

# THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS IN RIO DE JANEIRO AND ITS ROLE ON THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN BRAZIL

Sonia Gomes Pereira

## THE CREATION OF THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS IN RIO DE JANEIRO AND THE BRAZILIAN ART OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The transfer of the Portuguese court in 1808 to Rio de Janeiro has caused a huge transformation in the political scene in Brazil. Several institutions appeared in order to adjust the country to its new role as the capital of the Portuguese empire. One of these institutions was the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, created in 1816 and finally opened in 1826.

The formal artistic teaching under the academic rules changed the Brazilian art. An intense laicization took place: civil buildings, urban improvements, sculptured monuments and various genres of paintings, as portrait and history painting.<sup>1</sup>

In all these artistic achievements, especially after the independence in 1822, the Academy played the leading role at the political project of the nation construction and of its cultural identity.

The narrative of past history and the idealization of the native Indians were fundamental in this state strategy – topics that have been well studied by the present historiography of Brazilian art.<sup>2</sup>

But the discovery of the landscape and the representation of a multiracial population were also important for the construction of the national identity.

In this paper, I shall examine all these topics as connected by a more extended cultural program, to which the Academy was sensible, at least at their annual exhibitions. All of them have

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to point out that our colonial art was mostly religious. Both statuary and carved sculptures were much more used at the churches, as well as tiles and ceiling paintings. Other forms of art, as portraits, are less common and even very rare, like landscapes.

<sup>2</sup> Sonia GOMES PEREIRA. *Arte brasileira no século XIX*. Belo Horizonte 2008.

the same foundation on some social ideas which were formulated at that time in Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

## 1-THE NARRATIVE OF THE PAST AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL HISTORY

There is no doubt that nation is not something natural, but it has to be constructed as a deliberated project. This is even truer about the American colonies that made their independence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the organization of the state, it came to the moment of the making of the nation, which is a mental construction.

So the idea of Brazil is an engineering product of its political and intellectual elites. It is the Romantic generation of the 1830's that has an outstanding importance in this process: a generation formed by politicians, historians and writers, like Domingos José Gonçalves de Magalhães, Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen, Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre, Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and José de Alencar.<sup>4</sup>

Actually, after the independence in 1822, the construction of a national identity became a state concern. And, in this effort to establish the references for the Brazilian nation, history has a central role. The past, reconstructed in an intellectual manner, is to become an important source of legitimating the new regime.<sup>5</sup>

A good example of this official strategy is the creation of the Historical and Geographical Institute of Rio de Janeiro in 1838,

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<sup>3</sup> I have been working a lot on the Academy studies for a long time and nowadays I believe that it is very important to understand the performance of the Academy inside a more general cultural program which was encouraged by the imperial government. From this point of view, I could understand more clearly some of our Academy's limitations. For instance, the Academy did not offer the course of engraving. This task was played by the Casa da Moeda on one hand, and by the lithography agencies, which received the official license for establishing. At a time when funds were limited, that was a clever policy of sharing different objectives among various institutions.

<sup>4</sup> Bernardo RICUPERO. *O Romantismo e a idéia de nação no Brasil (1830-1870)*. São Paulo 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The historiography of the 60's and the 70's in Brazil was well marked by the polarization between left and right positions. In this point of view, this strategy of a national construction was seen as a clear manipulation of the local elites in order to disguise their effective intention of maintaining the status quo. After the 80's a less radical criticism had begun, recognizing the coexistence of different strands of social thought at that time, even inside the intellectual elites. Thus, it is now clearer for us that some of these thinkers were sincerely interested in the promotion of a more just society for Brazil.

with the explicit purpose of fixing the frame of a national history.<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, in 1840, the IHGB had organized a concourse for a plan about the writing of the ancient and modern history of Brazil. The winner was the naturalist Karl von Martius, with whom the IHGB was academically connected. Basically, the idea was to make a selection of the structures and the events of the past, choosing the more convenient ones to build a narrative that gives significance to the national community.<sup>7</sup>

Another institution important for the accomplishment of this official program was the Academy of Fine Arts of Rio de Janeiro which was created by some French artists contracted by the Portuguese court in 1816.

