
O artesanato e a escultura popular em barro. Arte sentida ou arte pensada? Estudo de caso Aldeia da Terra

The crafts and the popular sculpture in clay. Art felt in or Art thought of? Aldeia da Terra case study

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Resumo

O barro, como material de escultura, também é usado como meio de expressão e terapia psicológica. Muitas vezes, encontramos exemplos de obras cuja criatividade é uma manifestação de ansiedades e conflitos internos dos artistas neste material. Podemos dizer que grande parte da arte folclórica criativa, tem uma componente subconsciente, na sua criatividade, que “mostra o artista” e como sente os temas. Esta característica encontra-se também nas obras de artistas treinados, em teses talvez mais escondidas, porque estas estão mais conscientes do fenómeno. Por outras palavras: a arte da escultura em barro e a sua criatividade serão tanto “à superfície” como a formação do artista o permite. A pergunta que poderíamos fazer, nomeadamente em relação à arte popular e ao artesanato, seria qual a arte mais genuína? Aquele que está mais consciente deste fenómeno ou aquele que está menos consciente deste fenómeno? A arte popular e o artesanato também são construídos e promovidos, na sua vertente de criação, produção e divulgação ao longo de dois eixos aparentemente antagónicos. A escultura de barro popular figurativa tem as suas raízes criativas em arte primitiva crua e ingénua? Ou melhor, nas elaboradas e sumptuosas produções emocionais do barroco? Neste trabalho vamos analisar o estudo de caso do projeto Aldeia da Terra para tentar estabelecer paralelos e tirar partido destas conclusões. Compreender este problema pode também ajudar-nos a compreender a realidade da criação, produção e divulgação da arte popular e da escultura figurativa cerâmica popular que é praticada não só em Portugal, mas com as suas próprias características, em todos os países.

Abstract

Clay, as a sculpture material, is also used as a means of expression and psychological therapy. Often, we find examples of works whose creativity is a manifestation of anxieties and inner conflicts of the artists in this material. We can say that much of the creative folk art, has a subconscious component, in its creativity, that “shows the artist” and how he feels the themes. This characteristic is also found in the works of trained artists, in theses perhaps more hidden, because these are more aware of the phenomenon. In other words: the art of clay sculpture and its creativity will be as much “at the surface” as the artist’s training allows it. The question that we could ask, namely in relation to popular art and handicraft, would be, which art is the most genuine? The one which is more aware of this phenomenon or the one is less aware of this phenomenon? Popular art and handicraft are also built and promoted, in their aspect of creation, production and dissemination along two apparently antagonistic axes. Do figurative popular clay sculpture, have their creative roots in raw and naive primitive art? Or rather in the elaborate and sumptuous emotional productions of the Baroque? In this work we will analyze the case study of the Aldeia da Terra project to try to establish parallels and draw from these conclusions. Understanding this problem can also help us to understand the reality of the creation, production and dissemination of popular art and popular ceramic figurative sculpture that is practiced not only in Portugal, but with the inherent characteristics of its own, in all countries.

Palavras-chave

Criatividade, consciente, subconsciente, psicologia da arte, arte primitiva, cerâmica figurativa, Aldeia da Terra.

Keywords

Creativity, conscious, subconscious, art psychology, primitive art, figurative ceramics, Aldeia da Terra.

1. Introduction

This article is part of an investigation, in a doctoral thesis in art history, which runs under the title: "The "Craftsmanship" as a creative process: the example of Barrística (art in clay). Contribution to a reflection on creativity". Specifically in this article, the author makes a comparative reflection on his own empirical creative artistic processes - namely his beginnings in his artistic career and the development of one of his projects called "Aldeia da Terra - garden of sculptures" - and artistic themes associated with the eventual emergence of paleoart, namely that of the female "Venus" figures of the Paleolithic.

