

# MISSING 'BRAZILIANNESSE' OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZILIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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## **Introduction**

Despite their ideological oppositions, Brazilian modernists and eclectic nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had one stance in common: both groups agreed that the country's art and architecture since the second half of the previous century lacked national character and adaptation to Brazil's climate and social conditions. This postulate was partly refuted in Portuguese-language scholarship published since the 1960s, exposing the persistence of colonial-era patterns in the hinterland and, in a few cases, in urban settings. In the urge to rehabilitate nineteenth-century Brazilian art and architecture, however, the actual discourses by which it came to be ostracized were themselves suppressed from scholarship.

This paper examines a few landmark narratives on the issue of national character published between 1880 and 1940. Some major authors in point were academic art critic Gonzaga Duque, neocolonial engineer Ricardo Severo and physician José Mariano Filho, Beaux-Arts architect Adolfo Morales de los Ríos Filho, writer Monteiro Lobato, and modernist architect Lucio Costa. These authors' writings will be examined here with regard to their definition of a Brazilian character and the purported lack thereof in works produced in the generations that preceded them. The discourse on the lack of national character put forward in these narratives stems both from well-documented aesthetic agendas advanced by these authors, and from the less frequently acknowledged difficulty in dating Brazilian vernacular architecture due to its marked continuity and stability. This brings attention to the matter of how canonical examples of Brazilian art and architecture were cherry-picked, then oftentimes tampered with, to conform to certain expectations regarding national character. The authors' aesthetic movements are less relevant to how

each addressed the matter of Brazilianness in art, than is their understanding of the nature of artistic and building professions.

Brazil in the 1880s was an empire ruled by landed elites from the Northeast and, to a lesser degree, wealthy merchants from Rio. The only monarchy among the republics of the American continent, she owed this peculiar situation to the historic roots of independence. Brazil had been a Portuguese colony from 1500 until 1808. In that year, the Portuguese Crown, fleeing the Napoleonic invasion, relocated to its colony, making Rio de Janeiro the seat of the Portuguese Empire. King D. João VI strove to turn the city into a proper European capital, and thus it came to be that a group of French artists, purged in the Restoration, made their way to Rio, later to create the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts on the model of its Parisian namesake. Imbued with such civilizing mission, it is no wonder that these artists had no knowledge of, and little interest in, Brazil's artistic and architectural past. Outside Rio, however, art and architecture were only marginally influenced by the academic novelties for most of the nineteenth century.

The period of our study corresponds to the transition, in Brazil, from the old imperial gentry to rule by another rural elite in the Southeast, and then to the hegemony of industrial capitalism. It also covers the decline of the Imperial Fine Arts Academy, later National School of Fine Arts. In a curious amalgam of echoes from European artistic movements, the *Salons* of Fine Arts in Rio during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were dominated by Romantic and Impressionist painting, and Neoclassical sculpture. Urban growth and renewal displayed eclectic styles of architecture of mostly French, British and Italian influence, happily mixed and matched until the 1910s, when the moralist traditional or neocolonial movement began to set the tone of architectural debate.

## **Assessing National Character**

The Brazilian cultural establishment in the early twentieth century took a keen interest in the matter of national character in art and architecture. This interest can be traced back to two concurrent influences: first, the nation-building debates spearheaded by the Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute (IHGB) in the 1840s; second, the European romanticism's nationalistic themes. A landmark in the first factor was the publication, in 1854, of Francisco

Adolfo de Varnhagen's *História Geral do Brasil* (General History of Brazil), defining the Brazilian nation as the junction of three races—white Portuguese, black Africans, and Amerindians. Nationalistic romanticism had its most acclaimed expression in the literary movement known as Indianism. The lead of novels such as José de Alencar's (1829–1877) *O Guarani* (1857), idealizing the contacts between Portuguese colonists and the natives, was followed in music. Carlos Gomes's 1870 opera version of that novel preceded Chiquinha Gonzaga's erudite stylization of Afro-Brazilian songs. Even more so, painting picked up the subject, as in Rodolfo Amoedo's (1857–1941) series of Indianist works from the 1880s.

By the 1880s, Indianist subjects, as well as scenes of daily life, had begun to lend local flavor to Brazilian Beaux-Arts-style painting. Around the same time, prominent art critic Luiz Gonzaga Duque Estrada worried, paradoxically, about the disappearance of national character in art. In the book that was the synthesis of his early thinking, *A Arte Brasileira* (Brazilian Art, 1888), Gonzaga Duque made a pessimistic account of Brazilian Art:

The novels, history, and poetry of this country had no influence whatsoever in these works, which remained impervious to the dawn of national thought. . . .

One concludes, then, that this art is missing native features and originality, primordial qualities for the founding of a School.

