

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**LACERDA, Aarão Soeiro Moreira de** (Porto, 1890 – Curia, 1947)

The art historian Aarão de Lacerda was born on 23 March 1890 in the parish of Bonfim, Porto, into an upper-middle-class family, whose social advance followed by way of higher education. His mother, D. Josefina Cândida Moreira de Lacerda, was the daughter of a distinguished royal tutor in Lamego, while his father, Aarão Ferreira de Lacerda, who held a PhD from the University of Coimbra, was a lecturer in zoology in the Academia Politécnica do Porto, later incorporated into the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Porto. The child would grow up in a privileged and highly cultured environment, attending both primary and secondary school (*liceu*) in the city of Porto before travelling to Coimbra to study in the Faculty of Law, where he gained a bachelor's degree, with distinction, in 1912. Returning to his native city he was nominated first officer of the Secretariat General of the University of Porto and opened his own legal business, but quickly recognized that such a career would not satisfy his greater propensity for cultural and artistic studies. This was not unconnected with his close association with Joaquim de Vasconcelos and the *tertúlias* around the Renascença Portuguesa, the movement that was invigorating intellectual life in Porto at the beginning of the twentieth century. There he met various significant figures in the world of arts and letters who influenced his thinking and his interest in new areas of knowledge.

If Joaquim de Vasconcelos had been crucial since his youth in sharpening his artistic sensibility and introducing him to new areas and criticism of art, Leonardo Coimbra had also stressed philosophical speculation through his familiarity with the work of Bergson and new trends in aesthetics, alongside recent developments in Archaeology and Ethnography, centred around the journal *Portugália*, which they engaged with for a better understanding of Portuguese art. And so in 1916 Aarão de Lacerda returned to the University of Coimbra, enrolled now in the Faculty of Letters to study Historical and Geographical Sciences, where he consolidated his choice of specialist field in Aesthetics and History of Art, a course he studied in the final year under the supervision of Dr Teixeira de Carvalho. In his memoirs he was lavish in his praise for this teacher and his regard for the course of studies he ran, regarding him as his mentor by reason of his erudition and his openness to discussion of aesthetic and artistic questions, as a result of the close connection between them. In the opinion of António Cruz, he was “the most valuable of the disciples of Quim



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Martins, his true and faithful follower, his successor” (“Aarão de Lacerda – o professor, o artista e o historiador da Arte”, 1984, p. 100).

In 1919, rather than put himself forward for the exams for his degree, he accepted an invitation to the run the History of Art course at the Porto School of Fine Arts, for which he had been proposed by Joaquim de Vasconcelos, putting back for five years the examination of his academic credentials, which he concluded with a mark of nineteen (out of a possible twenty). Himself a conservative republican, in May of the same year he was elected to the Porto City Council, in the lists of the Partido Republicano Evolucionista, and was publicly reprimanded just days later by Leonardo Coimbra’s ministry for having objected to the contentious removal of the Faculty of Letters from Coimbra to the University of Porto. It was in this turbulent environment that, aged around 29, he published his work *Templo das Siglas*, originally a short study that appeared in the pages of *Terra Portuguesa*. A case study of the church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Ermida (Castro Daire), it took its place as one of the first national monographs dedicated to Romanic Art. Alongside a sharp defence of the safeguarding and restoration of Portuguese heritage, a cause to which Aarão de Lacerda had dedicated himself all his life in his works and his press columns, his writing revealed an author gifted with an objective analysis laid out with a rigorous and scientific vocabulary, fruit of a fine historiographical erudition and an examination of historical documents, valuable for a contextualization of works of art. Although this shows some influences of the Positivist current, in seeking a scientific model of objectivity that distanced itself from the usual subjective judgement of artistic criteria, we can also glimpse the aesthete whose appreciation of beauty and art is reflected in the fair and honest views regarding the context of their creation.

