

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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VASCONCELOS, Joaquim António da Fonseca de (Porto, 1849 - Porto, 1936)

A connoisseur of the nation's artistic treasures, an expert on art education in Portugal, and a historian of comparative art, he was born on 10 February in Cedofeita, the son of businessman José António da Fonseca e Vasconcelos and Maria Rita de Freitas Guimarães. Orphaned at the age of four and following an experience he described as unpleasant in Porto's schools, he left Portugal for Hamburg in 1859, where he received a solid general education, studied singing and solfège, and, in 1862, began his studies in art. During this period, he visited most of Germany, Denmark, France and England. He returned to Portugal in 1865, aged 16, with a degree in Philosophy and, thanks to his family fortune, no financial constraints.

In order to enrol at the University of Coimbra, he undertook preparatory studies but became disillusioned with the teaching methods. The Franco-Prussian War puts the brakes on his desire to return to Germany. Since returning to Portugal, he has felt a withdrawal from the studies he had begun in Germany — in the face of a society he describes as lacking in principles, seriousness and ideals. Transported to a new political, intellectual and artistic milieu, throughout his life he kept a prudent distance from political circles, which he attacked with fierce independence in moments of public intervention. The "scientific and literary way" (*Albrecht Dürer...*, 1877, p. IX) of thinking that he carries over from his German education is used with a strictness that is hardly in keeping with the rarely cultured dilettantism he will encounter. In this new environment, it was only the artistic world that truly captivated him, as he remained in Coimbra, driven by the sensations and curiosities evoked by the buildings and works of art around him.

A representative of the unyielding desire to position Portugal within the European artistic arena and to value its monumental heritage, in opposition to the "nationalist monomania" (*Joaquim de Vasconcelos*, 1929, p. 125), his dedication was evident early on in his numerous works. A writer, researcher, educator, tireless traveller, lecturer, publicist, museologist, bibliophile, and professor (once his financial resources were exhausted), he viewed the scholarly study of art as serving the dissemination of popular artistic traditions. He fosters a deep approach to cultural heritage, valuing works of art and monuments through the lens of their influences and historical context, rather than viewing them as mere trophies for the aristocratic classes to admire and keep alive as symbols of their own *cultured* status.

His writing production (more than seventy books on music, painting, architecture, ceramics, jewellery,



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ethnography, archaeology, decorative arts, home crafts, and artistic instruction) is divided between original studies, previously unpublished historical documentation, and catalogues, where his meticulous handling and thorough citation of primary sources earned him a reputation for rigour and integrity. It also emerges through civic intervention documents (cases of the controversy over the translation of a work by Goethe and the analysis of government projects for the reform of art education).

His writings also include multiple articles in the press (e.g.: in the newspapers *A Atualidade*, do Porto, *Comércio do Porto*, *Ilustração Portuguesa*, *Jornal do Comércio*, in Lisbon) and, in art, art pedagogy or teaching publications (*A Arte*, de Coimbra, *A Arte: revista internacional*, *A Tribuna do Professor*, *Boletim da Real Associação dos Arquitetos e Arqueólogos Portugueses*, *Ilustração Moderna*, *O Arqueólogo Português*, *O Ensino. Jornal do Colégio Portuense dedicado aos Pais*, *Revista de Guimarães*, *Revista dos Liceus*). Some of the publications are linked to institutions he was a part of or helped to found. This is the case of *A Arte Portuguesa: Revista Mensal de Belas Artes*, published by the Centro Artístico Portuense (founded in 1879), of which he was a patron member and elected president (1882-1883); or the *Revista da Sociedade de Instrução do Porto*, to whose foundation he was closely linked (1880), taking on the role of secretary, organising the first statutes and regulations, and serving as a member of the scientific committee (1881-1883).

