

Introduction

HOW DO IMAGES AND words embalm the ghosts of the past, incessantly resurrecting them for the souls of the living? How does time become arrested, drawn out, made to double back on itself? How do a people gain the protection of God and the saints without entirely waking from the pagan enchantments cast by the ancient sea nymph Calypso? What is the effect of so much metaphysically suffused history on an inchoate identity balanced precariously on the threshold between ancient and different Christian worlds, when a modern age has been imposed on cultural productions nourished by a much older one? These questions have never been more relevant for understanding the Portuguese people as they are at the advent of the twenty-first century, especially since the economic and political crisis that has afflicted the nation since 2011.

History, metaphysics and myth are produced through the manipulation of images and texts across different genres of literature, photography, film, popular and high art, and academia. These manipulations may be conscious or unconscious, accidental or deliberate. They involve aesthetic and instrumental agencies and may be deployed by the state, corporations, universities, religious institutions, museums, communities and individuals. The rich assemblages of texts and images that permeate Western societies provide the weaponry

for a veritable battlefield of discursive strategies that lie at the heart of competing world views and constructions, deconstructions and reinventions of social and national identities.

This book—which I consider to be a sort of album—opens varied perspectives and provides glimpses into the diverse aspects of the rich and complex visual and textual sources that at different times have been used to evoke particular imaginaries of Portuguese identity and notions of national essences. Each chapter juxtaposes different aspects of religion, politics, popular arts and culture, and museum and exhibition history to evoke partial and particular mappings of aspects of Portugal’s cultural landscape. These texts had their origin in research based on the collection of popular art I assembled for the UBC Museum of Anthropology from 2010 to 2011 and further elaborated while collecting the images assembled in the following pages. They refer to one socially constructed imaginative world that exists side by side with many others.

Folk art—or what I term “popular art”—most clearly reveals its meanings, qualities and intentionalities when it is contextualized within the changing political, economic and cultural circumstances in which it is mediated and developed. Popular art, I shall argue, does not blandly reflect the forces that produce it but mediates them

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through its own specific visual strategies and technologies. The ten chapters presented here share the conviction that such work should not be treated as an inferior, rustic category of art but rather as sets of diverse personal practices and responses to wider historical movements and changes in market conditions and political and religious situations. Far from being traditional or frozen in time, popular art—which includes contemporary forms of expression like murals and graffiti—has a history of its own, intimately bound with texts, photographs, exhibitions and discourses that frame it and provide it with a dynamism that is too often obscured by a descriptive vocabulary of traditionalism, rusticism and antiquarianism.

Popular art has received renewed attention in the last few years. In the United Kingdom, folk art was admitted into the Tate Gallery of British Art only towards the end of the 1990s. This led in 2009–10 to a series of workshops entitled *Folk Art and the Art Museum*, organized with Compton Verney and the American Museum in Britain. Since then a number of artists, often curating installation-style exhibits, have represented folk art to the British public: *Folk Archive* by Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane as part of the Tate's *Intelligence* exhibition (2000); Vladimir Arkhipov's *post-folk archive* (2002–3); Grayson Perry's *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006); Compton Verney's *What the Folk Say* (2011); and Ruth Kenny, Jeff McMillan and Martin Myrone's *British Folk Art*, curated at Tate Britain (2014). These were complemented by a retrospective archival exhibition on the groundbreaking 1951 popular art show *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, which was held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2013.

In the United States, folk art has a longer history of aesthetic recognition that goes back to the 1930s with exhibitions like *American Primitives: An Exhibit of the Paintings of Nineteenth Century Folk Artists*

(Newark Museum, 1930), *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (Museum of Modern Art, 1932) and *Contemporary Unknown American Painters* (Museum of Modern Art, 1939). Unlike in Europe, where certain genres of folk art, like outsider art, were considered the expression of otherness and appreciated for their exoticism, in the United States popular art was tied to ideas of national character and a culture of individualism and nonconformity.¹ Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, went so far as to identify three currents of modern art: the abstract, conceptual tendency represented by Cubism, the art of the unconscious expressed in Surrealism, and popular art produced by untrained and naïve artists, which grew indifferent to and independent of the academies.² Nevertheless, subsequent museum directors narrowed his expansive view, focusing their exhibitions on formalist, referential artists and movements. In 1953 the Museum of International Folk Art, the largest museum of its kind, was founded in Santa Fe; it extended and projected the identification of innate, raw, untutored aesthetic expression with distinctive national character traits onto a global survey exhibition.