In 1921 he secured his entry into an academic university career running a subsidiary course in Aesthetics and History of Art. On receiving a double invitation from the Porto First Faculty of Letters and its congener at Coimbra, the latter opening caused by the death of his former mentor, Dr Teixeira de Carvalho, Aarão de Lacerda’s choice fell upon the former, where he joined the teaching staff and participated in a project of pedagogical reform, allowing him to continue to reside in the city of his birth. His erudition, his critical qualities and his pedagogical leanings were recognized by Leonardo Coimbra and Damião Peres at the time of his nomination. The following year he was charged with running a similar course at the Porto Municipal Conservatory of Music, while still maintaining at the Faculty of Letters the courses in Archaeology and General History of Civilization, for which he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor in Historical Sciences in 1926. Until that university institution closed in the summer of 1931, he distinguished himself as one of the main enthusiasts for its academic life and for the unsuccessful fight against its closure. His renewed contact with Leonardo Coimbra and the Renascença Portuguesa (which grouped, albeit informally, various professors and students from the Faculty of Letters) led to a brief incursion into metaphysical thought, evidenced in his work *O Fenómeno Religioso e a Simbólica* [The Religious Phenomenon and Symbolics]. However, it was in the field of the History of Art that he had now established his investigative prowess, whether by his collaboration in Damião Peres’s *História de Portugal*, with two chapters on the



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history of Portuguese art, or by Virgílio Correia's praise for the wide erudition shown in his historical, archaeological and artistic essay, *O Panteão dos Lemos* [The Pantheon of the Lemos].

Throughout the 1930s, Aarão de Lacerda devoted himself to teaching in Porto, taking on the chairs in Archaeology and the management of the School of Fine Arts (1939) and the course in Acoustics and the History of Music at the Conservatory of Music. He also continued his researches as a critic and art historian, active as a lecturer in the municipal course in Portuguese Studies, as the last director of the Porto Municipal Museum, and as an author for the famous German publishing house *E. A. Seemann Verlag*, which even today specializes in works on Art and the History of Art. Even so, he embarked on a project unparalleled as a synthesis of national art history, which led to the first volume of his *História de Arte em Portugal* (1942), perhaps his principal historiographical work, presenting a global conception of the whole assembly of Portuguese art up to the end of the Middle Ages. Although pertinent and solid from an academic and historical point of view, it was inscribed in the nationalist ideological matrix promoted by the Estado Novo in its attempt to emphasize the evolution of national artistic expression. Furthermore, in collaboration with Vergílio Correia and Luís Keil he had already organized various activities in the section of the National Commemorations of 1940 devoted to exhibitions of art; as a result his ideological affiliation had some impact on his historical analysis, and it was Mário Chicó and Reinaldo dos Santos who continued the work in its later volumes.

In 1945, towards the end of his life, he returned to Coimbra to take up a Chair of Aesthetics and History of Art, awarded after public examinations, where he succeeded Vergílio Correia. However, it was a fleeting appointment, as he died on 7 September 1947, during a stay at the thermal spas of Cúria. A few months earlier he had been invited to join the management of the Centre for Humanistic Studies, attached to the University of Porto, an institution devoted to research which prepared the ground for the reappearance of the former Faculty of Letters. Aarão de Lacerda certainly took his place on the national scene in the first half of the twentieth century as a notable historian and art critic, recognized for his vision of historical reality, and his acute and demanding analytical ability, by which he distanced himself from subjective positions to focus instead on the construction of careful and methodical researches, tackling different artistic periods from the medieval to the contemporary. As well as running the journals *Dionysios*, *Prismo*, *A Águia* and *Mvsev*, his name appears as author of many articles and historical studies, in the pages of *Ilustração Moderna*, *Revista de Guimarães*, *Boletim da Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes*, *Ocidente*, *Comércio do Porto* and in the collective works *História de Portugal: edição monumental*, the *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira* and the *Guia de Portugal*, amongst others. He was honoured with the position of commander of the Order of Sant'Iago da Espada, of corresponding member of the National Academy of Fine Arts, and member of the Portuguese Academy of History.

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APOIOS:

