

CHANGING A COUNTRY WITH THE HELP OF ART:
HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS AT THE BEGINNING
OF THE 20TH CENTURY



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ABSTRACT

During the first decades of the 20th century, many changes were taking place all over Europe. Some of those changes occurred in different countries due to external, though at the same time common, factors such as the First World War. These were, namely, economic or political transformations, and happened very suddenly.

However, other changes or transformations might have taken more time to happen or develop in terms of settlement and those might have to do with culture and ways of thinking of the People from a specific country.

Changes in the cultural patterns of a country in terms of art, namely literature and painting, cannot be considered isolated phenomena, once they happen together with other mutations within societies as well as with possible influences from abroad. Therefore, the focus of this article will mainly be on the literary and artistic transformations that took place in Portugal during the first decades of the 20th century; the reasons why they happened, bearing in mind the influence some European countries might have had in terms of art; and the implications of those transformations in the art of the following decades.

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The eternal battle of tradition against innovation was certainly on, though the real quest some of the Portuguese artists pursued was different than just winning that combat. Theirs was a quest for a country that, based also on the deeds of the past, could be proud of itself and its People in the present, in order to be able to work, to teach and learn together with other countries in the future.

KEY WORDS: Change, Modernism, Europe.

Changing a Country with the Help of Art: Hopes and Expectations at the Start of the 20th Century

“Já repararam bem nos meus olhos? Repararam bem nos meus olhos, não são meus, são os olhos do nosso século!

Os olhos que furam por detrás de tudo.

Estes meus grandes olhos de Europeu, cheios de todos os antecedentes como o passado, o presente e o futuro numa única linha de cor, escrito aqui na palma da minha mão esquerda” (Negreiros, 1921, p.3)¹.

The purpose of this article is to introduce some literary and artistic transformations that took place in Portugal during the first decades of the 20th century, bearing in mind the influence that some European countries might have had upon Portugal in terms of art and in terms of the relationship between some Portuguese artists and their own country. It will also be referred how those artists contributed for a new awakening of Portugal in the fields of art, culture and society in the subsequent decades.

The beginnings of the 20th century were times of turbulence and change all over Europe and Portugal was no exception. From the fading 19th century, the country had inherited a growing dissatisfaction concerning the existing and declining monarchic regime and its policies, along with a conjectural and widespread pessimism amongst the population.

Everything was changing or about to change. The image that the Portuguese had of their royal family was one of distrust and frustration, due to the latest incidents concerning the quiet acceptance of the British *Ultimatum* by the Portuguese crown

¹ “Have you noticed my eyes yet? Have you noticed my eyes, they are not mine, they are the eyes of our century!/ The eyes that perforate in the back of everything./ These big European eyes of mine, full of all precedents like the past, the present and the future [...]” Free translation from Portuguese of Almada Negreiros’ article “A Conferência n.º 1”, published in the newspaper *Diário de Lisboa* in 1921, p. 3. The Portuguese used in all the quotes from Almada Negreiros respects the writing of the author, therefore maintaining the writing in use at the beginning of the 20th century.

in 1890. By agreeing with the conditions of that *Ultimatum*, Portugal had given up the fight and a firm position that meant much more than just the sole possession of a stripe of territories in Africa.

For those who were not in power but were aware of the politics of the epoch, the *Ultimatum* meant nothing but resignation and subservience from a nation to another; this kind of national humiliation accompanied the minds and souls of the Portuguese for quite some decades, therefore influencing negatively and to a great extent behaviours and ways of thinking.

On the other hand, the opponents to the crown, mostly the republicans, who took advantage of this feeling of national humiliation and discredit towards the monarchy, were growing in number and strength and preparing to defeat the regime, as eventually happened on the 10th October 1910, giving raise to the much desired republic.

Although we can talk nowadays about widespread dissatisfaction of the Portuguese in general, we must be aware that in actual fact we are talking about the attitude of what was then an influential minority within the people.

At the beginning of the 20th century, more precisely in 1910, the population in Portugal was 5.9 million people, of which around 70 to 75% was illiterate and only a small percentage (15.6%) lived in the cities ², the place where politics and everything that mattered, in terms of ruling the country, happened. As a matter of fact, only a few cities had any real influence then, namely: Lisbon, the capital, Coimbra and Porto.