In Canada the connection between folk art and community identity was encouraged by the Toronto-based Community Folk Art Council, established in 1963. Nationally, however, it was the Canadian Museum of Civilization (renamed in 2013 the Canadian Museum of History) rather than art galleries that led the promotion of popular art as expressions of the diverse multicultural mosaic that comprised the nation's population. Important exhibitions included *Folk Art in Canada: Land and People* (1992–95), *Just for Nice* (German Canadian folk art, 1993–94) and *Les Paradis du Monde: Quebec Folk Art* (1995–96). The Canadian Museum of History remains active in promoting its extensive collections by

curating travelling exhibitions like *Wind Work, Wind Play: Weathervanes and Whirligigs* (2013).

The foundation of the Museu de Arte Popular (Museum of Popular Art) in Portugal in 1948, and the exhibitions that prefigured it, coincided with an earlier and wider renewal of interest in popular or folk art across Europe and North America both before and after the Second World War. In many cases this renewed interest was provoked by profound crises of ethnic identity and nationalist sentiment that invented a wholesome idea of nations as idealized communities.³ The 1951 Festival of Britain coincided with the important exhibition *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, curated by Barbara Jones at London's Whitechapel Gallery, and various regional attempts to resuscitate folk art.⁴ *Black Eyes and Lemonade* focused on everyday, as well as some extraordinary singular, British objects arranged by home, life-cycle celebrations, self-images, commerce and industry.

The relationship between folk art exhibitions, idealization and romanticism is close in many parts of the world. Similarly, the mobilization of this trinity in relationship to national crises and identity politics, although articulated differently, occurred historically under political and governmental regimes as diverse as those of post-revolutionary Mexico, 1920s–1930s Germany, 1930s–1950s Britain, the United States of the Great Depression era and the world-weary Portugal of the 1930s to 1950s.

At its outset the present research and exhibition pondered the question of the meaning of popular art, an awkward and orphaned category disowned at times by mainstream anglophone art history and anthropology. The sociologist Howard Becker, preferring the term “folk” over “popular,” defined folk art as always being external to professional art worlds. “Folk art . . . is art done by people who do what they do because it is one of the things

members of their community, or at least most members of a particular age and sex, ordinarily do.”⁵ Community rather than individual is important in Becker's definition and affects the constraints and opportunities expressed in the works. Arthur Danto drew attention to the compounds formed from the prefix “folk”: folklore, folk saying, folk wisdom, folk medicine, folk tale, which like folk art attest to an elaborate category of practice associated with traditional communities and an intimate connection to the environment.⁶ Kenny reiterates Becker's position, affirming that “folk art . . . is rooted in the idea of community, in the sense of being produced for and often by a group,”⁷ while going on to note that such artists often subsume their authorship under community identity.⁸ McMillan, using the same term, observes that folk art in Britain was often practised by working-class artisans and used its own distinct materials like bone, wood, straw, wool and broken crockery as opposed to the more durable materials like marble, stone and bronze favoured by the academy.⁹ “Many of these works,” McMillan feels, “represent a kind of condensation: a thing boiled down to its essence. The sense of time, the sheer labour involved, along with the at times intimate, miniaturized scale, suggest an interior (or internalized) work.”¹⁰ His co-curator Ruth Kenny emphasizes the use of found materials, idiosyncratic imagination and varying degrees of technical and aesthetic accomplishment,¹¹ while Charles Russell, like Barr and Danto, emphasizes that the artists were self-taught and their modes of expression were unconnected and innocent of the self-consciousness underlying academic art practices of their day.¹² For the Brazilian anthropologist Edison Carneiro, “Folklore is the culture of the popular become normative through tradition.”¹³ Many of these characteristics are also applicable to Portuguese popular art, although artists have more

often served in apprenticeships or participated in training and are attentive to historical antecedents.