His first work, published at the age of 21 (1870), was a biographical compilation of 400 Portuguese musicians, marking the beginning of the publication of biographical dictionaries on musicians in Portugal. It brings together information scattered across foreign dictionaries, particularly those by the German musician and musicologist Johann Nikolaus Forkel and the Belgian musicologist François-Joseph Fétis. It is also based on the work of the writer and bibliographer Diogo Barbosa de Machado, whose *Biblioteca Lusitana* [Lusitanian Library] is described as the "first origin of our biography" (*Os Músicos Portugueses...* [The Portuguese Musicians...], 1870, p. XXVIII), as well as on the "generous contributions of some devoted individuals", foremost among them the musicologist Joaquim José Marques. "To this distinguished man, art owes its most valuable services (...). This is the very rich source from which everything that has been written about music in Portugal in modern times has been drawn" (*Idem*, p. XXX).

It is acknowledged that Portugal has distinguished itself in the arts of sculpture, architecture, painting, and music, and has produced "artists of great merit" (*Idem*, 1870, p. X). While recognising the importance of studying related fields such as drawing, engraving, lithography, photography, ceramics, epigraphy, and philology, he expresses surprise that there is no comprehensive history of the fine arts in Portugal and at the widespread ignorance of the names of national artists. Due to this gap, in mid-1872, he circulated a prospectus for publication in newspapers advertised as a repository of research on history of the arts in the Iberian Peninsula: *Arqueologia Artística*, the first instalment of which was dedicated to the lyric soprano Luísa Todi (1873).

The criticism of António Feliciano de Castilho's translation of Goethe's *Fausto* [Faust] (1872), and the public controversy that followed, reveal him to be a determined and exacting polemicist. He also

demonstrates a keen methodological approach when he says, quoting Goethe, that everything we think has already been thought, but what we can claim as our own is the process by which we again think and study subjects that have already been explored (1873). The controversy with Castilho's advocates (known as the "Faust Question") was closely followed in Berlin by his future wife, the philologist Carolina Wilhelm Michaëlis, who was then working as an interpreter in Hispanic languages for the German Ministry of the Interior. This sparked an exchange of letters between the 24-year-old Joaquim de Vasconcelos and Michaëlis. They were married civilly in Berlin in March (1876) and settled in Porto in June of the same year. In 1877, they had their only son, Carlos Joaquim, who studied in Berlin and graduated as a mechanical engineer.

He affirms his intellectual and moral affiliation with Germany, the country where the creation of the ideal state — the republic of the wise, or republic of letters (*Gelehrtenrepublik*) — was realised through an artistic cosmopolitanism and a communism of the spirit. The evidence that the monuments are deteriorating (with the exception of occasional efforts to preserve Jerónimos and Batalha), the lack of resources for research, the scarcity seen at libraries and archives, and the absence of an audience to support the continuation of scholarly work, are recurring themes in his reflections. The comparative approach in the artistic studies of the Polish count and diplomat Atanazi Raczyński, who lived in Portugal in the 1840s, along with the issues he raised (including the case of the painter Grão Vasco), captivated his admiration. With Raczyński's death in 1874, and in fact, with his diplomatic transfer to Spain in 1848, Vasconcelos notes a hiatus — a lack of continuity in artistic studies — marked by only a few exceptions, which were not sufficient to establish a trend. Instead of striving to investigate and establish artistic facts, he observes a situation where work is never rewarded in proportion to the energy and dedication invested. The cheerful willingness to remain immersed in archives and papers, however, reveals a troubling tendency he identifies as the "pat-on-the-back disease" among researchers, publicists, and onlookers. This situation leads him towards a form of active pessimism. It is at this point that he analyses the "creeping and servile courtesy of the Portuguese" (*O Consumado Germanista...* [The Consummate Germanist...], 1873, p. 5) and the insistence on ostentation that the decadence becomes apparent in the face of the two aspects that make or break a nation: moral and intellectual existence.

