Aleijadinho: A Brief Commentary on His Life and Work*

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Abstract

This article deals with some aspects of the life and work of the Brazilian artist Antônio Francisco Lisboa (1738?-1814), dubbed Aleijadinho (“the small cripple”) due to the physical deformations he had to cope with. In spite of his physical disability, he became the protagonist of Brazilian colonial art. Slave by birth, Aleijadinho is a living metaphor of the mix of races that influenced and still influences the process of cultural formation not only of Brazil, but of America as a whole.

Inspired in a famous Aleijadinho’s sculpture, this Christ was painted by the Ucranican artist Dmitrij Ismaïlovich (1892-1976), who adopted Brasil as his homeland. The drawing is a modest homage I pay to both.

Introduction

Let us talk about Aleijadinho: the most important artist who lived during colonial times (1500-1815) in Brazil. He was born around 1738 and died in 1814. Actually “Aleijadinho” is a nickname that means “little cripple”, and is due to the physical deformations caused by some strange diseases he contracted during his adult life [1]. Among the terrible consequences of those diseases, he suffered from continuous and excruciating pain, lost almost all the fingers from his hands and feet, and became completely blind two years before his death. Having worked mainly as sculptor and architect, he is the key figure for the development of the Brazilian Baroque and Rococo styles. His themes are always religious. Historically, his art stems from the Counter-Reformation phenomenon that radiated from Rome since the 16th century as a reaction against the iconoclastic wave led by Luther, Calvin and the like. Produced between 1800 and 1805, Aleijadinho’s masterpiece is the sculptural group of the twelve Prophets that borders and adorns splendidly the shrine of Bom Jesus do Matosinhos, in the city of Congonhas do Campo. By that time, Aleijadinho had to tie the chisel around his wrists so that he could give form to the stone. The more his body was dominated by the awful diseases, the more his art approached perfection. Such a fact allows us to establish an analogy between Aleijadinho and Beethoven – never forgetting that both became great artists in spite of their physical and psychological drama. In both cases, however, suffering caused by disability may have contributed

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indirectly to the deeper development of the artistic potential. Depending on the way one accepts it, suffering purifies the soul, as experience proves [2].

Aleijadinho’s real name was Antônio Francisco Lisboa. Ethnically speaking, he was a *mestizo*: the natural son of the Portuguese architect Manuel Francisco Lisboa and of an African slave called Isabel. He was born in Vila Rica, now called Ouro Preto, the most representative city of the so called Brazilian colonial style, whose exuberance is inspired in European Baroque and Rococo. Created in 1711, Vila Rica was a very rich city indeed, thanks to gold mining [3]. Rapidly it became the third city of Brazil, in terms of richness and political importance [4].

However, by the end of the 18th century, the city was already in decline, as an effect of the shortage of the precious metal. The majority of Vila Rica’s constructions dates from the middle of this same century. This fact leads us to conclude that Aleijadinho spent a significant part of his life in direct contact with many other artists. Aleijadinho’s life and work were deeply investigated by the French scholar Germain Bazin (1901-1990); still nowadays his book *Aleijadinho et la sculpture baroque au Brésil*, first published in France, in 1963, is the main reference for the comprehension of the themes concerning the “Bernini of the tropics”, as Aleijadinho is called sometimes [5].

Certainly Aleijadinho’s statues are superior both in quantity and in quality to those of his Brazilian contemporary sculptures. But this does not justify the fact that the other Brazilian colonial artists were not granted the same systematic approach Aleijadinho received. Skilled and historically important artists such as Francisco Xavier de Brito, Francisco Vieira Servas, Manoel Inácio da Costa, Mestre Valentim, Mestre de Piranga and many others are still waiting for due attention from the art historians. Aleijadinho’s value as an artist has not always been recognised. The Austrian essayist Stephan Zweig considers Aleijadinho as a *minor* artist [6] - a completely different opinion from that of Germain Bazin, who regards Aleijadinho as a genius [7]. José Marianno Filho, a Brazilian researcher, considers impossible that Aleijadinho could sculpt with the hammer and the chisel tied around his wrists. In any case,

With no doubt he [José Marianno Filho] ignored that Renoir asked people to do the same with the brush, between the forefinger and the thumb of the paralysed right hand. Which art is more difficult, with impotent hands, than painting or sculpture? We are not talking about these handless virtuosi that stay on the streets writing or playing piano with their feet [8].

As far as I can see, Aleijadinho was surely a good sculptor, possibly a great one. But he was not a genius, as Michelangelo and Bernini were. Doubtless he deserves our respect and admiration, especially considering the enormous burden of prejudices he had face during his life and even after his death. But there is no point in replacing a prejudice by a political correct myth: both drive us away from the truth.

Just like the Indians, the Africans who came to Brazil as slaves during the colonial period had little or nothing of real importance to enrich the new country in terms of artistic production. This fact is quite remarkable, since sculpture and painting flourished southwards Sahara centuries before the Muslims started to invade those regions (8th century), making of the African pre-historical practice of enslaving prisoners of war a profitable business of transcontinental scope [9]. Aleijadinho, thinks Germain Bazin, represents a phenomenon of atavism: he could have inherited the “plastic skills of his black ancestors”[10].