. . . . The defining feature of our art is cosmopolitanism, and a nation, to have a School, needs, foremost, a national art.<sup>1</sup>

He was not particularly excited by earlier art forms, however. Even the monumental architecture of the colonial period (1530–1808), which so captivated later writers, was to him:

. . . . A flagrant evidence of bad taste and lack of intelligence . . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Luís Gonzaga Duque Estrada and Tadeu Chiarelli, *A Arte Brasileira* (Campinas, SP, Brasil: Mercado de Letras, 1995), 258–259.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

To their credit, Gonzaga Duque conceded, colonial painters such as Manoel da Cunha (1737–1809) had, at the very least, a sort of crafty authenticity about them<sup>3</sup> For him, then, differently from the European romantics, national character was not to be extracted from the achievements of previous eras. It was something yet to be produced out of the maturing of late nineteenth-century artists. On this regard, even a promising young painter such as Amoedo—to whom Gonzaga Duque commissioned his portrait—was censured for the feebleness of his subjects. National character was thus not to be found in any specific style, but merely in the choice of proper subject matter, chiefly Indians<sup>4</sup>

Later on, though, in 1909, Gonzaga Duque would commend Amoedo for having outgrown Indianism, "vanquished by the assimilating force of a superior environment":<sup>5</sup> European culture, in the form of classical nudes and mythological scenes. In his last survey of Brazilian art, the opening speech delivered at the 1908 *Salon* in Rio de Janeiro, Gonzaga Duque summarized a triumphal picture of national art. The occasion was momentous: 1908 marked the centennial of the transfer of the Portuguese Crown from Lisbon to Rio, thus marking the onset of a cycle of direct European influence on all aspects of Brazilian culture. In Gonzaga Duque's speech, Colonial art was no longer judged by its aesthetic value—either good or bad—, but seen as a "historical document" of utmost importance.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, French influence was no longer seen as harming the expression of national character. On the contrary, it provided the necessary professional expertise and cultural environment in which national character would gradually emerge.

The colonial heritage, of Portuguese and Catholic extraction, was thus granted the status of a mythical ancestor of contemporary national character: one to which ritual deference was owed, but one that exerted minimal influence on present conceptions of national art. Gonzaga Duque, speaking before the assembled professors of the Fine Arts School as well as the President of the Republic, was cautious in his definition of this character:

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 185.

<sup>5</sup>Luís Gonzaga Duque Estrada, *Contemporaneos: Pintores E Escultores* (Benedicto de Souza, 1929), 13.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 247.

. . . . The characteristic art, truly Brazilian, shall appear from this admirable nature, from this golden light, from this popular soul made of the Indian's nostalgia, the animal infallibility of the African, and the lyrical soul of the uprooted, seafaring Portuguese.<sup>7</sup>

His commentaries on the *Salons* of the years 1904–1907 give, perhaps, a more vivid picture of what he took this "truly Brazilian" art to be. Landscape paintings, adroitly portraying the "admirable nature" with its "golden light", were particularly favored and commended. Scenes of daily life drew a good lot of his attention, as much as the conventional mythological scenes and classical studies. Indianist subjects were not altogether disparaged, but they had ceased to be sufficient reason for a painting or sculpture to be commended. Religious, historical and allegorical works, supposedly the acme of academic art, were mostly shunned by the nation's most respected art critic.

## **Tradition and Decay**

The years leading from the restructuring of the federal debt in 1902 to the centennial exposition of 1908 built up a momentum of conflicting urges: cosmopolitanism and the expression of national character, exaltation of modernity and industrialization as well as taste for the exuberant tropical nature, national unity and showcasing states' identities<sup>8</sup> In this context, a national character in art and architecture was an optimistic prospect rather than something already achieved at any point in the past or present. In keeping with the romantic nationalist drive that first established the debate on this topic, Brazil was seen as having started off under the yoke of Portuguese culture, slowly blended with Indian and African influences. National character, therefore, had not been there to begin with, then lost to degeneration, as in the myths of origins in European cultures. On the contrary, it would gradually emerge from the maturing interaction of racial and geographical forces in the future rather than in a mythical past.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>8</sup>Margareth da Silva Pereira, "A Exposição Nacional de 1908 Ou O Brasil Visto Por Dentro," in *1908 Um Brasil Em Exposição*, ed. Margareth da Silva Pereira (Rio de Janeiro: Casa 12, 2011), 11–49.

This placement of national character in the future was a boon for authors and movements attempting to commandeer the idea of constructing *Brazilianness* in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It assumed, quite contrarily to the dominant literary mood in the second half of the previous century, that no national character had yet been able to grow out of the melting pot of cultural influences in the nation. Although Gonzaga Duque forecast a natural, unconscious development of a Brazilian art school, other writers set out as a program to create this national style.

Around the time of Gonzaga Duque's passing in Rio, a sharp critical and literary scene was emerging in São Paulo. One of the most acclaimed and prolific writers in this milieu, addressing the issue of national character both explicitly and implicitly, was José Bento Monteiro Lobato (1882–1948). His debut literary book, *Urupês* (1918)—the name of the ultimate small, remote town in São Paulo state—, was a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the tension between the yearning for modernity and cosmopolitanism in provincial towns, and the backwardness of their agrarian society. The closing chapter of the book featured an unforgiving criticism of the literary infatuation with authentic national characters. In the 1910s, the foremost representative of these characters was the *caipira*, archetypal small isolated farmer sunk into endemic poverty, who had replaced the Indian as a favorite Brazilian literary character<sup>9</sup>

Monteiro Lobato was, like many of his fellow bourgeois from São Paulo, an outspoken enthusiast of material progress and industrialization. His writing, often disparaged in the mid-twentieth century as conservative, was actually part of his modern enthusiasm. The *non sequitur* juxtaposition of nonsensical anecdotes from several remote towns was itself a very modern literary formula at the time, contrasting with the conventional and uneventful way of life portrayed in the text. It exacerbated the naturalist tendency towards depicting individual scenes, yet departed from that style by refusing the idealized image of the country folk as authentic representatives of the national character<sup>10</sup>

His criticism of the inert social and material underdevelopment of small inland towns in *Cidades Mortas* (Dead Cities, 1919) was, however, complex. The

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<sup>9</sup>José Bento Monteiro Lobato, *Urupês*, 2nd ed., Biblioteca de Literatura Brasileira, VIII (São Paulo: Martins, 1944), 208–209.