Let us examine some works made by masters and pupils of the Academy concerning the historical paintings and the official portraits.

The French Jean-Baptiste Debret has made some of the most preeminent paintings at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as "The arrival of Princess Leopoldina" in 1817. He was the first teacher of painting in the Academy and formed various Brazilian artists during his stay in Brazil until 1831, such as Simplício Rodrigues de Sá, who made, among others, the portrait of the first Emperor, D. Pedro I.

But it was during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the historical painting came to its peak, especially with the painters Vitor Meireles and Pedro Américo.

Here, it is important to point out a significant change in the interpretation of the past. The first Romantic generation, like Gonçalves de Magalhães, assumed a hostile attitude towards the colonial time and the Portuguese heritage. But the later Romantics, like Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen, looked at it in a more positive way. Against the proposal of becoming the

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<sup>6</sup> Manoel Luís SALGADO GUIMARÃES. "Nação e civilização nos trópicos: o Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro e o projeto de uma história nacional". In: Estudos Históricos, n. 1, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> This von Martius' memoir has been published in Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, 1839-1870, p. 279.

“southern Yankees”, they defended the cultural autonomy of the region and interpreted the past as a natural stage of an evolutive process which was to be surpassed by the present generations.

From this point of view, we can understand well the connection between this second phase of the Romanticism and the great historical panels of the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century. The “Battle of Guararapes” (FIG. 1), held during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was settled as the first moment of the nationality, because it was considered the first time in which the three races had fought together against the Dutch invaders.

The success of this cultural policy can be measured by the popular response to these works, not only at that time, but also afterwards, like the permanence of these images at the didactic books of national history.

## 2) THE IDEALIZATION OF THE NATIVE INDIANS: THE LITERATURE AND THE “INDIANISMO”

Another important feature of the project of a cultural identity for Brazil was the idealization of the native Indians.

We know that this movement, called “indianismo”, had begun in literature. At the beginning, the presence of the Indians did not have an immediate connection with nationalism. The two first poems written at the 18<sup>th</sup> century – “Uruguai” in 1769 by José Basílio da Gama, and “Caramuru” in 1781 by José de Santa Rita Durão – celebrated the Portuguese conquest. Yet, especially on Durão’s poem, it is possible to recognize already the character of Rousseau’s beau sauvage.

But later the Romantic approach added another meaning to the “indianismo”: the myth of the origins. Conceiving the national history as an evolutive process, it was important to emphasize the starting point. Even accepting the Portuguese heritage as an important income for the national culture, it was much more powerful in symbolic terms to place the origin on the natives of the land.

Thus, we have various works on this theme. Some of them represent historical episodes, where the alliance with the

Indians was decisive for the Portuguese victory, as "The Last Tamoio", by Rodolfo Amoedo. But most of the images treat literary themes, like "Moema" by Vitor Meireles, where the Indians are presented in a much idealized way. In other cases, the native Indian, as the origin of the Brazilian population before the arrival of the Portuguese, is raised to the status of the nation's symbol, as we see in "Allegory of the Brazilian Empire", by Francisco Chaves Pinheiro (FIG. 2).

It is not difficult to understand the adoption of the native Indians by the local Romanticism. First of all, the Brazilian Indians, known at that time, were mostly dominated and so offered no risk.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, it represented the origins of the nation, placing it before the arrival of the Portuguese. Third, they were seemed to be in complete harmony with nature – a local version of the myth of the beau sauvage, so dear to the Romantics.

### 3) THE DISCOVERY OF THE LANDSCAPE AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TERRITORY

The traditional historiography of Brazilian art claims that the Academy did not care for the landscape. It is true that, being a public school primarily dedicated to the construction of an official art, the Academy was more concerned with portraits and historical themes.

But there is another branch of the Academy performance which is formed by landscapes. In this group, it can be seen various types of landscapes. They are produced both by artists connected to the Academy or by outsiders, in several techniques besides painting, such as lithography and photography. It is important to say that the annual exposition of the Academy accepted all these techniques as well as outside artists.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to say that the occupation of the Brazilian territory at that time was much concentrated along the littoral and the inland more close to it, like the province of Minas Geraes for example. But a great part of the territory was still barely occupied, as the region of Amazonas and the extreme western frontiers. This explains the interest of so many expeditions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many of these lands there were isolated Indian groups, who were to be contacted only at the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before examining these images, it is necessary to point out the importance of nature and territory for the construction of the national identity.

