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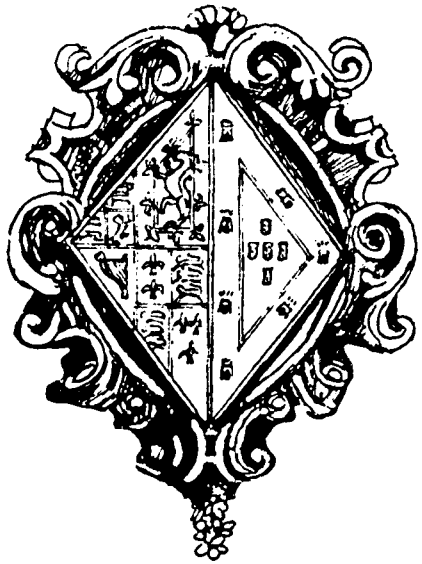

An Anniversary The Art of Portugal at the Royal Academy in London

by Angela Delaforce

It is now fifty years since that magnificent exhibition, *Portuguese Art 800-1800,* opened to the public at the Royal Academy of Arts in London on 29th October 1955. In the words of the President of the Academy, Professor Albert Richardson, the winter exhibition that year was; "in a literal sense unique, for never before has it been possible, even in their native country, for the arts of Portugal in all their variety to be assembled on so rich a scale. It may well be doubted whether such a project can ever be repeated". Professor Richardson's words were perceptive, such a project has not been repeated and it is doubtful if it ever could.

The archives of the Royal Academy (consulted by kind permission of the archivist Mark Pomeroy), reveal the extraordinary circumstances in which the exhibition was conceived and hastily assembled. As significant was the way in which politics and diplomacy came together and were fundamental in ensuring the remarkable quality of the loans. A Portuguese exhibition was first proposed in 1939, but the idea was abandoned due to World War II. Then in 1951 (Minutes of the Council, vol. XXVIII), it was proposed to hold a comprehensive exhibition of Spanish art and with it a display of Portuguese art. The difficulty of securing loans from Spain in these years was probably the principal reason for this idea also being abandoned.

Then on 20th January 1955, Sir James Mann, director of the Wallace Collection and an honorary member of the Academy, suggested that a Portuguese Exhibition could be assembled by Reynaldo dos Santos, who was, he says, "a very old and dear friend of mine". Reynaldo dos Santos, renowned as a surgeon and today as a pioneer of the history of Portuguese art, did, as Mann continues,

"know the resources of Portugal like the back of his hand, and he is on good terms with Dr Salazar, who is their benevolent Dictator". It is evident from a reading of the correspondence that these words alone were enough to reassure the Council at the Royal Academy of the political viability and success of the project. For already, on 24th January 1955, the request was sent to Portugal and, in a period of just eight months, the loan of no less than 572 objects had been secured. The great majority were from Portugal, to which were added pieces from English public and private collections, with others coming from Paris, Munich and Vienna. In London the Duke of Wellington lent tureens and a dish from the famous silver service designed by Domingos António de Sequeira, and generously offered to pay for the taxi that took them from Apsley House up the road to the Academy. Most remarkable from today's perspective was the number of works lent by Portuguese private collectors, all, except one, of whose names appear in the catalogue. Many of these rare and precious pieces were then little-known and inaccessible even in Portugal.

The enthusiasm expressed by the Council of the Royal Academy for the project, described as 'a unique treat in store for London', was balanced by their concerns over attendance figures and the final cost. In the event the Portuguese Government undertook to be responsible for the considerable expense of assembling the works in Lisbon, their insurance and for the transport to and from London. The Royal Academy was responsible for insurance while the works were in their custody, the catalogue and the cost of installation. In the end the exhibition made a modest profit for the Academy of just under two thousand pounds. Afterwards, in the Annual Report of the Academy for 1955, the Council would acknowledge that it was only the generosity of the Portuguese Government that had saved the exhibiton from resulting in a substantial financial loss.