Interpretive frameworks, Kenny notes, have been sharply drawn between discussions of folk and professional artistic practices. Despite Danto warning of the parochialism that could result from all creative objects being categorized as art, canonical art schools and styles have mostly been discussed within a developed body of academic theory, while folk art is often described in relation to emotional expressions and historically transcendental, essentialized practices that are often pitched against high culture.¹⁴ Nowhere is this clearer than in the common incorporation into the folk art category, both in Europe and the Americas, of outsider art produced by “creative individuals whose psychological or sociological conditions placed them on the margins of socially expected behavior.”¹⁵ Kenny emphasizes the difference between these, noting outsider art is indivisible into movements and periods, celebrates the raw visions of its makers, ignores everyday reality and seeks no audience or social consecration. Folk art, on the other hand, as it is in Portugal, “is rooted in the idea of community.”¹⁶

The British Folk Art exhibition attempted to subvert the distinctive discourses that separate and distinguish folk from fine arts by examining folk art’s formal compositions such as figuration and abstraction, which inadvertently pull it inside art historical discourses. *Heaven, Hell and Somewhere In Between: Portuguese Popular Art* attempts to do the opposite by examining how the category of “folk art” has been created, reproduced, hybridized and re-created as a means of inventing and signifying different evocations of the notion of community and nation within a specific territory. Folk art is here referred to as “popular art” to avoid the rural character, ahistoricism and essentialism usually ascribed it. Popular art, we shall argue, is an invented category

produced through a cultural synthesis, which inevitably hides the often singular relations that connect creative individuals to socially, politically and academically sanctioned discourses. Rather than focusing on popular art by adopting an introspective and formalist or technologically centred analysis, this approach focuses outwards to enunciate the dense layers of associations and affects in which Portuguese popular art has been and is implicated.

Popular art in this book is therefore the starting point to uncover the changing and sometimes paradoxical everyday aesthetics of Portuguese life. Aesthetics is usually applied to isolated objects that have been removed from social life and institutionalized in museums, galleries and private collections. Popular art, even in the context of this more limited institutionalization, nevertheless conveys a general aesthetic affect, like those of Santa Fe’s Museum of International Folk Art or Lisbon’s Museu de Arte Popular, which often derives from assemblages and juxtapositions rather than from individual pieces themselves. The wider locations of popular art, in communities, in homes, in markets, in churches, in schools, on buildings and in the street—as part of public assemblages—create an everyday aesthetic capable of evoking different sentiments, memories and significations. Such an aesthetic creates deep experiences of social space capable of haunting us profoundly and helps distinguish society’s “deep spaces” from those that are shallower or indifferently coded and less appreciated.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Portuguese imaginative culture has largely been shaped by three grand, core preoccupations endemic in its rich, hybridized roots: the struggle between official and popular religion, uncertainty around national identity and the pull between urban and rural cultures. The first of these conundrums involves the mediation and reconciliation of pre-Christian

and Christian beliefs and practices, which at an institutional level is synonymous with the long struggle between popular and institutionalized religion. According to historical texts, this conflict became most attenuated between the third and fifth centuries but continued throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and showed little sign of abatement until the nineteenth-century Republican period, when a secular state not only curbed the authority of the Church but also sought to combat superstition and insalubrious practices. After 1926 the *Estado Novo*, or “New State,” combined secular and ecclesiastical authority to combat popular religion. Finally, with the advent of a liberal democracy in 1974, the growth of urbanization, modernization and consumer values began to break the authority of both organized and popular religion and their monopoly over taste and cultural expressions.

