

THE ACT OF DRAWING AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROCESS: A CASE STUDY ON VICTOR PALLA'S EARLY WORKS::

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Abstract

This paper is a case study on Victor Palla's early works, promoting the process of drawing as a mediator between different disciplines, and explaining how his artwork was related to the rebellious spirit that emerged and prospered in Portugal at the end of World War II. This paper will range from hand-drawn sketches to final masterpieces with the intention of enhancing a better understanding of interdisciplinarity.

The objectives are of two kinds: to develop a study and interest in Victor Palla's work, and secondly, to analyse in a general view, the importance of 'drawing' in his different artistic activities. Our exploratory analysis will help reveal additional information about the artist's work and demonstrate, hopefully, how Victor Palla's contribution helped enrich the Portuguese Visual Culture. These artworks are part of our cultural heritage; therefore, this essay will assist the construction and preservation of a cultural and visual identity.

Keywords: hand-drawn sketches; design/artistic process; interdisciplinarity; visual culture.

Introduction

Victor Palla (1922-2006) is well known for his photographic work, his best example being in the book "Lisboa, cidade triste e alegre", published with Costa Martins in 1959. However, his artwork production ranges a wide number of activities: he was simultaneously an architect, painter, book designer and producer, writer, sculptor and photographer.

He attended the School of Architecture in Lisbon (between 1939 and 1943), where the academic teachings were based on the "Beaux Arts" of Paris, very conservative and even discretionary, fact that made him in 1944, along with several other students search for the alternative left, the school of Oporto, where Carlos Ramos's (professor and architect) character changed the way Modern Architecture was taught in Portugal. There, due to his acquaintance with other students, architects and writers, he participated in the "Independents" exhibition which was considered to be more of a Manifesto, against all canon-like representations, proclaiming new reality values, than anything else. This postulate acquired a new strength in the following year, more specifically in 1945 with the end of World War II, creating in Portugal a fresh hope for the fall of Salazar's dictatorship. Huge celebrations were held, freedom and liberation was momentarily felt, but unfortunately the totalitarian regime still lasted for another 34 years.

After 1944, Victor Palla designs a considerable number of book covers for different Book Publishers, whose authors were (most of them), the initiators of the Portuguese Neo-Realism Movement.

The Social Realism Theory, influenced by Maximo Gorki and Jdanov in Russia, and later by Italian and Brazilian references, found doctrine in a new proletarian literature based on social criticism. Therefore, the social realism novel stimulated the organisms of narrative representation being inspired in the Marxist Consciousness and being formulated in social conflicts, putting into scene peasants, workers and landlords.

"Portuguese Reality Conscious" problems were first tackled in the 30's through scattered magazines and it was only between 1941 and 1944, with the 10th volume of the "Novo Cancioneiro" (poetry collection), that the Social Realism, or Neo-Realism Movement, had found as well its own expression in Portugal. This desire to renovate society escorted artists to a new expression, influenced by artists such as Orozco, Portinari, but also Picasso and Braque. Consequently, Victor Palla had found a chance of expressing this new era and contributing to its new visual formation by illustrating several books belonging to this literary movement. He had produced an enormous amount of book-covers between 1944 and 1960, determining a very important aspect of the Portuguese visual culture.

In 1947, Victor Palla returned to Lisbon and established, together with Bento de Almeida, an Architectural Studio that lasted 25 years. Although being architecture his main professional activity, he continued to carry out his other artistic activities such as painting, drawing or photographing, participating in exhibitions, book editions, writing etc. Experimenting through different methods of expression characterized Victor Palla's artistic personality and work.

The Act of drawing structures an interdisciplinary activity:

We will observe, throughout this paper accompanied by images, how the act of drawing presupposes the problem solving amongst different artistic disciplines, in a social/political context. Drawing was adopted from and to various disciplines, undertaking the emergent culture characterized by resistance to political oppression.

Hand-drawn sketches that assist illustrations and paintings:

We will determine what functions drawings/representations carry out in social criticism.

