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VICTORY SERVED UP ON A PLATE
Wellington's Portuguese Service at Apsley House.

by Caryl Panman

A burnished silver plateau nearly eight metres long with over 1000 additional pieces of silver and silver-gilt including a dining service sufficient for 55 people, which took more than 100 men over three years to produce at great cost and considerable trouble is not a gift to be taken lightly. It was given in gratitude to the Marshal-General who defeated and finally expelled the French Army from Portugal in a series of battles extending from Roliça in 1808 to Toulouse in 1814, and indeed, the Portuguese Service as it is known, is a great source of national pride - to Great Britain for the possession of it, and to Portugal for the making of it:

Senhor Domingos de Sequeira, painter to the (Portuguese) Court, an artist of taste, genius and industry, (...) is at present superintending the workmanship of a grand service of plate which is to be presented by the Prince Regent of Portugal to Lord Wellington, and which will be a lasting monument of the elegant taste of this artist.

This modest paragraph in the March 1814 issue of *The Gentleman* was probably the first time the British public heard of Domingos Antonio de Sequeira, arguably one of Portugal's greatest painters of all times, who was commissioned to oversee the work probably in 1812, even before the Peninsular War was ended. The service arrived in London in September 1816 on board the frigate *Perola*, packed in 55 cases and accompanied by Portugal's new Ambassador to London, the Duke of Palmela, with a letter from the Governors of the Realm:

We have the honour to present Your Excellency, in the name and by the order of His Majesty our King, the silver table set that commemorates the series of

victories won by the Portuguese, gloriously led by you, from the extreme East of the Peninsular to Bordeaux and Toulouse. It will always be a testimony of our gratitude, as well as that of the whole of Europe, for the freedom that such memorable successes brought us.

Wellington was in The Netherlands at the time, so his brother William Wellesley Pole received the gift. "It is" he was reported to have said, "an honour to the Portuguese nation. She has finished a work, the likes of which have never been seen in England." To this, Wellington added his own words:

I hope you know that such a magnificent present from His Majesty was not necessary to remind me how much I owe the brave Portuguese Army, the whole nation and Your Excellencies in the critical moments.

When put on display at Garrard's in Pantons Street, the Courier reported that the silversmith's house was "thronged by great numbers of the Nobility and gentry, who were admitted by tickets to view it. The groundwork of the plateau is composed of silver burnished; a beautiful design; it is illuminated by 106 wax candles, and whole forms a most delightful spectacle." Every single piece of the silver set, apart from the knives, forks and spoons, is rich with symbolism and allegory, and each has a story to tell.

Wellington found a home for it at the house he bought from his brother, uniquely addressed at No. 1 London, where it was used for the first time according to the *Gazeta de Lisboa* on June 29, 1819:

The great silver table set that the Noble Duke received from the King of Portugal as a tribute for his services in the Peninsula, was used for this occasion and everybody present admired it for the first time.

The following year, Wellington started holding his famous annual Waterloo Banquets for the officers who had served him. This most exclusive of exclusive dinner parties excited great national interest, and it is significant that Wellington always favoured the Portuguese service over the many others he had received, for this occasion. Apsley House has recently been reopened after extensive refurbishment, and the Portuguese Service is now on view, spread over the dining room table just as it always had been from the first of Wellington's Waterloo Banquets in 1820, until the last one in the year of his death, 1852.

A painting hanging at Apsley House shows the banquet in full flow. Wellington is on his feet, addressing his fellow officers and other distinguished guests seated at the long, lavish table. It is a dynamic, eye-catching canvas, full of movement and contrasts of colour and light and shade. But what draws the eye is the central ornament of the table's centrepiece, showing the Four Continents paying tribute to the united armies of Britain, Portugal and Spain, while Victory stands victoriously above the whole, and fleet-footed silver Tagedids dance joyfully on the candle-lit surface. All the players on the stage have long since departed, but what remains to this very day is a medley of molten movement celebrating the genius of its creator.

The Service was called the *Baixela da Victoria* after Wellington's new title, Duque da Victoria which he was given in 1812 after triumphantly storming the Spanish frontier towns of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz and effectively removing the French threat from Portuguese soil for once and for all. Normally, a gift of this magnitude would have been commissioned in France, home of the world's leading and most accomplished silversmiths, but under the circumstances, this would hardly have been appropriate. Instead, Sequeira - the second son of a poor Belém seaman - came up with a Portuguese *oeuvre* equal to anything produced in France at the time.

