

The French Artistic Mission and the Academy of Fine Arts

Sonia Gomes Pereira

The coming of the Prince Regent Dom João VI and the Portuguese court in 1808 promoted a deep change in the political, economical and cultural areas in Brazil. The opening of the colony's ports to free trade with friendly nations effectively brought to an end the colonial pact of monopoly with the metropolis and, thereafter, Brazil was admitted to the expansion circuit of the European capitalism and exposed to the direct influence of other countries apart from Portugal.

With a view to adapting Rio de Janeiro city to the status of the capital of the Portuguese Empire, Dom João VI carried out a number of measures – including the establishing of an Academy of Fine Arts - to provide Brazil with an updated profile, laying the foundation of institutions that could foster the economic infrastructure necessary for a capitalist regime - and promoting the essential cultural grounds for creating a local elite, in conformity with the parameters of the Enlightenment.

Since the end of the 18th century, still during the colonial period, it was possible to observe a change in artistic taste, revealing the exhaustion of the Baroque-Rococo cycle and a renewed interest in the classical forms, of which the work of Master Valentim is an example. But, surely, this taste shifting process was radicalized with the hiring of the so called French Artistic Mission in 1816. It was composed of a group of French artists - among which were the architect Grandjean de Montigny and the painters Nicolau Taunay and Jean Baptiste Debret - led by Joachim Lebreton, author of the first project for a School of Arts and Crafts.

Ten years later, in 1826, when the Academy was definitely established, the model was converted into an Academy of Fine Arts dedicated to the teaching of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting.

The Academy initiated the artistic teaching in formal models, opposed to the typical empirical apprenticeship employed in the previous centuries. Keeping the structure of the academic system, it was delivering a teaching founded on the basic precepts of classicism: an understanding of art as representation of the ideal perfection; the appreciation of noble themes, especially those in exemplary character, like historical painting; the value of the drawing as the basic structuring of the composition; the preference for some techniques, like oil painting, or for some materials like marble and bronze in sculpture.

And so, the works of the French masters can be appreciated. The building of the Academy, itself a work by Grandjean de Montigny, follows to the letter the standards of symmetry and harmony peculiar to the neoclassical architecture. Today, having

been demolished, there just remains its magnificent porch which was transferred to a secluded area at the Botanical Garden in Rio de Janeiro city.

As to painting, the historical theme was regarded as the most noble one in the academic circles, having received an outstanding welcome, as is the case of the painting “The Disembarking of Princess Leopoldine”. But other themes were also explored by the French artists who were focused on representing landscapes - as depicted on the works of Nicolau Taunay - or displaying the local human types - as shown on countless drawings and watercolors Debret prepared for his book “A Picturesque and Historic Trip to Brazil”¹.

Certainly, these directives displeased the colonial tradition restricted to the religious theme and to the predominance of using certain materials like wood - an attitude that would be criticized by the historiography of the Brazilian art connected with Modernism. But it is undeniable that the Academy expanded the horizons of the plastic arts in the country, creating a new statute for the artist, by providing him with an improved technical education and increasing the thematic repertoire.

Having been established and supported by the State, the Academy subordinated the artistic production to the official guidance, a fact that, surely, limited the development of the artists, and was a cause for further criticism by admirers of Modernism. However, in these times due to the absence of an art market, the State patronage had a crucial importance for its development.

¹ This book was originally published in France under the title “Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil.”