clearly the responsible for the National Library does not understand the value of these works of art.



Figure 2: Main reading room of the National Library, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil, 1911, National Library files.



Figure 3: Room of Rare Books. Picture available at <<http://www.bn.br/visiteespacossala-obras-raras>>. Accessed in: August 17, 2018.

In 1909, a year before the inauguration of the building, panels and statues were commissioned by director Manoel Cícero Peregrino da Silva to decorate some of the library's environments. In 1910, the building (see figure 4) was inaugurated in an eclectic style, combining mainly neoclassical and Art Nouveau elements.



Figure 4: National Library, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil, 1909. National Library files.

Regarding the commission cited, made by director Manoel Cícero Peregrino da Silva, we can read in the annals of the Library volume 33 of 1911 the director words:

“These decorations are painted on canvas that was glued to the wall. I have chosen the subjects that seemed to me appropriate and to artists of the most competent I entrusted their interpretation.” (Annaes da Bibliotheca, 1911, page 389).

From this statement some important information can be apprehended: the technique used and the considerations made on the themes and on the artists. The technique used to fix the painting to the wall was *marouflage*, when the canvas is fixed instead of hanging at the wall on a frame. It makes sense since decorative art is conceived for a specific environment. On the themes, Peregrino da Silva says he chose those what "seemed adequate." When expressing himself on the designation of the painters to develop these themes and to carry out the works of art, we find the most interesting words of Peregrino da Silva: "to artists of the most competent I entrusted their interpretation." We realize that these artists were given the task of producing the works related to these subjects, but the interpretation of these would be carried out according to the painters' own options because they are "artists of the most competent".

Let us now pay specific attention to the works "The Memory" (see figure 5) and "The Reflection" (see figure 6) of Rodolpho Amoêdo. As we enter the room the "Memory" is on the wall in front of us and the "Reflection" on the wall to our left. The two paintings contain very similar characteristics. They are both women who appear to be in a mature youth, something close to their thirties, and the figures occupy about sixty percent of the distance between the base and the top of the canvas. The two caucasian ones with robes that immediately locate them in classic antiquity in landscapes that emulate the Mediterranean coast.





Figures 5 and 6: Rodolpho Amoêdo, *Memory* (on the left), *Reflection* (on the right), oil on canvas, 344 x 104 cm each.

When we look at the two panels we can see in each of their horizontal spaces narrowly the whole body of the protagonists, no arm, hand or foot hidden by a branch, stone or the body itself. Something recurring in the work of Amoêdo that valued much the classes of alive model in the formation of the artist. The time of the day seems to be the same as the sky has the same orange twilight. It would be the dawn or dusk of the day. This illumination contributes to a palette of colors that would not call undue attention in an environment of concentration that is a reading room.

### 3.2 At the Itamaraty Palace:

This was the first decorative work done by Rodolpho Amoêdo in 1906. It is the decoration of the gallery (see figure 7) that gives access to the second floor of the Itamaraty palace, built in the center of the city of Rio de Janeiro in the 1850s as a private residence of the Itamaraty family, and which at the end of that century became the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The decoration theme addresses the history of Brazil by presenting in different parts dates of historical value for the nation from colonial times to the then recent years of the Republic. His aesthetic, on the other hand, is not related to the theme but to a decorative style that goes back to ancient Rome and which for centuries was used from the Renaissance to the XX century, elaborated and academized by Europe and later also by the American academies of art. We talk here of the Amoêdo's choice of the grotesque. The gallery is located under the glass and metal dome of the palace and indirectly receives natural light. The gallery was the place where staff and guests passed by to the various rooms of the building. Since then, to the present, the building has held government functions.



Figure 7: Rodolpho Amoêdo, panels on a gallery at the Itamaraty Palace, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in order to change the character of the building from a residential to a public building, Baron of Rio Branco, occupying the post of chancellor, acted to improve the palace for its new function. One of his actions in this sense was the commissioning of the decoration of various environments of the building, including this gallery.

There are twelve panels, three on each wall, but all of them show great harmony in the form of a single painting. The painting simulates reliefs in stucco. Highlighted in each panel are the dates chosen by the Baron of Rio Branco written in Roman numerals. The clear shade of the painting confers a discreet and elegant character to the environment and the work of the artist. Of all the Amoedo's decorative works the one in the Palace of the Itamaraty is the one in worse state of conservation. There are four walls decorated by the painter, and in one of them the decoration is largely destroyed (see figure 8). According to diplomat and researcher Guilherme Conduru the deterioration occurred "due to infiltrations through the roof".



Figure 8: Rodolpho Amoêdo, detail of a panel on a gallery at the Itamaraty Palace, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil.

#### 4. Conclusion:

The public buildings built in Rio de Janeiro and some other Brazilian state capitals at the beginning of the XX century included, as part of their architectural designs spaces reserved for decorative paintings in the shape of French public buildings and their 19th century decorations. Here we examined the specific cases of Amoêdo's paintings at the National Library and at the Itamaraty Palace both owned by the federal government and both at the city of Rio de Janeiro. But another examples of public buildings that houses Rodolpho Amoêdo decorative paintings at the same problematic situation are: the City Council (the Rio de Janeiro municipal government), the former Supreme Court hall (the Brazilian federal government), the Municipal Theatre (the Rio de Janeiro state government), the Mariano Procópio museum (the Juiz de Fora, municipal government), the Paulista Museum (the São Paulo state government) and the José de Alencar Theatre (the Ceará state government).

Concluding our work we deal with the connection of the public power that manages the institutions where the paintings are and the state of care of these, both in the conservation and in the preservation of information about them.

