

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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CORREIA Pinto da Fonseca, Vergílio (Régua, 1888 - Coimbra, 1944)

In 1935, Vergílio Correia was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Coimbra. He initially graduated in Law (1911), but transitioned to academia in 1921, becoming a professor of Aesthetics and Art History, succeeding Joaquim Martins Teixeira de Carvalho (1861-1921) and leaving his legal career behind. He taught Archaeology (1923), History of Eastern Antiquity (1930) and History of Classical Antiquity (1930). His intellectual brilliance, particularly in historical studies, is well known, despite being largely self-taught.

His professional career was closely related to museology and museography. In 1929, he became the director of the Machado de Castro Museum, a position he held until his death, balancing it alongside his teaching duties. From 1933 onwards, he oversaw a major restructuring of the museum's various buildings. This renovation focused on preserving the integrity of the structures while enhancing their architectural aesthetics and ensuring effective display of the exhibits. His emphasis on the museum's sculpture collection elevated the institution to one of the most important museums in Portugal, a distinction it holds to this day. Following a competitive recruitment examination, he was successively appointed as curator of the Portuguese Ethnological Museum (1912-1915) and the National Museum of Ancient Art (1915-1921). His work at the Portuguese Ethnological Museum, now known as the National Archaeological Museum, marked a pivotal moment in his scientific career, largely due to his close relationship with José Leite de Vasconcelos (1858-1941), the museum's founder and director. Vasconcelos deeply influenced him through their work on the museum's archaeological and ethnographic collections, although Vergílio Correia demonstrated a notably different approach to archaeological research.

In the field of heritage research and preservation, he also served as director of the Brigade of the National Artistic Inventory Centre of the National Academy of Fine Arts. This work led to the posthumous publication of a multi-volume series titled *Inventário Artístico de Portugal* [Artistic Inventory of Portugal].

Vergílio Correia conducted significant research on the district and city of Coimbra, collaborating with António Nogueira Gonçalves.

His primary research methods included extensive documentary investigation and in loco monument assessments. He favoured what he called "intimate contact with reality" or "moving away from theory and



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focusing on observation and personal investigation of the facts" (Dr Vergílio Correia, 1945, p. 8). His writing often prioritised presenting new and objective facts over theorising and contextualising the objects he studied, reflecting a positivist approach: "Before presenting ideas, they must be grounded in facts. Before putting forward general ideas, which are often inconsistent and lack foundation, [...] we must first prepare a detailed and faithful account of the documents. [...] This is the method I follow in artistic history studies, where documents serve as the cornerstone" (*Vasco Fernandes: mestre do retábulo da Sé de Lamego* [Vasco Fernandes: Master of the Altarpiece of Lamego Cathedral], 1924, pp. IX-X). This focus on historical documents is evident throughout his publications, which included transcriptions of sources, such as his research on the construction of the Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon, his studies on the alterpiece of the Cathedral of Lamego — where he supported its attribution to Vasco Fernandes — and his nearly complete edition of the *Livro dos regimentos dos officiaes mecânicos: da mui nobre e sempre leal cidade de Lisboa* [Book of Regulations for Mechanical Officers: Of the Most Noble and Ever Loyal City of Lisbon] (1572).

On the publishing front, he began his prolific career at the young age of 24 with *Lisboa Préistorica* and the monograph *A Igreja de Lourosa da Serra da Estrela* [The Church of Lourosa in Serra da Estrela], both published in 1912. His untimely death left several unfinished works, resulting in a substantial but incomplete body of research that reflected his wide-ranging interests. His main research interests were Art History, Archaeology, and Ethnography, which he considered closely connected fields with shared goals that could not be separated from a methodological standpoint. His archaeological research had a practical impact across several excavations, including the Roman Villa of Freiria (1912), the dolmens of Pavia (1921), Alcácer do Sal (1925, 1930) and Conímbriga (1936), with a particular emphasis on the cryptoporticus of *Aeminium* (1930-1944).

In Art History, aside from his previously mentioned studies on Vasco Fernandes (1924), his seminal works include studies on Visigoth art (1928), fresco painting (1921), architecture (1922, 1929, 1931), painting (1923, 1928, 1932, 1934), and medieval and Renaissance sculpture (1940, 1941). He also made significant contributions to the study of medieval tomb sculpture in Portugal (1918, 1921, 1924, 1929), which remain essential references today.

His contributions to *História de Portugal* [History of Portugal], directed by Damião Peres and featuring a collaboration from many leading intellectuals, were pivotal in establishing Art History as a recognised discipline. In the field of ethnography, he played a key role in integrating folk art into the discipline, to the point where ethnography and folk art became almost synonymous. His research focused particularly on the ornamental art of the Alentejo, between 1912 and the early 1920s.