The foundations for constructing a general history of art, subjected to the only admissible approach — the comparative method of art history — seem to be found in the archives of the Torre do Tombo, as well as in the Dutch, Belgian, Roman, Florentine, Spanish, German (Nuremberg and Augsburg), and the English Royal Household archives. The design of this geographical framework reflects Portugal's historical relations with the Court of the Dukes of Burgundy, the Vatican, the Medici, the Austrian and Spanish monarchies, the two southern German centres of trade, the Renaissance movement, and the House of Lancaster. Building on the foundations laid by Raczyński, Joaquim de Vasconcelos establishes the study of Portugal's international relations in the 15th and 16th centuries as a crucial source for identifying foreign influences in Portuguese art and for demonstrating the nationalisation of some of them. In doing so, he weaves the Ariadne's thread of Portuguese artistic works. When, at the age of 28, he published his findings on the influence of the German



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engraver, painter, and illustrator Albrecht Dürer on the Iberian Peninsula (1877), he was able to claim that the migratory movements of merchants and the establishment of trading posts followed a pattern that enables the tracing of the influences on Portuguese art, and he argues that the circulation of works of art adhered to commercial relationships and that knowledge of international relations in the 15th and 16th centuries and of the merchant nations is crucial for an appreciation of the history of art in Portugal.

By focusing his research on these centuries, he observes that even the great period of the Discoveries has not been adequately studied in Portugal. He emphasises that the "problem of national art" (*Albrecht Dürer*, 1877, p. 156) should be addressed by examining the history of artistic migrations to the Iberian Peninsula through trade routes. In addition to exploring archival materials — and with a keen awareness of the development of research tools based on his own scholarly practice which leads him to describe himself as a *fragment maker* (*Idem*, p. X) — the historian soon felt the need to translate the essential textbooks for art history (*Idem*, p. VI). Over the years, he published a bibliography of Portuguese art (initially intended to include a universal catalogue of art books from the South Kensington Museum) as well as a bibliography of Portuguese industries.

To distinguish him as a researcher equipped with both a theoretical and practical framework, a master of research methodology — and also an informed polemicist, as evidenced in his trilogy on the reform of fine arts education (1877, 1878, 1879) — we can examine his publications from the late '70s. In *Albrecht Dürer...* (1877), fourth instalment of *Arqueologia Artística* [Artistic Archaeology], Joaquim de Vasconcelos summarises the philosophical endeavour of his lifetime: to compile the materials for a history of the Portuguese Renaissance in the 16th century, drawing on European historiography, with particular emphasis on modern German scholarship.

Joaquim de Vasconcelos' philosophy regarding art history should be seen as part of the broader effort to establish the discipline on a scientific basis, aligning with the tradition pioneered by the German historian Leopold von Ranke. Ranke, through his renowned seminars, emphasised presenting the results of research alongside the methodologies used to obtain them, encouraging students to engage directly with sources and explore archives. Like Ranke, Vasconcelos was focused on researching specific historical periods, seeking to understand historical continuity as the key to grasping national specificity. Vasconcelos follows this path, as he himself notes, inspired by and in dialogue with some of the figures who best symbolise the development of modern German art history. Among these are the historian and writer Franz Theodor Kugler, the art historian, jurist, and traveller Karl Schnaase, and the art historian and professor of architecture Wilhelm Lübke. Like them, Vasconcelos shares the conviction that connecting different historical periods and explaining them in relation to one another is essential, and so is the publication of artistic inventories as a way of laying a solid foundation for historiographical study — and with which he cross-references information in order to connect Portuguese artistic movements to international ones (*Conde de Raczynski...* [Count of Raczynski...], 1875, p. 36 and 41-42).

Joaquim de Vasconcelos's efforts were driven as much by his concerns for artistic education as by his



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desire to communicate with the public, evident in his extensive critical commentary on the work of the government commission appointed in 1875 to reform the fine arts. In the Porto newspaper *A Atualidade* and across three volumes published sequentially, he offers a comparative analysis of the state of art education, and also theorises about the pursuit of harmony between art and industrial production, and about the knowledge of cultural heritage as a means of fostering intellectual and moral wealth, points capable of building a new artistic renaissance, given the ruin of monuments and the dispersal and alienation of works of art.

