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Visual Communication In Portugal: Professional Training And Skills In Twentieth Century

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1. Introduction

With few exceptions, professional training in Portugal was unable to fill the void of doubt and perplexity arising from the new challenges of modernity. Through their professional practice professionals, however, acquired a wide range of practical knowledge and competences in various areas. This on-the-job experience was deep and meaningful because it grew from an attitude towards the real world that assimilates knowledge and skills, and goes beyond the academic practice limited to transmit acquired knowledge. The present study is a contribution towards a better understanding of the great lines of Training and Acquiring Professional Competences in graphic professions in Portugal.

2. Facing the Challenge of a New Printing Technology:

The Litographic Draughtsman

The development of lithography in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth increased the importance of the visual arts and advertising, while marking the appearance of a new professional class – the “lithographic draughtsman”.

These professionals acquired their skills through a daily, on-the-job training; mainly by copying into litho stone the designs produced by artists. They were however short of artistic training and were for the most part unaware of the milieu where new artistic currents were being engendered. Its creative expression – naive and incipient – stemmed from these circumstances, while sufficient to satisfy not very demanding and unsophisticated consumers.



2.1 The Paradoxes of the Classical Training of Artists

At the time, artistic training was almost non-existing in the training of lithographic draughtsman. But the artists that supplied original drawings were familiar with the Beaux-Arts Academy, where they learned the practice and theory of the visual arts.

The formal and aesthetic values that marked the age were deeply influenced by the naturalism of artists such as Columbano, Malhoa, Soares dos Reis, José Simões de Almeida and Teixeira Lopes.

3. Professional Competences Developed Formal Learning

Throughout Europe as the century began there was an enthusiasm for new aesthetic ideas and conceptions such that young Portuguese artists looked abroad for inspiration in the new artistic currents and avant-garde movements. The challenge and the will to explore unknown paths are intrinsic to progress and innovation.

In our country, the initial manifestation of modernism was the Portuguese Humorists Exhibition that scandalised Lisbon in 1912. The innovative pioneering design of Almada Negreiros, Cristiano Cruz, Emmérico Nunes, Jorge Barradas and Stuart de Carvalhais, made their mark newspapers and magazines, especially in its humoristic vein, both in cartoons and illustrations.

3.1 The Group: A Space of Integration of Knowledge and Experience

The signs of modernity brought awareness and further interest. Although crossing a highly unstable period, Portugal was not indifferent to the Zeitgeist of post WWI Europe.

In 1927, Fred Kradolfer came to Portugal. He became here the main force behind the modern language in graphical arts, and the main reference for the contemporary professionals of the visual arts. He was the only professional of graphic arts with an academic training, having obtained a degree in Switzerland. He raised an enthusiasm and provided guidance for a group of artists that included Jorge Barradas, Stuart de Carvalhais, Bernardo Marques, Emmérico Nunes, Roberto Nobre, Amarelhe, António Soares, Carlos Botelho, José Rocha, Thomas de Mello, Paulo Ferreira and Maria Keil.

The official teaching was still oblivious to the deep transformations occurring in the arts. Discontent led some artists to search outside the Beaux-Arts institution for new views and skills. They acquired their competences through applied self-learning; by confronting themselves with “workplace situations that led to an accumulation of experiences not available through the conventional Beaux-Arts training” (Silva, 2001: 14).

3.2 Studios, Exhibitions and Other Places of Work and Learning

In the words of Fernando Azevedo, the studios were the places where work and learning combined; “ranging from the showcase window to the poster; from the bottle label to the Logo (as we say today)” (Mello, 1989: 37). These were the real “schools” and some distinguished themselves for the quality of their work. The Tom and ETP (Estúdio Técnico de Publicidade) studios were among them.



Exhibitions too, were places for intense learning. “[...] the growing need to give an image to a precise political-ideological message justified the use of exhibition space, fitting and organising it for that goal” (Acciaiuoli, 2000: 46). After a period of singular relevance in the late twenties, it was under the leadership of António Ferro that exhibitions became a huge success.

4. THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THE ANTÓNIO ARROIO SCHOOL

In accordance with the spirit of the age, the educational context of the country was also oriented towards moral and patriotic values. Within this context the creation of the School of Decorative Arts António Arroio was a momentous event in the pedagogy of the arts.

Created in 1934 with the aim to teach the arts; it was as Rio de Carvalho (1993:41) puts it , “a school more active than the Beaux-Arts academy itself, more interesting, more alive, with an interesting staff [...] Classes were small, and there was a personalised treatment given to the student, who felt more in a studio of the Quattrocento where the Master assumed more the proportions of an universal mastery than acting an highly qualified technocrat”.

