

## A Portuguese Draughtsman: Francisco de Holanda's Drawing Theory and the case of *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article studies the drawing theory of Francisco de Holanda through the sketchbook *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* (1543-1573). This graphic work reveals the author's artistic life through the parts that compose it. The visual production of Holanda is marked by two poles, chronologically demarcated: i) first stage – Humanist Thought (youth, journey to Italy, treatises *Da Pintura Antigua*, *Diálogos em Roma* and *Do Tirar Polo Natural*) and ii) second stage – Trent Thought (distancing from the court, doctrine of faith, spirituality, treatises *Da Fabrica que Falece na Cidade de Lisboa* and *Da Sciencia do Desenho*). The album *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* permeates these two phases, given the interregnum of its production, and show the matrix of thought of Holanda, between classicism and reforms. This period of 20 years alternated between importance of observational drawing in Renaissance humanism and the post-Council of Trent, where the drawing was under suspicion. The studied work materializes through the direction of that conflict.

**KEYWORDS:** Drawing, Visual Thinking, Humanism, Francisco de Holanda, Portugal.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Francisco de Holanda (Lisbon, 1517-1584) is one of the most influential draughtsman in the history of drawing in Portugal. He graduated as illuminator under his father's tutelage, António de Holanda, who was an artist of Flemish origin. Holanda lived his youth in Évora, which at the time housed the Portuguese court and was an important center of cultural, artistic and humanistic production [1]. In the court and Italianate context of the time it was common teaching with Italian artists. This humanistic phase of Portuguese history shows the interest of the court by the new artistic practices in Italy, as the center of creation and diffusion of cultural excellence.

Under the reign of King John III (1502-1557), Holanda departs at 20 years old in 1537, with the delegation of D. Pedro Mascarenhas to Italy, with the purpose of studying Italian art, the fortresses and other civilian and military buildings. In 18 months of travel, he made a series of drawings of art works, places and customs, compiled in the *Álbum dos Desenhos das Antigualhas* [2], dedicated to King John III. This trip provided Holanda the ability to improve the knowledge, studying new models alongside the established works. From his travel annotations, he produced much of his treatises, with special emphasis on the initial treatises *Da Pintura Antiga* [3] and *Diálogos em Roma* [4]. Decisive texts to understand the theory of art structured by Holanda and the defense of the new European-oriented ideas about the virtues of drawing.

The stay in Rome (1538-1540) was important for its cultural circle, and particularly for his friendship with Michelangelo (1475-1564). In *Diálogos em Roma*, Holanda describes conversations with the Florentine artist and approaches of their thoughts of Neo-Platonic inspiration. Although the text is considered controversial because it was written two years after the visit to Rome, and so with all the inaccuracies that may arise therefrom, it is considered a valid and coherent source [5]. Michelangelo wrote no formal drawing theory, hence the Holanda text presents itself as an original contribution.

## 2 VISUAL THINKING AND FRANCISCO DE HOLANDA'S DRAWING THEORY

### 2.1 THE AUTONOMY OF DRAWING

For Holanda, the drawing is the foundation of all arts, and the ability to draw is the gateway to any artistic form. This conception about the universality of drawing approaches Holanda of Leonardo (1452-1519) and the drawing theories of European classicism, based on intellectual promotion of the artist and the knowledge [6]. At this time, the treatises are a reflection of urgency of a theoretical body to understand the importance and autonomy of art compared to other areas of knowledge (eg, *Da Pictura* by Alberti). The Holanda treaties appear in this order, and are important for the quality of Holanda's ideas about the drawing, the act of drawing and the draughtsman. *Da Pintura Antigua* (1548) was the first Portuguese work to study systematically a reflection on the art. It presents a theory of the painter and painting combining the aesthetic and philosophical directions [7].

For Holanda, the origin of the painting is metaphysics of creation of the world as an artistic creation, because it has divine origins. God is an example of the creative human power, in that the world is painted altarpiece by a God-painter. Holanda places God at the center of his work and his aesthetic theory, as a model of perfection and as prime painter. The drawing is the unifying science of the arts, and in the artist the ability to draw is an innate and divine gift. The draughtsman is given the ability to imitate the divine act of creation. He thus allies the aesthetics with metaphysics [5], [7]. These novelties in visual representation are a major contribution to the history of drawing in Portugal, because they reflect the new European conceptions of disciplinary autonomy in drawing.

### 2.2 THE NEO-PLATONISM AND THE NEW USES OF NATURAL DRAWING

To Deswarte-Rosa [8] it is often that Holanda matches the purpose of the painting to drawing, using them interchangeably. The relationship between Light and Shadow is structuring in the visual thinking of Holanda, because the action of God is to define the light on the dark. The divine work is enlivening because of its sublime character, while the man painting is inanimate, being an imitation of the demiurge gesture of God [9].