Born in 1768, Sequeira won admission into the Royal School of Design and Sculpture at the tender age of twelve, and showed such promise as a painter that in 1788 he was sent to study art in Rome for seven years at the expense of the privy purse of Maria I. In 1802 he shared the post as First Painter to the Portuguese Court with a fellow student from Rome, and the following year was appointed drawing master to two of the young princesses. His course seemed set for success and fame - but then came the muddled events of 1807, and along with them a story that throws a different and somewhat ironic light on the making of the *Baixela*.

At that time, Sequeira was working in Oporto as Professor do Desenho at the Aula da Academia de Marinho e Comércio. The Prince Regent Dom João, ruling Portugal on behalf of his insane mother Maria I, tried to appease Napoleon and prevent the ravages of war in his country, by himself declaring war on Britain (29 October). Unfortunately, he did not know that Napoleon's troops had already crossed the frontier into Portugal with the collusion of Spain eleven days earlier, and that Napoleon had already promised that "The house of Braganza had ceased to reign in Europe" (*Paris Moniteur*, 13 October). It was not until November 25 that the British Ambassador, Lord Strangford - who was lingering on in Lisbon - managed to show the Prince Regent a copy of the *Moniteur*, and four days later the royal family was shipped off with undignified

haste to the safety of their Brazilian dominions by the Royal Navy. The very next day Marshal Junot with an advance party of only 1500 French soldiers marched unopposed into Lisbon.

And that is how, only four years prior to receiving the commission to make the *Baixela* for Wellington, Sequeira ended up accepting a commission from the other side:

Junot received me courteously, made an eulogy of my being an artist and a credit to the nation and was determined that I should continue in the position that I occupied because men of merit must at all times deserve greater consideration.

The upshot was that he made an allegorical painting of Junot "as the conquering hero, both prudent and just ... (whose) ... government ... is wise and prudent and concerned about (Lisbon's) future." Hardly had the paint dried on the canvas when the picture changed again: the French were driven out of Lisbon by the British, after the Battle of Vimeiro (1808) and the subsequent Convention of Cintra - and Sequeira was left with the unenviable task of defending his patriotism.

This he did by donating half his salary to the depleted Portuguese treasury and by protesting loudly that he had done the job against his will, but to no avail. The evidence was all too evident: a great canvas depicting Junot courteously holding the hand of a simpering, grateful Lisbon. He was tried for treason and sent to prison in January 1809 where he spent a greater part of that year.

But fortunately, he had friends in high places and Portugal's Primo Pintor soon found himself back in favour. A flurry of allegorical paintings followed as if in apology: one shows a trio of brave young men representing the English-Portuguese-Spanish alliance brandishing glittering swords at a cowering France. Another is a portrait of the Prince Regent Dom João surrounded by heavenly figures representing Generosity, Compassion, Religion, Clemency, Stability, Greatness of Soul, Heroism, Kindness, Docility and so on, with others representing Happiness and Obedience looking on admiringly. He was certainly on the way to rehabilitating himself, in paint if not in word.

Shortly thereafter, probably around the time Sequeira completed another allegorical painting - this time of Wellington standing triumphantly in a golden chariot, surrounded by trumpeting angels and heading with great horsepower for the temple of immortal glory - the Prince Regent commissioned his Court Painter to start work on the *Baixela*. Past sins had clearly been forgiven.

The result was an unprecedented piece of Portuguese neo-classical metal-work, all the more remarkable for having been designed by a painter rather



Domingos António de Sequeira: Signed dated drawing of an allegorical figure with the note "Dei este desenho ao Sr. Faustino Joze Rodrigues no dia 29 de Abril de 1812 para fazer por elle modello em cera". Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.

than a silversmith, and for having been completed in time, and at a time when Portugal was in such a state of disorder. Sequeira himself truly believed he had produced a masterpiece, albeit a monument for a hero of antiquity rather than a dinner service for a British General; it had offered him an unparalleled opportunity to display that knowledge of classical art which he had once so unfortunately put at the disposal of Marshal Junot.

