

## **Santos Dumont's style: male fashion and innovation at Rio de Janeiro during the Belle-Époque<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines, after Gilbert Durand's myth concept, the relation between fashion and innovation with the investigation of a specific male clothing collection associated to dandyism. The main documental source is the wardrobe of Alberto Santos Dumont, known Brazilian sports man and airplane inventor, renowned aeronaut and key actor of male fashion style in Rio de Janeiro by the end of the XIX and beginning of the XX century.

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## **Introduction**

The relationship between fashion and innovation is here investigated in a specific collection of men's clothing of the Brazilian elite: Alberto Santos Dumont's wardrobe (1873-1932). Known Brazilian sports man and airplane inventor and renowned aeronaut is also a key actor of male fashion style in Rio de Janeiro by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Circulating between Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Brazil and Europe, a regular presence in the Parisian high society, Santos Dumont was a sportsman who practiced tennis in both the Fluminense Club in Rio de Janeiro and in Paris, as well as canoeing, skiing and equitation.

The creativity and aesthetics expressed through material aspects, embodied capital images, exemplified by the clothing patterns associated with end of the century Brazilian dandyism. At the same time, the interpretation of such models will allow us to understand the symbolic and aesthetic choices to build and express world-views. From Gilbert Durand's concept of myth, it seeks to identify the symbols and signs that give shape to these mythical figures, primordial images exemplified by the garment patterns associated with dandyism.

According to Durand's topical, and inspired by Freud's tripartite schema to explain the human psyche (id, ego, and superego), the complex elements of a system are situated in a diagram: an imaginary circle covering a three-degree horizontal grade, corresponding from the bottom up to three metaphorical levels: the first level, located at the bottom of the circular diagram, the deepest, the specific unconscious, the origin of the symbolic images supported by the medium environment (*Urbilder*), the source of representations embodied in social roles (the personae / masks) played in the social game; the second level, situated in the middle of the circular diagram and where the different roles are modeled according to the classes: "castes, age groups, sexes and degrees of kinship or in valued roles and marginalized roles"; the third level, at the top

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of the diagram, where codes, plans and programs, ideologies and pedagogies, the positive roles of the social "ego" will be organized and rationalized.

Completing this scheme, the imaginary circle is divided vertically to place in reverse movements, from top to bottom, the marginalized roles, more dispersed in a less coherent flow to the bottom and from the bottom up, the socially valued roles that tend to institutionalize in a coherent set and with its own codes.

*"Therefore, the imaginary contents (dreams, desires, myths, etc.) of a society are born during a time course and a confusing but important flow, to finally be rationalized in a 'theatrical' (Jean Duvignaud, Michel Maffesoli) uses 'legalized' (Algirdas Greimas, Yves Durand), positive or negative, who receive their structures and their values from various social 'confluences' (political, economic, military, etc.), thus losing their mitogenic spontaneity in philosophical constructions, ideologies and encodings." (Durand 2010: 96)*

In the context of the transformations that occurred at the end of nineteenth century in masculine garments, the interpretation of Santos Dumont's clothing allows the symbolic and aesthetic choices to be problematized as ways of constructing and expressing worldviews, finding the key to understanding the multiple choices and the successive movements that are the very form of contemporaneity.

## **Guiding principles**

Vestimentary practices occupied a central place in European culture and a Franco-English elite that was attentive to the distinctive signs of social status reflected by common variations in clothing established the paradigms that were followed in the main urban centres in Brazil. In a capitalist economic context marked by the rise of the industrial bourgeois and a degree of relative mobility between the social classes, clothing ceased to be the ultimate marker of status and came to be the expression of an individual's personality, much to the delight of contemporary liberals.

The legendary figure of George Brummell (Remaury 1994, 90) is immortalized by the writings of French romanticists and post-Romantics such as Balzac, Barbey d' Aurevilly and Baudelaire. Brummell marked with his behaviour and dress choices the transition from the court dress to the bourgeois, stating through the modernization of the male costume a new guiding principle for the English and European elite in terms of fashion. The first of the many faces of the dandy (Catharina 2006, 62-69) was inaugurated here by the writers of several aesthetic schools throughout the 19th century.

Pleased, without title or pedigree, "Beau" Brummell affirmed himself by instituting a perfect and superior self-decreed elegance, able to dominate the worldly and aristocratic life of his time. His destiny and his tragic end confirmed his foundational role. Imaginary contents embodied by appearance, rupture of the consolidated pattern, this revolt, and the affirmation of new desires emerge from the founding place of myth, Durand's first metaphorical level in his interpretive schema (Durand 1983, 15;19).

The new techniques of tailoring, the almost exclusive use of wool and mainly the focus of elegance based on the Brummellian principle of not being noticed, consolidated a repertoire composed basically of black, brown, suede and white surfaces clearly defined, that came to replace the bright and multi-coloured ornamentation of the silks used during the Old Regime. Its use is therefore legalized, and the new model occupies the second Durandian metaphorical level. It is the affirmation of a principle long matured and finally legalized in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. The outward form was the very affirmation of the principle of coherence, stability and seriousness of the bourgeoisie elevated to the role of leadership at the expense of the

revolutions of the previous century. The established pattern was subtly perfected, reconfiguring the essential modernity of the appearance that made it possible later to make mass production of the costumes and their dissemination possible. Here we have two systems of production that have been affirmed: tailoring made-to-measure clothes and ready-made clothing.

As an aesthetic parameter, the cut, the basis of modern men's tailoring. The coat - a new format of men's vest borrowed from the country repertoire - made of plain and dark wool on white waistcoat, garnished with metal buttons, worn on wool trousers or other coloured fur, boots, light gloves, top hat and cane. That's the style of the English gentleman. Thus encoded, masculine clothing distanced itself from the Brummelian spring that gave rise to it, reaching the third Durandian metaphorical level and becoming the bourgeois standard par excellence.

This model tended to be followed by the Rio elites and was updated on trips to Europe, which supplied themselves with costumes and accessories in the important French and English houses. In the Brazilian periodicals of the time and in later reports, some central personalities are remembered who incarnated these models with aplomb. As usual, the appearance was the very image of the lifestyle and especially of the training that many elite men in Rio de Janeiro liked to affirm and see acknowledged.

### **The social time**

In the late 19th century in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro was the main center of the dissemination of cultural models. As the administrative center, the Brazilian capital was naturally the link between the various national regions and the capitals of other countries. Center of political and cultural life, Rio de Janeiro was also the setting for fashion (Araújo 1993, 26-27). Housing a political and administrative elite that had great importance as opinion maker, the city played an important role as a diffuser of models of the European clothing then in vogue.

Rio de Janeiro, besides being one of the major ports in the country, received products manufactured in Europe and in the United States and housed manufactures – especially shoes, hats and textiles – in addition to top names in tailoring and feminine couture of the time. The trade of the capital attended a small portion of consumers of luxury goods that found pieces and accessories of clothing imported or copied from these standards. The latest fashion was purchased in specialized stores or boutiques in the downtown area, or on trips to Europe, where they purchased costumes and accessories in the important French and English houses.

In the periodicals of the time and in subsequent reports are remembered some fundamental personalities who had incarnated these models with ease. As usual, the dressed appearance was the very image of the lifestyle and especially of the training that many men of the elite in Rio de Janeiro liked to affirm and see acknowledged. This is the scenario that the clothing worn by Santos-Dumont will have a real and symbolic impact.

### **The inventor**

The manifest expression of local culture evolved immersed in a tension established between localism and cosmopolitanism (Candido 2006, 117).



Figure 1: Santos Dumont, 1903. Photo: Hélio Nobre/ José Rosael. Collection of Museu Paulista of São Paulo University, Brasil.

Standing for one of the moments of ideal balance between these two trends, daily dandy, solar, no less tragic because of this, Alberto Santos-Dumont stands out as a singular presence of the *Belle Époque*. Son of the French-Brazilian engineer Henrique Dumont, great coffee planter, Dumont received an inheritance from his father that was enough to finance his inventions and support him throughout life. Living in Europe since 1898, until 1909 he held several flights in experimental aircrafts invented by him. At the end of his life, sick and depressed, he committed suicide. The costumes that belonged to the aviator and are part of the Museu Paulista collection are from the end of his life.



Figure 2 and Figure 3: Santos Dumont's swimsuit. Rosemberg Hertzat Cologne Germany. In. No.1-08-09-000-01475-00-00. Photo: Hélio Nobre/ José Rosael. Collection of Museu Paulista of São Paulo University, Brasil.

The bathing suit of the German brand Rosemberg Hertzat, the yellow leather shoes, or the blue set with chalk line and the jacket, ordered in P. Vignette, Biarritz, show a sophisticated and cosmopolitan wardrobe.



Figure 4: Santos Dumont's striped blue coat by P. Vignette, Biarritz – France. In. No.1-08-04-000-01471-01-02. Photo: Hélio Nobre/ José Rosael. Collection of Museu Paulista of São Paulo University, Brasil.

The big stores located on the Rive Droite in Paris, in the area between the Louvre and the Opera known as the golden triangle, developed tailored pieces in accordance with Santos-Dumont's specifications. Hermès and Cartier stores either in Paris or in Biarritz were suppliers of exclusive articles. Louis Cartier developed, along with his master watchmaker Edmond Jaeger, by order of the aviator, a watch that could be attached to the wrist so that Santos Dumont could control the plane and at the same time measure the time of flight, controlling the expense of the fuel. The famous wristwatch "Santos" designed for the aviator and first used in 1904 took three years to be developed by Cartier who sold it in 1911 (Winters 1991: 115-19; Blay 2005).



Figure 5: Santos-Dumont wristwatch. Cartier Paris, 1912. Yellow gold, pink gold, one sapphire cabochon, leather strap. This particularly rare timepiece is one of the very first Santos created by Cartier. 3.42 x 2.48 cm (case). Photo: Marian Gérard, Collection Cartier © Cartier

Shirts were ordered at the *La Belle Jardinière* or at the *Madeleine*; the hats in *Chez Leon* in Paris, except for his Panama<sup>2</sup> hat, a light straw and soft hat of American origin that the airman wore crumpled since he put out an early fire in the carburetor of his dirigible Number 9, "*La Baladeuse*", with his Panama (July, 1903).



Figure 6: Santos Dumont's Panamá hat. In. No.1-08-01-000-01472-00-00. Photo: Hélio Nobre/ José Rosael. Collection of Museu Paulista of São Paulo University, Brasil.

Features of his clothing were perceived by the Brazilian public as his own creations. These included a stiff removable collar, known in Brazil as a Santos-Dumont collar, which was worn by European elites between 1880 and 1900. This collar, which was

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<sup>2</sup> Straw hats made of braided leaf of an American shrub that grows mainly in Panama, hence its name. Its fashion was influenced by Napoleon III who wore a Panama hat during the Universal exhibition in 1855. Colette Guillemand. *Les mots du costume*. Paris: Éditions Belin, 1991, 186.

over eight centimetres wide and folded over itself, could be bought for 10 Reals in *Fábrica Confiança do Brasil* (O Malho 1908, 23), a shop located in the city centre of Rio de Janeiro. The style of this collar was recognised and copied by young people.

Hair and moustache were indicators of refinement and showed the concern to compose the dressed appearance and the small wedge he placed at the bottom of the shoe was intended to increase his short stature (about 62 inches). He used his creative talent to adapt parts of clothing in accordance with his activities as an inventor and aviator and to satisfy his vanity.

Dominating the elite fashion codes of his time, Santos Dumont adapted clothing as a designer with aerodynamic knowledge. From 1899, his pants had legs tightened and lapped seam so not to be stuck in the car or pedal plane. His shorter aviator jacket – dated from 1909 - was designed to be less dangerous and had pockets closed that prevented them from opening when he was flying. The innovation of his "Demoiselle" (airplane n° 20) also corresponds to the consolidation of pilot suit. The collar of the jacket has a vertical button to protect the tie and the white shirt from engine oil splashes. The jacket was itself an instrument, crossed by the steering cables (Blay 2013).

### **Changes in society on fashion**

According to Blay (2014, 84), the characteristics of the aviator's dress were elegance, correction and adaptation to sports practice to aid performance. This movement of adaptation of the garments to the sporting practice that the design of Santos Dumont already hinted at will represent the fusion of bourgeois minimalism of the nineteenth century with the body shaped by the exercise. The masculine distinction would then become the resourcefulness conferred by sporting practice, because: "The distinct man is that which separates himself from the common people by means of which the volume is modest but whose strength - in some way energetic - is very great" (Barthes 2005, 346).

The diffusion of new sports practices between the urban middle class and the modernization of the men's garments after the I Great War, bringing a new male standard: the sportsman-businessman, a relaxed, modern and practical man. In this context, the Santos-Dumont style highlighted original forms of self-image, anticipating the expression of a new kind of sociability and elegance, redefining the end of century's dandyism. His achievements as an inventor served to ensure notoriety and create an unparallel myth.

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