

Decolonizing the History of Pre-Columbian Art in Brazil

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Abstract

*This study resumes the discussion undertaken by Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes, historian, archaeologist and museologist at the University of São Paulo, the first to “decolonize the history of Art in the Americas”. At the same time, this resumption is in charge of paying homage to this researcher who found the mistakes and gaps left by European scholars who were at the service of Eurocentric colonialism and its Eurocentric culture. However, the central objective of this text is to contribute to this process of decolonization, expanding the discussion that began in the 1980s. To this end, here, the chapter that opens the work *História geral da arte no Brasil*, edited by Walter Zanini, whose title is *Art in the pre-colonial period*, and which completes decades.*

Keywords— *To decolonize, history, art in the Americas, archeology, pre-colonial period.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The ethnocentric and Eurocentric way in which our history has been told is full of mistakes and silence, which is why the title of this essayistic study carries, in its outline, the risk of criticism that adds to the discussions about the processes of identification and subjectivation that we experience in the present, as a result of the decolonization processes that occur in the Americas, mainly in the area that corresponds to the so-called Latin America. The way to begin the decolonization of our history and our bodies is through pre-Columbian art. Although we know that the idea of art linked to aesthetic issues arising from Western philosophy had no place among the Amerindian peoples, they developed collective practices whose aesthetic forms were linked above all to ancestry and the cosmos. For this reason, the main objective of this work is to discuss such misconceptions to try to hear what is found in the world of silence at this exact moment in history that our continent seeks to decolonize its history and our bodies from the colonial yoke. To this end, I take as a central point Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes' attempt to retell our history based on the gaps and based on such mistakes made by the history written by the Eurocentric colonizer, in the chapter that opens the work *General History of Art in Brazil*, edited by Walter Zanini, whose title is *Art in the pre-colonial period*. In this writing, Menezes (1983) exposes, in a very clear and objective way, the risks that can be taken when

seeking to reconstruct the history of art in the face of objects found in various archaeological sites that date back to times prior to the invasion period, conquest and colonization of Europeans. Certainly, the author himself faced this problem when he was called to organize the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at USP, between 1964 and 1968, and when he directed the Museum Paulista between 1989 and 1994. This can explain why Menezes (1983) had become a classic regarding the topic in question. In other words, this text by Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes sets out arguments that are the result of his teaching experience and his experience as a museum organizer and director. Therefore, in this text, we will find an inventory of the country's archaeological situation with regard to the way archaeological documentation is made and how certain objects are considered artistic, using criteria that are still inadequate. However, we can perceive, in this text, a gesture of decolonizing our history, making the silence of our ancestors give way to their silent voices throughout time and the voices of the defeated are also heard in the present. In short, the way we look at the past in the present needs to be revised so that we can review errors and solve the problems found. It is along this path that we will be able to build a decolonized history that meets the processes of identification that we desire today and is attentive to issues linked to otherness that was born from this encounter, in disagreement, with our ancestors in

the past, and with this memory that we seek to find in the present. But in this search for the beginning that the Greeks called *arché* (ἀρχή), we end up staring at the past and forgetting that we are looking at it in the present (cf. Foucault, 2000, p. 151). Perhaps if we had this awareness, we could find many answers to past questions in the present, since our gaze always sees the past in the present; however, we are not able to notice this or that in the act of looking the other is there and he is not as different from us as vain philosophy thinks. The search for the beginning is not just a concern that appears, under the order of metaphysical thought, in the great narratives of Western culture (cf. Funari, 2019). The creation myth, for example, is something that we find in several cultures, including those of the forest people, identified by the author as aborigines. So, “cosmogony” (or cosmogeny) is a type of concern that intrigues the human nature of man, and that the myth seeks to provide an answer to.

In “Art in the pre-colonial period” (*A arte no período pré-colonial*), we find this concern between the present and the past, above all, how we look at objects found today. On the other hand, it is evident how we ignore the presence of forest people who live among us and how we still need to establish a dialogue with our ancestors today, in the present (cf. Krenak, 1999). So, if we take into account that many of these people still preserve habits that were common in many of these disappeared cultures, because they were brotherly peoples, we will be able to admit that they can contribute a lot when it comes to solving certain problems, because, when in doubt, “who to ask, if not the other person?” (Derrida, 2002, p.18). In these terms, the archaeologist’s work does not need to be solitary. He should not limit himself to hearing what the ears cannot hear, when he finds an object in an archaeological site, nor even cling to the scientific tradition that is often intransigent and arrogant, ignoring that there can be many beginnings or many ways of looking at a common beginning. In general, this chapter of General History of Art in Brazil manages to diagnose the problems faced by Brazilian archeology, pointing out points that need to be reviewed with important reflections on the identification of objects considered artistic. In these terms, the aforementioned chapter can be seen as a valuable contribution to archaeological studies and, mainly, to the history of art in the Americas, since the oldest evidence of human presence on the continent can be found in Brazil (cf. Serra da Capivara). In this gesture of his, we would say that the author seeks a fresh start that perhaps makes it possible for humanity to encounter the past in the present, in this part of the planet, and for us to reconcile ourselves with the humanity we lost when we became captives of Eurocentric history. In this fresh start, in potential, we