Most of the population lived in the countryside, and their concerns had to do mainly with agriculture and a permanent struggle for surviving. As the decades went by, the population progressively has started moving towards the cities, or abroad ³, which did not necessarily translate into a concern for politics or economy as a whole. Instead they moved in search of a better quality of life. After the First World War - where Portugal was belligerent - and also due to the

² Concerning these references see José Mattoso's extensive and very complete *História de Portugal*. Its 6th volume has a detailed account of the Portuguese demography and the social and economical changes that took place in the country during the 20th century, situating it in Europe and describing the most relevant parallel events in other European countries.

³ According to Paulo Guinote (1990, p. 171-230), from 1911 to 1926 more than half a million people abandoned the country. Adding to this number, we had the emigrants from the islands of Madeira and Azores, therefore making the number grow to 620 000 Portuguese, i.e. more than 10% of the entire population.

brutal rise in inflation, the people's primary concern was for their own quality of life and not exactly the destiny of their country.

With this in mind, who were then the real opponents to the regime, who worried about and were depressed by the deteriorating state of the country? The answer is: certainly those who belonged to the existing elites. And by elites we mean people who were directly connected or involved with the church, always seen as a dominant source of power⁴; people involved with the government and the two existing political parties; people involved with the field of education and the field of culture. Basically, in social terms, this meant the middle-class and the recently born *bourgeoisie*.

In this article I will focus on one of these groups only: people who were involved in or connected with the field of culture. *Firstly*, because in many eras the cultural field offers a good reflection of the transformations that occur within societies⁵, as was the case with Portugal during the first decades of the 20th century; and *secondly*, because this group can be looked at as quite a good example of what a dissatisfied middle-class elite group can be. Contrary to their 19th century predecessors from the romantic and naturalist movements, the emerging artists of the 20th century had the concept of cosmopolitanism as a ruling ideal. Their principal goal was to have their works published or exhibited abroad, where in Europe at the time there was much innovation in forms and themes and where the future was already taking place.

Along with the ambition felt by young artists of going abroad, new artistic trends were arriving in Portugal from other countries. And as a country that had once been magnificent, but was then going through a crashing national crisis Portugal was eager to try to absorb every drop of novelty and knowledge that could help redeem its people from their depressing and insistent focus on the past. Glorious in its past deeds, but going through a time of chaos by the end of

⁴ Nevertheless with the advent of the new republican values the anti-clericalism was growing. On the 20th April 1911 came out a law separating the powers of the State from the Church.

⁵ "A história e literatura de um povo explicam-se e influem-se mutuamente. Há entre as duas uma correspondência constante e recíproca. Se as tendências gerais da literatura dum povo reflectem as qualidades mestras do seu carácter, por sua vez, as grandes criações literárias acabam por moldar a dirigir o espírito colectivo." Free translation from Portuguese of Jaime Cortesão (1965, p. 14): "The history and literature of a people explain and influence each other. Amongst them there is constant and reciprocal correspondence. If the general literary tendencies of a people reflect the master qualities of its character, then, the great literary creations will eventually mould and direct the collective spirit".

the 19th century, Portugal had, not that long before, been considered (together with Belgium) in the *Dictionnaire Politique* by Garnier-Pagés (Hobsbawm, 2004, p.31), too little to be taken serious as an independent nation.

In opposition to this statement we can focus on the way of thinking of the Portuguese writers and artists of the first decades of the 20th century who, in general, were willing to learn more about foreign and different approaches to their work. However, those artists never intended to go abroad and forget about their own *little* country, on the contrary, they wanted, once abroad to learn about the latest skills and movements, in order to use and transmit them in their own way back home. One of their great hopes was to be able to help enlarge the artistic borders of Portugal, by making the Portuguese aware of the potential of their own art.

Almada Negreiros, one of the greatest Portuguese modernist artists would say: “A arte não pode viver sem a pátria do artista. Aprendi eu isto para sempre no estrangeiro”. He wrote these words in 1926 ⁶, after having already spent a year (in 1919) living, learning and sipping from the French absorbing atmosphere that Paris represented back then.

Along with Almada Negreiros, several other well-known Portuguese writers from that time such as Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Fernando Pessoa, and painters, namely Amadeo Souza Cardoso and Santa-Rita Pintor, had gone to Paris for some time for the same reasons: to learn and enrich their work and creation with the aid of brand new methods and of new acquaintances, new friends. They did not want to leave the country for good, although that had already been the reality forced upon many of the 19th century intellectuals opposing the royal regime then.

What this new generation of artists really wanted was to be freed from a long gone majestic past, which had already served its purpose but was of no use to them and the upcoming generations. In the midst of their frantic youth, these artists wanted more than anything else to live in a country that deserved them and that, they could also be proud of. Always with an eye on the neighbouring and then more developed countries, but also creating its own nationality, always fac-

⁶ “Art cannot live without the homeland of the artist. I learned that forever when I was abroad.” Free translation from Portuguese of a conference read by Almada Negreiros on the 10th December 1926 at the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes and also published in the newspaper *Folha do Sado*, from December 5th 1926 to January 9th 1927.

ing the future. Again, using Almada Negreiros' words to illustrate this statement: “- Portugal precisa, para se valorisar, avaliar-se, ir aprender lá fora o sentimento nacionalista.”⁷

So how did these new generations of artists intend to achieve such a transformation? Apparently, quite naively through the dissemination of their own art. Quite naively, I say, for as it was said before, most of the population was illiterate then and art and culture were not really one of their main concerns.

Even so, one way or another, those artists managed to pass on their message, either by means of being rejected by the existing *status quo*, and shocking the public opinion with their *avant-gardism* or for the fact that they did become the role models for some of their contemporaneous and future colleagues⁸.

Let us then get closer to the artistic atmosphere experienced by some of the painters and writers we want to focus upon.

Futurism, modernism and a series of other *isms* and their ideals were then being imported and adapted mostly from France, Italy and England directly into magazines, newspapers and manifestos in the shape of text, drawings or paintings transmitting to others the artists' thoughts about the world, their country and their inner selves.

Most of the plays exhibited in the important stages of the big cities were of French origin; most books from German authors, for instance, were accessible in Portugal only by means of French or English translations. Moreover, in order to be part of the much envied middle-class, one had to wear, read or possess something from another European country (Mattoso, 1994).

The greatest example of this fashion was language itself. The Portuguese vocabulary of the first decades of the century was *enriched* with quite a vast number of foreign words, to be used intentionally but to be heard as if said by accident. The most traditional users of the language were shocked, but the winds

⁷ “Portugal needs, in order to value itself, to make a self evaluation, to go abroad and learn about the nationalistic sentiment.” Free translation from Portuguese of an interview given by Almada Negreiros to the magazine *Ideia Nacional* on the 31st March 1927. Though this interview took place in the late 20's, the above referred citation does represent the feeling that was common to most artists since the early 10's.

⁸ The fact that some of these artists - like Fernando Pessoa in the writing or Almada Negreiros and Amadeo de Souza Cardoso in the visual arts - are nowadays recognized and taught in school as being part of Portugal's collective cultural inheritance means they have certainly managed to pass on their message.

of change in the form of machinery, speed and industrialization were already blowing strongly from abroad and nothing could be done to prevent them from entering the country.

With the beginning of the First World War, some artists who were living abroad returned to Portugal, bringing with them sometimes the theory, sometimes the practice of the latest trends⁹. Amongst them were painters like Amadeo Souza Cardoso, coming from Paris and embracing both the French fauvism and traces from the upcoming cubist art movement in his magnificent paintings; and Santa-Rita Pintor, self-called first and only futurist in Portugal, heir of Marinetti's Italian Futurism, though with an eye on Picasso's cubist work too. The writer Fernando Pessoa, who from an early age had been travelling to Paris as a tourist every single year, had also been there studying Law, something that was not uncommon amongst middle-class educated youngsters.

These three artists were just a few amongst many, yet we chose them because they were part of a group that made a difference back then. They were - along with the aforementioned Almada Negreiros and Mário de Sá-Carneiro, and also with the writers Luís de Montalvor and António Ferro to mention just a few - part of what was known as *Orpheu's Generation*: the generation and group of artists that rebelled against all traditions in favour of modernism; those who had been, at some point in their lives, living or travelling abroad and had come back with the will to change their old country into a new one; or those who wanted to recreate Portugal, to make it a nation of the 20th century, an European country with the same possibilities as all the other countries they admired. Also those, like Fernando Pessoa, who had been part of the traditional and conservative fringe, but had suddenly decided to leave the past behind¹⁰.

As an example of their way of thinking we can look at the words of António Ferro, back in 1922, at a conference: “Ter saudades dos séculos que morreram, é ter vivido nêsses séculos, é não ser de hoje, é ser cadáver e andar a fingir de vivo...”¹¹.

These group of artists would very often get together and meet in the centre of the city of Lisbon, more precisely in a café called *A Brasileira*, the place

⁹ About this topic see Nuno Júdice (1990, p. 233-252).

¹⁰ Fernando Pessoa had taken part in a magazine called *Águia* which had the past and all its lost values as guiding principle.

