Essay

Aleijadinho’s Mestiço Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Brazil: Inventing Brazilian National Identity via a Racialized Colonial Art

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Abstract: Antônio Francisco Lisboa (Aleijadinho) is arguably the most famous Brazilian colonial artist, known for his Baroque sculptures and architecture. The reception of his life and work, which often centered on biographical aspects such as his mestiço identity and his disability, conferred him a mythological positioning in Brazilian history. From the first sources from the 19th century to the modernist reappraisal of the Colonial Baroque in the 1920s, Aleijadinho became a foundational figure in the construction of Brazil’s post-colonial nationhood. This article contributes to the understanding of the mythification of Aleijadinho, paying special attention to how his mestiço identity was articulated in the essays of the Brazilian modernist Mário de Andrade.

Keywords: Brazilian baroque; Antônio Francisco Lisboa (Aleijadinho); colonial Brazil; mestiço; Brazilian modernism; Mário de Andrade; post-colonial Brazil

1. Introduction: The Origins of the Myth

The year is 1793, and it is night in colonial Brazil. In the city of Vila Rica, the capital of the hilly captaincy of Minas Gerais, a man is carried up and down through the narrow streets made of irregular paving stone on the back of a second man, named Januário, who is making their way toward the church of Antônio Dias. The first man, Antônio Francisco Lisboa, had a mysterious condition that left him disabled (which is the reason he was carried around on Januário’s back, at least when he was not in the mood to travel on a chair specially adapted for this purpose). Rumor has it that Lisboa had syphilis or leprosy; others conjecture a type of rheumatoid disease or Zamparina, the neurotropic flu with a predilection for the locomotor system. Some say Lisboa lost all his toes and had to walk on his knees while his fingers were withered, bent, and even fell off—allegedly only his index fingers and thumbs remained, which enabled him to carry on his labor. Others maintain that Lisboa, suffering from terrible pain and a choleric temper, cut off his fingers using his working tool, a chisel. It is said that the man lost all the teeth in his crooked mouth, while the inflammation in his eyelids revealed their inner part to disgusted interlocutors. In addition, the chin and lower lip had drooped. Out of shame, Lisboa, who would have enjoyed a feast and a dance in the past, worked in adapted conditions, either at night or hidden by a tent that shielded him from the public. The closest ones to him were Januário and his two enslaved men, Agostinho and Maurício. Maurício was an excellent carver and assisted his owner in his endeavors in the temples, attaching to him the self-manufactured prostheses that allowed him to work. Both had a close relationship, and it is reported that Lisboa even shared his earnings with Maurício. On several occasions, however, Maurício was reportedly severely punished with the same mallet he had applied to Lisboa’s hands. No matter the weather, Lisboa dressed heavily in a long, blue overcoat, which he can be seen wearing on a supposed posthumous portrait by Eucládio Ventura painted in the nineteenth century. Antônio Francisco Lisboa, better known as Aleijadinho—“the little cripple”—is arguably the most famous artist of colonial Brazil.
Little is known with certainty about Aleijadinho’s biography. The previous paragraph assembles pieces of information familiar to most Brazilians and often taken to be true. However, what remained from the artist’s life is shrouded in a mixture of phantasy, legend, and controversy. The primary historical source on Aleijadinho is a newspaper article published around forty years after the artist’s death, in 1858, by the Brazilian lawyer Rodrigo José Ferreira Bretas. Under the extensive title “Biographical traits relating to the late Antônio Francisco Lisboa, a distinguished sculptor from Minas Gerais, better known by the nickname of Aleijadinho”, the text was published in two parts in the Correio Oficial de Minas (Bretas 1858a, 1858b). The account begins with biographical elements such as Aleijadinho’s birth and education, appearance, and illness, and continues with a laudatory relation of the artist’s main deeds in architecture, sculpture, and carving. Besides basing his text on alleged first-hand testimonies of Aleijadinho’s daughter-in-law, Bretas trusts a contemporary source from which he quotes an extensive fragment. In 1790, the councilman Joaquim José da Silva was commissioned to produce a chronicle on the situation of the arts in the Captaincy of Minas Gerais. The request supposedly came from the Queen Mary of Portugal, who wanted every event of the captaincy of Minas Gerais “worthy of going down in history” to be annually collected and included in a so-called royal Book of Notable Facts, which has never been located to this day (de Grammont 2008, pp. 96–98). According to Germain Bazin, da Silva’s chronicle inaugurates the history of the evolution of artistic forms in Minas Gerais and constitutes Brazil’s oldest art criticism text (Bazin 1963, p. 69). The Brazilian art historian Myriam de Oliveira explains that the excerpt transcribed by Bretas demonstrates an attempt to establish a hierarchization of taste, subordinating Aleijadinho to the “French style”, which would have followed the two phases of the Baroque in the region: the first one, pejoratively called gothic, and the preferred barroco joanino, in reference to John V of Portugal. It turns out that the very existence of the chronicle is as debatable as the veracity of what Bretas conveys, as the Brazilian historian Guiomar de Grammont discusses at length in her book Aleijadinho e o Aeroplano.

It can be established with some certainty that Aleijadinho was born in Vila Rica and worked in the historical cities of Minas Gerais between the 1760s and the end of his life, in 1814. Although Bretas, relying on a problematic birth certificate, posits Aleijadinho’s birth in 1730, the death certificate conflictingly states the artist was 76 years old at the time of death, which would determine his birth year to be 1738. It is usually sustained that Aleijadinho was the son of the Portuguese architect Manuel Francisco Lisboa and Izabel, an enslaved African woman. For this reason, as determined by the law at the time, Aleijadinho was born into slavery but was manumitted by Manuel to be baptized in the church of Antônio Dias, where the artist is now buried. The artist may have had a son, though it was never known whether he was married or to whom. This son was also called Manuel and eventually married the midwife Joana Lopes, who took care of Aleijadinho during his last years of isolation, and allegedly conveyed to Bretas what she knew. As Grammont concludes, over the years the debate about the real versus imaginary Aleijadinho has lost track of the relevant questions: it is precisely this process of mythification of Aleijadinho, with an emphasis on the questions of historical reception, that is more relevant to Brazilian historiography (de Grammont 2008, p. 121).

The construction of Aleijadinho as a national hero was a process highly dependent on Bretas’ article since later interpretations of the artist often drew from what Bretas conveyed. Here one can already find the main mythification aspects that forged the later reception of the artist. There is an emphasis on Aleijadinho’s humble origins, his resilience despite disease, and his identity as a mestiço, an aspect that would later be articulated favorably by the modernists.

For example, deemphasizing collective work gives room to the idea of the sole genius artist. An effective resource at hand to pursue this argument is the usage of references to Antiquity. According to the transcription passed down by Bretas, da Silva’s chronicle, which would have been written when Aleijadinho was about 52 years old and at the peak of his career, refers to the artist as the “new Praxiteles” (Bretas 1858b). Reinforcing
comparisons with classic models, Bretas tells of an episode when a group of women went to the Sanctuary of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, in the city of Congonhas do Campo. Paving the way to the main church are seven small peregrination chapels illustrating the Stations of the Cross with sculptural groups, completed by Aleijadinho at the turn of the 19th century. Visitors can observe the scenes by peeking in from the outside through overtures in the door. “It is said that some women”, Bretas reports, “having gone to Matosinhos in Congonhas do Campo, when they passed by the chapel of the Last Supper, greeted the figures that represent Christ with the Apostles, which (…) would induce us to compare the works of our patrician with the bunch of grapes painted by Zeuxis and wounded by the beaks of birds believing them to be real” (Bretas 1858b). The comparison with Zeuxis may have been employed here primarily to elevate Aleijadinho to the international canon of universal artists. Bretas, who had no art historical training, nevertheless failed to understand that what legitimizes Zeuxis’ geniality in the anecdote are precisely his illusionist abilities as a painter, who escapes the obstacles of his medium, namely, its fundamental impossibility of tridimensionality. In contrast, the work mentioned by Aleijadinho is a group of life-size wood sculptures, staged theatrically around a real table as if in the Last Supper (Figure 1).

