Art History and Cultural Hegemony in Brazil: The Risks of Misunderstanding Indigenous Art and Colonial Art

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Carolyn Dean's[1] reflections on art highlight the challenges faced in the attempt to produce a global art history. She emphasizes the impossibility of arriving at any objective definition of the term, one able to encompass everything treated as an object of study in art history, made by the most diverse cultures across time and space. There is no globally accepted definition of art that can apply anywhere during any era. Art is not, therefore, a universal concept. Both Eurocentric aesthetic standards and the history of art as a discipline have served and still serve as instruments of cultural hegemony. They take modern Western culture as a model for other cultures, a *telos*. Even at a local level, the history of art has served to advance hegemonic interests. In Brazilian art history, this teleological bias projects an idealized image of the nation, supposedly equal, united, miscegenated, that seeks to minimize racial and social conflicts. The idea of the Brazilian nation is supported by the widespread belief in harmony among the three formative "races" of the Brazilian people, the "Indian," the "black," and the "white" (often ignoring the ethnic diversity within each of these groups). Likewise the historiography of Brazilian art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constructed the identity of the nation's art on the notion of a mixture of these three components, which supposedly determined its uniqueness and originality. Certain traditions from the past were chosen and reconstructed to compose part of this history, while others were shunned. These choices resulted in a history of art that contains representations of these groups, but that also maintains the supremacy of dominant groups, the main agents in the construction of this history, whether as artists or

as historians.[2] These representations in general hinder a deeper comprehension of the diversity of Brazilian culture, especially its art.

Hence both indigenous Brazilian art and the art of the colonial period were appropriated by hegemonic discourses from the nineteenth century onward. These discourses generally ignore the particular context in which indigenous art was produced in order to foster a predominantly aesthetic or formal approach. Such art has been appropriated in this sense with the aim of promoting the originality of national art within a global context, although this production cannot be fitted into the canonical, evolutionary timeline of the history of Western art. Indigenous cultures' relation with the past is not one of constant supersession. Their conception of time is distinct from that found in Western art. And this makes any inclusion of indigenous art in this temporal sequence problematic. As a consequence of this difficulty, it is commonplace even today to encounter narratives that privilege the archaeological production of indigenous art, situating it at the origins of Brazilian art and transforming it into a kind of national prehistory,[3] ignoring the contemporary art produced by other indigenous groups that continue to exist and resist in the present. Moreover, the very nature of indigenous objects, often made from perishable materials, indicates a different relationship with time: it is the tradition that persists and that allows objects to be recreated, rather than necessarily the same object persisting over time, as in the case of Western art. A merely formal appraisal of painting, body adornments, and objects ignores the symbolic meanings of these manifestations, their uses and contexts, and their integral role in rituals and celebrations, limiting our understanding of them and carrying the risk of treating very different ethnic groups as identical, annulling their diversity.

Problems persist when we turn to examine the period between the sixteenth century and the end of the eighteenth century in Brazilian art. This is the period called "colonial art" in Brazil, studied for decades—and even today—from an anachronistic nineteenth- and twentieth-century perspective, which typically employs nineteenth-century categories such as "originality," "authorship," and the romantic idea of "genius" notions that were entirely foreign to artistic production in Brazil until the end of the eighteenth century.[4] This was a time when, on the contrary, collective production prevailed and the idea of the "copy" had yet to acquire the negative meaning it possesses today. What was considered "art" then was rather different from what it later became in nineteenth-century Brazil. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century art in Brazil, with a few exceptions, was directly related to catechesis and education, controlled and produced by religious orders and, after the mid-eighteenth century, the fraternities and Third Orders. Art had a predominantly religious, educational, and persuasive function, based on the Aristotelian classic tradition.

Nonetheless, many of the studies of the art of the period center on its formal and aesthetic aspects. The nineteenth-century Romantic categories often applied to Brazilian colonial art, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, and continuing in some cases today, respond to a very specific goal: the attempt to build a national identity, highlighting the "originality" of this artistic production, its supposed "national character," even though these terms are completely anachronistic in relation to the period studied. Another aspect implicitly contained in this Romantic reading of eighteenth-century art that cannot be overlooked is the effort to incorporate African elements in the origins of Brazilian art, principally through the figure of the *mestiço* craftsman, idealized, romanticized, and synthesized in the mythology surrounding Antonio Francisco Lisboa,[5] also known as Aleijadinho.

The appropriation of the culture of peoples known as non-Western and the cultures of earlier periods is a process central to art history that repeats itself in diverse situations. In Brazil there was an appropriation and simplification of indigenous culture and the Western culture that became established in the country in the first centuries after the arrival of the Europeans. Each was allocated a specific place on the timeline constructed to legitimize the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and the recently independent nation that needed to build its own identity, affirm its own culture, and elect its own traditions. It is as though these cultures had been superseded by a new synthesis, Brazilian art, which extracts their substrate in order to offer its singularity to the world in a global setting.

These dominant art history discourses thus often support politically oriented biases as well as art market purposes. Above all, it is indispensable to keep in mind the need to preserve the diversity of cultural repertoires and to avoid, as far as possible, the traps of dominant interests that tend to impose their own viewpoints and distort the meaning of manifestations that occur away from the centers, either locally or globally.

Notes

[1] Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble With (the Term) Art," *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 24–32.

[2] As examples of artistic movements that recurred to the indigenous subject as a means of reinforcing local identity, we can mention the Romantic academic painting in the late nineteenth century in Brazil, as well as twentieth-century early modernism, related to the Anthropophagic movement.

[3] The recent setting of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) permanent collection (2016) includes, in the beginning of its chronological arrangement, two ancient Marajoara funerary urns, but there are no other indigenous works from subsequent periods in the whole exhibition. We find a similar state of affairs in Brazilian art history compendia, such as Walter Zanini et al., *História geral da arte no Brasil* (São Paulo: Instituto Walther Moreira Salles, 1983), and in the recently published collection of essays Fabiana Barcinski, *Sobre a arte brasileira: Da pré-história aos anos 1960* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes: Ed. Sesc-SP, 2014), just to mention two examples.

[4] See João Adolfo Hansen, "Notas sobre o 'barroco,'" *Revista do IFAC*, no. 4 (1997): 11–20.

[5] For additional discussion on this subject, see Guiomar Grammont, *Aleijadinho e o aeroplano: O paraíso barroco e a construção do herói colonial* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008).