



museu nogueira da silva

UNIVERSIDADE DO MINHO

César Valença

Museum Director

1987 - 2002

Collecting can be an obsessive game or a hang-up, a way of cheating death.
"Les petits princes", Yannick Vu, Franco Maria Ricci, 2005

After passing my hand over the edges of the piece of furniture I realised that they were still vivid, and in no way blunted by age.

"La Casa Della Vita", Mário Praz, 1979

The invitation to organise the "Chosen Pieces from the Nogueira da Silva Collection" exhibition was yet another gesture of kindness with which Professor Carolina Leite chose to confirm our long-standing affinity.

I had spent sixteen years of my life surrounded by this collection, studying its contents, or finding someone else to do so when I didn't feel up to it, and this was my chance to pay tribute to the man who had created it. My work with the collection began when we first changed the way it was displayed, when I began

working alongside Professor Nuno Barreto, my predecessor as museum director. In undertaking this task I forged an unbreakable bond with the memory of Senhor Nogueira da Silva. I would continually ask myself if we were doing the right thing in moving the contents of the house around, recreating an image, in a process that, despite the obvious differences, resembled that of the characters in the Alexandria Quartet.

The kind support of Nuno Barreto, Maria Helena Mendes Pinto, Maria Teresa Gomes Ferreira, Artur Nobre de Gusmão and obviously that received from the university authorities at the time, as well as the unspoken support I felt from the members of the household staff, some of whom had known Nogueira da Silva very well, or even worked with him, gave me the courage to follow the goals I had set myself.

Any initial doubts were put to rest by the fact that pieces from the Nogueira da Silva estate had already featured in exhibitions in Portugal and abroad, and that works from the collection had already been reproduced in publications by respected researchers.

This collection, like any other, arose from the culmination of various common urges suffered by collectors throughout time: an exercise in aesthetics; the subconscious desire to escape death; and quite clearly an expression of power. Collecting works of art has long been justifiable in social and cultural terms, much like the practice of philanthropy. Nogueira da Silva was both a collector and a philanthropist. A letter written by Cardinal Cerejeira cites him as one of the most influential forces behind the foundation of the Universidade Católica, second only to the Holy See. The completion



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of the Templo dos Congregados; the district he built in Braga and to which he gave a school; the construction of a community centre in Póvoa de Lanhoso, to which he donated a sum as large as that given to the Universidade Católica and which he made in his father's name, who had been born nearby in Taíde; all these acts more than demonstrate an extraordinary generosity and social awareness that on his death he would pass into the care of the staff of the Casa da Sorte, an organisation he had founded and seen flourish. He would not forget his domestic staff either, treating them, as always, as part of an extended family.

Ever since he was child, Nogueira da Silva had been surrounded by beautiful objects belonging to his mother's side of the family. Furniture made during the days of the empire was joined by solid silver cutlery, 18th-century oratories, and above all, a large amount of Louis Philippe style mahogany furniture. These were the everyday items of the surroundings in which he was raised; part of a family firmly positioned in the upper echelons of the city's business and financial set. All the time Nogueira da Silva was turning his provincial fortune into a national one, right up until his very last days, he couldn't bear to part with a Louis Philippe settee and two mahogany armchairs that once belonged to his grandparents, and which he kept in his reception room. One can only guess at the number of church and state dignitaries, or personalities from Lisbon's and northern Portugal's social, political and economic circles, who have sat on these at his famed receptions. Opposite the sofa stood a very rare "cassone" featuring 15th-century paintings, and not far away a sumptuous Louis XVI gilt sofa and fauteuils. The decision to keep the settee and armchairs was certainly not made by chance.

The "Chosen Pieces from the Nogueira da Silva Collection" exhibition aims to highlight the importance of certain pieces within the museum's collection in terms of their rarity in Portugal. This can be said of its "Blanc de Chine" chinaware, of a Ming pot in Celadon porcelain sandstone, or of its elegant Netzukes. Both a small Persian vase dating from the 14th Century and some 17th-century Portuguese faience plates, known as "aranhões", are particularly interesting as they have been influenced by Chinese porcelain. Interestingly the influence of this porcelain in Persian chinaware can be seen as early as the 9th Century. António Nogueira da Silva assembled a notable collection of export chinaware, commonly referred to as Companhia das Índias in Portuguese. Elements of particular merit in this collection include a set of decorated china, one featuring European figures and another featuring scalloped plates, in the Famille Rose palette and shaped like lotus flowers. There is one particular tea cup however that, given its quality as a forerunner of what would follow, far outshines its fellow pieces. Its saucer features the initials A.R., alluding to Prince Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, King of Poland, and bears the mark of the Europe's first porcelain factory (founded in Meissen by the prince in 1709): two crossed swords, painted in blue. This tea cup, and ones like it found in London's Victoria and Albert Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum, is one of the first forgeries of products made in China to imitate European products. Decorative Chinese arts continue with a set of 18th-century enamelled copper plates from Canton – produced solely for the European market but quite a rarity in Portuguese collections nonetheless.