![Last Supper Chapel, Sanctuary of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, Congonhas do Campo, 1796–1808. Photo by the author (July 2023).](image)

**Figure 1.** Last Supper Chapel, Sanctuary of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos, Congonhas do Campo, 1796–1808. Photo by the author (July 2023).

Regarding the illness, Bretas suggests, without giving a concrete reason, that the signs of Aleijadinho’s illness can be traced back to 1777 (Bretas 1858a). In fact, two receipts dating from 1777 and 1778 register payments to two Black men for having carried Aleijadinho to the church of Nossa Senhora das Mercês e Perdões, which might indicate a mobility limitation of some sort, especially considering the short distance between the church and Aleijadinho’s residence. 5 Aleijadinho’s medical condition is also already mentioned in da Silva’s chronicle: “so much value is found deposited in a sick body that needs to be taken everywhere and has tools tied to it in order to be able to work” (Bretas 1858b). While one should be cautious not to give Bretas too much credibility, the very centrality of Aleijadinho’s illness in his text is symptomatic of the author’s motivations and context and helped shape a significant part of the myth surrounding the artist.

The romantic writer and painter Manuel Araujo Porto Alegre, then Secretary at the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, was the one who commissioned Bretas to write the article. With the objective of establishing a pantheon of national, unifying figures,
the Institute requested the various provinces to send material on each region’s notable characters. As the Brazilian historian Guiomar de Grammont emphasizes, Bretas’ text was thus conceived in the context of nationalist romanticism, which inspired the political and cultural project carried out by the Institute from 1838 onwards (de Grammont 2008, pp. 94–95). Moreover, both de Grammont and Myriam de Oliveira argue that a romantic sensibility was responsible for the emphasis on the dramatic aspects of Aleijadinho’s disability, “described with such abundance of detail that the analogy with a popular character of literary romanticism comes naturally, namely Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame” (de Oliveira 2014, p. 4). In fact, Araújo Porto Alegre made the comparison himself: “A biography of the sculptor and architect Antônio Francisco Lisboa appeared in the Correio Oficial de Minas, a man worthy of posterity for his skill, the originality of his character and his ‘quasimodesque’ forms and physiognomy” (de Oliveira 2014, p. 4). Aleijadinho was already becoming the archetype of the national genius cursed by disease.

Based on several pieces of travel literature written by foreign travelers in Brazil during the nineteenth century, Germain Bazin points out how the assessment of Aleijadinho’s disability gradually but steadily mutated into legend. There are some issues with Bazin’s translations from the originals, but since the general meaning remains the same, Bazin’s argument is valid at least to illustrate the snowball development of the narratives on the artist’s illness. Bazin begins with the first piece of information available, conveyed by da Silva in 1790 (Aleijadinho needed to “have irons tied [to his body] in order to be able to work”) and proceeds to 1811, when the German geologist Wilhelm Eschwege conveyed that Aleijadinho “needed to have the chisel attached to his paralyzed hands”. Around the same time, still according to Bazin, the English traveler John Luccock spread the word that the artist “did not have hands anymore and needed to have the chisel and the hammer attached to his wrists”. Like the children’s game telephone, where each teller whispers a new exaggeration to the original story, in 1818, Saint Hilaire conveys that Aleijadinho “had lost the use of the extremities and had to have his tools attached to his forearm” (Bazin 1963, p. 97). The image of the artist without hands is further confirmed by Friedrich de Woech in 1831 and also by Francis Castelnau in 1850, finally culminating in the corniness of Richard Burton, who, in 1868, wrote that “the sculptures of Saint Francis of Assisi in São João del Rei are the result of the manual skill of a man with no hands” (Bazin 1963, p. 97). Although quite late in the line, Bretas resists the temptation, writing that Aleijadinho had lost some of the fingers in his deficient—but not absent—hands (Bretas 1858a). Furthermore, the fact that Aleijadinho continued to sign receipts until the early 19th century suggests that his hands were still somehow functional. In any case, Bazin’s playful argument has a point, while his translation flaws end up contributing to the myth.

Finally, there was something else about Aleijadinho’s appearance that Bretas found worth mentioning—something that would be a substantial aspect of the modernist reappraisal of the artist in the 1920s. In the very beginning of his text, right after introducing the artist’s progenitors, Bretas describes Aleijadinho: “he was dark brown, had a strong voice, an impetuous speech, and an irritated temper: his stature was short, his body was full and poorly shaped, his face and head were round, and the latter was voluminous, his hair was black and curly, his beard was tight and thick, he had a broad forehead, a regular and somewhat pointed nose, thick lips, large ears, and a short neck” (Bretas 1858a). Before anything else, then, Aleijadinho was a mestiço.

2. The Society of Eighteenth-Century Minas Gerais

The foundation of the cities of Minas Gerais, often called just Minas, dates back to the last decade of the eighteenth century when gold was first discovered in the region by the paulista excursions known as bandeiras. Mostly born in Brazil and often mestiços themselves—either ethnically or culturally—the Bandeirantes were adventurous men who undertook paramilitary expeditions towards the inland to explore and exploit territories previously uncolonized. This was a mutually profitable enterprise: while to the Portuguese Crown, the bandeiras conveniently allowed the metropole to expand the occupation in
the colony, to these trailblazers of São Paulo, the excursions served the purpose of seizing Indigenous subjects to be used in forced labor. As a result of these journeys, gold was uncovered almost simultaneously in several locations between the current cities of Diamantina and Ouro Preto.13

Minas Gerais—literally, “general mines”—witnessed unprecedented development in only a few years. In 1711, Father André João Antonil, an Italian Jesuit known to be less benevolent than Father Antônio Vieira, estimated that around thirty thousand people were involved in the mining trade, either as workers, chiefs, sellers or buyers—all people who had gone to the general mines fueled by an “insatiable thirst for gold”.14 According to Antonil, “each year, several Portuguese and foreigners arrive in the fleets to go to the mines. From the cities, towns, recesses, and sertões of Brazil, there are whites, browns, and blacks, and many Indigenous, which the people of São Paulo use. The mixture is of all kinds of people: men and women, young and old, poor and rich, nobles and plebeians, secular and clergy, and pious of different institutes” (Antonil [1711] 2011, p. 224). The fame of the mines grew to such a point, that in 1709, Portugal was struggling to maintain order and started to hamper access to the region, including a ban on religious orders due to their association with smuggling activities. Antonil’s book was confiscated in Lisbon as soon it was published because it contained detailed directions about how to reach the mines from diverse starting points in other captaincies. Furthermore, the region became forbidden to foreigners until the nineteenth century (when, finally, European travelers like Eschwege, Saint Hilaire, John Luccock, and Richard Burton were allowed in and thus were able to write the travel accounts known to Brazilian historiography today).