He advocates for a reform that adopts the broadest perspective in order to achieve the most profound radical change, calling for a top-down restructuring of education, including not only the two existing academies of fine arts (Lisbon and Porto), but also general education in the High Schools and artistic education in the professional schools of arts and crafts — and specifically the teaching of arts applied to industry, which at the time occupied hundreds of workers at night.

Faithful to the European movement that sees drawing as the basis of all the plastic arts, to the international experiences of England, Germany and Austria as models of the *Artes e Ofícios (Arts and Crafts)* movement, and to the artistic training of workers as emancipation and a fight against poverty, Joaquim de Vasconcelos found the weak determinations of the reform to be lacking, its centralising weight unbearable and the omission of music, an art that had mobilised him so much, incomprehensible.

The three central issues addressed in the Report (reforming the teaching of fine arts at the Lisbon and Porto academies; organising a central museum; and implementing measures to preserve and repair monuments) reflect Joaquim de Vasconcelos's sense of distance from the commission. To do so, it is essential to help the fine arts academies. For Joaquim de Vasconcelos, it is important to take action at the level of the teaching of drawing, the first reform of the fine arts reforms (in primary schools, where pupils destined for the manual professions came, and in vocational education, to try to reform the disintegration and indiscipline fostered by the suppression of the old craft guilds), giving priority to the *escolas de aplicação* (professional schools of arts and crafts) over the academies.

For the commission, the idea was to establish a central museum in Lisbon — at that time envisioned as a museum of art and industry — that would gather the nation's most valuable treasures and make them available for public contemplation. For Joaquim de Vasconcelos, it's a question of creating museums for *industrial arts*, in other words, museums with an immediate practical and useful component. He argues that the existing museums are irrelevant, pointing to their lack of planning and method, their failure to serve aesthetic and educational purposes, and the fact that they are driven merely by a superficial, careless enjoyment. Finally, for the commission, the focus was on implementing measures for the conservation and repair of monuments and artistic objects. Without outright disagreement, Joaquim de Vasconcelos proposed a different solution: to remove the art collections from the *Academia de Belas-Artes de Lisboa* [Lisbon Academy of Fine Arts], where they were deteriorating and becoming mouldy; to appoint custodians responsible for the care of art objects in public buildings and those held by corporations; and to establish an

archaeological commission tasked with overseeing the nation's underground treasures. He also advocated for the implementation of the first and most urgent measure: the establishment of an authority to prevent indiscriminate demolitions and to oversee the restoration of monuments.

The desire to keep the central issue of art education at the forefront led to the writing of the third volume (*A Reforma do Ensino de Belas-Artes III* [The Reform of Fine Arts Teaching III], 1879), which offers a systematic approach to a comprehensive reform of drawing education in Portugal, and presents a curriculum that spans from elementary to higher education, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of comparing the English, Austrian, and German models with the local context, while carefully considering Portugal's own indigenous conditions. He devotes a chapter to the collections of art education in Portugal (the existing ones seem to him to be random clusters), in other words, the methods of reproduction for educational purposes and to reinforce the concept of cultural heritage. A fourth essay is promised, dedicated to the history of the academies of fine arts, which will be published in the Porto newspaper *A Atualidade*, however, it will focus solely on the *Academia de Lisboa* [Lisbon Academy] (1880).

Linking the reproducibility of heritage to the wonders of the mechanised world, he consistently emphasises the role of museums as a pedagogical tool, capable of mass-producing artistic works for educational purposes. A strong advocate for educational industrial museums, with the goal of refining the "natural" and "indisputable" ingenuity of the general population, he sought to cultivate the education of the senses and the ennobling of feelings. He was delighted to be provisionally appointed curator of the *Museu Industrial e Comercial do Porto* [Industrial and Commercial Museum of Porto] (1884), a position that would become permanent in 1888. Later, he was appointed as its director (1889). What promised to be a challenge soon turned into a nightmare, as he took up the position at the peak of the museum movement, only for the government to determine its closure in 1899. The historian remained a loyal custodian of the museum, which lingered in a state of twilight existence until around 1927-28. The same can be said of the *Museu Municipal do Porto* [Porto Municipal Museum], for which Vasconcelos was a member of the commission tasked with its reorganisation (established in 1888). He had been working towards this goal since 1889, when he authored a report outlining the proposed reforms for the museum. As the years passed, he saw the museum remain without an endowment, a proper manager, a catalogue, or a library. Despite this, he continued with the ambition of becoming its curator, taking on the arduous task of inventorying and evaluating pieces for acquisition — though this would never come to be.