need to reconcile with ourselves, seeking to build a better future than the present we have built, and in this way, we can remember that “Indians, whites and all colors of people and cultures in the world yearn to improve” (Krenak, 1999, p.26). The criticism made here is more of an epistemological nature, especially with regard to the way in which the presence of forest remnants is ignored today in this search for the beginning of aesthetic manifestations in Brazilian lands, in other words, there seems to be a lack of dialogue also with ethnology and anthropology in this search. In the following lines, we try to highlight the general aspects of the picture exposed by the author.

II. THE ARCHEOLOGY OF ART IN BRAZIL: CARE AND CRITICISM OF APPROACHES

This seems to be the first difficulty highlighted in the development of the theme of the aforementioned chapter, as it is recognized that “the available documentation is still very poorly organized and analyzed” (Menezes, 1983, p.22). So, how to deal with found objects is an incipient question that arises when we seek to organize and analyze them as archaeological documents. But there is also another type of problem that occurs due to the difficulty in admitting that some of these objects have something that demonstrates an aesthetic concern in their making and, therefore, can appear as art. In this case, we are facing a problem that involves both epistemology and the practice developed, and which is responsible for the inventory of such objects, essential in the formation of museums of archeology and ethnology, of art in general and, above all, of indigenous art, in addition to the knowledge produced in this practice. Hence “the main purpose of the text is to raise elements to begin to define ‘a grammar of forms’ produced by the aborigines in Brazilian lands, prior to contact with the Western world” (Menezes, 1983, p.22). To achieve this aim, it is hoped to avoid “notions associated with the artistic phenomenon in Western civilization”, mainly those linked to the intentional production, circulation and consumption of certain goods that obey such specificity and that made possible the emergence of categories such as “artistic objects, artist, art collector, dealer and so on” (Menezes, 1983, p. 21).

In these terms, it is “totally inappropriate to assume an artistic activity for primitive cultures and, therefore, try to identify a class of art products or seek specialization in manufacturing” (Menezes, 1983, p.21). It would also be inappropriate to “refer, as an alternative solution, any and all relevant formal phenomena, in these cultures, to a ceremonial context and symbolic contents”, since this type of reductionism “can clarify nothing” (Menezes, 1983, p.

21). There are also other types of current deformations that appear in the three categories (rock paintings, adornments and the shapes and decorative motifs of different types of artifacts) that archaeological literature privileges in terms of 'art' and 'artistic activity', rather than refer to cultures that existed before the arrival of Europeans in the geographic space that today corresponds to the Brazilian State. In the case of the first category, "it is understandable that cave painting deserved such an approach" because it would be close to the objects to which it would be possible to attach an aesthetic function. In other words, in addition to the fact that it is customary to speak of rock 'art', "encompassing not only painting itself, on rock surfaces (pictographies), but also engravings and incised figures (petroglyphs)", these types of manifestations suggest a predominantly visual consumption due to the fact that they are exposed, on these surfaces, to someone's eyes and because they often assume a representative character that encompasses "a very vast repertoire of forms, technical solutions" (Menezes, 1983, p.21). Objects such as perforated shells, for which no other function can be proposed than as adornments (necklace or pendant) or with objects that incorporate decorative motifs or representative shapes, such as anthropomorphic funerary urns, the same occurs. In all these cases, "the main deficiency lies in considering a separate category of objects – defined precisely as artistic objects" (Menezes, 1983, p.21). So, the problem highlighted for this type of categorization is the fact that the absence of a utilitarian justification for certain objects leads to the mass grave of decoration. But for this fact not to remain current, "it would be advisable to pay attention to the aesthetic form" (Menezes, 1983, p. 22, emphasis added). In this case, it is necessary to seek to understand what this means, that is, what would it mean to pay attention to the aesthetic form? What is the meaning of this expression that appears written in italics? Appropriately, he made a choice that seems to avoid many inconveniences that the term art and its cognates bring to the discussion due to the polysemic richness that this term has acquired throughout the history of Western culture, including the scientific world. We still often ask ourselves what art is, especially when we come across a toilet displayed as an artistic object in a contemporary art museum. But finally, it is necessary to be clear that aesthetic expression is not something that belongs to a given culture, or in Western terms, to civilized cultures in a given period. Aesthetics precedes history. It's been with us forever. It is in the desire that precedes the word for thirty thousand years. We are aesthetic by nature. Perhaps this is the understanding that is juxtaposed in the expression "paying attention to the aesthetic form". Without a shadow of a doubt, these observations are a

harsh criticism of the way in which objects found in archaeological sites located in Brazil are dealt with. There are good intentions in it that demonstrate a certain degree of seriousness with empirically constructed scientific knowledge, that is, how one should proceed to make something scientifically known. In other words, the author tries to follow to the letter a scientific tradition whose model required the man of science to describe the object intrinsically after observing it for a long time, and then arrive at a hypothesis.