<sup>10</sup>Marcela Verônica da Silva, "A Modernidade Em Monteiro Lobato: Cidades Mortas E O Retrato de Um Brasil Decadente No início Do Século XX," *Revista Virtual de Letras* 5, no. 1 (January 2013): 303, <http://www.revlet.com.br/artigos/188.pdf>.

pretentious self-sufficiency of the establishment in the aptly-named fictional city of Oblivion, for instance, alluded to a sort of timeless decrepitude, rather than mere underdevelopment. People in Oblivion died of boredom,<sup>11</sup> not material want. The dead towns contained:

. . . . Impressions of a dead youth that vegetated in the stagnation of the dead cities. There is also some modern stuff. But both modern and old are worth the same—nothing<sup>12</sup>

This sense of hopelessness, of something that would have been yet did not bear fruit, stroke a very strong chord with Monteiro Lobato's contemporaries, as it clearly alluded to the material and moral decadence of once-thriving urban centers in depleted coffee-growing regions<sup>13</sup>

There, everything was, nothing is. No verbs are conjugated in the present tense. Everything is preterit.

A group of dying cities drag on a decrepit living, spent weeping in today's pettiness the nostalgic greatness of yore.<sup>14</sup>

The former affluence of these cities was never directly spoken of in the book, but it was vivid in the mind of its readers. Monteiro Lobato rejected the romantic and naturalistic ideal of the glorification of a national—or even regional—character, embodied in traditional society. Yet, *Cidades Mortas* evidenced a different sort of nostalgia, harking back to Gonzaga Duque's early writing: the idea that some process of national character-building had been under way, crude but authentic, then stifled before reaching cultural maturity. This construction of a mythical "time outside time"<sup>15</sup> of eternal decay from an acme that never was, set the stage for the construction of a highly malleable image of lost *Brazilianness*. Crucial to this narrative of a mythical loss of something that never quite existed in this world was the implicitly perceived

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<sup>11</sup>José Bento Monteiro Lobato, *Cidades Mortas: Contos E Impressões* (São Paulo: Revista do Brasil, 1919), 25.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., epigram.

<sup>13</sup>Silva, "A Modernidade Em Monteiro Lobato," 299.

<sup>14</sup>Monteiro Lobato, *Cidades Mortas*, 8.

<sup>15</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Aspects Du Mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

gap that retained a tenuous link to chronological continuity<sup>16</sup> This was also well known to Monteiro Lobato's readers and did not require explicit mention in the text. It would have been obvious, at the time, that decay in the region of the dead cities set on around the 1860s and was felt more strongly from the 1880s on.

Monteiro Lobato saw in material and cultural modernization the only means of escape from this eternal decay, thus using the heyday of the coffee-growing urban society as little more than an abstract backdrop to his criticism of contemporary backwardness. Meanwhile, similar ideas about a stifled development of national character, followed by a period of decay, and the need to reassert the greatness of Brazilian identity, were being promoted in São Paulo by a Portuguese engineer, archaeologist and political activist, Ricardo Severo. His presence in Brazil coincided with the development of traditionalist movements throughout the Americas in the early twentieth century. Rooted in the European romantic nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century, traditionalist architecture in the Western Hemisphere took root first in the United States, where the Mission Style provided a template for Hispanic revivals. It then spread southward, reaching Latin America around the time of the centennial of independence in many of its countries<sup>17</sup>

## Reconstructing Brazilianness

In 1914, Severo gave a highly influential lecture at the Artistic Culture Society in São Paulo, titled *Traditional Art in Brazil: The House and the Temple*. He shared in Gonzaga Duque's late view that local culture had not yet developed sufficient strength to establish a national artistic character. Unlike the art critic, however, Severo would not wait patiently for a national school to gradually emerge out of the cumulative efforts of individual artists: he outlined, instead, what would give Brazilian architecture a distinctive character right away. Severo argued that the forms and plans implanted in the Americas by the Portuguese colonists, chiefly derived from both Roman and Moorish sources, were to be the basis for the establishment of a national-traditional art

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<sup>16</sup>Luciana Meire da Silva, "Cidades Mortas: O Declínio Da 'Civilização Cafeeira' No Vale Do Paraíba Segundo a Elite Agrária Decadente," *Idéias* 1, no. 4 (2012): 293, <http://www.ifch.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/ideias/article/view/867>.