The most comprehensive and informed attempt to establish a system of art education is made by a man from outside the academy. He defends this position by arguing that teaching plans and knowledge of the art industry are the product of practical study, and that the presentation of art collections comes from firsthand travel experience (he made two trips of more than a year in European countries and, between 1876 and 1879, travelled throughout the country to document and illustrate his proposal). Throughout his life, he travelled extensively across the country, from north to south, observing artistic objects and monuments, often recording them in detailed drawings. It was the intersection of his ever-roaming gaze and the tireless probing



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of his own body that enabled him, in 1895, to rescue four panels from near-forgetfulness. These panels were rediscovered during a visit to the Monastery of São Vicente de Fora. The *Saint Vincent Panels* were covered in dust, almost obscured by darkness, hidden away in a corridor leading to the religious cells. It is true that the panels are in good condition, but they remain out of the country's critical eye.

He arrived at mainstream schooling due to financial difficulties (*Joaquim de Vasconcelos: historiador, crítico de arte...* [Joaquim de Vasconcelos: historian, art critic], p. 137) and began teaching English and German at the *Liceu do Porto* [Porto High School] in 1883, where he remained until 1924. He does not look back fondly on this teaching experience, often complaining about the effort required to engage students who were uninterested in learning, as well as the labour involved in grading tests. His experiences in higher education happened later in life and were very brief. At the age of 64, he taught at the *Escola de Belas Artes do Porto* [School of Fine Arts in Porto] (appointed to teach Art History in 1913 and dismissed at his own request in 1917) and authored lecture courses at the University of Coimbra (between 1915 and 1918, according to himself). Still within the field of education, he was appointed inspector of the *Escolas Industriais da Circunscrição do Norte* [Industrial Schools of the Northern District] (1891-1892), a position he held for seven months. During the Republic, he received an invitation to teach at the *Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa* [Lisbon School of Arts & Humanities].

In 1883, he claimed to be a pioneer in the publication of essays on various Portuguese art industries, as seen in the 1883 catalogue for the *Exposição distrital de Aveiro em 1882. Relíquias da arte nacional* [Aveiro district exhibition in 1882. Relics of national art]), he created studies on ceramics (1883-84), goldsmithing and jewellery (1881 to 1884), *panos de rás* — the textile paintings (or tapestries) that originated in the city of Arras — (1900), and metals (1901). It is in the "popular soul" and "spontaneous inspiration" of the *cottage industries* — which he believes only require careful education — that the historian hopes to recover the homeland's traditions, traditions that are attested by a chronological continuity that spans from prehistory to the ornaments of cottage industries. These traditions, which are suitable for all types of buildings — whether noble, bourgeois, or rustic — exist in potential within the natural proclivity of working-class people. They are to be recreated in Vasconcelos' ultimate objective: a style that is pure and distinctly national in its expression. It is not a return to the past, but a return to the genuine sources of national inspiration.