III. THE CHALLENGES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DOCUMENTATION IN BRAZIL

In addition to all these conceptual problems, the tropical climate, which dominates much of the territory of the Brazilian State, imposes certain limits on archaeological work, above all because it makes it very difficult to preserve organic material, such as fibers, wood and skin. Due to this fact, the core of our archaeological documentation is restricted to objects made of stone and clay, and to a lesser extent, those made of bones (including teeth) and shells. However, there are some exceptions that can be mentioned, such as "parts of a basket from Imbé or pine knot artifacts in Alfredo Wagner, SC, or remains of slings, sashes and strings from a funerary camp from the Mucuri phase (19th century) VI AD) of the lower Paraíba River, RJ" (Menezes, 1983, p.22). Therefore, it is believed that a "considerable portion of material culture has not reached us" (Menezes, 1983, p. 22). Hence "the lack that represents the non-existence or insufficiency of documentation relating to the housing structure or clothing, for example" (Menezes, 1983, p. 22). However, certain types of manifestations must be considered that, due to their nature or circumstances, are precarious or of ephemeral duration, as is the case of body paintings or masks, traces of which are found in some rare rock representations. There are also limitations that occur due to the rapid destruction of archaeological sites, motivated by agribusiness exploitation, the construction of dams and roads, vandalism or even the amateurish collection of artifacts, despite the existence of very strict legislation. Within this framework of limitations, there is another serious problem which is the lack of "a sufficiently broad and secure body of information to establish general frameworks for defining issues as a whole", although progress is recognized in research undertaken systematically and following criteria scientific. Furthermore, the gap in iconographic studies can be justified due to aesthetic problems that have always been marginalized "under the suspicion that they do not lend themselves to scientific analysis, but only to subjective digressions" (Menezes, 1983, p. 23).

THE DIVERSITY OF CERAMIC OBJECTS

Ceramic archaeological objects are the most commonly found in most archaeological sites located in the country, but in a very dispersed manner. According to the descriptions pointed out by the author, the first thing that is noticed is that “the diversification of the shapes of ceramic containers is quite restricted” (Menezes, 1983, p.23). From this perspective, “they are basic variations of the sphere and cylinder: caps, half-caps, ovoid and globular shapes. Rectangular shapes, attested in Marajoara or Tupi-Guarani ceramics, are marginal” (Menezes, 1983, p.23). In these cases, there is a predominance of continuous lines with simple volumes, in which, for example, inflected or compound contours (vessel with a double edge or a faired bulge) occur less frequently. There is still a significant exception, however, located mainly in Amazonian traditions where there is the presence of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic vases, or, even, in the special case of the so-called caryatid or bottleneck vases of the Tapajon culture, in which the juxtaposition can be observed. of elements and complex shapes with the body being articulated into distinct parts, “such as the foot, female figures serving as support and tray, whose edge, in turn, holds plastic representations (appliques) of animals” (Menezes, 1983, p.23). In open containers, the decoration can appear comprehensively and internally, while in narrow-mouthed containers, the external decoration usually reaches the upper parts. In general, it can be seen that “the decoration techniques are numerous: painting, incision, excision, brushing, corrugation, ungluation, etc.” (Menezes, 1983, p.24). Regarding plastic decoration, it can be said that it has a very restricted scope, both geographically and chronologically. Terracotta figurines are, in general, “anthropomorphic representations, with a predominance of female figures – they also seem to be phenomena restricted to the Amazon area” (Menezes, 1983, p.24).