2. Clay since the paleolithic

The use of clay in what we can call artistic sculpture has been going on for thousands of years. Ceramic animals' figuration and human figuration, namely women, "Venus" figurines (Miroslav Kralik, et al. 2002), are known dated more than 30.000 years, going back to the Paleolithic (Fig 1 and 2). In the Greek and Roman empire clay was also used in the art of molding small figurines, or coroplastic. These usually served votive, funerary or toy purposes, sometimes made by mold.



Fig.1 - Two bison in clay¹

1 - Two bison, cave reliefs at Le Tuc d'Audoubert, France, ca. 15,000-10,000 BC clay. Image consulted on 19 February 2019. Available at <https://klintlover.wordpress.com/art-before-history/paleolithic-art/>

The operative concept or definition of Popular Art (Leal João, 2002) emerged with the interest, in Portugal from the 1880s, of the scholar and collector António de Vasconcelos, perhaps initially not as an anthropological approach, but rather an approach within the scope of Art History. In a mixture of nationalist emotion and scientific reason, Vasconcelos created an inventory, which sought above all to find “the genuine sources of national inspiration”. It was later between 1910 and 1930 (Leal, João 2002) that Portuguese anthropology began to gather around popular art and it was by the hand of Vergílio Correia, trained in law, ethnographer, art historian and archaeologist, that the first anthropological definition for popular art emerges:

“Popular art is literally the art of the people. By people we must understand the “men who are closest to the primitive” (...) “the set of artistic manifestations produced by people, not regimented in corporations with special technical direction, nor working in workshops of recent methods and machinery, thus ordinarily following traditional processes and models” (Correia, Vergílio. 1915).

Clay was a transition material between thoughtful works and grandiose final sculptures in the 18th century to. In these, for example, the sculptor Machado de Castro (1731, 1822) would not feel so free to be creative. On the other hand, in the simple “curiosities” in clay - what they called the baroque nativity scenes of Italian influence - freedom of expression brought him another creativity and apparently happiness. Cyrilo Volkmar Machado (1748-1823) describes him and other artists referring to the created schools of sculpture in Mafra and Lisbon. It was also from this time, apparently, that clay, as an artistic creative final medium, began to be used, no longer just as a sculptural transition material or votive, funerary coroplastic reproducible object.



Fig. 2 The Venus of Věstonice¹, Mixture of charred powdered bone and clay, 111x43mm

1 - Venus of Dolní Věstonice', a Palaeolithic female figure. Approximately 30,000 years old, one of the earliest known manmade ceramic objects. Image: Pitt rivers museum, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/the-venus-of-vestonice>



Fig 3 - Aldeia da Terra – Sculpture garden. View 2012



Fig. 4 - Polaroid of the wedding – Aldeia da Terra project
Terracota and acrylic paints 200x150x30cm, 2010



Fig. 5 - Pigs playing chess – installation in Aldeia da Terra project Terracota & acrylic paints 40x40cm, 2009

1. The Aldeia da Terra² project

Aldeia da Terra (Fig.3 to 5 and Fig.8 to 14) was a plastic exhibition, of the author's work, in the form of a 3000m² theme park, with more than four thousand sculptural ceramic pieces. Located in the open air in Arraiolos, Évora district, Portugal. It represented a miniature clay village, with characters, houses, vehicles, and other props. In

form of humorous caricatures, popular idiosyncrasies and everyday scenes were depicted. This project had European Community funds³ in its building, was open to the public between June 2011 and September 2017 and was declared of Cultural Interest by the Ministry of Culture, having been visited, during this period, by more than sixty thousand people.

2 - Aldeia da Terra - Village of earth.

3 - PRODER



Fig.6 - From earth to heaven - one figure Terracota. 20x10x10cm, 2018

In Cabeça P. (2018) this project was also described as where pointed two distinct sculptural projects and expressions, which are different not only chronologically speaking but also in terms of content and visual language. The thought or rational caricatural expression of the Aldeia da Terra project, and the felt or visceral expression of the From earth to heaven exhibition (Fig.6 and 7).