<sup>17</sup>Aracy A Amaral, "La Invención de Un Pasado," in *Arquitectura Neocolonial: América Latina, Caribe, Estados Unidos*, ed. Aracy A Amaral (São Paulo: Memorial : FCE, 1994), 12.

in Brazil<sup>18</sup> He followed up this first conference with further texts, putting forward his ideas about a new traditional Brazilian architecture. In a 1917 article in one of the country's most important magazines of the time, Severo emphasized the adaptation of Portuguese styles in Brazil as the source of a local authenticity:

The Portuguese always gave a particular mark to the architecture he imported, and this phenomenon, noted by the most illustrious historians of Portuguese art, shows up in colonial Brazil as well, where the Baroque, said to be Jesuit, took on expressions of modest simplicity, but with a noteworthy local mark<sup>19</sup>

He made a point to show how churches and houses in the colonial period displayed that sort of plainness, "being appropriated into the local setting and in their aspect of characteristic originality" were to constitute "what is or may come to be Traditional Architecture" in Brazil. Severo went on to describe how the vigor of this traditional architecture persisted in Brazil up to the time of Independence (1822). At first, he claimed, not even French influence—once decried by the young Gonzaga Duque—was able to stifle its vitality. According to the Portuguese engineer, it was only around the second half of the nineteenth century, and more strongly after the proclamation of the Republic (1889), that this traditional setting began to erode. Severo thus proceeded to decry the arrival of fresh immigrants at that time, "deft stuccoists come from Italy and Portugal" who brought eclecticism, a façadist habit of making up "incomprehensible styles that shocked mostly by their disconnection with the local setting and its destiny"<sup>20</sup> The solution, he asserted, was to reclaim an authentic national tradition, consisting in the adaptation of old Portuguese styles, as adapted and transformed by the influence of local climate and geography.

The argument constructed by Severo thus rested on the ideal of a national character consisting in a timeless, natural Portuguese adaptation to their colonial *genius loci*, only to be suppressed by an unfortunate onset of eclectic

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<sup>18</sup>Ricardo Marques de Azevedo, "Las Ideas de Ricardo Severo Y La Relación Con El Academicismo," in, n.d., 249.

<sup>19</sup>Ricardo Severo, "A Arte Tradicional No Brasil," *Revista Do Brasil* II, no. 4 (April 1917): 402.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 415.

influence in the second half of the nineteenth century. The same cycle of timeless authenticity followed by a historical gap fostering decadence would be represented, two years later, in Monteiro Lobato's "dead cities". Although the fiction writer had a much more explicitly negative view of the backwardness of the countryside, the Portuguese engineer was also careful not to romanticize old houses. He made clear his case for material and even aesthetic progress, if only tempered by traditional adaptation to the site:

Traditional Architecture does not mean, then, literal reproduction of traditional things, of archaeological fossils, of rammed earth or cob houses, of little adobe churches, of back streets between shacks three fathoms deep, with door and louvered window, or of the gloomy houses in the city centers of yore, without hygiene or aesthetic appeal

Traditional art is the stylization of earlier artistic forms that constitute at some point in time the local environment, the moral character of a people, the hallmark of its civilization; it is the product of a rhythmic evolution of successive cycles of art and style . . . .<sup>21</sup>

Severo wrote, spoke, and designed in São Paulo, a city that woke up from its own gloomy slumber of economic inertia as late as the 1860s, when the construction of the railway turned the city into a major economic hub. From a point of view taken in São Paulo, little of any architectural significance had been built in the city between the reconstruction of the emblematic Jesuit College in 1700, and the opening of the railways in 1867–1871<sup>22</sup> Neoclassicism in São Paulo had been an essentially rural phenomenon in those formerly affluent coffee-growing regions, mitigated by the practical conservatism of local builders. As Monteiro Lobato showed in his prose, the more traditional of these regions were decadent by the early twentieth century. In this context, the Portuguese engineer embraced the neoclassicism of the first two thirds or so of the nineteenth century as a continuation of the authentic Portuguese-Brazilian tradition.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 423–424.

<sup>22</sup>Carlos Lemos, "Ecletismo Em São Paulo," in *Ecletismo Na Arquitetura Brasileira*, ed. Annateresa Fabris (São Paulo: Nobel : Edusp, 1987), 72.

Rio de Janeiro, in contrast, was in the 1910s the nation's capital, twice as large a city as São Paulo, and had a much more diverse architectural heritage. It had undergone a continuous process of urban infill and extension throughout the nineteenth century, with a self-conscious interest in up-to-date architecture, crowned by large-scale urban renewal in its core starting in 1902. The differences between traditionalist discourse in São Paulo and Rio are, thus, probably not surprising. In the capital, this traditionalist movement was advocated, chiefly among all its proponents, by José Mariano Filho (1881–1946), a hygienist physician and amateur architect. He was, incidentally, responsible for coining the word "Neocolonial" to designate that movement<sup>23</sup> Mariano was also instrumental in rousing public support for monumental buildings to be designed in the neocolonial style, in addition to having sponsored, with his personal wealth, a number of architectural competitions biased towards the same style.

In spite of the lifelong ideological constancy of his prolific writing, José Mariano Filho was perhaps most remembered for having provided, in 1924, traveling scholarships for a number of young architects to document what were then the largest surviving ensembles of colonial Brazilian architecture: the former gold-mining towns of nearby Minas Gerais State. Among these young architects was Lucio Costa (1902–1998), future modernist agitator, theorist, and practitioner, known worldwide for having designed Brasília, but who was at that time an enthusiastic supporter of the neocolonial movement. What Costa took out of this experience will be discussed later; what interests us for now is how the geographic scope of the effort was evidence of how differently traditional Brazilian architecture was perceived in Rio as compared to São Paulo.