Still, the agitation was unavoidable. As the Brazilian historian Lilia Schwarcz points out, neither the Crown’s effort to keep the location of the mines secret nor the rough crossing of the Serra da Mantiqueira managed to impose a limit on the unbridled ambition driving people to the newest territory in the colony (Schwarcz and Starling 2015, p. 114). Amidst the shock of the local authorities facing the stampede of residents from the coastal settlements and the high numbers of individuals arriving from beyond the Atlantic Ocean, Minas was receiving a variety of people with hopes of fast fortune and a better life, aiming to escape political or religious persecution.15

This unprecedented influx of people significantly changed the economic, social, and political configuration of the colonial business in Brazil. New cities inevitably emerged, and from 1711, with the foundation of Vila Rica, they were gradually officially integrated into the colony’s administrative system. In 1720, Minas Gerais separated from São Paulo, becoming an autonomous captaincy, host to the “first urban and spontaneous society of non-coastal function” in Brazil, which posed an alternative to the further centers in the colony which were, in comparison, more heavily dependent on agricultural slavery (Machado [1969] 2003, p. 166). Laura de Mello e Souza, the Brazilian historian who specialized in the history of Minas, explains that in the coastal cities of the Northeast, where Portuguese colonization began, the State and society functioned as one: urban planning, where there was always the cidade alta and the cidade baixa; the more frequent contact with the metropole; the implementation of institutions; the aristocratic class, which assumed many roles similar to ones of the Portuguese elite—it was almost as if a second Portugal was created (Souza 2006, p. 149). The urban society developed in Minas Gerais was comparatively more keen on newness and change, somewhat irreverent regarding social hierarchy, and showed some resistance to the notions of honor and tradition (Souza 2006, pp. 149–81). Additionally, Minas offered a more diversified range of economic activities connected to the international market. According to the art historian Tania Costa Tribe, Minas Gerais “enabled individuals to operate economically outside the sugar-producing framework” (Tribe 1996).

Not only people but also goods of all sorts were abundantly circulating through the new paths opened to connect other cities to the mining region. Apart from the necessary sugar, cachaça, cattle, gunpowder, tobacco, olive oil, rice, and salt, Vila Rica was also receiving “pompous French peddlery” such as tableware, mirrors, velvets and silks, plush
toys, hats, and fashionable clothes—all sold for exorbitant prices, given the comparatively higher purchasing power allowed by the gold business (Antonil [1711] 2011, p. 228). In his satirical poem *Cartas Chilenas* (Gonzaga 2006), Tomás Antônio Gonzaga describes Vila Rica in the 1780s, conveying an animated image of a complex, dynamic, multi-ethnic society juggling personal interests and institutional jurisdiction. He describes the street markets and trades, the *quitandeiras*, the traveling traders, the food stores that served the Black and white men of the lower classes, the shoemakers, tailors, and pack animal owners. Without leaving out the mechanisms of slavery, Gonzaga narrates the construction of the famous jail building, built to resemble Michelangelo’s *Palazzo Senatorio* in Rome. The poem also refers to cavalcades, processions, and the comedies presented at the Opera, which, to the pride of the Vila Rica’s elite, was able to house three hundred spectators. Furthermore, *Cartas Chilenas* (Gonzaga 2006) mentions one of Aleijadinho’s works in Congonhas, where the anecdote told by Bretas took place.

The poem’s lyrical subject, a member of the higher classes, sides with the royal regime, concentrating his criticism not on the political system as a whole but on a singular figure of the local administration, the semi-fictitious Governor Fanfarrão Minésio. An apparent reference to Luís da Cunha Meneses, then governor of Minas Gerais, Governor Fanfarrão is portrayed as the unworthy ruler whose bad example authorizes society to divert from a virtuous path. As the eminent literary critic Antônio Cândido pointed out, the lyrical speaker, Critilo, manifests an opposing view regarding the violation of the law since he “no longer feels safe, or even situated, in a society where men of wealth are despised, authorities are treated without courtesy, conveniences are swiftly ignored” (Cândido 1975, p. 161). In Cândido’s reading, Critilo resents Governor Fanfarrão for having altered the natural relations of a hierarchical society, “such is the obsession with which [Critilo] refers to the rise of *mulatos*, tent owners, small people in general” (Cândido 1975, p. 161). It may be challenging to reconcile Cândido’s view with the many excerpts of the poem where Critilo demonstrates a sensibility that is revolutionary enough for the standards of the time. For instance, he criticizes the imprisonment of free Black men and escaped enslaved people “whose sole infraction is to escape the hunger and punishments they suffer under the power of inhumane owners”. The same poem, however, criticizes certain “upstarts” for parading their Black mistresses dressed luxuriously in rich clothes, or men who walked around with hats but no wigs, while women shamelessly crossed their legs in public.

The key to understanding Critilo’s perspective is the tension between conflicting values of *mineiro* social fabric, embodied by Vila Rica’s upper class to which Critilo-Gonzaga belonged. Far more than a revolutionary poem, as it was often interpreted, *Cartas Chilenas* (Gonzaga 2006) was written in a moment of social crisis, when irreconcilable interests were evidenced precisely because Minas’ society was beginning to settle. Reflecting this ambiguity, the intellectual elite of the captaincy praised the society of estates and the attributes of nobility while recognizing individual merit. The alternative social order created in Minas Gerais allowed for money to be a tool of mobility, as was made clear by a famous episode when a tradesman who, having originally been poor but able to enrich, wrote on his window the following sentence in gold letters: “The one who has money, will do as he pleases” (Souza 2006, pp. 178–79). Soon conflicting groups found themselves in a cultural mismatch. Vila Rica’s elite was cornered between a society of estates and of classes, that is, between European values and the reality imposed by local circumstances. This new social dynamic, based on money instead of honor, observance, and tradition, was something to be resented by a particular group. Such noble values had little adherence in Vila Rica’s society. In opposition to the European nobility, based on solid principles, the “nobility” of Minas Gerais developed to be what Laura de Mello e Souza calls “*nobreza de costume*” (Souza 2006, p. 180). As the historian points out, Judge Teixeira Coelho’s testimony of Vila Rica’s society, written in 1780, instead describes a bourgeois upper class than the nobility: “Wealth is what makes honor and popular veneration; revenge is what acquires and establishes respect, and the greatness of pomp is the only character of nobility and knighthood” (Souza 2006, p. 180). In Minas, everything had more than one meaning.
and function, unlike the European order based on an immutable set of values attributed by birth. On the one hand, this greater flexibility resulted in the generalized discredit of formalisms very much criticized by Critilo in *Cartas Chilenas* (Gonzaga 2006). On the other, it was hard, even for the elite, to refuse a world of new possibilities, especially after the upper classes incorporated local members, becoming more heterogeneous and, eventually, embracing emancipatory and revolutionary values.¹⁹

Luís da Cunha Menezes’ mandate marked the victory of money over order. During his government, which began in 1784, the ties between the powerful and the rulers that had been comfortably in place for the previous decades were broken, intensifying the conflict between principles of class and estate, illustrated in Teixeira Coelho’s lament. This conflict had existed since the formational years of Minas Gerais. Former governors had often complained to the higher powers in Portugal about the particular character of mineiro society, always accentuating its heterogeneous, indomitable, and rebellious character. As early as 1720, Governor Dom Pedro Miguel de Almeida Portugal, the Count of Assumar, resentfully portrayed Vila Rica as a society of subverted norms, where conventions and titles did not matter, and “people of no name achieved in the profusions of their dealings the honor of the rich” (Souza 2006, p. 159). To him, this society felt “out of place” or “reversed” (Souza 2006, p. 160). Lamenting having abandoned Europe, “where he was well known”, Count of Assumar struggles to understand, for instance, why “two honorable lawyers, or three colonels, are entering the mining area carrying sacks on their backs” (Souza 2006, pp. 156–60).

The relativization of European social principles in Minas Gerais, combined with the region’s accelerated urban development and its immediate and spontaneous character, and allied, in turn, to the *mestiço* origins of Minas, generated a very peculiar context. Lilia Schwarcz defends that the urban context allowed for diverse publics to meet despite stratification: “It was common to see enslavers and enslaved working together [as was the case of artisans and artists like Aleijadinho, for instance] or just experiencing the greater flexibility provided by everyday life in the city, where there could be a more autonomous role for the slave and conditions that, eventually, could lead to his freedom” (Schwarcz and Starling 2015, p. 126). Although this may sound overly optimistic at first, the urbanity of Minas Gerais was especially important for the emergence of *coartação*, a process of manumission not very widespread in Portuguese America but particularly common in the mining region. In this situation, the enslaved people would be permitted to work for third parties to earn money and accumulate a predetermined sum of the cost of their liberty, to be settled in installments. A sort of bought manumission, its application was invariably connected to the dynamic economy and diversified labor options inexistent in rural territories. Because it enabled the population of color to engage in unsupervised economic activities, the American historian Stuart Schwartz defined the *coartação* as an intermediate condition between captivity and freedom (Schwartz 1988, p. 214). The introduction of this system further complicated an already complex society, revealing the contradictions of a population that accepted and promoted manumission while still regarding people of color as inferior. Not all cases of *coartação* ran smoothly, but many did. These cases, rather than being a granted concession, were often intensely fought for, constituting a “form of resistance that acted from inside the system, without attempting to disrupt it, like the *quilombos* did”.²⁰

Urbanization, ethnic amalgamation, and money. According to Schwarcz, the intense use of manumission as a liberation strategy (either conceded or bought) granted mainly three characteristics that distinguished the mineiro society from the rest of the colony: the combination of an extensive class of *mestiços* and a relatively small percentage of whites; the formation of the largest group of freedpeople in the colony; and the possibility of some social ascension for people of color (above all through commerce, the purchase of some small property, the achievement of an administrative, military or religious position, or, still, through the occupation as an artisan, musician, painter, or sculptor).²¹ While one must be careful to not overemphasize the positive side of manumission, ultimately, in Minas Gerais, white people could be poor, and Black people could be free.²²
3. The “Emancipation” of the Mestiço Artist in the 1920s: The Modernist Interpretation of Aleijadinho

In the 1920s, a group of artists and writers leading the modernist movement in São Paulo promoted a reassessment of the Baroque of Minas Gerais, imbuing it with political and aesthetic values in tune with the renewal of the Brazilian arts they were pursuing. Concerned with the implementation of an authentically Brazilian artistic language that would break with the academicism that had triumphed in the previous decades, they looked inward, to Brazil itself, in search of some defining trait of its cultural identity. The political moment was conducive to such a renewed nationalist interest, boosted by the centenary of Brazil’s independence in 1922, which was celebrated by the paulista modernists at the Municipal Theater in São Paulo.

Nationalism was valid only as a participatory element of the international context. The “Brazilianess” of Brazilian modernism was responding to a need for self-affirmation but was not immune to international influence since the modernists were aesthetically in debt to French modernism. Tarsila do Amaral, the most prominent painter of the group, had studied under Fernand Léger and André Lhote in Paris, where she also met the Swiss–French Blaise Cendrars, who turned out to play an encouraging role in the modernist reevaluation of the Colonial Baroque in Brazil. What the modernists sought, therefore, was a renovation of Brazilian art that combined the influence of the European vanguards with the awakening of a national artistic conscience. It was necessary to reconcile the internationalist desire to participate in the world with a local need to assert their own identity and imagine a shared national future—past and future, nationalism and internationalism: these are dualities that distinguish the paulista modernists.

3.1. The Modernist Excursion to Minas Gerais in 1924

In their quest for a national identity, the modernists aimed to connect to the country’s history and social reality. Driven by a nativist desire to investigate their land, they aimed to uncover regionalisms, folklore and local art, popular culture, and Indigenous and African heritage. As part of this agenda of “discovering Brazil”, the modernists organized trips throughout the country to the Northeast, the Amazon, and the carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Notably, in April 1924, Mário de Andrade led a trip to the historical cities in Minas Gerais.23 The self-entitled “modernist caravan” included Mário himself; the painter Tarsila do Amaral; Tarsila’s husband-to-be and author of the Antropofagia construct, Oswald de Andrade; his son, Nonê; Olívia Guedes Penteado, a patron of the movement; the enthusiasts René Thiollier, Gofredo da Silva Telles, essential members of São Paulo’s high society; and, finally, the poet and novelist Blaise Cendrars.24 In reference to the seventeenth-century bandeirantes, the modernist excursion to Minas was self-baptized “Brazil’s Rediscovery Journey” and sometimes, in a playful reference, the modernists would refer to themselves as bandeirantes modernos—attesting to the urgency they felt to reappropriate their country, to colonize themselves.

Their journey, which lasted roughly half a month, passed through seven main colonial cities: São João del Rei, Tiradentes, Belo Horizonte, Sabará, Ouro Preto, Mariana, Congonhas, and Belo Horizonte. Tarsila’s interview with the Correio da Manhã on 25 December 1923, reveals her expectation in exploring the countryside. Freshly arrived from Paris and convincingly seduced by cubism, the artist also aimed to turn her attention to her country: “I am profoundly Brazilian and will study the taste and the art of our caipiras. I expect, in the countryside, to learn from the ones who weren’t corrupted by the academies.”25 While rejecting the dictated references of academicism, Tarsila was not bothered by adhering to the precepts of cubism. She defended herself against the sharp reporter’s inquiry about whether an alliance with the French avant-garde would not be to emulate Europe once again. The artist, therefore, embodied the ambiguities of the modernist elite, whose need to reaffirm a Brazilian identity was often awakened by a sojourn in Europe. In Tarsila’s case, who had been born in the countryside and spent her childhood on a farm, the evocation of the country’s past coincides with the personal revisitiation of her infancy, as is expressed in
a letter she wrote in Paris earlier that year: “I feel myself ever more Brazilian. I want to be the painter of my country. How grateful I am for having spent all my childhood on the farm. The memories of these times have become precious to me. I want, in art, to be the little girl from São Bernardo...”. This belief in the ingenuity of humble people living in a pure state similar to childhood betrays romantic reverberations typical of Brazilian modernism. Every member of the group has testified to having encountered, in Minas Gerais, a naive originality, not sparing an exotic gaze toward their own country, which was, in turn, confirmed (and legitimated) by the foreigners among them. Gofredo da Silva Telles remembered that the group was “enchanted with the mysticism that hovered in the air in these small cities due to the intense but simple and naive religiousness” (Amaral 1997, p. 60), while Blaise Cendrars defined the population of Minas as “modest people of profound kindness, innocence, and meekness”, characteristics, by the way, attributed to “the climate and the mixture of ethnicities” (Amaral 1997, pp. 69–70).