**Catholicism and Art**

Aleijadinho’s century is marked, in Europe, by the emancipation of the so called *mechanical arts*, a group that included the plastic arts; in the Middle Ages, those were generally considered inferior in relation to the *liberal arts*. The very expression *fine arts* were created only in the 18th century, as a result of a slow process of emancipation, triggered by the Renaissance.
The subdivision of the seven *artes liberales* into the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) comes from early Middle Ages and was inherited from late Antiquity; priority was given to the arts in closer relation to the intellect, while those “made by hands”, such as sculpture, painting and even architecture tended to occupy an inferior range, as it has already been mentioned here. Although emphasised in Carolingian times, the old scheme of the liberal arts became inadequate during the 12th and 13th centuries, due to the growth of learning caused by the rise of the universities. In fact,

(...) Huge of St. Victor was probably the first to formulate a scheme of seven mechanical arts corresponding to the seven liberal arts, and this scheme influenced many important authors of the subsequent period, such as Vincent of Beauvais and Thomas Aquinas. The seven mechanical arts, like the seven liberal arts earlier, also appeared in artistic representations, and they are worth listing: *lanificium, armatura, navigatio, agricultura, venatio, medicina, theatrica.* Architecture as well as various branches of sculpture and of painting are listed, along with other craft arts, as subdivisions of *armatura,* and thus occupy a quite subordinated place among the mechanical arts [11].

During the Renaissance, European artists had already achieved a status that could hardly be imagined in Antiquity and the middle Ages [12]. For the Brazilian society of colonial times, the artist was more than an artisan, with basically the same professional status of workers who made certain kinds of handicrafts, such as pottery and embroidery. The hierarchy among the arts depended directly on their ecclesiastical function: “The principal arts were those of the carpenters, the stoneworkers, wood carvers and sculptors, who executed the innumerable altars of the Portuguese-Brazilian churches” [13].

Aleijadinho represents a landmark in Brazilian History of Art. To a certain extent, his position in Brazil is similar to that of Giotto di Bondone (1226-1337) and his contemporaries in Europe: before him, people devoted to plastic arts remained in anonymity; he was the first one to transcend the boundary between the artisan and the artist, ascending this way to a nobler step in the society.

Catholic art of the period follows the new rules established by the Council of Trent, which lasted from 1545 until 1563 [14]. Among the consequences regarding plastic arts, was the stimulus to venerate the saints through their painted and carved or sculpted images; and in the process of diffusing the new patterns for the binomial faith-art, the Jesuit Order played a decisive rule? This is valid not only for Europe, but also for the new lands incorporated to the Catholic world, such as the American colonies, mainly divided between Spain and Portugal. The following quotation, from Émile Mâle, gives us an idea of how close was the relationship between the Counter-Reformation and the development of the arts in the Western World during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries:

This art – conceived in the tragic years in which the Papacy had witnessed the separation of a great part of the Christianity from Rome – could no longer, as in the Middle Ages, express the relief in the faith; it had to fight, affirm and refute. It became the allied of the Counter-Reformation and was one of the forms of the Catholic apologia. It defended the same things that Protestantism attacked: the Virgin, the saints, the Papacy, the images, the sacraments, the charitable institutions, the prayers for the deaths. It developed some themes that were almost completely new if compared with the art of the past; it expressed new feelings and new forms of devotion [15].

In Brazil, the first Jesuits arrived in 1549, along with Tomé de Souza, the Portuguese governor of the whole colony, who founded the city of Salvador, the former capital. Naturally, other Catholic orders were also interested in promoting artistic production in Brazil. Friar Agostinho da Piedade (1590 - 1661) and Friar Agostinho de Jesus (1600 - 1661), the most renowned sculptors of the 17th century in Brazil, were both Benedictines (until 1760, Brazilian sculpture
was confined to only two materials: wood and terracotta). Jesuits, however, were the protagonists not only in the process of transmitting the new faith to the Indians but also in that of initiating them in the art of sculpting and in manual activities in general [16].

**Aleijadinho as a Living Metaphor of Brazilian Colonial Society**

To a large extent, Aleijadinho’s life and work reflect the drama of miscegenation in the New World. Despite having been liberated from slavery since birth, he was not accepted as an equal among the Portuguese and their pure descendants; neither could he feel at ease among black people, who worked as slaves; in other words, he was “a black among the whites” and “a white among the blacks”. The racial prejudices he experienced in Brazil were analogous to those suffered by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539 - 1616) in the Spanish world, son of an Indian woman and a white Spanish man. As well as Garcilaso, Aleijadinho personifies the racial hybridism that characterises Latin America population till nowadays [17]. As regards social context, being a mestizo was very common during the colonial period. The continuous ethnic mixtures among European, African and American people created new patterns all around Latin America.