Thus, influenced by Ficino's ideas (1433-1499), his Neo-Platonic vision is revealed as legitimation of the draughtsman's virtues. The Neo-Platonism as an ideological position that crosses theological thought, turns Holanda away from the purely artistic spirit of Alberti (1404-1472) and other first-generation humanists, but approaches him to the *Oratio de Hominis Dignitate* of Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) [10]. In artistic methodology he gives priority to the Idea, as an interior look, focused on the absolute. The Idea is a state of perfection that the visual representation attempts to approach, but not quite translates completely. This ideal is the possibility to approach God.

The *Idea* distances itself from the inevitability of physical form of art, bearer of a sublime that the drawing attempts to translate [11]. Hence the importance of drawing that tries to rescue from the Idea the figure contour line. It is also because of this that Holanda considers drawing a difficult action, thus marking the superiority of drawing over the other arts. Although God has always been at the center of its theoretical and aesthetic concerns, founded in the Neo-Platonism [12], Holanda gives new uses to the drawing:

- i) values the democratic access to religious sources;
- ii) attaches importance to the fidelity of the visible representation;
- iii) approaches the accuracy of the trace and artistic quality of Dürer (1471-1528);
- iv) produces unorthodox and hermetic images beyond iconography.

Fond of antiquity, the Vitruvian thought is strongly present in Holanda by the importance of the proportion, symmetry, canon and the study of the human figure in the training of a draughtsman [13]. Aspect that is obvious in his treaty *Do Tirar Polo Natural* (1549) [14], where he studied the portrait drawing from observation of a model. The talent of drawing that human possesses is assigned by God, making the draughtsman privileged, passing from craftsman to artist-prophet. This new paradigm over the drawing was an original contribution at the time, since merged knowledge on the importance of the man with the metaphysical cosmological divine inspiration of Neo-Platonism.

### **3 DE AETATIBUS MUNDI IMAGINES**

#### **3.1 THE STRUCTURE OF ALBUM AND THE CHRONICLE OF THE WORLD**

The work that directly illustrates the theories of Holland is the album *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* (1543-1573) [15]. The album is a collection of illustrative images of a Chronicle of the World, according to the Scriptures. Also called *O Livro das Idades*, its character is mystical and illustrative, representing the power of narrative and iconographic drawing. Francisco Cordeiro Blanco discovered it in 1953. It lies in the section of Fine Arts (XVI century - *Album Dibujos*), in the Library of El Escorial in Madrid. It belongs to this collection, at least since the eighteenth century, and in what context or date have arrived in Spain is unknown.

The album is a total of 155 pages of drawings, even if the catalogue of the library refers to 152. The dimensions of the paper are on average and approximately 427 x 282 mm (binding carmine velvet). The images are drawn by feather, brush and black pencil, on parchment. Of the whole set, 17 pages are painted in watercolor. Many drawings have watery sepia. Only one has watery purple. Some have notes in gold [16]. In addition to the drawings, the album also features blank pages, pages with only titles or texts such as dedication and drawings subtitles.

The album is divided by different contents, with two important blocks, carried out in distinct phases, which add a few drawings:

- i) 130 main theme drawings – *Images of World Ages*;
- ii) 21 drawings with the theme – *Images of Apocalypse*;
- iii) 2 extra drawings: *The Angel of Apocalypse and Aphrodite and Eros*;
- iv) 1 drawing on the cover with the title of the work + 1 drawing with self-portrait in the conclusion.

Holanda recreates the chronicle according to the writings of the fourth century, about the history of early Christianity of Eusébio de Cesareia (ca. 265-339). Based on the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493) of Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514), where Dürer worked as an apprentice in illustrations, Holanda divides the Chronicle of the World in 6 ages [16]:

- i) First Age (22 drawings) - The Creation of the World to the Flood of Noah;
- ii) Second Age (5 drawings) - From the Flood to Abraham;
- iii) Senior Citizens (21 drawings) - From Abraham to David;
- iv) Fourth Age (6 drawings) - From David to Babylon;
- v) Fifth Age (11 drawings) - From Babylon to the birth of Christ;
- vi) Sixth Age (65 drawings) - Since Birth of Christ the End of the World.

#### **3.2 THE NARRATIVE REFERENCES AND THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF GRAPHIC ACCURACY**

The drawings represent figures such as Adam, Eve, Jesus, Mary and many others, including Angels and God. The drawings narrate various biblical episodes such as *The Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, The Last Judgment* or *The Last Supper*. The use of geometric elements in the first drawings of the album is not abstract or anti-figure [17]. They are icons that approach the sublime nature of God. The drawings show graphic accuracy in the study of:

- i) anatomy, pose and movement of the figures;
- ii) the marking of drapery;
- iii) the expression of feelings (drama, tension, virtuosity);
- iv) the use of perspective;
- v) mastery of light and shadow in the volume;
- vi) the symbolism of the scene in the relationship of scale and proportion;
- vii) the creativity of shapes, figures and colors.

