

Memoirs of a Brazilian Fan

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Abstract:

The fixed hand-held fan adorned with feathers, insects and a bird, carefully preserved in its box is a Brazilian handmade artifact from the eighteenth century hardly ever studied in Brazil. This fan possibly belonged to Eugênia Barbosa de Carvalho Neves (1860-1947), a dedicated wife who lived between Niterói and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Lisbon in Portugal.

The challenge of this research is to recover the history of the object and its collector, since the remaining material culture of the nineteenth century is formed by material vestiges of private life. Some of them are keepsakes that teach us not only about the social representations and hierarchies, but above all about the tastes of their users.

The art piece studied here is part of the Ferreira das Neves Collection that was bequeathed by Eugênia in 1947 to the School of Fine Arts of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and was later incorporated into the D. João VI Museum, a didactic museum of art.

Résumé:

L'écran à main fait de plumes, oiseau et insectes, soigneusement conservé dans sa boîte, est un artisanat brésilien du XIX^e siècle, peu étudié au Brésil. L'écran appartenait probablement à Eugênia Barbosa de Carvalho Neves (1860-1947), une femme au foyer et épouse dévouée qui a vécu entre les villes de Niterói et Rio de Janeiro au Brésil et Lisbonne au Portugal.

Le défi de cette recherche est celui de récupérer l'histoire de l'objet et de sa collectrice puisque la culture matérielle restante du XIX^e siècle est composée de traits matériels de la vie privée. Certains de ces objets sont des souvenirs qui nous renseignent non seulement sur les formes de représentation et hiérarchies, mais surtout sur les goûts de ses utilisateurs.

La pièce fait partie de la Collection Ferreira das Neves et a été léguée par Eugênia à l'École des Beaux-Arts de l'Université Fédérale de Rio de Janeiro en 1947 et a été incorporée plus tard au Musée D. João VI, un musée d'art principalement didactique.

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Introduction

Objects adorned with bird feathers, stuffed birds and insects, that were produced in Brazil and included in European and North American collections, have been the subject of recent studies (Gere and Rudoie 2010, 228-229; Roberts, Sutcliffe and Mayor 2005, 130-206, Tolini, 2002; Schindler, 2001). In Brazil, hardly anything is known about this type of product (Volpi, 2013, 2014a, 2015).

The starting point of the present study is a fixed hand-held fan embellished with bird feathers and a stuffed bird and some insects. This fan is part of the Jerônimo Ferreira das Neves Collection. It was left in 1947 to the School of Fine Arts of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro by Eugênia Barbosa de Carvalho Neves, who complied with the wishes of her late husband. In 1979 the collection was incorporated into the D. João VI Museum, which was created that year to house didactic material collected by the School of Fine Arts along its history. D. João VI Museum is part of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, one of the most important universities in Brazil and its collections have

attracted the attention of researchers engaged in a better understanding of the history of art, artifacts and the teaching of art in the country. The museum collections also contributed to awaken student interest in scientific research.

A closer examination of the collection shows evidences of the inherent contradictions of the set bequeathed under the condition that the whole collection is kept together. The eclectic and heterogeneous collection includes more than three hundred pieces such as paintings, sculptures, rare books, medals and coins from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, mostly of European origin, as well as Chinese porcelains of significant symbolic and financial value, all of which have been gathered together as a form of investment or affirmation of social power and status. Other less valuable items such as cloth, some dishes and paintings, reveal a pattern of consumption associated with the average social strata of those times. Finally, around fifty personal items are the fragmented testimonies of a private and daily existence (Pereira 2009, 246-253; Malta 2012). In this set of personal items of the collection are some jewelry, hair adornments, unfinished sewing and embroidery works, as well as six folding hand-held fans and the fixed fan described in this study, all of which are characteristically female items and therefore must have belonged to Eugenia.

As hardly anything is known about the Ferreira das Neves couple, tangible items are the best clues to their lifestyle, considering that material vestiges of private life are part of the remaining material culture of the nineteenth century. Some of these vestiges are keepsakes that teach us not only about the social representations and hierarchies, but above all about the tastes of their users (Charpy, 2007: 108). The challenge of this investigation is, therefore, to link the object to its collector.

Who was Eugenia? What reasons would she have to include the fan in her husband's collection? Public documents and items from the collection are clues to these issues.

The Collector

Eugênia was born on May 16, 1860, in São Domingos, an upper-class neighborhood of Niterói, a town in the state of Rio de Janeiro. She was the daughter of the shoe merchant Antônio Gonçalves de Carvalho and his wife Maria América Barbosa de Carvalho. On May 25, 1881, she married Jerônimo Ferreira das Neves (1854-1918), who was born in Rio de Janeiro. Their Certificate of Marriage is in the Archives of Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Curia (N. Sra. da Glória mother church. Casamentos (Marriages) 1878/1885 – 6.º Livro (6th Vol.) fls. 44 (p. 44) – May 25, 1881). His wealth and social position can be inferred by the quality of the art works in his collection (Pereira 2009, 258). The couple lived between Niterói and Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, and Lisbon, in Portugal (Pereira 2009, 256-257). Niterói was at the time the capital of the state of Rio de Janeiro, the main coffee exporting center during the nineteenth century. Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon were both capitals of their respective countries, and consequently were important political and economic centers. Widowed without heirs, Eugênia was charged with keeping Jerônimo's collection and fulfilling his will. Having outlived her husband by twenty-eight years, she died at the age of 84 in Rio de Janeiro.

The detailed study of the items of the collection that belong to the feminine world confirms and widens the findings described in literature. Eugênia was a lay sister of the Venerable and Archiepiscopal Third Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Rio de Janeiro, an association of lay people that propagated the Catholic faith and the Marian cult. The will of Eugênia Barbosa de Carvalho Neves, dated July 27, 1934, is included in the proceedings of the inventory of items left by the deceased, dated June 11, 1947 (Archives of D. João VI Museum/EBA/UFRJ). In her will, she left a financial legacy to

the Order. During her life, she devoted herself to works of charity and participated in church affairs, as indicated by the altar cloths embroidered in the Portuguese style found among the unfinished works.

Among the fashion items included in the collection are a necklace and a bracelet made of braided human hair with gold finishing, a type of keepsake jewelry very common between 1840 and 1930. Although less decipherable, they are eloquent testimonies of the feelings of love, friendship, or sorrow that bind them to Eugenia.

Company gift hand-held fans from France dated 1889 and others from Austria and Switzerland allow us to presume that the couple traveled extensively within Europe (Volpi 2014b). Among all fans in the collection, "the fixed hand-held fan made of 'ermine' (sic) and white feathers with a mother-of-pearl handle", mentioned in her inventory, is an outstanding piece. Besides being perfectly preserved in its box, it is a relatively rare type of hand-held fan in Brazilian collections, since it is only present in two collections: the D. João VI Museum in Rio de Janeiro and the Feminine Institute of Bahia in Salvador.

Where and how the fixed hand-held fan was manufactured? Who were its likely customers in Brazil and what did this object signify to the ladies? What sense can we assign to its preservation by Eugenia? To answer these questions will require an analysis of the object and the background of its production and buyers in Brazil.

The Object



Fig. 1 a,b:
Fixed hand-held fan (front and back), c. 1881, Brazilian work. Feathers, bird, insects and mother-of-pearl. Height 32,5 cm; diameter 22,5 cm. Inventory n° MDJVI 1450. © D. João VI Museum, School of Fine Arts, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photo: Marco Cadena.

This white feathered fan features, in the center of one face, a male hummingbird (*Chrysolampis mosquitus*) surrounded by eight red-colored iridescent beetles (*Eurhinus s.p.*), each one on a white feather arabesque pattern (fig. 1 a,b). On the other face, there is a white rose with leaves of green feathers. The mother-of-pearl handle may have been produced in Brazil or imported from China, since Brazil regularly received

this type of merchandise from Canton, Nanjing and Macao until the mid-nineteenth century (Teixeira Leite 1994, 134).

The green cardboard box of this fan has a label with the name of the manufacturer, "Ao Beija-Flor" (Portuguese for *hummingbird*), printed on it (fig. 2). To the right of the label is written in Portuguese "Fine flowers of the best houses of Paris" and to the left, in English, "Feathers, flowers, birds, insects and Bresilian's (sic) curiosities", as if anticipating an international clientele. In the center, on a piece of pasted paper, there is the penned signature: "D. J. Ferr^a Braga".



Fig.2: Detail of the box label, c. 1881, Brazilian work. Cardboard and paper. Inventory n° MDJVI 1450. © D. João VI Museum, School of Fine Arts, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photo: Marco Cadena.

Almanacs show that the shop "Ao Beija-Flor" was in Ouvidor Street between 1862 and 1889. This was the main street of luxury trade in Rio de Janeiro at those times. Various advertisements indicate that the business was founded in 1850 by Mme. Clemence, but in 1881 Domingos Ferreira Braga appeared as the new owner. Upon acquiring the business, Braga may have reused the existing boxes, pasting a strip of paper with his signature over the name of the former owner. This detail suggests that the fan could be from around 1881, when the business changed hands.

Flowers made from feathers were already known in Europe in the late 1820s, although their production was attributed to the Indians (Bayle-Mouillard 1829, 2). However, the precursors of this art were the Ursulines nuns of the convent Our Lady of Solitude (*Nossa Senhora da Soledade*) in Bahia, who adapted techniques of confecting cloth flowers to make feather flowers (Denis 1875, 55). The nuns produced bouquets, garlands and flower wreaths only and these were used to decorate altars. However, their work was sold throughout Brazil and to cosmopolitan Europeans who used them to adorn their homes (fig. 3).