It was made a distinction between these two moments. “From earth to heaven” was understood as expression which was visceral and emotional. It was characterized by a heightened state of creativity which was intuitive. The second moment comprises the design and construction of the Aldeia da Terra project in its original location in Arraiolos since 2011. It featured a visual language that, from the outset, was assumed as having a caricatural commercial basis, was planned and objective in character,



Fig. 7 - From earth to heaven – installation, Terracota and acrylic paints, 100x100cm, 2018

thus rationalized. It was characterized by creative thought directed towards achieving a goal (construction on the theme park).

It was established a difference between the one considered a first expression, which was more visceral and felt (“From earth to heaven”) and a second expression, which was more rationalized and thought (Aldeia da Terra).

2. Parallels with the paleolithic

It was concluded that these expressions, namely From earth to heaven – the author’s first figurative manipulations

in clay - could serve as metaphor or a parallel between his beginnings in ceramic art and the way paleolithic human first expressed himself through the medium of clay. This consideration was certainly valid, to draw such a parallel because the attempts at self-expression were equally spontaneous, self-taught, with no intention or purpose other than to simple manipulate the material and find out about it, and since a common theme emerged: the human body the female form, there would certainly be connection. Accordind to Budja M. (2006) “The invention of ceramic technology in Europe was associated with female and animal figurine making in Gravettian techno-complex”.

If we do not think of objects as being created as works of art, they are just a form of self-expression. As a form of self-expression, they may also be eventually the manifestation of anxieties, both for paleolithic artist and for the author. According to Pamela B., Vandiver, Olga, Soffer, Bohuslav Klima, Jiri Svoboda (1989) first humans learned to make primitive ceramic sculptures. Teresa Perdigão (2003) claims that in their constant struggle for survival these images served for spiritual support. Figures of men, women, animals, or combinations of all these were used to calm the strange and frightening forces of nature. Devotions, prayers, or a sum of these were used to ensure the birth of strong offspring, fight diseases, ensure that hunting and fishing was successful, Perdigão stated. That these concerns were bound up with the survival of the human species seemed obvious.

Budja, Mihael (2006) investigations about the invention of the ceramic production process, were eventually consistent with Perdigão's possibility that humans molded anthropomorphic models of themselves and their surrounding animals, thousands of years ago as a means of expressing and overcoming worries and anxieties of survival. Self-portrayal also means self-awareness.

Ceramics was invented apparently in the same way: Paleolithic human fired portrayals of himself (humans) and his fellows, perhaps in the hope of a transcendent and magical outcome. He also learned how to control the properties of clay using fire so that molded mud became a stone-like object.

IF this could be the reasoning and it were possible for us to establish this analogy, then the figures elaborated by the author also arose naturally, viscerally, out of his first attempts at modelling. So the figures that emerged were apparently to, manifestations of emotions. This would have likely been also the case with the Paleolithic human: not so much in terms of form but more in essence or substance.

The emotive representation of the human figure - the female form - may have to do with issues of procreation, sex, territory, and consequently power, survival, genetic continuity, and the survival of the species. These may be general concerns, one could say, almost animal in form,

inculcated in behavioral manner, almost as a reflex in human beings. This could provide an explanation for the representation of a common theme by two kinds of novices in self-expression, through the medium of clay, who were millennia apart: Paleolithic Man and the author.

3. Thinking or reacting

The experience of running a commercial atelier and making art a way of life required in art more reaction than thought. Rationalizing things takes time. And, of course, time is money. There is either income or expenditure. This may seem like a contradiction but working and making a living as a creative artist did not allow for thinking about creativity. In this way you work mechanically, without the concern to make the same kind of things you have produced previously, as if you were in a heightened state of creativity that is almost instinctive. Art pieces occur to you one after the other as your thoughts ramble on, focusing on an extremely wide variety of things, and you grasp at bits and pieces of ideas floating around that are immediately used in the creation of the piece that is in the process of being made. Sometimes the current piece contains many elements of previous works and therefore the author tried to keep in mind these elements for the next piece, but by then many other features had already emerged or occurred to the author and the ones he had already in mind were swept from his memory to be replaced by new ones. Time went by so fast. At the time of the construction of the Aldeia da Terra sculpture garden project in Arraiolos, with practically nothing in the surroundings and with no one around to interrupt, the author worked alone for two years (his children and their mother left the house early morning to school and work and came back late in the day) creating pieces for the sculpture garden, without speaking to anyone else for weeks and months on end. Work filled the author days completely.