The travel immediately influenced modern artworks: such as Oswald’s “Pau-Brasil” poems, published in 1925 in Paris; Tarsila’s drawings produced during the excursion, as well as her paintings of the so-called Pau-Brasil phase; and Mário’s critical and literary writings, such as his poem “Noturno de Belo Horizonte”. Divorced from Brazil’s reality by their life between São Paulo and Paris, the modernists saw in Minas a sort of Brazilian originality that did not require them to refuse the international avant-garde. It is precisely this double interest that would prompt the Brazilian art critic Lourival Gomes Machado to famously declare, in 1946, that “the rediscovery of Brazil traveled the double route of the ships to Havre and the trains to Ouro Preto” (Amaral 1997, p. 16). Furthermore, the reappraisal of Brazilian colonial tradition served as an instrument for imagining the country’s prospects, as revealed in Gofredo da Silva Telles’ definition of Minas: “the landscape of a rich past full of confidence in the future” (Amaral 1997, p. 16). The paulista modernists were not the first or the last to “rediscover” the Baroque of Minas Gerais. Nevertheless, in fantasizing about the Colonial Baroque and connecting it to a utopian nation project they aimed to resignify the colonial heritage as an essential component of Brazilian post-colonial identity. Laying the groundwork for the creation of a founding national myth built on colonial Minas Gerais, the modernists saw the Colonial Baroque as the epitome of the country’s artistic production and a pivotal moment in the constitution of a national conscience. As such, the reimagined colonial Minas Gerais came to embody not only the notion of an authentic Brazilian aesthetic but of a permeating “Brazilianess”, also in social and political terms, definitively integrating the cultural and national imaginary.

3.2. Mário de Andrade’s Discussion of the Baroque of Minas Gerais: Originality, Tradition, and Race

The leading articulator of this recovery was Mário de Andrade. Mário’s art criticism relating to the architecture of Minas Gerais and Aleijadinho’s work are presented mainly in two essays, one written before and one after the excursion of 1924: “Religious Art in Brazil”, published at the Revista do Brasil in 1920, and “O Aleijadinho”, from 1928. In the first article, Mário defends that it was in Minas Gerais where the “most characteristic religious art of Brazil emerged” (de Andrade 1920b, p. 103). According to him, “the church could, there, freer from Portuguese influences, retain a more uniform and original style” than the buildings in the other centers that he thought were “prune, court-derived, without personality” (de Andrade 1920b, p. 103). By the “other centers”, Mário means the northeast of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro, where the Baroque was implemented upon the Jesuitic style inherited from Portugal. To Mário it seems important to distinguish between the baroque expressions in each one of these contexts: “In Bahia, the Baroque attains a less sincere expression, the construction is more erudite; in Rio de Janeiro, the external artistic preoccupation diminishes while the internal decoration reaches delirium... in Minas we see the supreme glorification of the curved line, the most characteristic style of excellent originality” (de Andrade 1920a, p. 95). The critic furthermore preferred the churches constructed either by architects of Portuguese origin already acclimatized to Brazil or by...
Brazil-born artists, since these designs “assumed a much more determined character, a much more national one” (de Andrade 1920b, p. 103). Regarding the artist’s nationality, Mário equates Portuguese based in Brazil and Brazil-born architects. He does not seem to be very concerned with the architect’s origins per se, rather he seems to be critical of the importation of sketches. As an example, Mário argues that the mother church of Caeté, whose architectonical project came from Portugal, is less significant than the Church of São Pedro dos Clérigos, in Mariana (Figure 2) or the Church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo in São João del Rei (Figure 3).28

![Figure 2. Church of São Pedro dos Clérigos, Mariana, 1753–1820. Photo by the author (July 2023).](image)

But why are the local designs “artistically more important” to Mário? Somewhat indirectly, Mário defends that Minas found a solution to the Baroque problem par excellence, namely, the detachment of ornaments from architectural structure, an original defect Mário traces back to the Roman origins of the style (de Andrade 1920b, p. 103). The modernist is therefore concerned with the opposition between application and inherence. According to him, “in the religious architecture of Minas, the baroque orientation [by which he means mainly the curved line] transfers from decoration to being an integral part of the architectural body, thus shaping the floor plan, the projection of the facade, the profile of the columns, the naves” (de Andrade 1920b, p. 103).

The critic places the church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Ouro Preto, designed by Aleijadinho, into the golden age of mineiro architecture (de Andrade 1920b, p. 105). According to him, this architectural stage is characterized by a greater comprehension of the Baroque style, reflected in the simplification of ornaments and the incorporation of the curve into the fundamental features of the building, plastically reconfigures the floor plan—a significant change he attributes to Aleijadinho (without any mention to Francesco Borromini, a reference that would later be first pointed out by the English historian John Bury; the critic also refrained from mentioning the cylindric towers that so famously distinguish Aleijadinho’s designs).29

Warier than his modernist colleagues regarding the alignment with the international avant-garde, Mário laments the state of the arts and argues, with a conservatism rarely pointed out by scholarship, a correspondence between the decline of Christian art and modernity’s generalized decadence (de Andrade 1920a, pp. 95–96). Positioning himself against the importation of international styles such as architectural eclecticism or cubist
painting, Mário defends that Brazilian modern art should be based on tradition, by which he understood things either developed locally or handed down from Portugal. He is equating, thus, traditional to colonial (de Andrade 1920b, pp. 109–10). The critic declares his task to be that of demonstrating “that our Christian art (…) is an abandoned treasure on which our artists could go look for inspiration”—still a shy nudge, in comparison to Mário’s later agenda, especially after the excursion to Minas in 1924. Here, Mário is still indebted to Ricardo Severo, the forerunner of the Neocolonial movement. To Mário, though, the origins of the “Brazilian national style” were not in the Portuguese tradition, as advocated by traditionalists like Severo, but potentially in the “vulgarizations” of European “architectonic orders” in the colony (de Andrade 1920a, p. 98). Such deviations from the European form would become a central idea later in 1928.

Figure 3. Church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo, São João del Rei, 1734–1771. Photo by the author (July 2023).

The argument that the Baroque in Minas Gerais was, despite the style’s European origins, Brazil’s founding national artistic manifestation, appears rather loosely in the first essay and is intensified in “O Aleijadinho”. At first, Mário defends that in the eighteenth century, Brazil testifies to the first expressions of “colonial collectivity” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 11). According to him, this new collective self-awareness can be explained
by four factors: (1) “Rio de Janeiro’s bureaucratic and centralizing position”; (2) “the anti-maritime expansivity of the cities in Minas Gerais”; (3) “the influence of the colonial man on the metropole”; and (4) “the normalization of the mestiço” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 11). The first three aspects are briefly explained and relate to (1) the establishment of the capital in Rio de Janeiro in 1763; (2) the new social and political circumstances Minas introduced in the colony; and (3) the increasing incorporation of Brazilian culture in Lisbon. The entirety of Mário’s essay is dedicated to the explanation of the fourth factor.

To him, a Brazilian collectivity was only made possible by the “imposition of the mulato” through a “collective outbreak of Brazilian raciality.” This collectivity, he further explains, emerges in close connection to the colonial arts, primarily architecture, from the moment when “new artists” began to shape an “incipient national consciousness” through the “unsystematic deformation of ultra-marine lessons” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 13).

By this Mário means that the “new artists”, that is, Brazilian-born ones, mestiço ones, such as Aleijadinho, adapted the formulas imported from Europe to the alternative context of the colony. This new collective perception, encouraged by racial self-awareness, was, thus, materialized in Brazilian arts.

The critic argues that in a society heavily dependent on racial structures and slavery, the free mestiços found themselves in a transitional position: although no longer enslaved, they possessed a “false liberty, for they were free men without education and means of permanent occupation” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 15). Moreover, since class and race were blended conditions, the mestiços were “declassified” as no longer belonging to a racial group (de Andrade [1928] 1984, pp. 15–16). To Mário, mestiço is not a race but a non-predetermined mixture of ethnic references. Nevertheless, notions of a “Brazilian race” and the mestiço often appear intertwined in his text. The critic suggests that, in opposition to their social standing, the mestiços succeeded greatly in the plastic arts, thus emancipating, metaphorically, once they become artists.