The making of the *Baixela* was not without its problems. 52 of his original designs are housed in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon - although there is some doubt that he actually drew them all himself - and some of them never materialised. His original idea for the centrepiece, to which he devoted all his enthusiasm and classical knowledge, showed a triumphant Britannia supported by Lisbon and Portugal. This was not universally appreciated and the end result more appropriately puts a soaring winged Victory high on a globe supported by swords bearing the arms of Portugal, England and Spain. The original design for the cutlery was rejected by Wellington himself in the early stages of production.

The Military Arsenal in Lisbon had been instructed to make way for the production of the *Baixela* but Sequeira insisted on working from his own house on the Rua de Santíssima Trindade, much to the annoyance and inconvenience of the displaced workers from the Arsenal, many of whom were soldiers likely to be drafted into action. He converted his house into a workshop with a forge and extended it next door to the Rua de São Domingos à Lapa, at his own cost. Adding to the confusion were scores of police - "ill, invalid and disabled troops" according to Sequeira - hired to protect the great amounts of silver, Spanish silver coins melted down into bars, which regularly arrived from the Mint. Sequeira himself, by all accounts a driven man, worked every day from dawn until midnight, and on top of it all, just when he was almost half way through the project his wife died in childbirth.

But the work was completed, and magnificently so. One of the Portuguese contingent accompanying the service to England in 1816 wrote back to Sequeira:

The service and centrepiece have been admired by all the great people of this and other nations, who have seen it. They admit that it is unique of its class and the most superior in its conception to be formed in the state of the arts in Portugal. The Countess of Mornington, mother of the Duke of Wellington, expressed her satisfaction, saying to me that her son was extremely flattered by a present that exalted the glory of his enterprises, and he was equally indebted to the nation which had dedicated it to him.



Domingos António Sequeira: Self-portrait with models of the *Baixela da Victoria*, inscribed (4 August 1813: Portugal, private collection)

The reception was very satisfactory indeed. The British, however, insisted on variously labelling the Portuguese craftsmen as being "Italians" or "Europeans", much to the annoyance of the givers of the gift. They had every reason to be proud of their patriotic all-Portuguese effort, not only for the superiority of the workmanship, but also for the economy of their techniques - a very real consideration for a war-devastated country. Much of the credit, which Sequeira was slow to give, must also go to his team of sculptors and silversmiths who may have been responsible for the less monumental but no less original pieces of the service.

A year after the *Baixela* had been safely delivered to England, Sequeira finished a ceremonial sword for the Marshal of the Portuguese army, William Beresford, which, with its fine diamond-studded hilt extolled the Viscount's courage, success and renown. What he actually thought of the thinly disguised British occupation of Portugal after the French were defeated by Wellington

became clear a few years later with the liberal Constitutionalist Revolution of 1820, of which he was an ardent supporter. The artist now showed his true colours in a brilliant and complex canvas called *Astro da Lusitânia* depicting Liberty (dressed as a Roman) approaching the throne of Lusitania while the mask of Despotism is ripped off.

But once again, by putting his brush where his heart was - or perhaps where his pocket was -, he found himself in deep water. Dom João VI's *volte-face* on the question of the Constitution in 1823, two years after his return from Brazil, put an abrupt end to Sequeira's chequered career of pleasing all masters, and he left for France.

There he met up with an old friend from his Junot days, the Count de Forbin, a former officer of the Napoleonic army in Lisbon and a student of David's, who introduced him to the Salon of 1824 where his work received considerable acclaim and a gold medal for his *Death of Camões*. By 1826 he turned full circle and returned to the Italy of his youth.

What ever Sequeira's political persuasions were, his sheer artistic genius always saved the day. There simply was not another artist like him in Portugal, and he continued to receive a yearly pension from the Portuguese Crown. When he died far from home in 1837, he had just received the *Ordem de Cristo* and had been nominated Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Lisbon.

And at Apsley House the Duke of Wellington continued to bring out the Portuguese Service for the annual Waterloo Banquet long after the author of the work had died.

And there it is today, in its full - or almost full - glory, but no longer the present Duke of Wellington's to use. The service was offered back to Portugal, but the offer was declined; either the price with its attendant taxes was too high, or the Portuguese questioned the doubtful protocol of buying back the gift they had given, and it is now in the hands of the Victoria & Albert Museum. But even with all the changes in fortune suffered by the creator and his creation alike, to this day Sequeira's Portuguese Service remains a source of national pride, a permanent testimony to the friendship between England and Portugal, and a "lasting monument of the elegant taste of this artist"

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