During the colonial time, the word Brazil was used generally to signify the group of Portuguese colonies in America. The colonizers, however, did not recognize themselves as Brazilians: they were identified by their several provinces, as, "baianos", "pernambucanos", "mineiros" etc.

This fragmentary character is seized by von Martius: "only now they begin to feel like an unity". But what could be seen as a fault, it is transformed by Martius in a quality:

"It is exactly in the great extension of the country, in the variety of its products, as well as in the fact that its inhabitants have the same historical background and the same hopes at a satisfactory future, that is founded the power and the greatness of the country".

<sup>9</sup>

So, it is clear that the idea of the territory had an important role in the creation of the national symbology. The knowledge of this territory and the registration of its landscapes are main tasks that were taken, on one hand, by naturalists; on the other hand, by artists.

Let us examine some of these landscapes. There is a group formed by urban views. They have an obvious intention of making a visual document. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great circulation of albums with this kind of landscapes, as well as the massive presence of these images in newspapers and reviews. There are countless views of Rio de Janeiro, in several techniques: painting, lithography and photography. There also views of other cities, like Ouro Preto ("The view of the old city of Vila Rica, now Ouro Preto", in a colored lithography by Pallière); or Recife (a photographic view during the Geological Commission). (FIG. 3).

But we can see also another group of landscapes that is dedicated to the nature itself. The "discovery" of Brazilian nature and its diversity became an important element of local

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<sup>9</sup> RICUPERO, op.cit., p. 126.

Romanticism. The waterfall of Tijuca in Rio de Janeiro was one of the most popular images: it appears in a painting by Felix-Emile Taunay, again in a painting by his pupil Augusto Rodrigues Duarte, and a photograph by Georges Leuzinger. The travels exploring the vast territory made possible the knowledge of important landscapes, as the Paulo Afonso Falls, photographed by Marc Ferrez. (FIG. 4)

Here it is necessary to say that several photographers and lithographers working at that time were foreigners settled in the country, but some of them were Brazilians, as Marc Ferrez.

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At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, another conception of landscape became usual: it is dedicated to the nature itself, but it does not seem to have the intention of making a visual statement of the Brazilian nature. It is a more personal and poetic approach to specific places. This is also a signal of Romanticism, but in a more subjective manner. A good example is the so-called Grupo Grimm, formed by the German painter Georg Grimm and his pupils, who practiced the plein air landscape, as can be seen in "The View of Cavalão", by Georg Grimm; "The Boa Viagem Beach", by Hipolito Caron; and "São Roque Beach at Paquetá" by Castagneto).

#### 4) THE REPRESENTATION OF A MULTIRACIAL POPULATION AND THE THEORY OF THE "MISTIÇAGEM"

If the discovery of the Brazilian nature is a welcome element for the local Romanticism, the question of the Brazilian people is not so simple.

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<sup>10</sup> There are several foreign artists in Brazil during the 19th century. Some of them stayed only for a few years, like the English Maria Graham (1821-1823 and 1824-1825), the Austrian Thomas Ender (1817-1818) and the German Joahann-Moritz Rugendas (1821-1825). The Swiss Johann Jacob Steinmann came to Rio de Janeiro in 1825, contracted to work at the Arquivo Militar, and soon opened a lithographic workshop, until his return to Europe in 1833. But other foreigners had settled in Brazil: as the French Hercule Florence, who arrived in 1824, came to live in Campinas, where he died in 1879; the Swiss Georges Leuzinger arrived at Rio de Janeiro in 1835, and in 1840 established the Casa Leuzinger for lithographic and photographic services: even after his death in 1892, the workshop was managed by his family for several generations. Some of these artists were also involved in private didactic activities, as the German Emil Bauch, who had opened in 1859 at Rio de Janeiro an atelier for teaching landscape, associated with the French Henri-Nicolas Vinet. The photographer Marc Ferrez was Brazilian: he was born at Rio de Janeiro in 1843, son of the sculptor Zéphérin Ferrez (member of the group which founded the Academy of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro), and had a long activity as photographer until his death in 1923.