Since the 1960s the clash between vernacular and institutional religion has progressively lost much of its doctrinal relevance, though popular religious beliefs and values continue to exert a strong imprint on the creation and interpretation of popular images. In the first in-depth ethnographic field study of a Portuguese rural community, namely Vilarinho da Furna, and a later study of the village of Rio de Onor,¹⁷ Jorge Dias, the founder of modern Portuguese anthropology, insisted on the influence of pre-Roman forms of social organization on the pastoral economy of the 1940s. His first work included a memorable description of how the community’s leaders legitimized their positions by invoking a distant ancestral authority.¹⁸ Even though the direct correlation between the head, the *juiz* or *zelador*, and his six-man council with saintly authority was no longer recognized at the time of Dias’s fieldwork, the mechanism and belief were still

remembered and were sufficient to legitimate the local government.¹⁹ In a similar way, while the origins, significance or context of popular artistic themes may have been forgotten, forms and subjects persist and are transmitted through memory, which actively borrows and combines with the free-floating images and texts drawn from magazines, films, libraries and the Internet, to continually reproduce, reinvent and reconfigure ideas, age-old themes and montages.

Vernacular religion was an integral part of Portuguese rural life and coloured all its facets, including popular art, which was mobilized to define a majority social group, identified as the “other Portugal” up until the 1960s. Although, as a result of emigration, urbanization and a decline in agriculture, rural culture no longer possesses the rigid clarity, uniqueness or authority it once held in the past, it continues to be remembered, idealized and re-elaborated to support and uphold values, forms and styles of representation that supposedly have their roots in history.

Until the 1970s, the gulf between popular and institutional religion strongly asserted itself in the division between rural and urban society. More recently, religious differences have become attenuated in discussions about the proliferation of sanctuaries and cults devoted to *Nossa Senhora*, “Our Lady” or the Virgin Mary, in preference to other Catholic saints and images. Divine apparitions of *Nossa Senhora* have been recorded at Nazaré, Póvoa, Cós, Ortiga and Porches and more recently at Barral (1917), Vila Chão (1945), Ladeira (1962) and, most famous of all, Fátima (1917). Some writers, adhering to folkloric interpretations, have suggested that these cults may have grown from Roman goddesses, such as Diana. Others have proposed they may be older still and originated in the successive transformations and splintering of a

mother goddess complex that had its origin in the ancient Near East 35,000 years ago.²⁰

Interpretations like these, not surprisingly, are strongly rejected by orthodox Christianity, whose texts and narratives continue to uphold the purity of established doctrine.²¹ Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of the Virgin Mary and her success in replacing older saintly cults cause concern within the Church, even though, in the case of the Fátima cult, the Church wields overwhelming authority over its liturgical organization. So strong are the differences on the authority of the Virgin Mary that some have argued that institutional recognition and proliferation of Marian cults form part of a clandestine strategy to convert Christianity into a matriarchal religion. Extremist proponents of this position even argue that the subversion of Catholicism prefigures the advent of the Antichrist and the inevitable Apocalypse. The persuasive power of text and image and their interconnective possibilities are so extensive that they can be manipulated to justify positions regardless of rationality or logical coherence.

The network of chapels and churches and the pilgrimages or *romarias* that connected them formed the basis of popular religion and rural society, which until the 1970s structured the world view and economic possibilities of Portugal's artisans and popular artists. The memory of popular religious practices and the attempt to reconcile this past world to present conditions influence a large part of contemporary popular art. Furthermore, in many texts the close relation between institutional religion and politics continues to reproduce a latent messianism—the belief in the second coming of a Messiah and the advent of a better age—that still haunts Portuguese thought as expressed in music, literature, popular culture and political rhetoric. It is even heard in the conversations of old men

huddled in the shade provided by rural stores while surreptitiously sharing a glass of wine or port.

Portugal's second core semantic conundrum stems from the contradictions between its past as a powerful global power and its current position as a small though significant state within the European Union. The choice between identifying itself with a specific transcontinental idea of civilization based on its relations with its former overseas empire and its recent incorporation as an expression of a common European civilization and history has only slowly begun to be reconciled. Portugal's hesitation between these two identities came to a head between 1933 and 1968 during the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970), when in its later years it continued to strongly assert imperial prerogatives over its African colonies at a time when other European powers were relinquishing their colonial territories. "Europe was the last continent where we had not landed," wrote Agostinho da Silva.²² The reluctance to sacrifice one identity for another was echoed again between 1988 and 2002 through the exhibitions sponsored by the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries, which sometimes reproduced colonially inflected ideological fragments to legitimate and attenuate new discourses that re-situated national identity within an incipient Europeanization.²³ This indeterminacy between two histories and two identities also impacts religious contradictions, since the older popular religiosity is widely regarded as part of a common European heritage derived from Celtic and Roman periods while Portugal's imperial expansion, which began in the fifteenth century, was encouraged by more cosmopolitan urban elite cultures. The differences between these rural and urban cultures constitute a third conundrum that has heavily marked Portugal's history. These three