Mário then sustains that Aleijadinho is responsible for the creation of “a type of church which is the only original solution ever invented by Brazilian architecture”, better embodied in the churches of Saint Francis of Assisi in Ouro Preto (Figure 4) and São João del Rei (Figure 5). In these projects, Aleijadinho would have distanced himself from the customary luso-colonial architectonic solutions, creating churches that are essentially Brazilian. However, in one of the most sentimental passages, Mário describes this Brazilian essence in terms that are all but architectural: things Brazilian are mild and tender, non-majestic, beautiful in a non-appealing way, sublimely small, balanced, “like a northeastern lullaby” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, pp. 30–31). A somewhat more concrete explanation follows, which returns to the subject of ornament, endorsing the easiness of Aleijadinho’s Baroque as opposed to the detached ornamentation of Jesuitic buildings. That Aleijadinho preferred “clarity” to “luxury and affectation, restlessness and drama” prompts Mário to declare that the artist was “baroque in style, but renaissant in sentiment” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 31).

Toward the very end of the essay, Mário states that Aleijadinho is the only artist of his time “who could be called national” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). Brazilian nationality, however, appears subjected to “Portugal’s influence”, so that any “Brazilian solution” is necessarily an outcome of Brazil’s colonial condition: “a colonial solution” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). This solution is nothing more than the success of the “Brazilian entity” acting over the metropole, while the mestiço is the Brazilian entity and the solution is “independence” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). That is why to Mário, Brazil’s originality emerges in close relation to the metropole, precisely through the “deformation”—the “brazilianization”—of “the Portuguese thing (coisa lusa)” by the mestiço. Equaled to the idea of resistance, the “deformation” of the imported model is presented in a positive light, and the mestiço thus becomes essentially anti-colonial.
Toward the very end of the essay, Mário states that Aleijadinho is the only artist of his time “who could be called national” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). Brazilian nationality, however, appears subjected to “Portugal’s influence”, so that any “Brazilian solution” is necessarily an outcome of Brazil’s colonial condition: “a colonial solution” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). This solution is nothing more than the success of the “Brazilian entity” acting over the metropole, while the mestiço is the Brazilian entity and the solution is “independence” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 41). That is why to Mário, Brazil’s originality emerges in close relation to the metropole, precisely through the “deformation”—the “brazilianization”—of “the Portuguese thing (coisa lusa)” by the mestiço.34 Equaled to the idea of resistance, the “deformation” of the imported model is presented in a positive light, and the mestiço thus becomes essentially anti-colonial.

Figure 4. Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, Ouro Preto, 1761–1794. Photo by the author (July 2023).

Figure 4. Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, Ouro Preto, 1761–1794. Photo by the author (July 2023).
4. “Deformed” Baroque, Utopian Baroque

Mário’s terminology usage is unrigorous, and his praises are quite sentimental. Moreover, his text’s structure is often arbitrary, the examples vague, and his arguments sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, at the moment of his writing, there were few precedents for what Mário was trying to put forward. On the one hand, the Brazilian Baroque would not be properly and scientifically researched until the 1930s, when specialized scholarship began to be incentivized with the creation of preservationist organs and the cooperation with foreign art historians. Still, even if Mário’s rehabilitation of the Colonial Baroque does not advance scientific scholarship, it constitutes a significant attempt to interpret colonial architecture beyond its morphologic and stylistic aspects, thus engaging with Brazil’s post-colonial condition. Furthermore, when Mário defended the potential role of the Baroque in forging Brazil’s modernist art and architecture, he was concerned with the continuity and authenticity of Brazilian art. Precisely these ideas—founding a Brazilian, modern artistic identity by reaffirming colonization in symbolic terms—would later be institutionalized in Getúlio Vargas’ official cultural agenda between 1930 and 1945, ultimately informing the practice of architects Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer.

One of the main problems in Mário’s writings is that he does not concretely explain the artistic “deformations” he so much cherishes. This is the most influential idea in Mário’s art theory—one that came to shape how future interpreters of Brazil would understand the country—but it is also his Achilles heel, the common departure point of many theoretical problems. It is clear he sees these deformations as the manifestation of Brazilian originality, and that they can only exist in comparison to a “non-deformed”, primary model. However,
in order to understand these adaptations, one would have to consider not only the local (technical, material, geographic, and climatic) conditions but also determine the models that were being imported. What designs were artists in Brazil trying to reproduce? Through what means did they learn their practice? Specialized literature attempted to answer these questions early on, successfully drawing parallels between Brazilian colonial art and its European counterparts, mainly in Portugal and Italy but also in Central Europe. For instance, Aleijadinho’s church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Ouro Preto has long been associated with Francesco Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, in Rome, due to their shared oval floor plan. Another hypothesis argues that the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Black Men, built in Ouro Preto in 1753, derived from Guarino Guarini’s church of Santa Maria della Divina Provvidenza, in Lisbon, whose sketch is depicted in Guarini’s posthumous treatise *Architectura Civile* from 1737 (Dangelo 2017, pp. 255–56).

However, to extrapolate formal comparisons, one would have to look for evidence that mineiro artists of the 18th century were deriving their practice from elsewhere. How exactly did European formulas reach the architects in Minas Gerais? Through formal training? Through treatises? There is no way of knowing with certainty, for example, that a copy of Guarini’s *Architectura Civile* circulated in Minas. As for further texts, many sustain that the Portuguese craftsman José Coelho de Noronha possessed a copy of the painter Andrea Pozzo’s treatise, *Perspectiva Pictorum et Architectorum*, which might have influenced Minas’ trompe-l’œils. If Germain Bazin is correct in his assumption that Aleijadinho learned his trade from Noronha, one can suppose he might have had access to Pozzo’s treatise. Another slight clue, the inventory of the carpenter Manuel Francisco de Araújo lists a “book of architecture”, but there is no mention of the title or author (de Menezes 1978). Unavoidably, the scarcity of documents registering such creative processes, like sketches, blueprints, and artistic treatises, hampers the composition of the theoretical panorama that guided artists and architects in eighteenth-century Minas Gerais.

Furthermore, since such writings were naturally more abundant in Portugal, a study of the theoretical training of mineiro artists would have to trace their lessons back to the treatises available in the metropole. Bringing further complexity to the subject, Portugal’s peripheral position concerning European art history and theory would demand such a study to also consider how Italian treatises were welcomed to the existing Portuguese architectural tradition—a tradition, apropos, which had its share of mixture already and was less white-centered than in continental Europe. Whatever was able to reach Minas had, therefore, made a long journey from Italy through Portugal to the Brazilian coastal urban centers until, finally, arriving in the hilly mining area. Minas Gerais was, then, three times peripheral.

Mário seems to have missed this aspect in his essays, namely, the peripherality of Portugal and the complexity of its culture. To be fair, the critic does not address Portugal as white, though he establishes an opposition between Brazil and Portugal where Portugal represents Europe alongside Germany, Spain, and France. Rather, Mário seems to oppose Brazil to Portugal not so much based on racial aspects, but on the fact that Brazil is a “land with no tradition” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 21). The comparison, then, is more between traditional Europe and new, informal, non-traditional, non-historical Brazil. Mário shows great concern with tradition, and he is often trying hard to convince the reader that a Brazilian tradition—one in which Aleijadinho is a key figure—can indeed exist.