The planning, selection and arrangement of the entire exhibition was the work of Reynaldo dos Santos who was assisted by Irene Quilhó. Members of the executive committee in Portugal included the art historian Mario Tavares Chicó; João Rodrigues da Silva Couto, director of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,* and

António Medeiros Gouveia, of the Institute of *Alta Cultura.* In London, considerable diplomatic support was given by Pedro Theotónio Pereira, Portuguese Ambassador to the Court of St James, who was responsible for negotiating the arrangements with the Royal Academy.

A reading of the press coverage, in particular the critical response to this great assembly of Portuguese art, is equally fascinating. The critics were faced with the art and culture of a country which was still relatively unknown and only a few were familiar with the subject. They would have found little help in the small and slender catalogue, priced at one shilling and sixpence, which contains only a brief outline summary of the sculpture, painting and decorative arts of the period and no specialised articles. The on book in English on the subject listed in the catalogue's short bibliography was J.C. Robinson's *The Early Portuguese School of Painting,* published in London in 1866, and long out of print. One of those who openly acknowledged their lack of specialist knowledge was the distinguished critic, John Russell, of *The Sunday Times* (30th October 1955). He wrote; "It is not easy to study Portuguese art without going to Portugal, and it will probably be fair to assume that most people will approach the exhibition, as I did myself, in a state of ignorance."

The first newspaper to anticipate the opening of the exhibiton was *The Daily Mail* (28th September 1955) with an article that appeared under the sensational headline *Treasures in the London Docks.* It described how at that very moment works of art from Portugal worth thousands of pounds were being unloaded from ships that had brought these treasures from across the sea. Sir Humphrey Brooke, secretary of the Academy, informed the paper; "the Portuguese have stripped their churches and museums to send their treasures to us". Meanwhile *The Daily Telegraph* (29th September 1955) sent a reporter to meet Reynaldo dos Santos at the Royal Academy where he was busy installing the exhibits. They described him as "a lively sexagenarian and the leading connoisseur of the arts of Portugal". They also reported that in Portugal Dr Salazar had been taking a close interest in the exhibition, adding,

"He has seen to it that Dr Santos, who is also his doctor, has had full powers to borrow any work of art or vertu." An article in the *Church Times* (7th October 1955), written by Michael Derrick, chose to avoid artistic matters altogether. Instead it considered the relationship between the Church and State in Portugal, the Constitution of 1933, and the important role in both of these of the miraculous apparition of the Virgin Mary at Fatima in 1917 and of Dr António Oliveira Salazar himself. *The Sunday Times* (23rd October 1955) focused on the personality and prestige of the curator, paying tribute to the 'Exemplary Professor' Reynaldo dos Santos. It wrote "His art-historical studies have been conducted in his spare time – for this spry, loquacious and eminently conversable man is, in his early seventies, one of the world's foremost surgeons, a Royal Society gold medalist, and doctor for many years past to Dr Salazar. His record is one which puts to shame those 'art experts' who exist only to be disagreeable to their colleagues".

There is no doubt that the special character of the exhibition lay in its imaginative display. The way in which a wide variety of objects – paintings, sculpture, carved and gilded altar pieces, tiles, furniture, faience, tapestries, carpets, glass and pieces in gold, silver, ivory and enamel – were assembled and juxtaposed side by side in a single gallery. This scheme was repeated chronologically throughout the great principal galleries of the Royal Academy, culminating in the circular Central Hall. The overall effect, with the combination of materials, colour and texture, was one of extraordinary richness. This distinctive arrangement, in a scheme still relatively novel in London at this date, and even more striking in those drab post-war years, was welcomed by John Russell. He described the distinctive atmosphere in *The Sunday Times* on 30th October 1955; "The visitor finds himself in an oratory, now in a tumbledown country mansion, now in a palace in Lisbon, now in a Goanese counting house". The great variety of objects, he concludes, come together to make up "a coherent and appealing picture of Portuguese civilisation".