¹¹ “To miss the dead centuries is to have lived in those centuries, is not being from today, is to be a dead body pretending to be alive...” Free translation from Portuguese of António Ferro (1923, p. 36).

where, everyday, and amongst other topics, the destiny of the world and of Portugal was discussed and debated. The café tables, as happened in other European countries proved the ideal spot for evading reality and creating solutions for all problems. At the same time, the café was by then considered a place for the elites to be, a place for problems to be solved, for life to be lived in full ¹².

In 1914, to make their opinions and thoughts known and to spread their attitude of rebellion, these artists published the first issue of a magazine called *Orpheu*. The main purpose of this magazine was, above all, to scandalize and upset the growing *bourgeoisie* who they despised. For them, that group meant nothing but uneducated, useless people, who had no real worries or thoughts. The magazine did suit their purpose: after the publication of *Orpheu*, the newspapers criticized and mocked the authors, calling them lunatics, something that, naturally, filled them with joy. Furthermore, there was also a political reaction to the magazine, as the republicans tried to convey that *Orpheu* was the literary means of reacting against the monarchy.

Yet this last assumption was wide off the mark, since for the magazine's creators and contributors, politics was something to be forgotten and replaced by art. In one of his most important manifestos, exhorting his country fellows to wake up from apathy and rebuild Portugal, Almada Negreiros demanded: "Abandonai os politicos de todas as opiniões: o patriotismo condicional degenera e suja; o patriotismo desinteressado glorifica e lava" ¹³ (Negreiros, 2006, p.31).

In any case, the scandalous but creative magazine did not reach its third issue for financial reasons amongst others. The authors did not have the means or any support at all to continue publishing. After *Orpheu*, the generation of modernist artists tried to use the same model but without much success: some due to censorship, others because they were just the effort of individual artists.

Moreover, in the years following the publication of *Orpheu*, the group of artists that had been involved in it dismantled: three of them had died by 1918, others departed to Paris or other European countries eager for future they were proclaiming in their magazine.

¹² About the bohemian atmosphere of cafés in that period and the importance of these establishments social and culturally see Marina Tavares Dias (1999).

¹³ "Abandon the politicians of all opinions: conditional patriotism degenerates and stains; disinterested patriotism glorifies and cleans." Free translation from Portuguese of Almada Negreiros (2006, p. 31); this quote was taken from his 'Ultimatum Futurista às Gerações Portuguesas do Século XX', written in 1917.

At this point we can state that *Orpheu* and its namesake generation of artists managed to turn Portuguese literate society upside down just by publishing two numbers of a magazine. What can be taken as an over the top statement can be simply confirmed by the fact that the artists of the following decades looked up to *Orpheu* and used the momentum created by that magazine to continue breaking old social and cultural borders over the following decades.

For instance, in 1927, a magazine called *Presença* was published. In contrast to *Orpheu* 54 editions were published¹⁴ and in those editions, along with all kinds of other writers, the works of those who created *Orpheu* and its ideals were continuously published. The publishers of *Presença*, who were later referred to as belonging to the period of the second modernism, were also *Orpheu*'s direct heirs and considered its authors as their masters.

It is undeniable that *Presença* became a reference itself, namely due to the articles written by foreign authors and published in it or to the organization and promotion of conferences, just to mention but some. Yet, the feelings and opinions that *Orpheu* had once provoked in the minds of people were not to be felt again in the subsequent decades, at least not with the same passion or intensity.

All in all, it can be stated that the young rebellious and eager-to-learn artists from the first decades of the Portuguese 20th century, with all the existential problems they might have endured; with all the walls of conservative tradition and cynicism they might have had to face did help change society back then and throughout the years that followed.

The knowledge they brought from abroad, the astonishment they felt at all the different things they learned, their desire to turn Portugal into an ever more developed European country, is easily and most certainly found in their works and was (and still is) most definitely transmitted to their peers and their critics through the strength of the colour in their paintings, and by the multitude of feelings we can witness (and feel) in their words.

Almada Negreiros, in 1943, expressed his wish that the Portuguese should be aware of their contribution to the creation of European art: “Essa oficina europeia da luz do mundo. Porque a luz do mundo continua a fabricar-se na Europa”¹⁵

¹⁴ The last issue came out in February 1940.

¹⁵ “That European workshop of the light of the world. Because the light of the world is still fabricated in Europe.” Free translation from Portuguese of Almada Negreiros’ words at a conference in 1943.

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