The opposition between Brazil and Portugal is also based on the obvious positioning of the latter as a metropole, and it is hard to ignore Mário’s post-colonial nationalism. Rarely is this antagonism clearer than in the last section of “O Aleijadinho”, when the idea of the deformation of the coisa lusa is consolidated. The notion of the mestiço as the agent who deforms (brazilianizes), and therefore resists, resonates with further ideologues in Latin America. The Argentinian art historian Ángel Guido, for instance, developed his bioaesthetic theory of a racialized Incaic–Hispanic Baroque between 1925 and 1928. Drawing from Heinrich Wölflin, Guido defends style as the embodiment of a nation’s “race”, and promotes the reappraisal of the Latin American Baroque in view of its hy-
bridizations, originated from the incorporation of Indigenous imagery (Weddigen 2017, p. 100). Seeing the Baroque in Spanish America as an anti-colonial manifestation, Guido also defends that the creation of an “architecture of our own” needed to be founded in the synthesis between pre-Columbian and colonial architecture (Weddigen 2017, p. 107). Whether Mário and Guido were not aware of each other’s work, they both reached similar conclusions almost at the same time. Admittedly, this permeating topic would famously culminate in the Cuban writer Lezama Lima and his La expresión Americana, first published in 1957. Playing with Werner Weisbach’s influential definition of the Baroque as the art of Counterreformation, Lima defines the hybrid Latin American Baroque as the art of the contraconquista. 40 Although Mário does not engage with the Latin American Baroque at large, his criticism nevertheless integrates a broader context of post-colonial nationalism observable not only in Brazil. 41

When one speaks of “anti-colonial resistance” there is invariably some implication of intentionality. Were Brazilian artists intentionally altering the European models as a conscious act of insubordination or were their choices defined more by material local conditions without any rationalized anti-colonial statement? In “O Aleijadinho” there are some contradictory passages regarding the intentionality of such deviations. As pointed out, first there is the mention of colonial, mestizo artists “who deform without systematization the ultra-marine lesson”, suggesting a non-intentional alteration of the imported European forms. 42 Later on, Mário argues that Aleijadinho was imitating the European masters (which implicates, in turn, a less insular positioning as an artist) and achieving “geniality” by being “unintentionally original”. 43 However, in a fragment approaching the end of the essay, Mário describes Aleijadinho as a “systematic deformer”, who works with “liberty” and “invention”—and there is reason to believe he is using the word in the sense of inventio (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 40). This statement unavoidably implies that Aleijadinho might have been very conscious of his making.

Guiomar de Grammont explored how the mythical “baroque man” emerged in connection to the notion of “national identity” in every Latin American country where the Baroque existed (de Grammont 2008, pp. 47–48). This mythical figure is commonly featured as the hero who “promotes the appropriation and subversion of European culture, transforming it into a hybrid culture” (de Grammont 2008, p. 48). Indeed, this idea of diverting precisely the repressing forces imposed upon the colonized toward the founding of a culture of its own is compellingly similar to Oswald de Andrade’s cultural concept Antropofagia. In Mário’s work, however, the suggestion of deliberate intervention, or intentional anti-colonial resistance, appears more nuanced. To him, in contrast to Guido and Lima, what betrays the mestizo in architecture is not active representation such as in the incorporation of pre-Columbian figurative elements. Instead, the mestizo lies precisely in the deviations, conscious or not. The tonic, therefore, is more in the negation of the foreign model than in any positive action.

Things Brazilian are by negation. Much more than art theory, Mário’s studies of the Baroque integrate his overall “theory of Brazil”, as José Augusto Avancini puts it (Avancini 1994, p. 47). What one really witnesses in Mário’s essays is the proposal of a new History of Brazil. As Antônio Cândido argues, paulista Modernism, the movement of which Mário is the most characteristic writer, finally released Brazil from a series of historical repressions (Cândido 2006, pp. 125–26). The fundamental ambiguity of Brazilian culture—that of being “a Latin people, of European cultural heritage, but ethnically mestizo, located in the tropics, influenced by Amerindian and African cultures”—had previously always been resolved in idealism (Cândido 2006, p. 126). Therefore, “the Indigenous had been Europeanized, the mestizo ignored” (Cândido 2006, p. 126). In modernist discourse, though, Brazil’s “deficiencies, supposed or real, are reinterpreted as superiorities” and no longer seen as “an impediment to the elaboration of culture” (Cândido 2006, p. 126). An absence turned positive.

Although Mário’s criticism was extremely influential for Brazilian scholarship in the decades to come, it would not stand a rigorous examination according to today’s scholar
standards. Instead, the critic fantasizes a colonial reality in order to feed his utopian view of what sort of nation Brazil should become. When he writes that “Aleijadinho prophesies Brazil” (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 40), what he is really saying is that Aleijadinho prophesies Mário’s Brazil. If Aleijadinho is the prophet, is Mário de Andrade the savior?

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### Notes

1. All translations from Portuguese are mine unless stated otherwise.
2. (de Oliveira 2014). For a study on the architectural typologies in Minas Gerais, see (Smith 1939).
3. See especially the second chapter of (de Grammont 2008).
4. (de Oliveira 1985, p. 20). According to Myriam de Oliveira, the first historical mention to Lisboa’s career dates back to 1766, when the artist received an important commission from the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Vila Rica.
5. See commented edition of Bretas’ account: (Bretas 1858 2002, p. 76); and (de Grammont 2008, p. 86).
6. See also (de Grammont 2008, p. 69).
7. (Bazin 1963, p. 97). The actual passage in Eschwege reads “lame hands”.
8. (Bazin 1963, p. 97). The original text refers to an artist “who had no hands”.
9. See also (de Grammont 2008, p. 138).
10. The Museu da Inconfidência, in Ouro Preto, shows, side by side, three receipts signed by Aleijadinho, the last one being from 1802. Perhaps someone versed in calligraphy could have compared the signatures, but this lies beyond my abilities. For the reproduction of several other signed receipts, and further records that attest to Aleijadinho’s involvement in many projects, refer to (de Andrade 1938).
11. I choose to use the Portuguese term—mestiço—instead of the Spanish mestizo, which is more commonly used in English, because of the broader meaning the concept has in its Portuguese application. While the word mestizo refers to people of mixed European and Indigenous American ancestry, the classification in Portuguese assumes a much less defined meaning, describing an individual originating from any possible ethnic mixture between European, African, Indigenous, Asian, and/or any non-mixed racial identity. In Portuguese, the word mestiço can be used as a noun or an adjective. A fundamental trait of Brazilian society, this identity is essential to the country’s self-awareness and was theorized in several moments of its history. While mestizo means essentially the same as the word pardo, commonly included in official records and statistics, the word mestiço carried utopian undertones in the 20th century.
12. “Paulista” in Portuguese is the adjective that defines people and things from the state (or former captaincy) of São Paulo.
13. (Antonil [1711] 2011, p. 219). Father Antonil refers to a mestiço man (“um mulato”) who was the first one to have discovered gold in the area of Cataguás. The first pieces of gold were discovered in 1697 in the rivers, an indicator of the existence of gold deposits in the mountains. This particular type of gold was covered in a black color, from which the name Ouro Preto derives. Acting upon this news, several bandeiras initiated, literally, a treasure hunt, and with it, the period of intense exploration that lasted less than a century.
14. (Antonil [1711] 2011, p. 224); (Souza 2006, p. 154). According to Laura de Mello e Souza, before the end of the century, the population of Minas Gerais was estimated at 380 thousand inhabitants, originating from several parts of the Portuguese Empire.
15. (Schwarcz and Starling 2015, p. 114). On the mythic or utopian resonance of Minas Gerais in the 18th century, see (Souza 2022).
16. Quitandeiras were Black trader women directly associated with the quilombos, fortified settlements housing communities of escaped enslaved people, spread in remote areas throughout the colony. According to Tania Costa Tribe, the occupation of Black mestizo street vendors “often functioned as an important pathway towards the acquisition of freedom and social mobility”. See (Tribe 1996).
17. Tomás Antônio Gonzaga, *Cartas Chilenas* (Gonzaga 2006), Third Letter, verses 140–145. “Também, nas grandes levas, os escravos/Que não têm mais delitos que fugirem/Às fomes e aos castigos, que padecem/No poder de senhores desumanos./Ao bando dos cativos se acrescentam/Muitos pretos já livres e outros homens./Da raça do país e da europa”.
19. Most famously, the *Inconfidência Mineira* (1789), a revolt of republican demands, was headed by members of the white, literate elite including Tomás Antônio Gonzaga himself. Other revolts against the Crown (mostly tax-related) were plotted by members of the high society, such as that of São Romão in 1739, and the Revolt of Felipe dos Santos in 1720, which was the first time that a Governor executed a rich, white man in the colony.
About the nature of such “deformations”, Mestre (de Andrade [1928] 1984, pp. 30). The attribution of the church of Saint Francis of Assisi in São Paulo to Aleijadinho is not unanimous. According to some scholars, the church was designed by Aleijadinho, who was also responsible for the medallion on the façade, some of the sculptures in the interior, the first two altars next to the chancel arch, and the image of St. John the Apostle. The high altar was also designed by the artist but has been completely altered by Francisco Lima Cerqueira and Luís Pinheiro. Francisco de Lima Cerqueira produced almost all the sculptures and carvings seen in the church. A famous sketch of the church’s façade, believed to be by Aleijadinho, is displayed as such at the Museu da Inconfidência in Ouro Preto.

