Rio de Janeiro: from the watercolors of Debret to the photographs of Augusto Malta, images for whom?

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Abstract
A comparison of Jean-Baptiste Debret’s watercolors of Rio de Janeiro, made between 1816 and 1831, and Augusto Malta’s photographs of the city after the urban reforms in the first decade of the twentieth century allows us to consider the artistic phenomenon in its full complexity. In both cases, the artists reproduced and disseminated these images to a large audience through their own initiative. What motivated them, and how did the public react? Comparing these reactions, is it possible to identify significant changes between these two periods? These questions guide our reflections on the production and reception of images of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Keywords

Images of Rio of Debret in Exhibition
In April 2015, I accompanied students from the Art History course of the Fine Arts School of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) to see the exhibition entitled “O Rio de Janeiro de Debret” held at the Correios Cultural Center, in Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition, which was organized by the Castro Maia Museums in partnership with the Correios Cultural Center, and, under the curatorship of Anna Paola Baptista, was declared by critics a huge success; enchanting both first-time and repeat visitors alike, after viewing 120 watercolors- an assembly from over 500 works of Debret borrowed from the Castro Maia collection-.

It was not the first time the locals could admire an important selection of Debret’s art work assembled for exhibition. In 2008, to celebrate the arrival of D. João VI to Brazil 200 years ago, curator Julio Bandeira presented “The Theatre of Debret” at Casa França-Brasil Cultural Center - an exhibition of over 300 watercolors presented by the Castro Maia Museums- in addition to 151 lithographs selected from the Mindlin collection, and, pictures drawn from diverse collections.
At that time, I was also able to visit this exhibition, observing the art works and exchanging ideas with a group of students.

The art works chosen and the creative exhibition set up emphasized different aspects of the art production of Debret. In 2008, the watercolors were displayed inside table showcases which were placed in the middle of the room. There sat, side by side, sketches and finalized works, clearly showing how the scenes of the final watercolors were created based on the sketches Debret had made of characters he had observed in the streets of Rio. In other words, images that at first glance seem to have been recorded out on the streets of Rio, were, in fact, a “collage” of his study of the natural habitat.

In the 2015 exhibition, magnifying glasses allowed visitors to see minute details painted by Debret. Some of the minute details of the watercolors were enlarged to panel size, enabling the fruition of animated scenes of commoners roaming the streets and squares of the city, most of whom were blacks, whether slaves or not. These panels showed the detailed eye of Debret when observing figures, their gestures and attitudes. The way he captured the peculiarity of his subjects prove he was familiar with the city and its inhabitants. Although a foreigner, his gaze was that of a local, much more precise than those of travelers passing by.
Both at the exhibition of 2008 and 2015, crowds fought over space to better appreciate these art works. This peaked interest in the watercolors of Debret is not new. For decades, these images have been disseminated in school books, newspapers or magazines, besides serving as a reference for filmmakers and TV productions, such as for “period soap operas”.

**Dissemination and Art Critics**

The dissemination of these images to the general public was one of the objectives of Debret himself, who made lithographs\(^1\) based on his watercolors in order to illustrate the volumes of engravings titled “*Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil, ou séjour d’un artiste français au Brésil, depuis 1816 jusqu'en 1831*”, published in Paris in three volumes: the first in 1834, the second in 1835 and the third in 1839.

But one fact calls to our attention: the first edition of the book in Portuguese was published only in 1939. Therefore, its dissemination to the Brazilian public happened much later than the French edition, taking over a century to occur.

We are not the first to become surprised by the time lapse that transpired between the French edition and its translation into Portuguese. In 1978, when a new national edition was published by USP University, Professor Mário Guimarães Ferri\(^2\) commented in the Preface that “its appearance among us, in the Portuguese language, happened only one century after the publication of the last volume was published in France.” The reason for this delay, according to Ferri, was the unfavourable reception of this work by Brazilian contemporaries of the painter; “members of the Brazilian Historical & Geographical Institute judged shocking paintings that

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1 Debret created lithographs based on a few of his watercolors, but not all of them were included in his book. In the production process of the lithographs, minor changes and adaptations were made to the watercolors.

2 Mário Guimarães Ferri (1918-1985), Professor of USP University, organized the collection “Re-Conquering of Brazil”, which included re-editing Debret’s book. In the Preface, he informs us that after the 1939 edition, a second edition was published in 1972. A third edition was published in 1978.
depicted the habits of slaves and scenes of common life with such realism.” (FERRI, 1978: 13)

Consequently, we should reflect on how the images of Debret were received by the public of his time. Everything seems to indicate that while painting these images during his years in Rio de Janeiro, the artist had already envisioned publishing them in Europe in the future, which, in fact, he did upon his return to France. However, this art production was not the main reason of his sojourn in Brazil. As is widely known, Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848) joined a group of French artists later known as the “French Mission” who arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1816 with task of organizing art education at the Academia de Belas Artes3 (Fine Arts Academy). In addition to his position as a professor at the Academy, Debret was commissioned by the court to paint portraits of sovereigns and to record historical moments, such as, the arrival of D. Leopoldina in Rio, or, the coronation of D. Pedro I. These were his “official” artworks, those that the Portuguese and Brazilians, his contemporaries, were familiar with. There is no record of Debret showing the watercolors that recorded the streets of Rio and life in the city to the members of the court, or, to other local artists. Debret himself states, in the Introduction of the first volume of his book, that the idea of publishing these images came to him after showing them to travelers passing through Rio de Janeiro. These travelers could have encouraged him to disseminate these images in Europe (DEBRET, 1834: ii).

In fact, Europeans were curious about Brazil -the “new” world- that after 1808 would become accessible to foreign scholars. During those years, many scholars organized scientific expeditions to Brazil in search of new knowledge. Among them, we can cite French botanist Saint-Hilaire (1772-1845), the Bavarian naturalists Spix (1781-1826) and Martius (1794-1868), or the Russian Langsdorff (1774-1852); all of whom could have been in contact with Debret in Brazil, since their expeditions happened during the decades of 1810 and 1820. It was certainly

3 Initially, they created the Escola Real de Ciências, Artes e Ofícios (Arts and Crafts Lyceum), following the definition of the Decree of 12 August 1816. Later it became a Fine Arts Academy.
the case of an anonymous scientist who published a small advertisement in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* (Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro) on 7 July 1825, commissioning “a painter who is familiar with drawings” to accompany him on a trip to the interior of Brazil. The scientist did not reveal his name, but the contact address in the advertisement is Debret’s home address, consequently, the scientist could have been one of the foreigners who, upon seeing the Debret’s watercolors, convinced the French artist to publish them.

Even so, although having targeted the European audience, once the first volume was released in 1834, Debret sent a copy to D. Pedro II, when the monarch was only 8 years old. (LEENHARDT, 2013: 515)

According to French professor Jacques Leenhardt, the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro -IHGB* (Brazilian Historical & Geographical Institute), founded in 1838, became responsible for receiving this book for inclusion in their collection. A commission of reviewers analyzed it and it was accepted into the collection of the library of The Brazilian Historical & Geographical Institute. Leenhardt comments:

*this first volume refers to the original inhabitants of the Brazilian territories, those who, in Europe, were called: “indians” or “savages”. [...] adorned by lithographs of great quality [...] in gouache colors, [it] was well received by the reviewers of the Brazilian Historical & Geographical Institute and was a welcome addition to the Imperial collections.”* (LEENHARDT, 2013:515).