Eric Newton, writing in *Time and Tide* (5th November 1955) also praised the arrangement, and especially Professor dos Santos, for the way he had chosen to place and balance each object in his attempt to

define the essence of Portuguese art; "It is many years since the galleries at Burlington House looked as richly or as spaciously furnished as they do today". Many others praised the taste and discretion shown in displaying the works of art. Only Basil Taylor, in *The Spectator* (4th November 1955) was doubtful about either content or presentation. In his review, one that was perhaps still informed by lingering English nineteenth century prejudice, he says; " We are plunged into a medley of furniture, architectural fragments, textiles, metalwork, carriages, the whole gamut of a provincial Baroque. I must confess here and now to an antipathy for Baroque, not uncommon among the English". Meanwhile the strictly Catholic paper, *The Tablet* (5th November, 1955) reminded visitors to the exhibition not to forget that religious art was created in the service not of art galleries but of the Christian faith. The paper was as concerned by the lack of correctness shown in the display of liturgical furnishings. "Whole altars are here erected, with candles in the candlesticks for verisimilitude; and there might well have been a liturgical consultant, once so much trouble was being taken to make sure that only things made to stands on altars were exhibited on altars".

The critics seem to have been equally divided as to the centerpiece of the exhibition, and their choice of the most unique among the many works of art. On display in Gallery II was the great polyptych, the iconic *Veneration of St Vincent* by Nuno Gonçalves (tempera and oil on oak, *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,* Lisbon). It was seen in London for the first time outside Portugal with all the six panels. For many this masterpiece was a revelation. Nuno Gonçalves was praised for his expressive power and consummate technical ability, hailed as one of the great artists of the fifteenth century and likened to a poet in the Italian Renaissance humanist tradition. Ernle Bradford, in *The Tatler* (26th October 1955) wrote, "If this brilliant exhibition does no more than reveal his greatness to lovers of painting it will have achieved its aim. The striking quality of the portraiture can hardly be surpassed". Stephen Bone in *The Manchester Guardian* (29th October 1955) was also moved by 'the curious, solemn, monumental effect of this great pageant of life size figures'. Others recognized the exceptional historical and factual

importance of the painting in Portugal's history. For Sacheverell Sitwell, writer and connoisseur, the panels were the most precious work of art in Porgual. Sitwell's perceptive reflections, those of a self-styled 'lover of Portugal inspired by the exhibition' was broadcast on the BBC Third programme (published in *The Listener* 10th November 1955). He described the *Veneration of St Vincent* as the banner or palladium of Portugal, and posed the question "Is there a comparable instance of the whole history of a country in its Golden Age, and all its leading personalities, enshrined in one great work?" It may have been the international recognition of the painting's importance in the context of European art that led to the concerns expressed for its safety as the exhibition closed early in 1956. It was decided that the six large oak panels, that had arrived together in London, be separated and they returned to Portugal in two ships.

For other critics of art pride of place went to the precious gold and enameled *Belém Monstrance* (1506, *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga,* Lisbon) made by Gil Vicente for his patron Dom Manuel I. This fragile piece with its delicate tracery had traveled to London in the diplomatic bag and was displayed in Gallery III. For Maurice Collis, in the *Art News and Review* (12th November 1955), the monstrance was a unique work of art 'springing from the Asian conquest and made of the first gold brought from Goa'. For Basil Taylor, the monstrance was the one and only compelling reason to visit the exhibition, for it was made 'with an elegant tenderness not to be found anywhere else in these galleries'. John Russell wrote eloquently in *The Sunday Times* of the beauty of this religious liturgical object, for him it was 'the apotheosis of Portuguese craftsmanship; in it the great organ notes of Gothic are scaled down to an exquisite whisper'. The special correspondent of *The Times* (3rd November 1955) even suggested that the monstrance, 'an object if feeling and mystery' was one of the minor wonders of the world, and should become a 'centre of pilgrimage in London this winter for all who are interested in the arts'.

Other critics chose to consider the legacy of Portugal's maritime and imperial history; the inspiration that had come from

the achievements of her explorers and the way that was reflected and interpreted in objects in the exhibition. Clive Cullerne-Bown, in the *Hampstead Express* (4th November 1955) told his readers that for the entrance fee of just two shillings you could enter 'straight into the devout yet adventurous life of a country which at the time led the world in pioneer exploration'. While, for Maurice Collis, in a comparison that is perhaps a little more controversial, the exhibition seems to suggest, 'that Portugal's great age (1450-1680) when she discovered and dominated Asia had a greater effect on her emotionally and, so, artistically than our subsequent dominion there had on us'.