Aleijadinho had to cope with the heavy burden of prejudices involving the fact of descending from slaves. Furthermore, progressive illness deformed his body, giving him an awful appearance. Humiliations and frustrations of all kinds, not to mention psychological conflicts, must have been frequent in Aleijadinho’s life. About this topic, Fernando Jorge writes:

**Mestizo**, with brown-coloured skin, belonging to a *casta* considered being inferior, seen with disgust and contempt, the artist seems to have been a misanthrope, evasive, in the complex colonial society of the 18th century, amalgamated by the heterogeneous crowd of nobles, poets, magistrates, lords and slaves. However, contemplating him at a long distance, he appears to us as the indisputable symbol of the Brazilian man (...), enemy of slavery and proud of his liberty [18].

Germain Bazin demonstrates that Aleijadinho suffered several kinds of social and professional discrimination, precisely because he was a half-caste man. His African blood was an impediment for him to sign contracts [19].

It is evident that Aleijadinho had a strong enough character to surmount the social obstacles of the society in which he lived. Notwithstanding, he was far from being a sociable fellow. As his disease progressed, he became more and more isolated from other people; preferring the company of stone and wood to that of men and human society, Aleijadinho found spiritual refuge in art and religion. The Bible was his main source of relief and inspiration. Aleijadinho did not become rich, albeit the fact of having worked during his whole life. He divided his payment with Maurício, his slave. Rodrigo Bretas, his biographer, says that he spent a lot of money in alms to poor people [20]. The Brazilian writer Mário de Andrade asserts that Aleijadinho searched every day in the Bible “the comforting reward of being loved by God [21].

He had little conventional education; probably was initiated in the field of arts by his father; and it is possible that he had learned also from the painter João Gomes Batista. Anyway, his success as an artist is due mostly to his great talent and to his efforts as self-taught. By the time of his death, in 1814, he had left an enormous amount of works of art. Aleijadinho offers the most complete synthesis of Brazilian art produced during the colonial period.

Much has been said and written about the artistic trends assimilated by Aleijadinho. His style stems mainly from Baroque and Rococo works of art which he was acquainted to see in his homeland and neighbourhood. Nonetheless, some of his works descend from other sources. As an example, we have the pulpits of the Church of São Francisco in Ouro Preto, which reveal almost explicitly an inspiration in a relief from Lorenzo Ghiberti [22]. In any case, Aleijadinho has
h is own artistic trademark, so to say. His art has not the rigidity that we often see in the works produced in Portugal during the “Manuelino” period. In close analogy with the poet Gregório de Matos Guerra, who lived in Bahia in the 17th century, Aleijadinho is ironic: he gives mestizo's features to his sculpted angels; the Roman soldiers that mistreat Jesus in His sufferings of Christ by the Crucifixion are just grotesque in their appearance; besides, he used to caricature his enemies in the statues, perhaps as a kind of revenge [23]. Speaking of irony, we do not know precisely how he looked like; no portrait of him can be considered authentic. This is just one more gap among many others in the Brazilian History of Art. Aleijadinho became an ugly man; what a contrast when we imagine him side by side with his beautiful artistic creations! Aleijadinho is a living metaphor of Brazilian colonial society, with its countless paradoxes; paradoxes that inevitably blur our comprehension whenever we try to understand Aleijadinho as an artist, let alone as a man. The more deeper we delve into Antônio Francisco Lisboa's life and work, the more difficult the questions that emerge.

References

1 According to his main biographer, Rodrigo José Ferreira Bretas, the first symptoms of his diseases appeared in 1777. Bretas, who was born in the same year that marks Aleijadinho's death, supposes that his body was attacked by a combination of a regional disease called zamparina, syphilis and scurvy (see Germain Bazin. O Aleijadinho e a escultura barroca no Brasil [translated by Mariza Murray], 2nd ed., Rio de Janeiro, Record, no date, p. 111).


3 “Vila Rica” means “rich village”. The name “Ouro Preto” (= “black gold”) is due to the dark colour of the gold found in the region.

4 Simão Ferreira Machado, a rich Portuguese businessman of the 18th century, described Vila Rica as the head of whole America, and the “precious pearl of Brazil” (quoted by Fernando Jorge. O Aleijadinho, 5º ed., São Paulo, Difusão Européia do Livro, 1971, p. 25).


7 See O Aleijadinho e a escultura barroca no Brasil, op. cit., p. 125. Brazilian historian Augusto de Lima Júnior (1889-1970) defended the thesis that Aleijadinho did not even exist; in his view, Aleijadinho would be a kind of myth or legend. Bazin refutes this thesis vehemently (see Idem, pp. 117 - 123).

8 Germain Bazin. Idem, p. 113.


10 Germain Bazin. O Aleijadinho e a escultura barroca no Brasil, op. cit., p. 66.


12 Lucian of Samosata’s (c. 125- after 180) famous statement can be considered as a portrait of the prevalent mentality among the ancients and medieval: “(...) everybody admires the works of the great sculptors, but nobody wants to be a sculptor himself.” (quoted by Plutarch. Pericles, 1 - 2).