The second volume, released in 1835, however, was not as fortunate. The Brazilian Historical &
Geographical Institute commission prepared a highly critical review and rejected it on 31 October 1840. The scholars that studied this case are unanimous in their opinions: they believed the main reason this volume was rejected was precisely because of its focus on urban life in Rio, and, its emphasis on “the place that slaves occupied in daily life and at work in the city.” (LEENHARDT, 2013: 515)

The greatest concern of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute commission was that of portraying a good image of Brazil, which, in Debret’s book, was presented as hardly civilized. Three specific prints were cited and criticized by the members of this institute. The first print was of “a public servant out with his family”. The reviewers Bento da Silva Lisboa and Attaide Moncorvo, saw in this image a deceitful caricature of Brazilian customs. At the same time, the critics admitted in 1816, the year that Debret arrived in Rio, “the [local] customs had not yet acquired the level of civilization that they have today”; in addition, the reviewers stated that it was not known that “public servants went out taking with them their pregnant wives in the third trimester of pregnancy, as seen in the print.” (LISBOA; MONCORVO, 1841: 98)

Figure 3 – Jean-Baptiste Debret – Um funcionário a passei com sua família. (A public servant out with his family) – engraving 5 of the second volume of the Viagem pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil (A Picturesque and Historic Voyage to Brazil)

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4 The reviews of Bento da Silva Lisboa and J. D. de Attaide Moncorvo, which only covered the first two volumes of Viagem pitoresca e histórica ao Brasil (Historic and Pictoresque Voyage to Brazil) were written in 1840 and published in the Revista Trimestral de Historia e Geographia (Quarterly History and Geography Magazine) in 1841.
The other two engravings, which were highly criticized by both members of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, were: *O mercado da rua do Valongo* (Market of Valongo St.) and *Feitor castigando negros* (Overseers punishing blacks). The former was considered a caricature and exaggerated when contrasting a potbellied merchant sitting on a high chair with the cadaverous slaves, recently disembarked from ships, sitting on the floor or on long wooden benches.

Figure 4 - Jean-Baptiste Debret – *Mercado da rua do Valongo* (Market of Valongo St.)– engraving 23 of the second volume of *Viagem pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil* (*A Picturesque and Historic Voyage to Brazil*)

In order to defend their criticism, the reviewers observed: “The drawing that Mrs Graham presents in *A Voyage to Brazil* is very different because she renders a true and serious portrayal.” (LISBOA; MONCORVO, 1841: 98) This is how the reviewers referred to the drawing of the Englishman Augustus Earle that also shows the *Mercado do Valongo* (Valongo Market), and which was published in Maria Graham´s book, *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil*, and residence there, during part of the years 1821, 1822, 1823.
One can comprehend why members of the Brazilian Historical & Geographical Institute would have preferred the image presented in Maria Graham’s book to those of Debret. Whereas the French artist represented the center of the market, with no accessory scene, the English author distracted us with a series of parallel characters, such as two women leaning over a balcony, so that the purchase and sale of slaves is diluted in the midst of city scenes.
As for the second image, *Feitor castigando negros* (Overseer punishing blacks), the commission made the following comment: “the attitude of the victim is such that it causes horror. Perhaps M. Debret witnessed a similar punishment, because one can observe barbaric masters everywhere; however, this is but an abuse.” (LISBOA; MONCORVO, 1841: 98) We do not find this a convincing argument.

What we do notice is that the discomfort Brazilian intellectuals felt in response to the second volume of *A Picturesque and Historic Voyage to Brazil*, is due to fact that it exposes an image of Brazil that they do not want to see, and, above all, would not like foreigners to see. Even in a favorable review of this work, published in the *Jornal dos Debates politicos e litterarios* (Political and Literary Debate Newspaper) in 27 May 1837, Gonçalves de Magalhães,⁵ -after writing an eloquent positive review of the first volume dedicated to the natives- offers a concise review about the second, saying: “the 2nd volume contains the customs and habits of people, some of which diminish as a result of the progress of civilization” (*Jornal dos debates*, [Newspaper of Debates] 27 May 1837: 31).

**Rio de Janeiro of the photographs of Augusto Malta**

It was precisely the “civilization” that the Brazilian elite envisioned the one that Augusto Malta (1864-1957) tried to capture with his photographic camera in the first decades of the twentieth century. Rio de Janeiro -then capital of the Republic- underwent an urban reform undertaken by mayor Pereira Passos (1836-1913) who undertook this idealized project under the auspices of the Presidency of the Republic; at that time, governed by Rodrigues Alves, from 1902 to 1906.