Fig. 3:
Bouquet of feathers, Salvador, Brazil, c. 1830. Cotton, wood and feathers. Height 52 cm. Inventory No. IV C 694. © Musée d'ethnographie, Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Photo: Alain Germond.

The expansion and secularization of feathered flower manufacturing took place in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Schoepf and Monnier 1985, 46). In the 1830s in Rio de Janeiro the technique was already taught by private teachers or at schools for women. Female slaves offered for rent or sale were prized for their ability to make feathered flowers. It was common to use feather flower bouquets among the high society in Rio. They were offered in honor of personalities or auctioned at charity events (Volpi 2015).

At least since 1830, those artifacts had been acquired by European aristocracy. They were produced by florists who employed techniques close to those for making artificial flowers. Rio de Janeiro dispatched boxes containing dried birds, insects and feather flowers inland and abroad to places like Valparaiso in Chile, Baltimore in the United States, Liverpool in the United Kingdom, Le Havre in France, Hamburg in Germany and Copenhagen in Denmark (Volpi 2015).

In 1861 the Brazilian government held the first national exhibition, with the intention to stimulate Brazilian manufacturers and to choose the products that should represent Brazil at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London. At that time, feather flowers were already in full production in Bahia, Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The apogee for the manufacture of fixed hand-held fans made with feathers, birds and

insects was between the years 1870 and 1890, when the center of Rio de Janeiro housed around fifty manufacturers. In fact, since the mid-eighteenth century fans were already being made in Brazil. These products were becoming internationally known through travelers and naturalists. Later in Europe, the combination of feather flowers, colorful birds and iridescent insects became known as the Brazilian style and was perceived as a fusion of tropical nature with French taste (Gere and Rudoe 2010, 231). In Rio de Janeiro, this production was linked to the fashions coming from Paris since it was marketed by dressmakers of French surname who also sold articles imported from France. of these artifacts during the 1880s and 1890s.

Now, in Europe and in the Americas, the vogue for adornments made of stuffed animals and feathers introduced an exotic sense to the prevailing uniformity of styles. Yet, in Brazil, the meaning of these objects was different, for birds and insects were not only the immobile and fixed ones used as ornaments, but also the live ones freely flying in the environment. On the other hand, we know that in Brazil, middle-class urban female consumers of fashion items tended to follow what was used in Europe, albeit with some delay, given the real and symbolic distances they were from the European centers of fashion. However, for middle class Brazilians, feathers, birds and insects fans were common, part of their daily life, and were exhibited in countless, exquisite shops in downtown, easily accessible to cosmopolitan women like Eugênia.



Fig.4: *Mulata paraense* (A Mulatto from Pará). Illustration by João Affonso. *A Vida Paraense*, November 20, 1883:4. Brazilian National Library Collection. Public Domain.

The exhibition of such works in universal expositions as of 1873, when this fashion was already consolidated, and the growing demand of women of the European and American bourgeoisie, willing to wear these products previously restricted to the dominant layers, led to the expansion of manufactures in Rio. In Brazil, the growing sales inland, the diffusion of the feather flower techniques and the spread of the production of these artifacts at the end of the 1800s made them accessible to consumers of all social strata in the country from north to south (fig. 4).Image: Documentation004.

Conclusion

Objects evoke memories. In her will (Pereira 2009, 246), Eugênia attributes the same symbolic value to her husband's legacy and her own selection of memorable objects. The collection, begun with Jerônimo, was maintained and enlarged by Eugênia with items of her personal choice.

The feather hand-held fan that is the subject of this article is unique in a set of items of small intrinsic value like the other hand-held fans in the collection, which show consumption practices like those of the petty European bourgeoisie, who consumed large-scale manufactured goods. However, in Brazil, these fans were consumed by the Brazilian upper urban middle classes. For this very reason, the feather hand-held fan does not indicate a scholarly collecting of exotic pieces, very common in the 1800s. By keeping the hand-held feather fan in her husband's collection, Eugênia seems to retain a fond memory with a subjective value and consequently not fully decipherable. Therefore, a hypothesis seems to make sense: the detail of Ferreira Braga's signature on the piece of paper on the box leads us to date the fan in 1881, the year Eugênia married Jerônimo. Therefore, this fashionable accessory is probably connected to that memorable event, as a gift or as an adornment used on that occasion.

Despite its inanimate nature, this feather fan contains memories. It tells us the stories of people it has been involved with: the approach of a seller starting a new business, the sentiments, memories, and aesthetic choices of a woman who has lived during two centuries. This item brings new aspects to the study of fashion in Brazil in the 1800s. Because it is exhibited in a museum that belongs to a university and it is an item made in Brazil for export, other stories may be told and other analyses may assign different meanings to it and different feelings to its owner.

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