In late-blooming São Paulo, the colonial period and much of the nineteenth century could be lumped together into a romantic era of traditional authenticity, albeit one endowed with a decaying quaintness that put off its sophisticated twentieth-century writers. In Rio, surviving buildings from the colonial period had often been added onto, or even disfigured, by nineteenth- and twentieth-century interventions. The relocation of the Portuguese Crown, in 1808, and even more so the beginnings of Beaux-Arts artistic training in

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<sup>23</sup>Carlos Kessel, *Arquitetura Neocolonial No Brasil: Entre O Pastiche E a Modernidade* (Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Estácio de Sá, Curso de Arquitetura e Urbanismo : Jauá Editora, 2008), 132.

1826, were the death knell of national character for the neocolonial proponents in the nation's capital. Since Rio had been heavily affected by these events, they had to look elsewhere for documentation. Minas Gerais towns such as Ouro Preto and Diamantina—now both World Heritage sites—were, conversely, their ideal image of a traditional urban culture, supposedly frozen in time after the decline in gold mining robbed the region of its vitality.

Thus, Mariano's "time outside time" could not last long beyond the end of the eighteenth century. The mistaken assumption that most construction had come to an end in Ouro Preto and Diamantina after the exhaustion of the gold mines both strengthened this cut-off date *circa* 1800, and later fostered a historic preservation ideal of removing supposedly later accretions to colonial buildings. It also sparked a curious search for the oldest, most remote examples of traditional architecture, expected to be the ones least contaminated by neoclassical affectations:

The Portuguese colonist, old friend of the sun, brought to the Brazilian land the centuries-old experience of his race, drawn out of the contact with the oriental civilizations, and learned above all from the Moorish experience. Thus, in confronting the Brazilian architectural problem, the Portuguese colonist had not the slightest hesitation. . . . During the first two centuries of national life [sixteenth and seventeenth centuries], Portuguese architecture was imperceptibly adjusting itself to the Brazilian way of life. . . . The absence of classical elements, together with the lack of a properly skilled workforce, led the people to improvise new practices and processes, unknown in Portugal<sup>24</sup>

This, at a time when Rio's last remains of the early Portuguese occupation had been eagerly obliterated in the name of urban renewal, and before the seventeenth-century farmhouses of São Paulo would really catch the attention of architects, was in truth inconsequential. The eighteenth-century gold-rush architecture of Ouro Preto and Diamantina became, effectively, the canonical examples of Brazilian colonial architecture, and this despite the enormous differences between the architecture of the two settlements.

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<sup>24</sup> José Marianno Filho, *À Margem Do Problema Arquitetônico Nacional* (Rio de Janeiro: Mendes Júnior, 1943), 10.

## Modernity and Preservation

Mariano's national tradition, even more so than that of Monteiro Lobato and Ricardo Severo, hinged on the notion of ethnicity. For him, "the preference of man for the architecture of his homeland" had an emotional source, based on domestic reminiscence and unconscious references. He therefore deplored the Portuguese immigrants and the Brazilians who, "instead of proceeding like the Italians, British, or Germans, who favor the styles of their own nations, . . . seek intently to hide or mask their own"<sup>25</sup> This hiding of the national style, in 1943, could be applied both to eclecticism and to the characterless and "stateless styles" of modern architecture. Mariano bemoaned the modern mentality, which in abolishing the principle of decor, reduced "the art of building to the science of making housing", requiring merely efficiency and economy<sup>26</sup>

Art, however, did not mean mere decoration to him. Whereas Severo in São Paulo gave in to the contemporary taste for modern plans and massing,<sup>27</sup> and commissioned painter José Wash Rodrigues a comprehensive study made almost entirely of details, Mariano steadfastly insisted, as late as 1931, that there was something more fundamental:

I do not care for the plastic qualities of traditional Brazilian architecture, because what I seek in it is far above these qualities. . . . Less of an artist than a sociologist myself, I consider architecture to be the social instrument of nationality. I do not care for artistic virtues, the charm of lines, or the splendor of details, by means of which the architectural styles are expressed. What I seek are the organic qualities, the healthy virtues, the structural fundamentals, from which stem the perfect accord of architectural feeling with the nation's soul<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>27</sup>Joana Mello, *Ricardo Severo: Da Arqueologia Portuguesa À Arquitetura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2007), 178.

<sup>28</sup>Marianno, *À Margem Do Problema Arquitetônico Nacional*, 64.

Modern materials and technologies, however, needed not be shunned in this endeavor to forge a new Brazilian architecture that was to remain firmly grounded in deeper principles, respecting its ancestral "Roman spirit, characterized by the constant proportion of its compositional elements, and by its rectangular geometric projection"<sup>29</sup> This ideal of material progress rooted in social conservatism echoed in the writings of the young Lucio Costa, his former protégé, who by the 1930s had grown to be Mariano's ideological rival. In 1929, while still a promoter of traditional architecture, he argued against the example of the exceptional monumental buildings of Brazilian rococo. An art made in Brazil by individual genius with no apparent following could not form the basis for national character, he believed. Following his former patron, Costa held that it was, instead, in the simple architecture of anonymous master builders that resided the functional, technical and aesthetic homogeneity of Brazilian character<sup>30</sup> After Lucio Costa's conversion to modernism, he authored in 1937 an article describing what he held to be the natural development of traditional Brazilian architecture. True to his roots, he was speaking of residential architecture built by masons and carpenters, which remained impervious to:

. . . . The unforeseen development of bad architecture teaching—giving future architects a whole, confused "technical-decorative" education, with no link whatsoever with life, and not explaining them the *why* of each element, nor the deep reasons that conditioned, in each period, the appearance of common features, that is, of a style . . . .<sup>31</sup>

Because Costa did not focus his narrative on learned architecture, he was able to circumvent the problem of "bad teaching", and to argue for the occurrence of an authentic traditional architecture as far forward as 1910. He could thereby synchronize the decay precisely with the onset of the traditional architecture movement to which he had previously belonged, and which he now condemned. This opposition notwithstanding, all elements of the post-romantic nationalist narrative were represented in his text: an original period

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>30</sup>Marcelo Puppi, *Por Uma História Não Moderna Da Arquitetura Brasileira: Questões de Historiografia* (Campinas: Pontes : Unicamp, 1998), 22.

<sup>31</sup>"Documentação Necessária," in *Lúcio Costa: Sobre Arquitetura*, n.d., 93.

of authentic national character, followed by another of pretentious or sophisticated decay; the possibility of overcoming that decay by promoting a certain architectural movement; the defense of technical modernization and aesthetic advance while remaining anchored in that authentic national tradition.

A few years later, though, Lucio Costa drifted from the broad sociological picture of national character to a romantic view favoring individual artistic intent<sup>32</sup> and personal genius,<sup>33</sup> both embodied in his contemporary Oscar Niemeyer. In this, he was probably influenced by his acquaintance and driving force behind the creation of the National Heritage Service (SPHAN), modernist poet Mário de Andrade.

Although Costa put forward the thesis of a chain of authentic architecture broken only by the neocolonial movement, his practice as official of the SPHAN effectively upheld Mariano's view that proper traditional Brazilian architecture did not reach far beyond 1800. In theory, this view should have fostered the protection of colonial-era monuments and urban sites, while denying protection for nineteenth-century structures. In practice, however, matters were a lot trickier, and actual knowledge of colonial architecture was sparse<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, the continuation of colonial building practices well into the nineteenth century, and their intermingling with neoclassical influences, had been known to Ricardo Severo and his São Paulo colleagues. On the other hand, documentation for most sites of historic interest was virtually nonexistent; dating often relied on conventional wisdom about local history as well as on *a priori* assumptions regarding pre-nineteenth-century styles. Proof of this uncertainty was that typological studies of colonial buildings, published in the SPHAN journal in the 1930s and 40s, one among which penned by Lucio Costa himself, were unable to ascribe even so little as rough date ranges to building types.

This entailed dramatic consequences even for those buildings meant to be preserved. A number of supposed eclectic or neocolonial accretions to historic churches were carelessly replaced with modern recreations of that original

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<sup>32</sup>“Considerações Sobre O Ensino Da Arquitetura,” in *Lúcio Costa: Sobre Arquitetura*, n.d., 113.

<sup>33</sup>“Carta-Depoimento,” in *Lúcio Costa: Sobre Arquitetura*, n.d., 125.

<sup>34</sup>Maria Lúcia Bressan Pinheiro, *Neocolonial, Modernismo E Preservação Do Patrimônio No Debate Cultural Dos Anos 1920 No Brasil* (São Paulo: EdUSP, 2012), 25.

"simplicity" heralded by the Rio neocolonial architects themselves<sup>35</sup> Certain nineteenth-century additions to Ouro Preto houses, such as parapets, were removed because roof overhangs were supposed to be a mainstay of colonial architecture; forged iron railings, on the other hand, were mistakenly attributed to the eighteenth century and thus incorporated into a canonical image of colonial two-story houses. In São Paulo, campaniles were "simplified" and entire wings in farmhouses were removed, in an infatuation with the ideal of volumetric simplicity promoted by Mariano and Costa, and followed with zeal by Luís Saia<sup>36</sup> The preservation of elements that seemed to prefigure modern architecture was particularly favored:

Colonial constructive devices, such as buildings on stilts, trellised louvers, and cob on wooden frames, were associated with *pilotis*, *brise-soleils*, and reinforced concrete. For modernist architects, the resemblance between their own architecture and the colonial one was not one of appearance or effect, as was the case in neocolonial buildings, but one of structure<sup>37</sup>

Conversely, whatever departed from association with these elements fell easily in place with a picture of eclectic architecture, especially in its popular French-inspired styles: orthostates, articulated wall surfaces, high pitched roofs and so on.

## **Tradition and the Professional Architect**

The onset of the Modern movement in Brazilian architecture thus entailed a power struggle between the proponents of the neocolonial movement and their younger rivals. Both camps deployed the same narrative regarding the development of national character in order to promote opposing views of architectural style and space, and both derided their rival as being so beneath them, it was "non-architecture". In the meantime, a single dissonant chord struck the debate in Rio during that time. It was Adolfo Morales de los Ríos

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>36</sup>Lia Mayumi, *Taipa, Canela-Preta E Concreto: Estudo Sobre O Restauro de Casas Bandeiristas* (São Paulo: Romano Guerra, 2008), 61.

<sup>37</sup>Maria Cecília Londres Fonseca, *O Patrimônio Em Processo: Trajetória Da Política Federal de Preservação No Brasil*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ : MinC-IPHAN, 2005), 188.

