

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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FIGUEIREDO, José Nunes de (Porto, 1871 – Porto, 1937)

José de Figueiredo was born in Porto on 20 December 1871. He was the youngest of three brothers, the sons of Leopoldina Cândida Albernaz Nunes de Carvalho (born in Lisbon, died in 1917) and Agostinho José de Figueiredo (born in Vouzela, died in 1875), a wholesale trader who made his fortune in Brazil.

He learnt his first letters at the *Colégio de São Carlos* [São Carlos College] in Porto. In 1888 he entered the University of Coimbra and graduated in law on 25 July 1893. He then returned to his hometown, where he worked in a notary's office. However, his lack of interest in his professional life and the illness of his brother Agostinho, who had meanwhile been hospitalised in Paris, led him to leave for the French capital in 1895.

After settling in the City of Light, he explored his taste for artistic subjects, attending free courses in art history, visiting exhibitions, museums, and antique shops, and socialising with Portuguese and foreign scholars, historians and artists. This was when he became a friend of Salomon Reinach (archaeologist, art historian and co-founder of the Louvre School), Émile Bertaux (art historian), Yvanhoé Rambosson (art critic and one of the organisers of the Paris *salons* in the early 20th century), Georges Demotte (antiques dealer and publisher) and the sculptor Auguste Rodin. The Parisian experience allowed him to develop an ability to analyse and criticise art, which resulted in the publication of his first books in 1901: *Portugal na Exposição de Paris* [Portugal at the Paris Exhibition] and *O Legado Valmor e a Reforma dos Serviços de Bellas-Artes* [The Valmor Legacy and the Reform of the Fine Arts Services].

After returning to Portugal, he was appointed 1st officer of the General Directorate of Public Instruction (24 December 1901) and settled in Lisbon. Thanks to his networks, he quickly became a part of the intellectual and cultural life of the capital. During this period, he was appointed a member of the Superior Council of National Monuments (December 1902) and an academician of merit at the Lisbon *Academia Real de Belas-Artes* [Royal Academy of Fine Arts] (19 December 1903). Within this organisation he developed his first major personal project: the campaign to restore, exhibit and study the St. Vincent Panels, which gave origin to the publication of his major reference work, the monograph *Arte portuguesa primitiva. O pintor Nuno Gonçalves* [Primitive Portuguese art. The painter Nuno Gonçalves]. José de Figueiredo was 39 years old at the time. The success of this project coincided with a political climate that proved to be highly favourable for his career: the change of regime in October 1910 promoted the implementation of important reform plans in the field of artistic and patrimonial institutions, providing an ideal context for the great role that would give him his public recognition: his appointment as director of the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* (MNAA) [National Museum of Ancient Art] in 1911.



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José de Figueiredo began his career as a writer on "art matters" with works in which he demonstrated his knowledge of the themes and debates then in vogue both in Portugal and abroad. In his first major works—*Portugal na Exposição de Paris* (1901), *O legado Valmor e a reforma dos serviços de bellas-artistes* (1901), and *Arte e artistas contemporâneos* (1905) [Contemporary art and artists]— he criticised the denationalisation of Portuguese art due to the influences taken by artists during their training abroad and the lack of a historical memory and a sense of heritage. He defended naturalism in painting as a fundamental means of spreading a "Portuguese-ness" that could be lost among the younger generations trained in French and Italian schools. Also, he called for the defence of local artistic industries, such as lace, ceramics, foundry and goldsmithing. His duly recognised influences in these texts were the works of Sousa Viterbo, António Augusto Gonçalves, Joaquim de Vasconcelos and Ramalho Ortigão. This last author was, in this period, the main influence on his critical thinking, which at the time was marked by a rhetoric linked to a fatalistic announcement of the tendency towards "denationalisation" and the de-characterisation of Portuguese art, so proclaimed by that scholar. However, Figueiredo progressively moved away from this stance, taking on a more positive and exalting attitude towards "being Portuguese". This is evident in *Algumas palavras sobre a evolução da arte em Portugal* (1908) [Some thoughts on the evolution of Portuguese art], a work that Reinaldo dos Santos classified as a "broad fresco which values and characterizes the current of national sentiment" (Reinaldo dos Santos, *Homenagem à memória do Dr. José de Figueiredo...* 1938 [Tribute to the memory of José de Figueiredo], p. 15).