core conundrums—the conflict between popular and institutional religion and the rural and urban cultures they represent, and the contradictions between a European or a transcultural and transnational identity—have held powerful sway over the aesthetic imagination and intellectual foci of the many diverse descriptive practices and visualizations that reoccur throughout this album.

Finally, Portugal's historical success in overseas trade and its uncompromising messianic Christianity redirected it, just two centuries after it had won independence from Arab control in 1143, away from its European neighbours towards the trading partners that its increasing number of sea routes had opened. Consistent with this interpretation, the country remained outwardly focused for nearly half a millennium within an evolving culture of exploration, uncertainty and expectation that had long mixed fantasy and reality with art and science. The maps, armoured spheres and navigational instruments, which opened the possibility of exploration, were fabricated not by scientists but by astrologers and artists. Portugal's drive to commercial success was combined with its spiritual search for the centre of the world and the mythical kingdom presided over by a great imagined Catholic monarch, Prester John. The peculiar ways of perceiving the world that originated from these experiences are well attested to by the Portuguese writer José Saramago, who advises:

The traveler [to Portugal] wishes he could have twenty senses, but would still not find them enough, so contents himself with the five he was born with to hear what he sees, see what he hears, to smell what he feels with his fingertips, and taste on his tongue the salt which at this very moment he can hear and see on the waves sweeping in from afar.²⁴

If Portugal's most heroized literary figure, Luís de Camões, is the chronicler of this more expansive view derived from the sea, Saramago is the narrator of the land that demands similar extraordinary senses. Fernando Dacosta agrees with the need for a revision of our sensory registers: "We have always been a people of the sound and the echo—for whom hearing predominates over seeing."²⁵

It was only with the fall of the Salazar dictatorship in 1974, which brought the country's long-drawn-out colonial wars to an end, and incorporation into the European Economic Community in 1986 that Portugal began to draw itself back into the continent of which it had always been geographically a part. By then it had become so ruined by poverty that returning migrants, who sought refuge from its wars in Africa, recounted to me in the 1990s their shock and disbelief at the conditions they encountered on their return.

Between 1986 and 2010 Portugal again prospered with a new geopolitical repositioning that united its destiny with that of the European Community. The country underwent profound infrastructural and political changes along with a sustained historical and ethnographic revisionism that sought to change its official collective historical narrative. Nevertheless, Portugal's nostalgia for the sea retains strong political interest. In a recent publication, *Portugal e o mar* (2011), Tiago Pitta e Cunha, a senior diplomat and government advisor, writes that many Portuguese associate the sea with history; they disregard its present or future economic development and connect it with *saudade*, the romantic longing and nostalgia for the past. "We have substituted the idea that we inhabit the land where the sea begins for the idea of the land where Europe ends."²⁶ He notes such an attitude limits the country's economic and political options, obscures the sea's importance as "the avenue to

the world,” and ignores the ocean’s resource value that the country could exploit in concert with other European nations. Portugal, with one eye to the sea and the other on Europe, deep in manufactured nostalgia and bittersweet memories and divided between a burgeoning subaltern class that includes a diminishing number of rural inhabitants, an industrial working class, a growing deprived and unemployed population and a small privileged elite, is unique among European nations. These irreconcilable conditions, which effect the absence of coordinated planning policies and which have weakened its political will, have also led to the increasing ruin and destruction of Portugal’s

architectural patrimony, as hauntingly portrayed in works such as the photographs of Gastão Brito e Silva.²⁷ The Lusitanian imagination is multifaceted and riddled with paradox and contradiction, as are the politics, art and exhibitions that will be discussed later. Portugal’s landscapes and histories create their own aesthetics, which, like ghosts, haunt its emerging future.