Filho's book *Grandjean de Montigny e a evolução da arte brasileira* (Grandjean de Montigny and the Evolution of Brazilian Art, 1941). In this work, Morales de los Ríos (1887–1973), director of the National Fine Arts School, went back to the later Gonzaga Duque's positive view of early-nineteenth-century French influence on Brazilian art. The argument was similar:

Yes, it dignified Brazilian art, fighting the neglect and ignorance of a fledgling society, . . . and contributing to the foundation of an art school, where it would have been difficult to create it using existing [local] resources.<sup>38</sup>

Despite being part of the architectural establishment, as director of the most important fine arts school in the nation, Morales de los Ríos had his own axe to grind as well. The Beaux-Arts method had been under critical fire for well over two decades, first from the traditionalist movement, then from the modernists. The National Fine Arts School was somewhat open, nevertheless, to the teaching of neocolonial architecture in the 1920s, although it was considered but one of several eclectic styles happily used and mixed by students and teachers. Lucio Costa himself, owing to political connections, had seized the school directorship for a few months in 1931, before being ousted by the professors. Moreover, urban renewal in Rio, exacerbated since 1920, was threatening the nineteenth-century French-inspired heritage just as much as the monuments of the colonial period.

Morales de los Ríos's arguments, however, were of an obviously different nature than those of the neocolonial-modernist groups. Unlike the neocolonial or modernist mavericks, he was directly implicated in the education of a class of elite artists expected to succeed in both public and private commissions. Thus, he defended not only the historical roots of his school, but also the diversity and adaptability of architects in a time of rapidly changing tastes among the public, particularly so in a moment when support for the neocolonial style in major works had all but disappeared. Also, the Pan-American ideology of the first three decades of the twentieth century, which had underwritten neocolonial architecture throughout the continent, had been replaced by introverted populism in Brazil's fascist government led by Getúlio Vargas. Paradoxically, this introversion was deleterious for the traditional art movement, as it made Brazilians look away from the art of the American

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<sup>38</sup>Adolfo Morales de los Ríos Filho, *Grandjean de Montigny E a Evolução Da Arte Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: A Noite, 1941), 157.

continent and towards the more conventional artistic centers of Europe. Public architecture in the Vargas régime oscillated between the stripped classicism then popular in most European countries, and modernism, which was being half-heartedly supported by fascist Italy at the same time. As for the fickle bourgeois of São Paulo, they moved on to favor variations on Art Déco, Italian rationalism, and whitewashed modernism.

Both Ricardo Severo and José Mariano Filho, on the other hand, had advocated a sort of sociological collectivism in the architectural profession. Severo, a republican activist who at first moved to Brazil to avoid political persecution, expected architecture and architects to play a role in the forging of a modern—meaning nationalist—state, conscious and proud of its ethnic origins<sup>39</sup> He sought to balance his archaeological interests, which led him to favor a structuralist cohesion of sorts between a centuries-old culture and its present developments, and his practice as an architect, where he ultimately gave in to the public expectations of wholly modernized, eclectic plans and picturesque massing. Nevertheless, he was successful in fostering public taste for such traditional Brazilian elements as the seventeenth-century *alpendres* (deep and wide colonnaded porches) and generous roof overhangs. These features went on to become favorites of Brazilian single-family houses throughout the twentieth century.

As for Mariano, a scion of the landed elite of the Brazilian Northeast, architecture was a dilettante passion as much as a political cause. Free from the need to make a living out of the profession, he was thus little interested in matters of professional cohesion and construction industry. Conversely, with his disposable income, he was able to fund a considerable documentation effort, as well as publicity stunts in the form of design competitions. In addition to this, he was a regular contributor to the Rio press throughout the 1930s. As the prestige of neocolonial architecture for major public works eroded during that decade, his criticism of the Modern movement increasingly resorted to the sort of racial and political slander expected to appeal to the heads of the fascist government: "architectural Judaism" and "communist architecture" were expressions used in his later writings,<sup>40</sup> as well as attacks on artistic "freemasonry."

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<sup>39</sup>Mello, *Ricardo Severo*, 29.

<sup>40</sup>Marianno, *À Margem Do Problema Arquetônico Nacional*, 41.

Both because of his early years in the neocolonial movement, and in reaction to Mariano's criticism of modern architecture, Lucio Costa, too, resorted to an ethnic narrative regarding the roots of national artistic character. As a pure-bred white Brazilian of colonial Portuguese descent, the son of a Navy officer, he was in as strong a position as Mariano to claim authority to speak for national roots. Moreover, his political connections in the Vargas government freed him from the concern with day-to-day professional practice in a market environment. Costa at first supported Mariano's narrative of a collective, anonymous architecture without architects, even through his first decade as a leader of the Modern movement in Brazil. This led him to shun at first the few known masters of Brazilian art in the colonial period. By 1945, however, his writings focused chiefly on self-conscious artistic intent and the importance of individual genius for the development of style. A hinge moment in his views probably occurred around 1939, when he supported Oscar Niemeyer's attempt to insert a modernist hotel at the heart of the historic district in Ouro Preto, although influence from poets Mário de Andrade and Carlos Drummond de Andrade in the SPHAN is not to be excluded. Costa then moved away from the ethnological understanding of architectural coherence, to argue that an architectural work of art "shall not resent the proximity to other works of art"<sup>41</sup> Throughout the remainder of his long writing career, he strove to reconcile both views as the discourses on the artistic originality of the Modern movement became hegemonic. The unchallenged ethos of national genius that Costa helped construct for Niemeyer remains to this day a favorite topic of debate regarding the nature of professional practice in Brazilian architecture.

