

Chapter 19

Overcoming Obstacles: The Creation of the Very First Art Museum in Portugal in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

After several failures in the artistic education in Portugal, throughout the 18th century, the 19th century was still to bring a few setbacks. Social and political upheavals marked the first years of the century, with the invasions of Napoleonic armies and the civil war. In this chapter I will tell the history of the birth of the first public art museum, created in Porto in 1833. The meeting of the future king D. Pedro IV and the artist Baptista Ribeiro was about to make history. Indeed, when Baptista Ribeiro delivered the prince a report on the need to create a public art museum in the city, the prince couldn't be happier. He then invited Baptista Ribeiro to organize it, giving all his support to the creation of the first public art museum in the nation. It would, in fact, take more than a 100 years to match the dream of its first director. But in the meantime, it surely achieved more than he could expect.

INTRODUCTION

After several failures in the artistic education in Portugal, throughout the 18th century, the 19th century was still to bring a few setbacks. Social and political upheavals marked the first years of the century, with the invasions of Napoleonic armies and the civil war. In this chapter we will tell the history of the birth of the first public art museum, created in Porto in 1833. The meeting of the future king D. Pedro IV and the artist Baptista Ribeiro was about to make history. Indeed, when Baptista Ribeiro delivered the prince a report on the need to create a public art museum in the city, the prince couldn't be happier. He then invited Baptista Ribeiro to organize it, giving all his support to the creation of the first public art museum in the nation. It would, in fact, take more than 100 years to match the dream of its first director. But in the meantime, it surely achieved more than he could expect. In this chapter, we will follow what the goals were, what obstacles arose and how they were solved. In the process, we will disclose the contribution

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of this establishment to the healing of this community after the hard times of a fratricide war as well as the dream of his first director to make it into a motor of social and cultural education through the arts.

FORWARD

After several failures in the artistic education plan in Portugal, throughout the 18th century, the following one hundred years were still complex. Social and political confrontations marked the first years of the 19th century. The Napoleonic armies had taken with them hundreds of national assets, artistic and scientific, after the looting of the Royal Museum of Ajuda (Lisbon) and of the Cabinet of Natural History, University of Coimbra, stripping them of important objects of their collections. According to the Portuguese historian and politician, José Silvestre Ribeiro (1807-1891), author of an important publication on the history of cultural and scientific institutions in Portugal, in 1808, the French General Junot had ordered Domenico Vandelli (then director of the Ajuda Cabinet) to deliver the French naturalist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire all that which the latter would choose from the Portuguese science museums, informing that he would then take them to their ultimate destination, the *free countries* — as Bonaparte defined France. Consequently, over 1,500 pieces of mineralogy and zoology were sent to France (Ribeiro, 1885, III, pp. 354).

Other private science and art collections were also looted. This doesn't mean that public art museums were spared. It only means that they did not exist at the time.

Art schools and museums had been in the mind of the Portuguese elite for many years. However, they had been constantly postponed. In this chapter we will follow the history of how the first public art museum, created in Porto in 1833 — or should we say drafted — would prepare the soil to other educational adventures in the country.

So, let us now go back to 1832. By that time, Portugal was torn apart by a crude civil war. The meeting of two men — D. Pedro, appointed heir to the throne and future king (D. Pedro IV), and the artist João Baptista Ribeiro — and one will was about to change the history of art museums and art education in Portugal.

In 1832, this painter and art teacher at the Academia de Marinha e Comércio [Academy for Navy and Trade], João Baptista Ribeiro (1790-1868), had been summoned to the liberal royal headquarters under the pretext of painting a portrait of the liberal prince D. Pedro. The painter used the opportunity to deliver the prince a report on the need to create a public art museum in the city.

Fully aware of the importance of education for the progress of nations, and having the full support of the Porto population, then still under siege, the liberal D. Pedro couldn't be happier about Ribeiro's proposal and invited him to make the necessary efforts to materialize it, giving all his support to the creation of the first public art museum in the nation and making the symbolic decision of donating his own sword as a foundational object (Vitorino, 1930, p.31). The dice were thrown. History was about to happen.

Some Data on the European Context

Before unveiling what happened, we should briefly look at the European background on art and history museums. In fact, all around Europe, museum institutions were by then a reality with their sumptuous

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