Scholars who wrote about Malta, relate that, the native of the State of Alagoas, having left his

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⁵ Gonçalves de Magalhães (1811-1882), was a doctor, professor, diplomat, politician, poet and Brazilian essayist. He, Araujo Porto-alegre and Torres Homem, released *Nitheroy, revista brasiliense* (1836) (Nitheroy, a Brazilian magazine), which was responsible for disseminating Romanticism in Brazil. He was also one of the founders of the *Jornal dos Debates* (Newspaper of Debates).
state to try his luck in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the nineteenth century, worked at odd jobs before dedicating his life to photography around 1900. He started out as an amateur after swapping his bicycle for a photographic camera. Apparently, a friend of his with contacts in City Hall, took Augusto Malta on site to take photos of the public works underway during the beginning of Pereira Passos´ mandate in 1903. The mayor, inspired by his photos, offered him the position of Official Documentary Photographer of City Hall. (ERMAKOFF, 2009: 18) His main task was to document the city´s transformation, which, under Pereira Passos´s urban reform project, should become a capital worthy of the Republic of Brazil; a showcase of a new civilization of the a new regime.

Therefore, streets, buildings and characters of Rio de Janeiro of the first decades of the twentieth century were amply captured by Augusto Malta, photographer of City Hall. As the researcher Regina da Luz Moreira (2008) keenly observed, Malta carried out the project of the elites and helped create the image of a Brazilian capital that dreamed of becoming the “Paris of the Tropics”. The Avenida Central, today Avenida Rio Branco, at that time, became the privileged stage where the renovations of the capital took place.

Figure 7 – Augusto Malta – Avenida Central (Central Avenue), 1906. Collection of the Moreira Salles Institute
Much has been written about the contradictions of the urban reform period and about the displacement of the poor population who used to live downtown; in an operation we would today call “gentrification” of the downtown area. Here I am interested in perceiving, through the images of Rio de Janeiro of Augusto Malta, how the feelings of the Brazilian elite of the beginning of the Republican period remained similar to those of the elite of the middle of the nineteenth century. The Brazilians that in 1840 criticized Debret’s vision of Rio, now, in the beginning of the twentieth century, wanted to create a “civilized” country based on the new look of the renovated capital. The photos of Augusto Malta disseminated the image they so desired, that of a “Europeinized” Rio de Janeiro, after the urban reform of Pereira Passos.

In the same manner as Debret made lithographs based on his watercolors to reach a wider audience, Augusto Malta made post cards of his photos of Rio to achieve the same effect. Malta had shown interest in postcards since 1905, when he joined the Sociedade Cartófila Emmanuel Hermann (Emmanuel Postcard Society). In the decade of 1910, Malta started editing his own postcards, creating the postcard series Malta Edition. It was not an isolated initiative, since, at that juncture many photographers created postcards of Rio. Among them, one of the most popular artists of that time, Marc Ferrez (1843-1923) is the author of the Álbum da avenida Central (Central Avenue Album) which shows the buildings of the new avenue. The photos of Rio of both Malta and Ferrez are admired till today, being disseminated in books, internet pages or at exhibitions. For example, they were included in the exhibition “Rio: first poses – Visions of the city upon the arrival of photography (1840-1930)” shown at the Moreira Sales Institute, in Rio de Janeiro, from February 2015 until February 2016. Audiences respond with peaked interest to these exhibitions because they identify the photos on display as “Photographs of Old Rio”. Whereas, when these photos were taken, they portrayed a picture of the new capital, in
contrast with the old city, which was inherited from the colonial period.

Due to mass reproductions, the photos of Malta that show an “Europeanized” city are the ones that are most popular. However, there are many photos of the original sites, before they underwent renovations. In some photos, he showed demolitions underway, in others, old buildings before they were destroyed. In many, the poor population is the protagonist, photographed as they walked the streets, or standing in groups that seemed to form spontaneously in front of the camera, for the simple pleasure of having their images preserved in a photograph. Recently, there has been a greater demand for this part of Malta´s art work. (ENTLER; OLIVEIRA Jr., 2008)

![Figure 8 –Augusto Malta- Beco de Batalha (Alley battle field), 1907; Collection of Gilberto Ferrez; Collection of the Moreira Salles Institute)](image)

The photos that Augusto Malta took of the kiosks that Pereira Passos disliked were very interesting; these kiosks would only be removed in the period following his administration, despite the original intentions of Passos. The kiosks were considered dirty places which were
incompatible with the image of a civilized city.

