

# Art and progress; Portuguese colonial representations in the great world exhibitions

Maria João Castro

*CHAM FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Universidade dos Açores, Portugal*

**ABSTRACT:** The great exhibitions – world, universal, international, or colonial – promoted in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century in the light of western development were one of the most important factors in spreading the idea that progress, an outcome of the Industrial Revolution, was essential. In effect, right from the start, these events were privileged spaces for presenting and promoting the socio-economic development of an imperial Europe, which had mapped out the world. The colonial idea was not forgotten, and its representation increasingly dominated the great exhibitions where it had been present ever since the first exhibition of 1851. As a result, the configuration of this faraway reality was brought to the metropolises of the Old Continent, and the hegemony of western civilisation was highlighted, as was its role as a civilising agent in a combination capable of bringing progress to the overseas possessions.

In this context, the great exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries were used as vehicles to legitimate and disseminate the colonial policies of the European empires, and to spread propaganda about them. However, they were used also, and primarily, as vehicles for an artistic culture that reflected the worldview of a society that saw itself on a global scale and was the fruit of progress, a progress it felt an urgent need to disseminate.

**Keywords:** Empire, Colonial Art, Exhibitions, Contemporary Art

## 1 GREAT EXHIBITIONS

In the mid-19th century, an ambition for universality, a desire to spread knowledge of the benefits brought by industrialisation, and faith in progress meant that a need arose to create an exhibition structure that could bring together the new urban experience – and so the great exhibitions were born. The ‘Universal Exhibition’ became a platform where the results of development on various levels, and in different registers, could be exhibited in a compact fashion. It brought under one roof the most glorious aspects of the 19th century. Exhibiting everything from agriculture to mining, from machinery to art, it brought the public a view of the human cosmos immersed in a new movement, finding its *raison d’être* in one of the main identifiers of the age: the birth of the phenomenon of the masses.

Held in the modern metropolises, these events reproduced in miniature a new model of urban life, imprinting a new rhythm on the city, which was adapting to the novelty of crowds that were avid with curiosity and interest to witness and experience the recent fruits of progress. In addition, these exhibition centres functioned in two ways: they showed the balance of the work already done and provided a foretaste of what still remained to be achieved. Visited by a huge public who were extremely eager to see and experience

a new reality, the great exhibitions became excellent experimental laboratories in technological terms, turning themselves into places of the future yet at the same time spaces for revisiting the past.

If in their genesis, these exhibitions proposed to display progress, they themselves were the result of that very same progress as they were built in areas redeveloped for the purpose and were backed up by a series of (support) infrastructures, which were also the result of progress. They were a manifestation of prestige and ostentation and the stage on which nations affirmed their economic, technological, and even cultural power, thereby revealing their own aspirations to embrace progress. In other words, these showplaces encapsulated what the 19th century understood as modernity, turning themselves into epicentres of cosmopolitanism that urgently wished to demonstrate and teach the virtues of the present age and confirm predictions for an exceptional future. Besides this, the exhibitions provided unique opportunities to highlight new landscapes, especially those that exhibited the local indigenous artistic culture of the distant possessions belonging to the European colonial empires.

In the context of this reflection, what is of interest is to focus on a tripartite strand consisting of progress – empire – art, all brought together and shown in these unique spaces. Consequently, we opted to refer only to

those exhibitions whose typology fits the triangulation mentioned above. The success of the first exhibition in London in 1851 set the calendar in motion for the international exhibitions held in other European capitals. These expanded and widened their scope while restructuring themselves according to a genealogy with a strong colonial bent. To highlight this perspective, large colonial representations were increasingly installed, the objective of which was to reproduce in miniature all the resources of the empire.

The very first exhibition on a truly international scale – the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (London, 1851) – included a small colonial wing limited to India, the jewel in the British crown. As a result, this prompted a fascination with colonial possessions and the exotic. Without any doubt, one of the objectives of this exhibition envisaged right from the start was to convince the public that the empire was an extension of the metropole and was capable, even at a distance, of mirroring and enhancing the source of progress.