This is how the historian engages in a controversy regarding an alleged national style represented in the monuments of the 16th century, the *manueline*, criticising its creators for focusing solely on ornamentation rather than the "static conditions of architecture" (the constructive elements); for failing to visit other monuments, both Portuguese and Spanish; and for neglecting the broader history of the arts and crafts in the Iberian Peninsula. This is also how he sets out to demystify another controversy, the question of the painter Grão-Vasco, to claim, through historical sources, the presence of eclecticism in the paintings of this School where the unification of principles was said to be rooted (that is, an absolutely original trait); to claim that notable painters travelled and moved from one place to another, sometimes collaborating in the ornamentation of the same temple. "Instead of a mythical Grão-Vasco, we have a dozen individualities worthy



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of study and our recognition" (*A pintura portuguesa nos séculos XV e XVI (Segundo ensaio)*. Grão-Vasco [Portuguese painting in the 15th and 16th centuries (Second essay). Grão-Vasco, 1890, p. 1879]; to claim that a single school (Viseu) cannot summarise the glory of Portuguese painting.

His reflections are rooted in a shared focus on studying Portugal's international relations in the 15th and 16th centuries, artistic migrations, and examining the "most unsuspected testimonies" (*Da Arquitetura Manuelina* [On Manueline Architecture], 1885, p. 13), the monuments themselves. The description of *manueline* architecture as non-original (lacking a rigorous layout, clear determination of functions, and a cohesive system of ornamentation) is not simply about noting an eclecticism that is able to accept the old and the new: in the "indiscipline" of the arts, he sees a reflection of the indiscipline of customs, a successive disorganisation and a lack of proper schooling, teaching, and study; the evidence of the "dissolving seeds" of an era, which finds parallel in *his* 19th century. Historical analysis, therefore, necessarily involves a moral examination.

His time-consuming, distinguished, and painstaking work was recognised throughout his life by various institutions: he became associated with Gesellschaft für Musikforschung in Berlin (1874) for his musicological expertise; with the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* [Lisbon Geographical Society] (1876); with the Imperial Germanic Institute of Archaeology (1878); with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, in Spain (1878). He was a corresponding member of the *Comissão dos Monumentos Nacionais* [National Monuments Commission] (1896-1898), collaborated with the *Conselho dos Monumentos Nacionais* [National Monuments Council] (starting in 1902), and served as a full member of the *Arte e Arqueologia da Circunscrição do Norte* [Art and Archaeology Commission of the Northern District] (1910-1932). He was a scholar of merit at the *Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes* [National Academy of Fine Arts] and a scholar of literary merit at the *Escola de Belas-Artes do Porto* [Porto School of Fine Arts] (*Joaquim de Vasconcelos: historiador, crítico de arte...*, p. 40).

Many other organisations also honoured him: the *Real Associação dos Arquitetos e Arqueólogos* [Royal Association of Architects and Archaeologists], of which he was a full member, awarded him the institution's silver medal (1879); the Royal Academy of Music in Florence (1881); the *Sociedade Martins Sarmiento* [Martins Sarmiento Society] (1882), the *Escola Livre das Artes do Desenho de Coimbra* [Coimbra Free School of Drawing Arts] and the *Ateneu Comercial do Porto* [Porto Commercial Athenaeum] elect him honorary member (*Idem*, p. 146); the *Escola de Belas-Artes do Porto* [Porto School of Fine Arts] granted him the title of scholar of literary merit (1908). He was also a patron member of the *Associação Industrial Portuguesa* [Portuguese Industrial Association] (1890). At the age of 80, the Portuguese government awarded him the Grand Officer of the Order of St James (1929) (*Idem*, p. 255).

For Joaquim de Vasconcelos, the study of Portuguese art traditions was not merely an artistic renaissance; it represented a rational and economic solution to uplift the lives of labourers and free them from poverty. The historian sought to democratise art for all social classes, aligning with a broader movement embraced by other intellectuals of his time, a firm belief in the transformative power of education. The



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historian shapes for posterity a dynamic concept of heritage, rooted in an intimate and popular understanding of the arts, the understanding that art must stop being courtly and art education must stop being inaccessible to the people. The connection between high art and industrial arts for the preservation of a nation's cultural models resonates from one of his well-known ideas: "Art needs to be everyone's daily bread, and that bread needs to be cheap and easy to digest" (*O Ensino* [Education], No. 1, Porto, Tipografia Ocidental, 1877, p. 4).

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