In these photos, we are able to find, yet once again, elements of the Rio of Debret in the pose of commoners seemingly at ease in their own space, even as they share the streets with a small assortment of shops. It seems that when Augusto Malta took photos of plain folk and of buildings about to be demolished, he did not do so through the curious eyes of someone who seeks the picturesque. Instead, he took photos following the instructions of the primer of City Hall, capturing an old Rio that needed to give way to a new clean city with straight wide avenues and luxurious eclectic buildings. (COSTA, 2011)

Figure 9 – Augusto Malta – Kiosk at the Largo do Depósito St., 1911, currently the Estivadores Square, Port of Rio, Rio de Janeiro

Whether or not this was the perspective that Malta himself intended, his photos actually ended up revealing more than he meant to. They captured the spontaneity and aliveness of commoners, precisely the elements that had been negated and avoided, because they represented an obstacle standing in the way of our dream of becoming European.
Conclusion: Final Considerations

If we are to reflect upon the strategies of circulation in the field of arts, it is interesting to contrast the two moments in time and two types of art productions presented herein. In the watercolors painted by Debret, picturesque and exotic aspects of Rio de Janeiro stood out; aspects that would possibly delight the European public, the target audience of the three volumes of Debret’s engravings titled *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, released in Paris in the decade of 1830. Already in the beginning of the twentieth century, photos of Augusto Malta disseminated an Europenized image of the-now-capital of the Republic, post urban reform of Pereira Passos. Malt’s postcards, based on the photos of the newly reformed city, also had ample circulation. Therefore, in both cases, images were reproduced and disseminated to the general public as a result of the commercial endeavors of their artists. However, while the watercolors of Debret evoked indignation in the Brazilian elite of the nineteenth century because they revealed the presence of blacks in the streets of Rio, eight decades later, the photos of Malta enchanted everyone who saw in them the idealized image of a new capital.

One might find it curious to realize what happened to these images over one hundred years after they were first disseminated. Both the watercolors of Debret and the photos of Malta are more alive than ever. This is undeniable, above all, for the Brazilian public who appreciates and enjoys the images of Debret, although they were initially addressed to Europeans. In the same manner, they admired the photos of Malta; which, from the beginning, targeted both the local public and foreign audiences. Today, these watercolors and photographs attract and seduce everyone who sees them as old “portraits” of Rio: as a record of the past of this nation.

One can understand the change in attitude of Brazilians regarding the images of Debret because they were perceived as reflecting the passage of time. Almost two centuries later, Brazilians can become enchanted by the picturesque and old character of Rio of 1830; apparently peaking into
these images with the same curiosity the Europeans of Debret’s time had shown.

As for the images of Rio of Augusto Malta, they went through a curious process. The admiration they caused in the beginning of the twentieth century remained till the beginning of the twenty-first century, but their meaning changed significantly. Initially, they represented a testimony of the modernization process of the capital, while later they were perceived as portraits of “Old Rio”.

The contrast between these two art productions and their different receptions lead us to reflect on the artistic phenomenon in its full complexity. The trajectory of this phenomenon initiated with the strategies used to circulate images; targeting a specific audience, which was located in a specific place and time period. However, these images ended up reaching different types of audiences that the artists had not foreseen, in different locations and at different time periods. The fact that audiences in different places and at different time periods had different surprising reactions, show how far reaching they are; and, in their gaze, the meaning of these images metamorphosized. In the case of the images of Rio under analysis, it is interesting to perceive how the relationship between the artists and the public contributed to creating a new “collective imagination” of the locals; in which we find embedded a desire to become like Europe; and, in which we value the picturesque aspects because they offer us the chance to establish a national identity.

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