LITHIC ARTIFACTS: MAIN FUNCTIONS AND FORMS

Among these three categories of archaeological objects, which the author mentions, the oldest are stone artifacts. Some of these lithics can be around 18 thousand years old and were found in Piauí (Serra da Capivara). Sites located in Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul can be safely dated between 10 and 12 thousand years ago. There is an exceptional range of variability in shapes and their functions (such as: drilling, cutting, scraping, smoothing, striking, pressing, etc.) which “can be fulfilled by different utensils and different shapes” (Menezes, 1983, p.25). The use of stones in the manufacture of plastic figures is very rare, but there are cases such as “the famous series of figurines from the Jamundá-Trombetas area, representing

different animals or felines, sometimes duplicating anthropomorphic figures” (Menezes, 1983, p.26). However, mention should be made of “the so-called zooliths, utilitarian objects (mortars, for example), which take the form of animals, coming from middens on the southern coast” (Menezes, 1983, p. 26). Among the oldest zooliths, there are those that can be identified in periods ranging from the end of the third or beginning of the second millennium BC. C. going up to the first millennium. Finally, we cannot forget a certain number of small lithic objects that perhaps served as pendants or trinkets, especially those called *muiraquitãs*, representing batrachians (in green, yellow, bluish or milky white stone) and, to a lesser extent, scale, geometric shapes (fig. 9 - object on the right).

CAVE PAINTINGS: FORMS AND THE PROBLEM OF DATING

The paintings were obtained with pigments of mineral origin in most cases (especially iron oxide for red, the most widespread), however we have those of vegetable origin (such as charcoal, annatto, and genipap) and were executed with a brush fiber or with fingers). In the case of engravings, which are less frequent, they were produced by perforating or rubbing). This type of manifestation can be found in abundance in various parts of the country, with the exception of the coast. But, “perhaps we can talk about concentration areas, such as Várzea Grande, in Piauí, or Lagoa Santa, in Minas Gerais” (Menezes, 1983, p.28). These are the sites most systematically and intensively explored by archaeologists. Most of these paintings appear on walls of rock shelters or caves, but there are some on ceilings, more rarely. It can be said about these places that, in general, they were not permanent homes, “but places for temporary protection or meetings of a varied nature or, eventually, as evidenced by the existence of burials, for funerary purposes” (Menezes, 1983, p.28). The repertoire of motifs in these paintings and engravings varies greatly between geometric and/or organic shapes. In the case of geometric motifs, “they mainly consist of lines (in various combinations), dots, circles (sometimes with possible astronomical connotations), rhombuses, rectangles with grids, triangles and so on” (Menezes, 1983, p.31). In organic motifs, there is a wide range of solutions that range “from the most accentuated schematization to naturalistic detail, from flat two-dimensionality to the concern with volumes and even foreshortening” (Menezes, 1983, p.31). In these cases, “animal figures deserve mention, especially quadrupeds (roe deer, antlers, jaguars, anteaters, monkeys), birds (emus, seriemas, eagles), reptiles (snakes, lizards, alligators, turtles) and, to a lesser extent, fish” (MENEZES, 1983, p.31). Human

representation also frequently appears both in isolated figures and in associations in scenes of fishing, hunting, dancing, combat, sexual relations, etc. Representations of vegetation elements are extremely rare.

IV. FIGURES AND TABLES

Figs.1 and 2: caryatid vessels - ceramic objects



Figs.3, 4, 5, 6, 7: ceramic objects anthropomorphic representations

Fig.3

Fig.4

Fig.5



Fig.6

Fig.7



Fig.8: lithic artifacts

Fig.9: lithic artifacts



Fig.4: Cave painting with the figure of a bird in flight position (hawk) - southeast of Goiás



Tables I and table II

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Prepared by Niède Guidon (1975)

V. CONCLUSION

The questions that appear in *Art in the pre-colonial period* have to do with the search for our origin in the proportion that we seek to know: who were the individuals who produced the oldest archaeological objects found in Brazil? Why can some produced objects suggest a certain aesthetic concern? These questions appear in this reading that we propose for the text written by Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes almost 40 years ago, which helps us reconstruct our history. It was these questions that motivated the reflections presented here. In a way, they also demonstrate that there is a strong desire to recover lost memories of this memory that attests to the presence of man on the American continent since the most distant times in human history. Certainly, such memories can help us find the answers to “Who are we?”, “Where do we come from?”. These questions reveal a concern about the origin of man that is present in all human civilizations. In this search for

an encounter with our origin, it is a mistake and a great mistake not to consider that the people of the forest are part of this path that man has followed over time on the American continent. Of course, we need to resolve these technical and epistemological problems because they are responsible for a large part of the mistakes and inadequacies in our way of telling the story of man's presence on the American continent. In addition to these mistakes that the author showed, there is the one pointed out by Ailton Krenak, an ancestor of ours who lives in our present. He reminds us that it is still believed that civilization arrived with those ships, that progress came with the arrival of Europeans. The cave paintings and engravings found on our continent have the same themes; therefore, they deal with everyday life and this form of recording seems to be our first way of intentionally recording what was done and how the world was seen. Thus, to reconstruct and decolonize our history, it is necessary to understand the pre-Columbian art produced by autochthonous peoples in the territory that corresponds to the territory of Brazil.

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