The Meissen coffee pot and tea cups dating from the 18th Century are equally unusual in Portugal. From the 16th Century until the 19th Century Portugal was so wrapped up in Companhia das Índias porcelain that it largely neglected European china, failing to enjoy the produce of the factories in Meissen and later Sévres and Limoges, which boasted a better paste and decoration quality than



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their Chinese counterparts and their export porcelain.

Table and decorative glassware feature greatly in the collection. The exhibition features but two types of glassware however: the first are some charmingly simple glasses produced by the Royal Factory of Coima, founded in 1719 as part of the trade policies of King D. João V; while the second has been chosen for its sophistication – a 126-piece clear crystal set, decorated in the Baroque style despite dating from the last quarter of the 18th Century. The set is painted in white and gold, and features medallions containing figures of men and women wearing clothes befitting of the nobility. The official appraisal of this particular set was performed by renowned industrial archaeologist, Jorge Custódio.

Of the collection's ivory items, a Portuguese-Mongolian plate exhibiting naturalist influences in its vegetable designs, taken directly from albums drawn for the Grand-Mongol by the Jesuits, merits particular attention.

It is also worth mentioning, especially given the rarity of such items in Portuguese collections, a pair of ivory female figures, sculpted in France during the 18th Century, and attributed to Clodion by Margarita M. Estella Marcos.

The museum's collection of old paintings is without doubt one of the most important of its kind in private and public collections in Braga, despite its relatively small size. Of particular interest is a mannerist triptych from the School of Prague, attributed to Dirk Quade van Ravensteyn (1565/70, circa 1619) by experts Luís de Moura Sobral and Costa Kaufmann. The painter's name appears in the court records of Emperor Rudolf II as early as 1589. Equally interesting is a Flemish Renaissance painting, "Senhora da Meia Laranja" (16th Century), attributed to Ambrosius Benson, or one of his students, by Costa Kaufmann. A beautiful portrait of Miss Jane Nisbet (circa 1812) attributed to Sir Henry Raeburn by Moura Sobral, makes another interesting addition to the collection. Of the collection's Portuguese paintings one particular work stands out from the rest, not only for its sheer size, but also for the insight it gives into King D. João V's desire to withdraw Portugal from the Spanish cultural sphere in which it had been trapped since 1640: "The Last Supper" by André Gonçalves, 1685-1762. Painter under royal commission, Gonçalves had studied under Genoese artist Júlio César Temine, who himself had travelled from Italy to Portugal to work on King João V's illuminist masterpiece, the Palace of Mafra. André Gonçalves is the first Portuguese painter to highlight the influence of Romanesque style classicised Baroque, and the use of cool colours inspired by Renaissance and Mannerist works.

Nogueira da Silva was well ahead of public opinion when it came collecting 19th-century artwork, an era curiously disliked during his lifetime. Examples in his collection include: a pair of tureens by Cifka, an artist brought over by King Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha; a pair of Napoleon III Sévres urns, once found in the Tuileries Palace; and also a "China-Rose" style "Cachepot" by famous 19th-century Parisian artist, Samson. Silverware from this period includes an elegant Biedermeier teapot and a milk jug featuring a straw-woven rim.

As with many larger collections, the 20th Century plays a less important role. Nevertheless the Nogueira da Silva collection does include what is purportedly the largest number of Jorge Barradas sculptures north of Lisbon, as well as a painting by António Soares, another from Emmerico Nunes, and an oil painting by Fred Kradolfer, who played an important role in Portugal's graphic art revival.



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Tastes may differ, but one should not ignore or twist situations in time. The 20th Century was more than just the century of avant-garde, while the 19th Century contained much more than just a rehashing of styles. If, on the one hand, much of modernity dates from the end of the 19th Century, it can equally be said that, despite everything, 20th-century tastes still uphold a level of conservatism, as exemplified in this exhibition by an unusual collection of birds in “biscuit” by Vista Alegre, remarkable for its quality and quantity. These two attributes give it the right to be included in this exhibition, together with the Coromandel lacquer screen and the family settee.

Visiting an exhibition is, above all, an exercise in cultural and aesthetic sensibility and, as in the case of viewing a play, a film or a concert, this act can equally function as a way of reinterpreting works of art, relating them to our own circumstances, while bearing in mind the period from the they come and obviously the creative and passionate being collectors always are.