Palla's drawing of a chained figure, published in 1945 in the art section of the "A Tarde" Newspaper, illustrates an article by Júlio Pomar (b.1926), entitled "Notes for an utilitarian art" where the author claims that the artist's state of mind is a "translation of reality through an objective synthesis" (Pomar 1945) exempt of any camouflages.



fig 1



fig 2

In the narrowest sense of the word, Victor Palla's illustration explicitly restrains the human figure to the limited space within the picture's frame. In the preliminary sketch we see a collective drawing, pencil draft drawn by Palla, and some ink sketches drawn by Júlio Pomar, testifying also a collective thinking, since Palla and Pomar had organized together the Art section of the "A Tarde" Newspaper. The drawing carries out various functions (descriptive, expressionistic, symbolic and aesthetic) in correlation with the text, serving like this as a strong social and political criticism. In this picture we observe how drawing, even when accompanied by writing, acts as a mediator between the artist's personality and the real world, establishing by this, among shapes and meanings, a dichotomy, in search for appropriate methods and results. As again we encounter the same drawing in a mock-up for a book-cover (fig.3) entitled "*Incomodidade*" ("Inconvenience"), written by Joaquim Namorado, one of the greatest neo-realism authors.

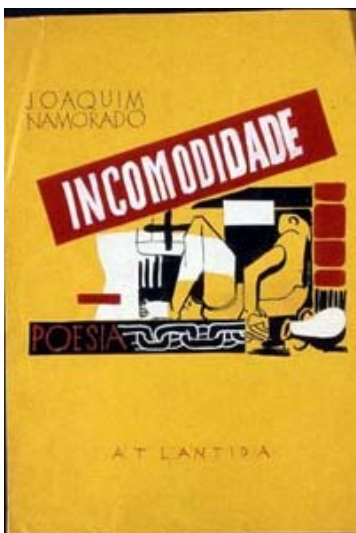


fig.3

In contrast with a yellow background, the drawing serves, together with other elements, as a graphical composition. The previous stylized restrained human figure is now part of the compositional organization as a whole, coexisting with different verbal signs, boxes, colouring, materials and techniques. Beneath the human figure, the chain draws the continuity of the word POESIA (poetry). This graphic element, together with the red painted stone block wall on the right and other elements like the small window, fallen vase exist as a supplement to the drawing. It gives the sense of enclosed space, behind these elements; the black and white colour marks exceed the outlines of the drawing and rule out any sort of shape definition. As a result, it is no longer noticeable where the drawing ends and composition starts. To counter fact this graphic ambiguity, the book-title was arranged (obliquely to look like a stamp) with great prominence, creating like this a visual instability that links the verbal element with the visual sign, through typography. In this book-cover example, it s clear that drawing played the main role and the other graphic elements were organized around it. This drawn and painted mock-up book cover didn't get to be published. Its final cover was printed in 1945 (see fig.4) and included a drawing from the series "La Gloire" (see fig.5).

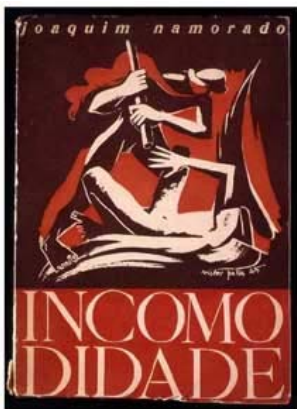


fig 4



fig 5

Again this drawing reveal the will to strengthen and express energetic and vigorous human representation, so characteristic of the social realism expression (sustained and encouraged by the end of World War II) that demonstrated the rising tendency to discuss and fight for better society's condition. Since there is no absolute equivalence between the text and the visual language, it is not asked that illustration represents all that is the book's message. However, Namorado's satirical epigram tends to exalt such energy. It is becoming clear how creative thinking has the ability to establish a metonymic relationship between representations and texts, as well as accomplish a stimulant achievement over the verbal meanings.