4.1 The Pedagogy of Master Frederico Jorge

During the fifties, António Arroio's pedagogy was innovated by Frederico Jorge. The school was up to then organized upon a system of arts and crafts, was renewed by a pedagogical model based upon the model and concept of the Bauhaus. With a group of sharp staff members such as Daciano Costa, Sena da Silva, Manuel Rio-Carvalho or Bragança Gil, “Frederico Jorge instilled a pedagogy which, by rationalizing the teaching of drafting, moved towards a technical framework” as Helena Souto (2001: 37) puts it.

“To do and teach are complementary forms of learning” as Frederico Jorge used to say (Summavielle, 1993, p.28). Along with the António Arroio School his own studio was a subsidiary space for a group disappointed with the programmatic intentions of the Beaux-Arts education.

4.2 The Pedagogical Experience of the Daciano Da Costa Studio:

The Methodology of Creative Processes

A year after being barred from teaching for political reasons at the Beaux-Arts school, Daciano da Costa started in his studio a four year's experiment in teaching design called “Basic Design” with the cooperation of Lagoa Henriques, Frederico Jorge and Roberto Araújo.

This course was attended by various professionals such as Cristina Reis, José Moura George, João Segurado and José Brandão. The latter co-operated with Daciano, and said about that experiment: “at the time the limits of specialization- at least among us – were not very clear. We faced every area of the project, from the interiors to industrial Design, furniture or graphic design. After all, it was about practising a “new idea” of cultural and functional intervention in society. We were going through an important time in consolidating and rationalising the profession. Historically, it was the decade of “design methods” - to “rationalise” the process of discovery, to control “inspiration”, to overcome the learning through osmosis” (Brandão, 2001, p.31).



5. Oficializing Design; the Methodology of the Project

5.1 Training Abroad: The Case of the Ravensbourne College of Art and Design

Scholarships provided by the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation allowed the formation abroad of several professionals abroad. One group from Daciano's atelier studied in London – a background not familiar to most, whose cultural references were markedly French.

It was at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design that José Brandão and other designers graduated in the seventies in graphic design, after encountering a very open and pragmatic culture, thus bringing to Portugal the references of the cultural complex of British society.

5.2 The Evolution of Design in Portugal

In Portugal, school was backward leaning. Concern over the artistic training led to the creation in 1965 of CFA – an artistic training course promoted by the Beaux-Arts Academy, aimed at training professionals to a pre-university level (Souto, 2001:41).

By 1971, conditions were capable enough to produce the First Exhibition of Portuguese Design, by the INII; according to Sena da Silva (2001:17), it is the first time the word 'design' occurs in an official capacity. Designer now becomes a proper professional identity, whose activity encompasses both project and responses to actual problems. Graphic artists, draughtsman, interior decorators, illustrators, page-makers and other professionals from various areas, then found a professional identity.

With the purpose of training in Design, courses at private and public schools appeared. Graphic Design became the training of project professionals in visual communication. In 1975 appeared the course of Design and Communication and Equipment at the Beaux-Arts school of Lisbon and Graphic Design in Oporto.

Even after the Revolution of April 1974, despite a vibrant environment, education remained in a dismal state. Facing this prospect, students such as Henrique Cayatte and Jorge Silva left formal training to search for broader horizons; for a broader understanding of the world's variety and complexity, and the different ways to approach them. The training and acquisition of skills emerged from daily on-the-job practice, facing the complexity of different tasks with a lasting predisposition towards finding and thinking new solutions.

These two professionals are paradigmatic of on-the-job training at a time when the first graduates from Design courses appeared.

With the eighties, and the “fever to modernise the country” (Costa, 1998, p.53) there was a proliferation of new Design courses. Post-graduate training became a reality and diluted the long lasting duality between practitioners and theoreticians. Despite the ascent of formal training, we can not leave unmentioned other forms of visual expression that were not part of intentional design and project: posters and murals and other forms of expression that resulted from artistic capabilities acquired outside formal training.



6. Conclusion

Throughout twentieth century Portugal, awareness of the need of a new conception of training that led to see, think and learn the surrounding world was permanent, because experts in graphic communication could not find in academia neither the skills they needed nor the certification of their capabilities: the “teachable knowledge” was not adequate for most creations; “constructed knowledge” gained no acceptance in academia.

To widespread auto-didactics, succeeded an abundant supply of university degrees in the areas of graphic communication. Also the multiplicity of areas that each professional was engaged throughout the century became limited to a specialisation in more restricted areas. With the amazing multiplication of technologies, activities and opportunities, exercising any function using modern technologies requires a greater focus of knowledge on a specific area.

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