## Conclusion

Despite their differences, Monteiro Lobato, Ricardo Severo, José Mariano Filho, and Lucio Costa constructed and upheld a long-lived teleological history of Brazilian art. It was fueled by a nationalist spirit, placed against perceived weaknesses in Brazilian culture. The starting point of this narrative was invariably a timeless period of formation of the national identity. This needed not be an exemplary or admirable stage; Monteiro Lobato despised the backwardness of the remote countryside as well as the pretentious manners of

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Carlos Eduardo Dias Comas, "O Passado Mora Ao Lado. Lúcio Costa E O Projeto Do Grand Hotel de Ouro Preto, 1938/40," *Arquitextos* 122, no. 00 (July 2010), <http://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/11.122/3486>.

regions that had experienced ephemeral wealth. The essential was that it provided fundamentals of national identity that could be later reworked and improved: Portuguese language and way of life, adaptation to climate and geography, simplicity, and rationality.

Then was supposed to follow a clearly circumscribed period of decay: for Monteiro Lobato, the decline of the oldest coffee-growing regions, from the 1860s on, was the preferred reference; Severo identified it in the cosmopolitan burst of growth in São Paulo starting in the 1870s, fueled by immigrants who threatened the cohesion of the old Portuguese-Brazilian culture; Mariano, in this specific topic the most enduringly influential among these four writers, pointed to the cultural disruption caused by the relocation of the Portuguese Crown to Rio in 1808. Lucio Costa made a timid attempt to find fault only in the traditional art movements of the 1910s and 20s, then retreated to the less controversial position of Mariano's narrative.

This shunning of nineteenth-century art, or at least that of the last third of that century, had strong consequences for Brazilian art historiography. The colonial period had been little known up to the documentation efforts of the traditionalists, but vernacular architecture and art of the nineteenth century remained poorly studied throughout most of the twentieth century. While documentation for the high art of the same period fortunately survived, several important buildings were allowed to be destroyed, because they did not fit into the continuous march of national character through history. Lucio Costa himself, shortly before retiring from his Heritage office, wrote an explicit refusal to list the former Senate building in Rio, demolished to make way for a subway station. Research on nineteenth-century art and architecture has flourished in Brazil over the past two decades, and the writings of Monteiro Lobato, Severo, Mariano and Costa have been reappraised as important historical documents. Incidentally, this has led to an unfortunate reaction portraying the period between 1930 and 1990 as a dark valley in Brazilian art historiography<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the contributions of Gonzaga Duque and Morales de los Ríos to the study of Brazilian art have yet to receive major scholarly attention. The Rio art critic's move away from teleological theses and towards circumstantial criticism over his career does not lend itself to the far-reaching historical revisions that have been popular in recent years. As for the Beaux-Arts architect and teacher, despite having occupied high-profile offices during

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<sup>42</sup>Puppi, *Por Uma História Não Moderna Da Arquitetura Brasileira*.

his career, he was eclipsed by the modern architects. When the hegemony of the Modern movement faded away, he was then placed in the shadow of his father, the Spanish architect who designed some of Rio's finest eclectic buildings.

(Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2003), pp. 75–114; Louise H. Guenther, *British Merchants in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Business, Culture, and Identity in Bahia, 1808–1850* (Oxford: Centre for Brazilian Studies, 2004). On Great Britain's role in the suppression of the African slave trade, see Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). On banking, Carlos Gabriel Guimarães, *A presença inglesa nas finanças e no comércio no Brasil imperial: os casos da sociedade bancária Maua*, MacGregor & C Brazilian-ness issued from this group's individual creativity and their efforts to decipher what was indigenous, though the indigenous was not necessarily reflected in their individual experiences. The modernist generation "acquired the stylistic language of the European avant-garde and assimilated themes and attitudes that they then acculturated in the creation of their nativist art of the 1920s."<sup>30</sup> They depicted a dual Brazil that merged the industrialized modern world of São Paulo with the picturesque simplicity of traditional country life.<sup>31</sup> She and a modernist group traveled to the state of Minas Gerais on a journey to rediscover Brazil in its architecture and tradition.<sup>44</sup> The trip took on the exoticism of an escape from civilization. In the urge to rehabilitate nineteenth-century Brazilian art and architecture, however, the actual discourses by which it came to be ostracized were themselves suppressed from scholarship. This paper examines a few landmark narratives on the issue of national character published between 1880 and 1940. Some major authors in point were academic art critic Gonzaga Duque, neocolonial engineer Ricardo Severo and physician Jos   Mariano Filho, Beaux-Arts architect Adolfo Morales de los R  os Filho, writer Monteiro Lobato, and modernist architect Lucio Costa. These authors' writings will be examined here. The future looks bright for Brazil and now few things could stop their rise to power. I hope you liked this slightly different map and as usual feel free to ask any questions, give suggestions or correct my grammar as English isn't my first language. And special thanks to u/Droerosh for much needed help with Brazilian Lore. [permalink](#). [embed](#).