fig.6



fig.7

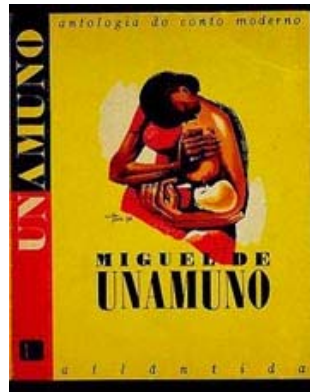


fig.8

Sketches function also in order to understand about shape specifications as in fig. 6 and fig. 7, a in the both sketches this posture is re-evaluated and re-shaped, as a whole, into a more fragmented, stylized form, having the mother's body tilted at an angle. woman breast-feeding a baby, the human figure adopts a vertical posture (aligning the mother's and baby's head), After tracing These same principles are applied at a more advanced stage, in "Unamuno's" book cover (fig. 8), printed in 1946, the drawing have been traced over to a point where shading and rendering completed its refinement, maintaining like this, its realistic look.



fig.9



fig.10

Again we see the breast-feeding figure, (Fig.9 and fig.10) in preliminary studies being used to obtain provisional solutions for the final triptych (fig.11). The breast-feeding woman, among other figures, is now integrated as a whole in the pictorial composition and appears partially distorted. The prevalence of precise ridges and triangles is articulated in a compositional fixture between light and shade, full and empty spaces. We recognize the fact that the concept of space in perspective, in this particular picture, isn't important at all, in other words, it is dismantled in order to acquire a bidimensional status where graphic elements are put along side each other.



fig.11

This type of visual composition, made up of various fragmented and pictographic attributes, resembles cubist paintings, most likely under the influence of Orozco and Picasso works. Consequently, we are able to distinguish drawing from a preliminary intention (refined and used in a coloured book-cover) to drawing as a preparation technique for an Oil painting. The existence of a common drawing helps detect how shape specifications can be translated into two different artistic expressions. Hand-drawn sketches were used as different types of illustrations, while in the first sketch the use of plastic elements is designated by representative and mimetic relation, searching for form, the second seems different, apparently drawn at once, without previous sketches, following an artistic intuition, a specifically, rely artistic drawing. Both re- used as an illustration f. sketches used for different purposes, namely in graphic design and painting, depending on its various transformations and shape specifications.

Drawing used in Modern Architectural Aspirations:

We will mention how Victor Palla's own house, built in Lisbon, served as an important self laboratory for the utilisation of the Modernism Postulates, which were implemented in Portugal at a much later stage, in comparison with other countries. In order to understand his place as an architect, the study of this house should be accompanied by Victor Palla's written testimonies and influences.

On the one hand, CIAM's second stage, lead by Le Corbusier, "who consciously shifted the emphasis to town planning" (Frampton, 1980). The principles of the "living machine" were finally tested by Le Corbusier's paradigmatic Unité d'Habitation in Marseille where a great sense of freedom and compositional rigour was recognised in the creation of external and interior spaces. On the other hand, it is notorious how the Brazilian Modern Architecture has influenced a generation of Portuguese architects and artists. For this "modernism" admiration there contributed the Exhibition on Brazilian Architecture, where Professor Wladimir Alves de Sousa held a conference in Lisbon in 1949, and the book "Brasil Builds, Architecture New and Old. 1652-1942" from 1943.

Bento de Almeida's (b.1918-1997) and Victor Palla's architectonical production helped contribute in the formation of the "Modern Architectural Principles" in Portugal. Such ideals were validated in the first Portuguese National Congress of Architecture held in Lisbon in 1948. In that same year, Victor Palla argues that "one has to have an intrinsic relationship with life and the way of being in life". To respond in discordance with each one's era means keeping off from tradition. Following this defiant thought, he criticizes the academic education, stating that it is "an old (based on unrealistic forms) traditional way of thinking that cowardly avoids debates on problems concerning "modernity" and invalidates any risk taking innovations by using easy as well as worn recipes" (Victor Palla 1949). Based on the "Modern Movement Principles", these words crossed through the eminently rebellious spirit of the era, where these influences and this will to disrupt as well as end with the "institutional", traditional and historical architecture are visible in Victor Palla's perspective illustration drawn for his own house, in 1948 (see fig.12).