At the second international exhibition (Paris, 1855), the colonial section's area was increased thanks to the growing interest in the distant exotic possessions that were part of all the overseas empires.<sup>1</sup> However, it was in the 1867 exhibition (also in the City of Light) that national pavilions, supposedly designed according to the respective architectonic typologies of each nation, made their first appearance.

The next event in 1878 saw the birth of the 'rue des Nations'. This highlighted the essence of this international fair through an eclectic montage of façades all lined up and designed in accordance with the aesthetic image of each country. In addition, an autonomous area for the colonies was created.

The 1889 exhibition commemorated the centenary of the French Revolution. Its symbol was the Eiffel Tower, which became not only a very popular panoramic observatory but also an icon of industrial progress. The colonial section was displayed in a large 'tableau vivant' divided into four zones: Arabia, Oceania, Africa, and Asia. "A maior sensação foram os nativos trazidos das colônias asiáticas e africanas"<sup>2</sup> (SOUTO 2011:211). This form of presentation meant that the backward nature of the colonial area contrasted dramatically with the European development evident in the rest of the exhibition.

The 1900 Paris Exhibition, the last and the most grandiose ever mounted, offered an overview of the century now gone, and was supported by a series of infrastructures that made an apologia for progress. If initially, these were essentially industrial; from 1900 on, they became linked to an aesthetic of illusion and magic: the recreational component became

requisite. Within this context, and with Art Nouveau at its apogee, railway stations, railway bridges, and the first Metro lines were inaugurated with electricity acting as the great fairy godmother (Guerreiro, 1995: 48–57). Film projections, the Ferris Wheel [*'la Grande Roue'*], the escalator, or a 'journey' in a Trans-Siberian Railway carriage became the attractions that allowed illusion to triumph and exalted progress. At each new universal exhibition, the shows became progressively more mechanised with state-of-the-art technologies occupying the place of honour.

In relation to art, "O lugar privilegiado concedido à arte neste programa não tem equivalente na história das Exposições Universais do século XIX"<sup>3</sup> (GUERREIRO 1995:70). The exhibition claimed its status as the beacon of the universe in matters of art (showing the triumph of Impressionism), but an art that must be measured by technique; a technique in its turn had to respond to the calls of art. The event was renowned for its prestige and became a place of pilgrimage. It included an important foreign and colonial section dominated by panoramic views and a 'Tour du Monde' pavilion inside which the visitor went on a journey around the world that evoked and simulated such different realities as a Chinese pagoda, an Indian temple, or elephants from Cambodia. Once again, but this time integrated into the foreign landscape brought to the exhibitions, came the human landscape. Exotic peoples coming straight from the colonies helped the tableaux presented to come to life, turning them into authentic 'Human Zoos' that quickly became famous.

Parallel to these industrial, commercial, technological and artistic exhibitions on a European scale, the growing importance of the imperial colonies meant that in 1883 the first Colonial Exhibition (the International and Colonial Exhibition) was inaugurated in Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup> However, it was only in the 20th century that this new type of exhibition would catch on and enjoy a new profile that aimed to show the inhabitants of the metropole the different facets of the colonies. This resulted in spectacular reconstructions of the natural environments and monuments of Africa, Asia, and Oceania together with the obligatory staging of performances by inhabitants of the colonies. Once they were emancipated, the colonies reflected not only the imperial policy of the western powers but also regarded themselves as an idealisation of those exotic territories, inviting people from the metropole to 'travel' through the overseas colonies without ever leaving home. Hence the importance of the presence of indigenous people, the 'Other', whose purpose was to certify the 'authenticity' of the representation. By bringing back 'living pieces of the

<sup>1</sup> For example, the third Exhibition (London, 1862) witnessed the rise of the fashion of Japonism (the influence of Japanese arts, especially wood engraving, clothing and decoration), with Japan becoming known in Europe for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> "The biggest sensation was the indigenous peoples brought from the African and Asian colonies."