The foundations of his innovative ethnographic ideas were outlined in a manifesto published in the first fascicle of his series *Arte Popular Portuguesa* [Portuguese Folk Art](published in *A Águia* [The Eagle], 1915, in three fascicles), although they remained unfinished. His main contributions to ethnography can be found in various scattered studies and brief notes, some of which were later compiled in *Etnografia Artística* [Art



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Ethnography]. *Notas de Etnografia Portuguesa e Italiana* [Notes on Portuguese and Italian Ethnography], (1916). His study *Arte Popular Portuguesa* introduced the first methodological approach to analysing folk art within the context of ethnographic and anthropological research in Portugal, at a time when the boundaries between these two disciplines were still undefined. He examined objects from two perspectives: tangible works (such as architecture, embroidery, textiles, tapestries, pottery, jewellery, basket weaving, clothing, and agricultural implements) and intangible works (including traditions, songs, literature, and music), aiming to highlight their aesthetic and ornamental qualities.

His focus on art created by lower-status people, often for utilitarian purposes, foreshadowed its use in Estado Novo propaganda, where it became part of the folklorisation of national identity. His works, particularly his article *O Carro Rural* [The Rural Cart] (1940) (“Metamorfoses da arte popular...”, 2002, p. 263), were instrumentalised for this purpose. While his ethnographic studies aimed to bridge the gap between popular artistic objects and the discipline of Art History — striving to include these objects in art textbooks — some of his writings reveal a significant divide between high art and folk culture. In certain works, he describes folk art as somewhat primitive, rudimentary, and limited, or, more delicately, as simple, naïve, and modest (*A Águia*, 1915), even comparing it to primitive art.

His contributions to identifying expressions of national culture — a topic that had gained significant prominence in Portugal since the late 19th century — in line with the work of Martins Sarmiento and Leite de Vasconcelos, are particularly noteworthy. In addition to his contributions to Art History, his efforts in the safeguarding and preservation of artistic heritage are also notable. Like other contemporary Portuguese intellectuals such as Aarão de Lacerda, his work played a key role in bringing these issues to the forefront of both public and academic debate.

On the editorial front, he founded and directed the magazine *Terra Portuguesa* [Portuguese Land] (1916-1927) in Lisbon, alongside Sebastião Pessanha and Alberto de Sousa. This publication is regarded as a key contribution to the study of Portuguese ethnography during the First Republic. He also established and led *Arte e Arqueologia* [Art and Archaeology] (1930-1933) in Coimbra, where he, along with António Nogueira Gonçalves, promoted and organised catalogues of jewellery, textile work and embroidery, and faience. He also wrote for multiple periodicals, including *Contemporânea* [Contemporary], *Rajada* [Gust], *A Pátria* [The Homeland], *O Século* [The Century], and *Diário de Notícias* [The Daily News], among others. He also served as editor of *Atlântida* [Atlantis] (1915-1920) and later as director of the newspaper *Diário de Coimbra* [Coimbra Daily] (1938-1944), where he placed a greater emphasis on Portuguese ethnography.

Virgílio Correia was also involved in multiple commissions, including the Seville Exhibition commission and the Fine Arts and Folk Costume commission. Additionally, he took part in various national and international scientific events, such as the Luso-Spanish Congresses for the Progress of Sciences (held in Cádiz, Salamanca, Lisbon, and Barcelona), the International Archaeological Congresses (in Barcelona, 1929, and Algiers, 1930), and the Portuguese World Exhibition (1940), among others. His research in Italy and Morocco



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culminated in the creation of *Sequeira em Roma* [Sequeira in Rome] (1923), a result of meticulous archival work, as well as *Lugares Dalém: Azemôr, Mazagão, Çafim* [Places Beyond: Azemôr, Mazagão, Çafim] (1923), later re-edited under the title *Três Cidades de Marrocos* [Three Cities of Morocco] (1950), where he explored Maghreb influences on Portuguese Renaissance art. His visit to Italy also had a significant impact on his work in Portuguese ethnography, helping to align Portuguese and Italian ethnographic concepts in 1916. He was also a contributor to the *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira* [Great Portuguese and Brazilian Encyclopedia].

His extensive body of work and research, along with his involvement in various cultural institutions, led to affiliations with several cultural societies, including the National Academy of Fine Arts, the Portuguese Academy of History, the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Berlin, the Royal Academy of History, and the Coimbra Institute. He was an honorary member of the National Society of Fine Arts, an officer of the Order of St. James, and was also awarded the German Red Cross.

His connection to Portuguese Freemasonry is well known, and he even published in the *Official Bulletin of the Grand Orient of Portugal*. Beyond his ties to Freemasonry, little is known about his political views. However, his frequent contributions to the magazine *A Águia* — a key platform for promoting the nationalist ideals and messianic tendencies of the *Renascença Portuguesa* [Portuguese Renaissance] cultural movement — alongside his Masonic affiliations, suggest he likely held republican views. Both institutions played significant roles in fostering and sustaining republican thought during that time. The phrase "the republican sensibility of our youth" (*Discurso pronunciado na cerimónia de Doutoramento* [Speech Delivered at the Doctoral Ceremony]..., 1933, p. 18), used by Joaquim de Carvalho to describe his youth alongside Virgílio Correia, further supports this.

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