fig.12



fig. 13

We shall first study the drawing itself: it is a modern and rigorously drawn illustration of the house, consisting of a two-point perspective method that was initially traced in pencil and then coloured with gouache. When compared to a 3D CAD generated drawing (see fig.13), we realized that an optical illusion was created using a stretched front view of the house. Two reasons that might have influenced this visual effect are: the picture's plane location in relation to the house's position, or the viewpoint's location in relation to the picture's plane. Both options alter the perspective's formation. This method was frequently used by Brazilian architects and was called the "Brazilian perspective" by Portuguese architects.

Now, as a second step, we shall analyse the image's atmosphere: the architectural elements represented in this picture show how Victor Palla applied the ideals according to Le Corbusier's "Five Points towards a New Architecture", specified in 1926. Looking at this drawing, one can feel a general sense of space, luminosity, freedom and joy. Raised above the ground, this house has a garden that extends beyond its limits, diminishing the so-called interior and exterior "barriers" by linking both of them with a ramp. Living in this house meant living in total accordance with the new aesthetic principle and with the disruption of the historical and traditional education taught at school. This project was designed in the same year that Victor Palla had graduated, in 1948. Its construction was completed around 1950 when he moved in with his family. In the early 1950's, several architects had gone to visit this house. It was demolished in 2006.

Hand-drawn sketches and photography:

In the early fifties in Portugal, Photography as an art was practically inexistent. It was mainly used as a documentary resource among journalists, or held in Photographic Saloons as a naturalistic domain.

The following series of photographs were created and photographed in Victor Palla's house (as referred to above) between 1953 and 1955, using an experimental method. We are not sure, but probably Victor Palla has been influenced by the impact of the first Fotoform exhibition (1950), which revives Moholy-Nagy's and Man Ray's photographic image-making, where Otto Steinert defined Subjective Photography; "A personal expression or interpretation by the photographer in contradistinction to the objective outlook of *Neue Sachlichkeit*" (New Objectivity). Palla's preliminary long sketched book functions as a storyboard, rich on notes, defining light intentions, materials to use, backgrounds and features. The quick sketches reveal the preliminary aesthetical intentions which consist of shot plans, relation between figures within the scene, model's attitude and all kind of adornments, including backgrounds and scenarios. The development of a relationship between form, essence, and abstract compositions helps define a personal artistic language. The essence of this code was initially used in sketches, and after that legitimated by transmitting it in experimental photographs.

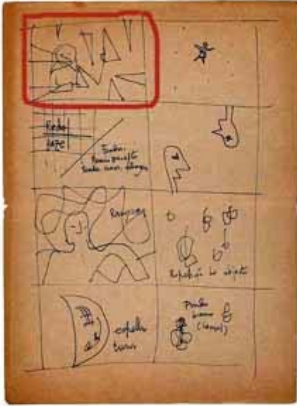


fig.14



fig.15



fig.16

Looking at the multi-triangle sketch (fig.14), one can see that the initial intention, but then the purpose of fulfilling the picture with triangles was made possible through the course of different actions: firstly by photographing the human model holding a triangle cardboard (see photo 15); secondly by framing the original photo followed by completing the process by overlapping triangular masks on a sensitive paper, using different exposure times. The end result (see photo 16) corresponds to the initial sketch. This sequence of triangles provides us with an ambiguous vision that plays with photographed and photogrammed; a technical and compositional pun. This photographic/graphic layout shows us the procedure for visual compositions, adding or subtracting matter, designating a graphic composition as photography, using light as an aesthetic medium. From its descriptive and representational drawings to its mechanical recording materialisation, each picture's settings were accurately calculated according to his drawn and written intentions.

It is not difficult to understand at this moment how photography and drawing are correlated. Drawn elements serve as an *aide memoire* that reveal the original ideas. On both accounts (hand and camera device), the artistic process undergoes a very personal experience where one gets in touch with one's self and the environment, extracting similar experiences. Just like drawing, photography as an art requires that one has all its senses at present and is aware of every detail in that moment in time. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright pointed out that, in the past, photography had more of an objective practice than painting or drawing: "(...) No matter what social role an image plays, the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization", (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Side by side, both drawing and photography make use of new compositional arrangements with the purpose of sublimating works and approximate to the final result.

Victor Palla's creative process is considered to be an artistic program that uses different mediums such as drawing and photography to define a new aesthetic expression.

Hand-drawn sketches and ceramics:

The Pottery Workshop, an experimental form of art, was developed in the 19th century, in opposition to the industrialization tendencies by the Arts and Crafts Movement. Several Bauhaus School masters and students pursued this movement's ideals, with the intention of dissolving the division created between Art and Production, by restoring the arts and crafts practice as the groundwork of all artistic activity. They therefore believed in a more humane society.

During this time, Portugal continued to have a very well reserved culture; international influences and ideas

disseminated at a much later stage. In 1954, the first Portuguese Modern Pottery Workshop was established in SECLA's Atelier. This artistic workshop was built within Caldas da Rainha's pottery factory. From this moment on, a new artistic approach and interest in the industrial pottery productions, contributed by designers and by the Hungarian painter Hansi Stael (b.1913-1961). Victor Palla's ceramics date between 1949 and 1950; they were made in SECLA before the workshop foundation. His unique hand-made pieces were preceded by sketches that specified what purpose and expression to use, in which handicraft seems to be the link between them.

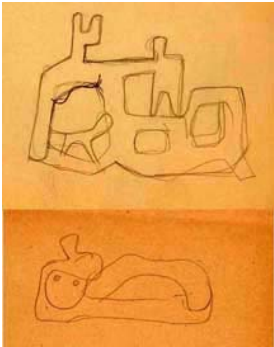


fig 17



fig 18

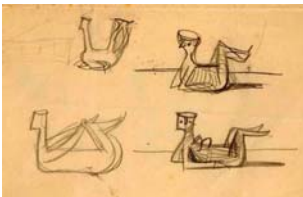


fig.19



fig.20

The correspondence between drawings intention and the final piece of ceramics is close as one can detect (see correspondence pictures 17 -18 and 19-20). Understanding a sculpture's weight is only felt through one's sense of energy: the model's weight is given by its solidity, in other words, it is measured by the amount of energy used to move the object. For example: when calculating a sculpture's volume, a draftsman is impelled to draw a form of mass instead of contour lines; a sculptor does the same thing when moulding clay, he starts by adding mass, continuously, from the centre outwards, in order to fill the pretended object's shape. In "The New Ceramics" book by Peter Dormer, the author distinguishes between "thrown" forms from constructed forms. "Thrown" forms originate from an intuitive skill; whereas constructed forms involve thought. He says "in practice, by no means all constructed forms in clay result from conceptual thought because clay is an ideal medium for those who want to make arbitrary gestures and marks in it. It is used as a free vehicle for intuitive expression." (Peter Dormer, 1985). In that same line of thought, Victor Palla writes an article about the experience and skill one has to develop when moulding the clay, stating that even the most domestic of all arts has its own rules, (Victor Palla, 1953). Dormer also says that "designers lose control over their creations once they relinquish it to production, whereas one of the strengths of a handicraft based form is the flexibility it allows for the artist to change, expand and explore his original intention (or design) until the point he or she considers that the art work is complete", (Peter Dormer, 1994). This leads us to the conclusion that pottery is an art as well as a design. Victor Palla's ceramic projects involve drawing and handicraft, eliminating like this, any distinctions between the designer, the sculptor and the artisan.

Overall Discussion

Since the Renaissance, drawing has become the most essential element of the artistic creation. In the past, the act of drawing was perceived as an experimental process which helped acquire knowledge as well as show how a work of art was finalised. In any conceptual design, sketch drawings have always been a fundamental instrument, “they record a sequence of design moves”, (Goldschmidt, 1991). In drawing education there are a number of skills and a specialized observation which expand the creative potential and visual intelligence. Some authors defend that the skill of drawing exists beyond its artistic creation; where as other authors beg to differ. Lawson argues that there is a difference in the thought processes between designers and artists. Designers aim directly towards a specific end -although they use indirect thought at times- while artists have the freedom to follow their mind’s natural directions, (Lawson, 1988). Bartlett also distinguishes the modes of productive thinking between the designers and artists. He refers to them as “closed system thinking” and “adventurous thinking”, (Bartlett, 1958). Manfredo Massironi (1989) puts the question very clearly – how can we individualize the paths, through the technique of drawing to obtain very different results, but also to obtain functional purposes in the necessity of expression, communication and instrumental. Massironi’s first approach is to “dismantle the mechanism” describing the different elements and study the possibilities of combination using thereby the hypothesis and knowledge supported by Psychology of perception, which can be explained as a “decoding” process of external reality to the observer. Preliminary sketches or conceptual drawings are the first and quickest forms of operating with both perception and cognition procedures. In “Visual thinking” Arnheim defends the idea that perception is the source to operate thoughts, “cognitive operations, called thinking, are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception, but the essential ingredients of perception itself” (Rudolph Arnheim, 1997). Cognitive operations are only legitimate if one carries out the execution of the process: first by becoming conscious of the fact that a problem exists; then by dedicating time and effort in solving it. Jorge Spencer introduces the concept of heuristics applied to the process of conception in architecture, which is any “procedure or instrument that contributes diminish uncertainties in pursue of a satisfactory solution and regarding the final”. As a result, studying drawings plays an important role in establishing strategies, while the act of drawing can be perceived as an “operative mode for comprehend and reach knowledge” (Jorge Spencer 2001). Drawing plays a preferential treatment on the apprehension of the idea, functioning as an as a vital mechanism that organizes, classifies and memorises visual elements, also helps building up a creative intelligence by the praxis of problem-solving skills. Zeisel suggests design behaviour is organized as “a loose ordering of three main activities: imaging, presenting, and testing”, (John Zeisel, 1984).

Victor Palla used drawing as a fundamental tool and the primary conceptual medium throughout his creative process, but he also exploited drawing’s multivalent nature by pushing this medium across boundaries to new forms and possibilities. In Palla’s drawings, sketching is not only seen as the basis for any formal and conceptual investigation, it is also considered as a medium and process that systematically tests the conditions, appearances and definitions of all hand work, shifting to the use of other *media*. In Victor Palla’s work, drawing acts as a mediator that consists of a cognitive process of reconciling mutually interdependent, opposed disciplines, merging different types of works by transferring the qualities and processes of drawing onto diverse *media* such as ceramics, sculpture, painting, graphic design, architecture, and surprisingly photography. These drawing-network subvert drawing’s conventional definitions by providing this traditional medium and practical process with new meanings.

By analysing Victor Palla’s art works, we hoped to point out that drawing played an extremely significant role in his executive and cognitive processes, involving different levels of creative production and construction. In other words, drawing in Victor Palla’s work should be understood as a personalized and creative dimension that has a beginning, middle and end. Depending on a practical skill and using reality as raw material of signification, his drawings come across with various latent possibilities. The transmutation process of reality is considered to be the genesis of all artistic creation. In his creative work (from ceramics, to fine arts, architecture and photography) drawing was used with the intention of discovering this transmutation procedure. One can sense, throughout his

artistic expression, an emerging and crucial visual culture.

In conclusion, drawing is used to register the pulsating world, and plays the key of connecting and integrating several disciplines, dissolving boundaries between them in pursuit of a common task.

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