The traditional historiography of Brazilian art has been very critical about the small appearance of the common people in the so-called fine arts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is well-known that Mário de Andrade, an outstanding critic of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claimed that the Brazilian art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had treated the history and the nature of Brazil, but did not have the courage to represent the Brazilian man. This, in his opinion, should be the task of Modernism, especially regarding the Brazilian worker.<sup>11</sup>

This general concept of the Brazilian art historiography is based, in my opinion, on the exclusive study of painting and sculpture, forgetting the rest of the visual culture of the period, formed by lithography and photography as well. I think that the study of the following groups of images shows that, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new thought about the Brazilian people was being constructed, at least in some circles of intellectuals and artists.<sup>12</sup>

But before examining the images, let us examine the difficult problem of interpreting a multiracial population, especially at that time.

It is very interesting to see the way Debret saw the Brazilian population. In his book "Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil", published in Paris between 1834 and 1839, he made a general classification of the Brazilian population according to its civilization degree:

1- Portugêses da Europa, portugêses legítimos ou filhos do Reino.

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<sup>11</sup> Mário de ANDRADE. O Movimento Modernista. Rio de Janeiro, 1942.

<sup>12</sup> I have to be very careful dealing with this subject. I don't want to deny the hegemonic mentality during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Brazil – and even later on – about the superiority of the white civilization and the strength of the racial ideas. What is important for me is to escape from a Manichaean position and understand that the cultural background of the period was much more complex, with various strands of thought with subtle or huge differences. I do believe that some intellectuals from this time were sincerely concerned about the comprehension and the promotion of a better future for the country. To give some examples, I can mention José de Alencar and Joaquim Nabuco (although they disagree even publicly on the newspapers!). I strongly agree with the historian Leonardo Ricupero about the social ideas of the Brazilian Romanticism: "Although the black slave generally stay out of the romantic "mestiçagem" and the Indians play the role of object submitted to the Europeans, rather than having their own being, we can not deny that it is very original the solution proposed by the Brazilian writers that the dominant models of the European civilization were not adequate to Brazil". RICUPERO, op. cit. p. XXXII.



- 2- Português nascido no Brasil, de ascendência mais ou menos longínqua, brasileiro.
- 3- Mulato, mestiço de branco com negra.
- 4- Mameluco, mestiço das raças branca e índia.
- 5- Índio puro, habitante primitivo; mulher, china.
- 6- Índio civilizado, caboclo, índio manso.
- 7- Índio selvagem, no estado primitivo, gentil tapuia, bugre.
- 8- Negro de África, negro de nação; moleque, negrinho.
- 9- Negro nascido no Brasil, crioulo.
- 10- Bode, mestiço de negro com mulato; cabra, a mulher.
- 11- Curiboca, mestiço da raça negra com índio.”<sup>13</sup>

In a very logical manner for the time, Debret analyzed the Brazilian population according to the concepts of civilization and barbarity and the hierarchy of the races.

But it is important to mention that since the very beginning it came out another way of facing the racial problem: the idea of the inevitability and even the positivity of the “mestiçagem”, as it was exposed in Jean-Ferdinand Denis’ book published in 1837.<sup>14</sup>

Martius also believed that, in order to write the history of Brazil, one must be aware of the elements that work for the human development and he recognized that in Brazil these elements were of a different kind. But exactly here there occurs our singularity: for the formation of the man there was a convergence of three races. The great originality of Martius was the recognition of the importance of the three races as an historical factor for the formation of the Brazilian nationality.

The writer José de Alencar says that the great Brazilian character is the fact that “various races, since the Saxonian to the African” had made “in this exuberant soil the amalgam of blood, traditions and languages”.<sup>15</sup>

So, beginning with Denis and Martius and developed by the Brazilian romantics, the theory of the “mestiçagem” was already present at the 19<sup>th</sup> century: they proposed the “mestiçagem” as the foundation of a new civilization at the

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Baptiste DEBRET. Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil. Paris, 1834-1838, vol. II, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Ferdinand Denis. Scènes de la nature sous les tropiques et de leur influence sur la poésie. Paris, 1824.