It should be noted, even the inclusion of medallions in the footer images, which act as a accessory to the main drawing and a descriptive supplement. A total of 247 medallions, which are noteworthy for the quality of the drawing and the blending of pagan indications, including motifs of Greco-Roman mythology (Sibyl, Hermes, Minotaur, etc.), that intersects with biblical characters. To Espeso [18], it is an audacity of the author's look, showing his innovative and imaginative character, in addition to consenting visual models.

### 3.3 DRAWING UNDER SUSPICION

After a break of 20 years, Holland resumes the album in Lisbon (1573) [16]. At this time, he creates all of the apocalypse drawings. The 21 assembly drawings entitled *Incipiunt Imagines Apocalypsis* each represent one of the visions of the apocalypse. There are common features among this group of drawings. In them there are no medallions, no subtitles and none of them are colorful, presented only in watery sepia. This set of drawings was not initially part of the structure of the album *Livro das Idades*. The diptych drawings of *The Angel of Apocalypse and Aphrodite and Eros* evoke the end of the world and are considered extra because they do not appear to have direct link with the project of the album and present a new visual behavior. Finalizing the book was intended to be offer to Philip II (1527-1598), who arrived in Portugal as new King in 1581. But access to Spain never materializes.

The second half of the sixteenth century is marked by Mannerism, which changed its center of gravity to the religious concerns, recovering the importance of God in artistic production. The change that occurred from the Renaissance to Mannerism focuses on the transfer of personal autonomy, aesthetic and artistic classicism to the religious, ethical and hierarchical domain of the church. With the Counter-Reformation and the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), we witness a return to feudal values, with strong opposition between the Fair and the Truth [19].

The consequences of the Council of Trent destroy the cultural achievements of the Renaissance, and put art as a political and ideological weapon, with themes of apologia and techniques that value the emotion and increases devotion as opposed to reason [20]. The interest is no longer in the physical work itself. The significance of the work, its symbols and meanings are valued, rather than the formal beauty. The models, the idea of similarity or visual pleasure are seen as a delusion for the senses. The artist's illusionistic skill with the use of perspective, the main visual product of the Renaissance, is seen as undermining the truth of message [21]. In the Renaissance, the use of the natural observation drawing was an important practice. The drawing and capacity of representation become suspects, and the artists are called to draw evoking the memory and imagination from an inner universe, iconic and symbolic. The Trent image policy was based on the subjectivity of the representation of feelings, vices and virtues.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Two poles, chronologically demarcated, mark the artistic and theoretical production of Francisco de Holanda:

i) First stage - *Humanist Thought*

(youth, journey to Italy, treatises *Da Pintura Antigua*, *Diálogos em Roma*, *Do Tirar Polo Natural*);

ii) Second stage - *Trent Thought*

(distancing from the court, doctrine of faith, spirituality, treatises *Da Fabrica que Falece na Cidade de Lisboa* and *Da Sciencia do Desenho*).

The album *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* permeates these two phases, given the interregnum of its production, and shows the matrix of thought of Holanda, between classicism and reforms. This interval between 1545 and 1573 holds many changes in the Portuguese social, political and cultural climate, as reflected in his work. The Inquisition persecuted intellectuals and saw suspiciously the mimesis in visual representation. In its final stage, Holanda writes *Da Sciencia do Desenho* (1571) [22] dedicated to D. Sebastian (1554-1578). It is a phase of sharp decline for Holanda, with many lamentations, and strong Catholic ideology. The last text recovers the basis and the foundations of *Da Pintura Antigua* in an attempt to remind the nobility, function and virtue of drawing as an autonomous and fundamental activity for the visual knowledge. The central idea of Holland, of the artist as a carrier of a privileged gift of divine grace is repudiated by the new inquisitorial censorship. Fact that Francisco de Holanda tries to safeguard, directing his works (written and graphic) to the defense of the Catholic ideology [23], as happened with the drawings of the second phase of the album.

The *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* album is a synthesis of the course of Holanda by the merger he creates between the Catholic matrix, the spiritual and mystical of his aesthetic theory, and the graphics resources of his drawings that attempt to capture a modern classicist image of the new times, as the drawings of Dürer and other humanists. In the end of the album *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*, his self-portrait with the three virtues (faith, hope and charity) with a dog biting the album he drew, is a self-aware picture of a misunderstood and destructive genius.

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