In the year 1776, Minas Gerais was composed of 25.7% of mestiços, exceeding the 22.1% of white individuals, while 52.2% of the population was Black. Data from 1821 show that being a mestiço represented an advantage in the slavery system: 149,635 mestiços were free, against only 51,544 Black individuals. In percentages, 14.4% of the total mestiço population was enslaved, while among the Black population, the number rose to 75.6%. For more data see: (Maxwell [1973] 2004).

Regarding the association between the elliptical floor plans in Minas Gerais and Francesco Borromini’s architecture section at the Modern Art Week of 1922, for being able to find inspiration in traditional architecture. See (de Andrade [1928] 1984, p. 105). Regarding the association between the elliptical floor plans in Minas Gerais and Francesco Borromini’s work in Rome, see (Bury 1955).

Mário de Andrade had been traveling to the colonial cities of Minas Gerais from 1917 onwards, which made him a natural leader in the modernist trip of 1924. He will from now on often refer to Mário de Andrade and Tarsila do Amaral by their first names, with the familiarity customary to Brazilian readers. (do Amaral 1923, p. 2). “Caipira” is the Portuguese word that describes the simple people from the countryside. For Brazilians, the word refers to things and people that are provincial, simple, or naive. While the word can sometimes acquire a pejorative connotation, Tarsila uses it as an opposition to the cosmopolitan city and international academicism. This influenced Tarsila’s view of the region and relates to the particularities of primitivism in Brazilian modernism. Primitivism, here, is manifested by a certain nativist interest and the belief in the purity of mineiro region. Purity, naïveté, and simplicity, in turn, relate to the idea of “original”, and “primary”. Throughout Mário’s essays, which will be discussed below, “primitive” mostly relates to the originating, foundational, and primordial.

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Aleijadinho’s art to the ones in his body. Furthermore, since Mário attributes the plastic phase to the localities of Ouro Preto and São João del Rei (where his major architectural projects are), while the expressionistic phase is connected to Congonhas (where his major sculptural work is), one can argue that the discussion of “plastic” and “expressionistic” deformations could also reflect an opposition between curvilinear architecture and sculpture.

See, among others, (Smith 1939); (Smith 2012); (Levy 1944); (Keleman 1951); (Bury 1955); (Bazin 1956); (Bury 2006).

This association was first drawn by Bury. See (Bury 1955).

The treatise was in fact once part of a library collection in Minas Gerais but got lost at some point and is now untraceable. See (de Oliveira Pedrosa 2018) and (Bazin 1963, pp. 88–89). Through what other means Aleijadinho might have learned his trade is also debatable. According to Bretas, he learned to draw mostly from his father, the Portuguese architect, and the painter João Gomes Batista. Bretas also assumes that Aleijadinho may have visited elementary school and had some knowledge of Latin. In a country of illiterates, Aleijadinho also knew how to read and write (Bretas 1858a). Germain Bazin argues that Aleijadinho then learned woodcarving with José Coelho de Noronha. Meanwhile, the historian and preservationist Rodrigo Melo Franco sustained that the woodcarver Francisco Xavier de Brito had a significant influence on Aleijadinho’s artistic education. Acknowledging the question of where Aleijadinho might have learned his trade as a major problem for art historians working with colonial Minas Gerais, James E. Hogan collected in 1981 a bibliography on this subject (Hogan 1981). For more recent studies, see André Guilherme Dornelles Dangelo (Dangelo 2006). A cultura arquitetónica em Minas Gerais e seus antecedentes em Portugal e na Europa: Arquitetos, mestres-de-obra e construtores e o trânsito da cultura na produção da arquitectura religiosa nas Minas Gerais setecentistas, Ph.D. dissertation, UFMG, 2006; and André Guilherme Dornelles Dangelo, “As gravuras e a tratadística em circulação nas Minas Gerais setecentistas e sua influência na produção da obra de Antonio Francisco Lisboa (1738–1814)”, Simposio Internacional Arte, Tradición y Ornato en el Barroco, (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2017). Myriam de Oliveira’s publication O Aleijadinho e Sua Oficina—Catálogos das Esculturas Devocionais (de Oliveira 2022) focusses on Aleijadinho’s work as a sculptor, and emphasizes his workshop and cooperation with further professionals, thus exploring the question of authorship and training.

For an introduction to the theorization of mestizagem, mestizage, and afroamericanism in the broader Latin American context in the 20th century, refer to (Valdés 2000).

Although the overlapping time frame is striking, it is not known to me whether Guido and Mário were familiar with each other’s work.

Lezama Lima defined the inclusion of Inca symbols into the Herrerian buildings as the “Inca rebellion”, which is resolved in an “egalitarian contract” once Inca “cultural and racial” elements are forced to be admitted into the repertoire of Hispanic forms. Similarly, Lima argues that Aleijadinho “symbolizes the artistic rebellion of the Black”, while his triumph is “to question the other’s work.

The question of the differences between the Baroque in Brazil and in Spanish America is relevant at this point. Hispanic hybridizations such as the Andean Baroque produced astonishing works of architecture that conjugate pre-Columbian symbols and the imported Herrerian style, like the Church of San Lorenzo de Carangas in Potosí, Bolivia. Meanwhile, the incorporation of Indigenous and/or African imagery into the Baroque buildings in Minas Gerais is harder to grasp at first sight, though it is verifiable in specific situations. Agreeing with Gilberto Freyre, in 1939 the American art historian Robert Chester Smith had already made this point, by stating “from all the former European colonies in the New World it was Brazil that most faithfully and consistently reflected and preserved the architecture of the mother country”. See (Smith 1939); and (Freyre 1937).


References


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