<sup>15</sup> José de ALENCAR. “Pós-escrito de Iracema”. In: Obra Completa. Rio de Janeiro, 1960, v. III, p.260.

tropics. This is already an important line of interpretation of Brazil, that begins with the Romanticism, passing through the Evolutionism and the Positivism, crossing the Modernism, like Gilberto Freyre, and comes to nowadays: the thought that Brazil is essentially a “mestiço” country.<sup>16</sup>

Now let us examine some images about the Brazilian population. Besides drawings and paintings, there are countless scenes with black slaves, made mostly by lithographers and photographers, some of them supported by the second Emperor, Pedro II.<sup>17</sup>

Jean-Baptiste Debret was one of the first painters to represent the slaves, especially in urban scenes, like “Black woman selling cajus”. The whole series of watercolours with these themes were his personal journey registration, with no connection with his role as an official painter of the court. But later on, at the 1830’s, he published the already mentioned book with these illustrations.

The interest of Debret at these popular scenes and the day-to-day activities of the city is clearly an historical one, especially among the travelers. He wanted to register costumes of a strange country and society.

Almost the same thing appeared in other images of black slaves in urban scenes, as “The Market of the bay of Mineiros” by Johann-Moritz Rugendas. All the descriptions of Rio de Janeiro during the 19<sup>th</sup> century present the public spaces as crowded, noisy and dirty. Their use of an informal trade was usual for the slaves, especially the so-called “escravos de ganho”. These scenes may have seemed exotic especially for Europeans.

But there is another kind of images, made especially by photographers, which represents different aspects of Brazilian life at that time.

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<sup>16</sup> RICUPERO, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> This is another point that I have to be very careful. At a first glance, it seems that the Brazilian artists at the Academy were much concerned about more conservative themes, in contrast with the foreigner artists, especially lithographers and photographers, who were much interested in more progressive subjects. I think that, once more, the explanation can be the division of work and the specialized dominance of techniques, as I have mentioned at note 3. If we look at the problem from another point of view, i.e. the taste of the public, we can see that both productions were very appreciated by public during the annual exhibitions of the Academy. The second one may be even more known, because of its circulation in newspapers, magazines and albums.

Some of them present to us black and “mestiço” people in the universe of both rural as “Encaissage et pesage du sucre”, by Benoist or “Départ pout la cueillette du café” by Marc Ferrez (FIG. 5).

But they present also some individualization of this anonymous people at portraits, such as “A Negra” and “Indios Umuauá do Amazonas”, by Albert Frisch and “Índio do Mato Grosso”, by Marc Ferrez. (FIG. 6).

In these cases, the travels across the territory and the interest of a visual document are the obvious intention, although the presence of a representative code is taken from the painting, as noticed in the portraits.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great change especially in painting. The old historical themes, treated in a rhetoric manner, lost a great deal of its importance. And a huge interest for the everyday life turned out to be more attractive in a society in a quick process of modernization.

The favorite themes are connected with the middle class. But there is also a new interest for the rural stories, as, for instance, in “Recado Difícil” (Difficult Message”) by Almeida Júnior. This change is a very important signal of the growing interest for the inland and the rural man. And the documentation of the poor population acquired a more narrative character. They are indeed incorporated to the process of narration of the nation.<sup>18</sup>

Later, during the decades of 1920, 1930 and 1940 and the Modernism, it is exactly this universe of common man and the work that will be pushed to the first plan of the artistic movements.

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<sup>18</sup> It is very important to observe that through the 20<sup>th</sup> century there is an increasing interest for the Brazilian inland. During the first half of the century, this is clearly seen at several fields like literature, music, and visual arts, concerning a strong idealization of the rural life. Also in science it is notorious the preoccupation with the studies related to the far distant territories, the “sertanejo” and the Indians. It seems that there is a general feeling that the inland is the genuine Brazil (“o Brasil profundo”) in contrast with the littoral, more exposed to the foreign influences and, thus, less original. After the second half of the century, the preoccupation with the inland turned to a different feature: the necessity of economic growth. The construction of the new capital, Brasilia, is clearly implicit into this plan.