All the buildings we mentioned function directly or indirectly as museums. The Pedro Ernesto palace for example functions as a city council for the city of Rio de Janeiro, but receives daily tourists so that they can see the various works of art and the architecture of the building. The Municipal Theater and the José de Alencar Theater as well function as theaters but also receive daily tourists so that they can visit the dependencies of the buildings and the

works of art found in them. At the Itamaraty Palace the Amoêdo's paintings are in the part of the building that is called Historical Museum.

But all these cases, and the other institutions that we mentioned, suffer from problems with the physical preservation of the painting or the preservation of data about them. Why does it happen? We will state what we perceive: This is not because of the lack of interest of the professionals who work there, but because the difficult working conditions they have and the lack of incentive e interest of the different spheres of government that manage these institutions from above. All these buildings are public, managed either by the federal government, or the state government or the municipal government. The servers we met work with seriousness and deep interest, but without material and financial resources. Brazil is currently experiencing a political and economic crisis in all spheres of government. The last elected president was impeached, unemployment reaches 13% of the population and the state of Rio de Janeiro, for example, has not been paying the salary of its current employees. The incentive to research in recent years has declined drastically. High level master's or Ph.D. students from public universities used to receive about \$ 500 a month to keep on researching without a need of a secondary occupation, but the number of scholarships has been cut each year. When the public administration is in a financial bankruptcy, art is one of the sectors that suffer the most cuts of funds.

#### **4.1 Federal government:**

Lula, the Brazilian president from 2002 to 2010 is in jail for passive corruption and money laundering. Dilma Rousseff, his successor, was impeached by “delaying the transfer of funds to public and private banks with the intention of alleviating the fiscal situation of the government in a given period”. Michel Temer, her successor has 3% approval of the Brazilian population and was recorded dealing about bribes with a businessman at his official residence. In 2017 the federal government has cut 43% of Culture Ministry's budget, so currently 0.012% of the Brazilian government's budget is destined for culture.

Because of this cut not only the historical buildings we mentioned are in deterioration and danger, but some catastrophes are happening. On September 2th, 2018, Brazil's National Museum at the city of Rio de Janeiro was destroyed by fire. The Federal University of Rio de Janeiro which manages the museum stated the amount the government made available to the needs of the museum was not enough to cover the institution's expenses, including fire prevention, and the federal government had been informed of this. Before the fire the biggest Brazilian Museum had a huge collection of natural history and works of art. It included mummies, one of the oldest examples of human remains in the Americas, dinosaur fossils, paintings e so much more.

On October 28, 2018, Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected the new president of Brazil. During his campaign Bolsonaro has never presented a proposal for the administration of the cultural aspects of his future government. Bolsonaro is a former congress man who has always shown admiration for the dictatorial government that governed Brazil, which was established with a military coup in 1964 and lasted until 1985. This military dictatorship exiled, tortured and murdered many artists, journalists and teachers without a fair trial. And they have never deny it. They just attest that these people were Communists and were against the country.

#### **4.2 Government of Rio de Janeiro:**

Sérgio Cabral, governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro from 2007 to 2014 is arrested for passive corruption, money laundering and evasion of foreign exchange. Only one of the charges is that he would have diverted R\$ 224 million reais (US\$ 57 million dollars) from the government. This level of corruption has left the state at a calamitous level. Servers were left without payment or had late payments.



On November 29, 2018, Luiz Fernando Pezão, the current governor of Rio de Janeiro was arrested on corruption charges. Pezão was the vice governor of Sérgio Cabral and is being accused by the Brazilian federal police of receiving 6.5 million dollars from 2007 to 2015 in kickbacks. I will point out a case in which we visualize a possible relationship with the Amoêdo panels and the posture of the current group of politicians who have ruled the state of Rio de Janeiro regarding art. It is the regrettable behavior of Luiz Fernando Pezão, facing decorative art and public institutions. It is because of the action taken by him in order to reduce the crisis that hurts the state. The politician seems to believe that the reason for the crisis is not the corruption of his political party and others parties. An article (See figure 9) of the journalist Ancelmo Gois explains:

... The painting "The death of Estácio de Sá", by the painter Antônio Parreiras (1860-1937), was removed on Friday morning from Pezão's office and taken to the Guanabara Palace's Noble Hall. The governor had long been convinced that the picture was unlucky. In fact, he, shortly after getting rid of the canvas, said he had obtained funds to pay the salary of the functionalism for that month. "Now, winds of change will come," says Pezão (GOIS, 2015)



Figure 9: The death of Estácio de Sá by Antônio Parreiras been removed from governor office. Available in: <<http://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/ancelmo/post/supersticao-de-peza.html?loginPiano=true>>. Accessed in August 17, 2018.

It does not seem to be the case that we may expect some practical help from current rulers to end up corruption or value art patrimony, but we believe that the academic community and the public employees who works with culture must continue their efforts in this direction so that we can increasingly elucidate a significant part of the history of Brazilian art. The political speech that art is not a priority when we face problems regarding health or criminality doesn't see the way education and culture might straight the path of the young ones now involved with crime. We don't have the expertise or space enough to talk about all politicians' faults in every area. This paper is a way to point out a few examples of their hypocrisy, so we might try to change our reality.

## 5. Brief biography:

Leandro Brito de Mattos is a professor and researcher at the IFRR (Federal Institute of Roraima) in Boa Vista – RR, Brazil since 2014. He holds a Master Degree in Art History and a degree in Visual Arts both by the UFRJ (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) and has developed studies about the Brazilian painting from the the end of the XIX century and the early decades of the XX century.

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