It is true that one enters an instinctive mechanical mode of work and production, intuitively altering the details of each art piece that is produced and thus giving rise

to something new, without being concerned to follow a model of production. The way creativity seems to arise, usually spontaneous and without us consciously causing it is described by Andreasen N.C. (2011). This process is also described in some literature (Gleitman, Fridlung & Reisberg, 2014a) as unconscious incubation. However, at the same time, it is also true that some of these pieces were commissioned, meant that immediately, to the author's mind, restrictions were placed on his self-expression. It was always more boring making ordered work, even though creative. In fact, He always produced unique pieces. However, taking orders meant producing something that did not originate out of free form and choice: dealing with an order is a rational process and kills visceral intuition.

This apparent contradiction may hold the key to this work. Thus, although production was mechanical, in a way, its essence was original and unique. This involved each piece constituting a singular work of art which could not be reproduced. The features of one piece might be like those of another, but the idiosyncratic nature of each piece had to be truly unique.

Similarly, making a caricature to fulfil an order involved "follow a recipe": the description provided by the customer regarding the subject for the caricature, in addition caricaturizing on a photo or image.

From earth to heaven was a very visceral work, felted. Intuitive. On the other project *Aldeia da Terra*, the themes, characters and motifs involved caricatures and therefore constituted rationalized art the author thought. However, in this case, there could be, subconscious conditioning, in the creative process. The author believed that this appends because there are no boundaries fixed. While on the one hand we may emphasize differences with the purpose of explaining in this paper the different types of expression (visceral or rational), on the other hand the creation of an artwork appears to be in fact influenced by both in a dialectic with rationalized and intuitive elements.

Stating that anyone can be a creative person Sternberg and Lubart (1991, 1993, 1995, 1996) expanded the model of creativity considering six distinct but interrelated factors,

which were considered indispensable resources for creative expression: Intelligence, intellectual styles, knowledge, personality, motivation, environmental context. Kamylyis and Valtanen (2010) argue that there are currently forty-two (42) definitions for what they describe as the "complex phenomenon of human creativity". However, the author felt intuition certainly plays an important part in artistic creativity.

We have seen in Cabeça, P.T. (2021, b) that Animals also demonstrate creativity. Kaufman et al. (2011) establish as the premise of their work around the neurobiology of animal creativity, the definition of creativity according to humans from Plucker & Beghetto, (2004): Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context. In the same text and referring to animals, they ensure that "the whole theory of creativity in humans is applied point by point to animal creativity (...) eliminating the parts that do not apply." These observations reinforce that creativity can be a biological phenomenon transversal to many species. A bio tool that ensures best probability of survival with fewer and more optimized resources.

Art has been recognized as an instrument of psychotherapy for many years, and well-known practices are established, with measurable concrete results. Several works on Art as the expression of feelings and emotional catharsis in therapeutic processes provide elucidation on this:

At the dawn of humanity there was art in caves, when man did not yet have a complete mastery of language and writing, (...). Through the semiotics of rock art, prehistoric people were able to transmit information to each other in order to guarantee their survival, and it also led to the strengthening of social bonds. (...)for it involves the communication of emotions, the unconscious and the unutterable. (...) instrument of catharsis in the expression of feelings, thoughts, ideas, fantasies, traumas and poorly articulated emotional behaviors that impel the individual to move towards self-knowledge and the healing or control

of a disease or disorder. (...) it transmutes feelings and emotions, materializes fears, fantasies. (Aragão, S. R. 2015)

Aragão states that artistic language presents its own semiology and thus is more powerful than written or spoken language because it deals with the expression of the unutterable, emotions, fears, and anxieties. She also states that this language does not pass through the critical filter of intellect and rationality so there is a direct free channel to material production, thus enabling the emergence of conscious or unconscious content for which no form of rational materialization exists. This is precisely what Bucho said about clay as a therapeutic art medium.