Finally there were those who recalled the perpetual alliance between Portugal and England, the ancient alliance that was the guiding spirit behind this unique and diverse assembly of works of art. The exhibition was intended as a cultural exchange, and made possible by the remarkable generosity with whish Portugal had, in the words of James Mann: hazarded her treasures to make this most widely representative of all the great National Exhibitions that have been staged by the Royal Academy in recent years. This at the time was the most complete collection of Portugal's art ever to have been assembled. Fifty years ago, in those immediate post-war years, it can be seen as significant that it was sent overseas with the blessing of the Portuguese Government to be presented for the first and only time in the capital city of her ancient ally. The gesture and its intent was recognised by Sacheverell Sitwell, whose knowledge and love of Portugal, her art and architecture was so lucidly expressed in his talk for the BBC. He concluded with the words "Portugal's treasures will brighten London, while they are here, and form yet another link between us and our old ally and friend".

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For added interest this letter – now translated – was published in *JLeitores on 17th January 2006*

The artist Bartolomeu dos Santos, who for many years was a professor at the prestigious Slade School in London, sent us the

following letter. It relates a curious story about his grandfather, Reynaldo dos Santos, and the exhibition which took place in London 50 years ago and which was reported in the last issue of *JLeitores:*

I read an excellent article by Angela Delaforce in JL on 21st December about a Portuguese Art exhibition which my grandfather, Professor Reynaldo dos Santos, took to the Royal Academy in 1955. It was an unique exhibition and the best of Portuguese art at that time was taken to London with an ease and speed which was only possible in a dictatorship headed by a "benevolent dictator", as Sir James Mann naively described Salazar. If, in my opinion, the exhibition suffered from too many exhibits from the 18th century which gave the collection a *bric-á-brac* air about it, on the other hand, it did give the English a chance to discover an art which, until then, had been unknown in Great Britain.

In terms of whether the *Custódia de Belém* went to London or not, allow me to rectify Angela Delaforce's information. Reynaldo dos Santos managed to get the "benevolent dictator's" permission to take any exhibit he wanted except the *Custódia de Belém* "because of its national and historical importance". But the banker Ricardo Espirito Santo Silva – a friend of Salazar – persuaded him at the last moment (the exhibition had already arrived in London) to allow the *Custódia* to leave. It was dismantled and placed in layers of cotton in a bag which the banker took to London. I presume someone from the Embassy was waiting its arrival because a *Custódia* – even the one from Belém – would not easily have passed through English customs.

Problems arose, however, after the exhibition closed for there were no documents to prove that the *Custódia* had ever entered the country which meant that it was not legally in England. It was therefore dismantled, placed in the same bag it came in and Reynaldo dos Santos took it back to Portugal. Presumably the Portuguese customs must have been warned for the *Custódia* went through without difficulty. After descending the few steps which, at that time, led to the airport's main entrance, Reynaldo met a Government Minister and told him what he had in the bag. The

Minister immediately offered to lend his car to my grandfather, who refused, saying he had his own car at the door. At that time there were few planes and we enjoyed the luxury of having our cars waiting for us at the airport entrance.

As it was late, the bag with the *Custódia* spent the night at *142 Avenida António Augusto Aguiar.* As I had lived there since my grandmother's death, in the bedroom next to my grandfather (to keep him company) I was privileged to sleep next to the *Custódia* that night – even though I did not see it. It would be interesting to know whether there is any documentation in the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* about this curious subject.

The catalogue, which is usually all that is left after an exhibition, was – as Angela Delaforce rightly said – "small and thin" perhaps because the exhibition had been organised in a hurry. Many years later I was in the Royal Academy library with Eduardo Paolozzi, a young librarian, and when he knew that I was Portuguese – and without knowing that I was Reynaldo's grandson – he said "The catalogue of the exhibition of Portuguese art was the first that the Academy published in a large format. I will show it to you." This amazed me because I knew the small 1955 catalogue. However the librarian was referring to the "Portuguese Art since 1910" catalogue on the Portuguese contemporary art exhibition organised by Helmut Wohl in 1978. As opposed to its predecessor this exhibition is still a noteworthy point of reference in terms of contemporary Portuguese art.

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