His role as an art historian was consolidated with the publication of *Arte portuguesa primitiva. O pintor Nuno Gonçalves* (1910). In this work, which takes into account previous studies by Athanasius Raczyński, John Charles Robinson, Sousa Holstein, Joaquim de Vasconcelos, and Herbert Cook, Figueiredo identifies the author of the panels (Nuno Gonçalves), suggests a dating (between 1459 and 1464) and puts forth that they should belong to a "national school" of 15th century painting— the school of the so-called "Portuguese primitives" who, although Flemish in origin, had their own technical and aesthetic originality that set them apart from the rest of European painting from that period. His historiographical activity was part of an international framework marked by the intensification of studies on the art of the early European Renaissance and by theses aimed at affirming the specificities and autonomy of the "local schools" in relation to the established Italian school, and had two major sources of influence: Positivism, especially the current defended by Hippolyte Taine, which was based on the idea that the conditioning factors of race, environment and time had strong implications for the emergence and development of human phenomena, such as art; and the theories defended by Louis Courajod and his disciples who, developing the ideas announced by Taine, built a historiographical vision based on the study of racial factors and local specificities as determinants of artistic styles, which resulted in the identification of numerous artistic schools that, when integrated into wider contexts, presented singularities worthy of being studied and valued. At the same time, Figueiredo is aware of the renewed interest in the so-called "minor" arts (decorative arts), which since the end of the 19th century were beginning to be studied in depth and integrated into art historiography. In this field, he was interested in the contact relations between Portuguese art and "overseas" art, especially in expressions such as ceramics, furniture, jewellery, tapestries, etc. It should also be noted that the themes he tackled throughout his career reflected the need to study the MNAA's growing collections and the countless old paintings coming from various other institutions into the

museum's restoration workshop for restoring.

As for the general methodological aspects of his work, we can see his attachment to a *modus operandi* based on intuition (a quality he considered essential for an art historian) and marked by a distrust of documentary resources as privileged sources for historiography. This empirical attitude, which brought him closer to the activity of the *connoisseur* and the attributionist currents, was based on the assumptions that the main document for the study of works of art and their history should always be the object itself, and its individual formal characteristics could only be analysed effectively — via comparisons, groupings, etc. — by a sensitive historian with a vast artistic culture. Only after this preliminary empirical and intuitive study should the results be compared with existing information in primary and secondary documentary sources, which would confirm or refute the first conclusions. This method earned José de Figueiredo accusations of often manipulating his studies in order to obtain pre-determined results. These criticisms were not only levelled at him by his detractors but also by figures close to him, such as Joaquim de Vasconcelos.

Another characteristic of his activity was his continuous need for internationalisation, linked not only to the desire to promote his individual work as a historian and director of the MNAA but also to a broader objective of giving the history of Portuguese art a prominent place in the context of the history of Western art. This internationalisation was very successful and was achieved through the publication of articles written by himself or referring to his work in foreign journals, his participation in conferences and the organisation of international exhibitions of Portuguese art. We must highlight his participation in the International Congresses of Art History (Paris, 1921; Brussels, 1930; Stockholm, 1933; and Berne, 1936), an opportunity to promote to foreign peers the studies he and other researchers, such as Luís Keil, Reinaldo dos Santos, João Barreira or Vergílio Correia, had been carrying out; and the major exhibitions of Portuguese art that he curated in Seville (1929) and Paris (1931), with the collaboration of André Dézarrois and Adriano de Sousa Lopes), which were shows of great public visibility and made works such as the St. Vicent Panels, the Custody of Belém or the Pastrana Tapestries known to a wider audience. Despite some controversy and criticism, their purpose was fulfilled: these events did indeed stimulate interest in ancient Portuguese art, which was reflected in the growing number of visits by foreign groups to the MNAA and more dynamic interrelationships between the museum and other European institutions.

José de Figueiredo died in Porto on 18 December 1937, two days before his 66th birthday. He was then director of the *Museu Nacionais de Arte Antiga* (*Janelas Verdes e Coches*); Inspector General of Museums; president of the *Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes* [National Academy of Fine Arts]; vice-president of the Superior Council of Fine Arts; president of the 6th section (Fine Arts) of the National Board of Education and member of its Permanent Council for Educational Action; member of the Corporate Chamber; member of the administrative commission of the House of Bragança; member of the administrative council of the Museu-Biblioteca Condes de Castro Guimarães [Condes de Castro Guimarães Museum-Library]; member of the Lisbon Municipal Aesthetics Commission; and president of the National Commission of Portuguese Iconography.

Active bibliography: *O legado Valmor e a reforma dos serviços de bellas-artes*. Lisboa: M. Gomes, 1901; *Portugal na Exposição de Paris*. Lisboa: Empresa da História de Portugal Editora, 1901; "Arte e artistas

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