On analyzing this text, we understand that it seems increasingly evident that there is a relationship between the factors of anxiety and happiness on one hand and creative production on the other hand. This could provide proof that there is, in the phenomenon of creativity, a direct association between the expression of the subconscious and creative expression which is a rationalized choice. Creativity would thus be a dialectic between both these, more or less, conscious components, and it would comprise both.

This conclusion would lead us that most, if not all, artists are in fact either individuals with a bigger need to express themselves or those who, fortunately, have in fact discovered a singular form through which they can express themselves. You may also say that most artists are probably people with a level of anxiety which is higher than average because they need to express it. This could be caused by traumatic experiences that gave rise to anxiety during their lives. Of course, we all experience potentially traumatic events in our lives. This does not mean that one becomes a visual artist. However, one might say, it is easier to handle clay and make a sculpture representing a trauma rather than talk about it, for example. Or it may be easier to make a drawing on paper portraying a trauma instead of describing it in words. And to do so will also provide tranquility and appeasement apparently. Many artists have

surely experienced it in their lives. And the more art they have created, surely the greater the appeasement they have felt in their hearts.

4. The creative trance

The author described above how his heightened state of creativity filled his days of solitude in Arraiolos building the Aldeia de Terra - Earth Village project. Time passed and was completely taken up with art, ideas, new pieces, and themes in an inexhaustible flow that began in the morning and only ended at night, continuing the next day. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned in to months.

This state was not characteristic of this project. The author worked like this every day when he had a studio in Évora. The difference is that while focusing on the project over a period of two years he had practically no other distractions to divert him from his creative work, day after day, week after week, month after month. So, he produced hundreds, perhaps thousands of pieces, which stored away for the grand opening of the Aldeia da Terra theme park, that was planned in 2011. With production at such a pace, he sought to rapidly fulfil customer orders so that could get back to channeling his energies into the main creative project.

The idea was to create a whole village: a society in caricature. Any type or social portrayal was valid because real life is full of people of all types and sensibilities. Professions, hobbies, manias, motives, actions: everything and anything was harnessed for the project. An idea just had to occur and it would be turned into a creation. Thus, a world of characters grew up, and society of caricatures, increased day by day in size and variety. The author immediately came up with names for many of the characters and they were thus baptized from the moment they saw the light of day. Usually, the names served as a means of classifying the pieces and organizing the collection as well, adding character to each, individual.



Fig. 8 - Couple on moped, Aldeia da Terra project institutional image, 30x35x20cm, Terracotta and acrylic paints, 2009

This comic-book-like world began to take shape, the difference being that it was three-dimensional and made of clay. Besides this, most times one character suggested another, and so pieces were continually emerging in a whirlwind of creativity.

This state, this creative trance, allowed for very little reflection. Rather, it had all the characteristics of a state of exaltation which was induced in some way.



Fig. 9 - Angels, Terracotta and acrylic paints 2009



Fig. 10
Facebook
Terracota and acrylic paints
2009



Fig. 11 - Zapping Clay 2009



Fig. 12 - Mrs Vinager and Mr Yes Darling Silva, Terracota and acrylic paints 2009



Fig. 13 - Family dinner
Terracota and acrylic paints
50x35x30cm, 2009



Fig. 14 - Bifanas van
versus dogs van
Terracota and acrylic
paints, 2009

It is true that simple creativity through art was not what moved the author, as explained earlier (Cabeça, P.T. 2018). The entire Aldeia da Terra project had an urgency of purpose as it was intended a complement to the income of the household, which was growing. The author's family - wife and two children - depended on this, he believed. So, the project had a very definite aim and urgent purpose, and the means to achieving this goal was to rely on the creative flow which, from the beginning, was inexhaustible. Continuous, urgent, permanent, and self-induced. This creative flow was not, in fact, conducive to deep rationalization. The art pieces that were produced were not rationalized or intellectualized: rather they were felt. The pieces born during the process of manipulating the clay, since no previous sketches were made. Each idea was immediately put into the material and came to life shortly after taking form. The piece was then put into storage and work immediately started on the next piece. This rhythm of work recalled the descriptions of psychologist João Bucho⁴ and his patients:

“When a person loses their capacity for creativity, there appears rigidity, sterility, emptiness and illness, and they become imprisoned, as opposed to creativity which allows for experimentation, renewal and liberation. (...) Through clay, in accordance with the Vygotsky (1987) conception, a Zone of Close Development is established between the material and creator which stimulates functions like perception, attention, cognition, sensation and stimulation of the symbolic and the imaginary. Clay functions as the “transitional object” between the world of fantasy and reality. Clay portrayals (...) represent the manifestation of thoughts, feelings, conflicts, anxieties, questions ... and establish a dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious. (Bucho, J.L. 2011)

Working in clay as part of therapy, for anyone who uses the material, playing with the clay brings things up from deep in the subconscious and one's dreams images or their

portrayals are then manipulated in a process of catharsis. The author believed that this was exactly the state he was in. And such a parallel - as we have seen - is not only found in his work. We find such patterns, or at least clues to them, quite explicitly throughout the history of art in clay, and art in general.

So today, on thinking about the case, one understands that the creative world of the Aldeia da Terra, through the way in which it emerged, and because it seems to possess similar features to phenomena of human self-expression, was the expression of the subconscious and dreams, and may involve more than just spontaneous creativity. Some of the images of the works, that formed the project, could provide clues as to the nature of the catharsis produced. One may suspect this is certainly the case in art generally.

Today the absence of the source of tension in the life of the author is accompanied by an absence of inspiration and production. He and his wife got divorced (the source of tension has disappeared), and his children grew. The project had its history but without the need and stimulation of providing for the family, the author stop production, currently producing practically nothing. Both the absence of tension and the current existence of tranquility in his life have seemingly taken away the need for self-expression. The author's life is relatively quiet. At the same time, other interests have apparently replaced his need for artistic expression, including the current academic research work he is carrying out. Reflecting on twenty years as an artist in a way has also doused the fire of inspiration. It has certainly been cathartic. Thus, now he feels no need to represent contained self-expression, in art.

It may be guessed that the greatest driving force for production was the needs of the author's family, especially his children, and the tensions that arose therein. He sought to represent many male/female issues because was least able to deal with such issues in real life. It was not the mundane need to generate revenue that motivated him, otherwise it would have eagerly continued in productive mode up until today, which is not the case. He was apparently motivated by the need for self-expression, as this is, in fact, a necessity - as basic as hunger or thirst.

4 - Psychologist. Expressive therapist. Master in creativity and innovation. Accessed on 29 December 2018. Available at <https://www.joaoluisbucho.com/>

5. Conclusion

In this current PhD investigation, one is reaching the conclusion that the need for self-expression is perhaps one of the driving forces behind creativity, and this is what disguises the content of our anxieties. It is not only rational, conscious, intuitive, or visceral. Eventually is a dialectic between them all. Generating images and symbols is apparently a subconscious process that allows us consciously or unconsciously to materialize and try to manipulate the environment and things that question or torment us. An unconscious incubation is always present, without our realizing it and occasionally manifests itself among realities in a cascade. For the question we asked at the beginning "The crafts and the popular sculpture in clay. Art felt or art thought?" We can perhaps approach a conclusion, which points out that art can emerge as a dialectic between thought and feeling. The thought and the feeling are the conscious or subconscious expressions. Like dozens of marmots peeking and disappearing back into holes. Occasionally a fox peeks out and disappears into one of those holes, and we did not notice the difference. This means that even if we intend to develop an artistic project, consciously and rationally, it is certain that the subconscious component will intervene, conditioning or altering it partially or in its entirety. This could be a proven fact in Art in popular ceramics, as it could certainly be also true in all Art.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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