<sup>3</sup> "The privileged place given to art in the programme found no equivalent in the history of the Universal Exhibitions of the 19th century."

<sup>4</sup> Portugal was not represented. It should be remembered that imperial Europe's interest was focused on the 'Scramble for Africa', a fact that would give rise to the Berlin Conference two years later (1884–1885).

empire', the colonial exhibitions became hybrid spaces for convergence that sought to emphasise the benefits of European colonialism.

Numerous exhibitions were held between the mid-19th and mid-20th century, but, given the scope of this paper, we shall mention only the following: the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London (1886), the Universal, International and Colonial Exhibition of Lyon (1894), the Portuguese Insular and Colonial Exhibition of Porto (1894, see below), the International and Colonial Exhibition held in Rochefort-sur-Mer (1898), the Colonial Exhibition of Paris (1907), the National and Colonial Exhibition of Marseille (1922), and, of prime importance, the International Colonial Exhibition of Paris (1931). This last event marked the end of an era – the 'Age of Empire' (Hobsbawm 1990) – that would never return.

All these events sought to encourage intercolonial relations, highlighting the achievements of human progress idealised in an age of imperial expansion. The fact that France invited the great imperial nations to be present served a dual purpose: to demonstrate that several countries followed the same colonial approach as France herself did, and in parallel to prove that France was better suited than any other country to celebrate the future of colonialism.

However, the Second World War altered and rescaled world geopolitics, and the end of the conflict coincided with (and led to) the beginning of the breakup of the European colonial empires.

## 2 PORTUGUESE REPRESENTATIONS

Portugal was present at the great European exhibitions right from the beginning and gradually gave increased importance to her representation.

This cycle of Portuguese participation began with the first exhibition held in London in 1851 where a Portuguese section, albeit mostly limited to a show of agricultural products, was erected. At the following exhibition in the English capital in 1862, the Portuguese commission was presided over by the king himself, Dom Fernando II (1816–1885), showing the growing importance given to these displays of national products. However, it was in Paris in 1867 that the Portuguese pavilion (built according to a design by Rampin Mayor) took pains to link the Portuguese representation to its empire by imparting an image of sumptuous magnificence and exoticism. The neo-Manueline architecture included oriental-style images of an Anglo-Indian nature, thereby showing the influence of the fashion for Orientalism that was so much in vogue at the time.

At the 1878 Paris Exhibition, Portugal was represented by two pavilions. One was in the 'rue des Nations' and reproduced the south portal of the Jerónimos Monastery (which together with the Tower of Belém was one of the two most famous monuments from the time of the Portuguese Discoveries). There



Figure 1. Portuguese Pavilion in the 1867 Universal Exhibition in Paris. Archivio Pittoresco. *Semanario ilustrado*, Vol X, N.º 7, 1867, p. 49.

was a carefully studied relationship between the interior and the exterior, and internally the pavilion alluded to the cloisters of Belém and the Monastery of Batalha in acknowledgement of the Manueline art inspired by the Discoveries. The second pavilion, the Pavilion of the Colonies designed by Jean-Louis Pascal (1837–1920), was eclectic in that it combined Manueline elements with polychrome neo-Mudéjar 'azulejo' tiles in a conventional and static arrangement with a vaguely Orientalist flavour. The job of filling this space was given to the commissioner Luís Andrade Corvo (1824–1890), who focused on the work he had been doing at the Colonial Museum of Lisbon during the previous two years.

At the 1889 Paris Exhibition, the Portuguese pavilion displayed features that referred to the Tower of Belém, the monument mentioned above from the time of the Portuguese Discoveries. Inside the pavilion, eleven of the sixteen rooms were devoted to the Colonial Exhibition. They again were organised by Andrade Corvo and contained objects that had been lent by the Lisbon Geographical Society (created in 1875).

At the 1900 Exhibition, Ventura Terra (1866–1919) designed the Pavilion of the Portuguese Colonies set up in the Trocadéro. It reflected not only the formal influence of French architecture (Ventura Terra had been a student at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris) but also looked towards the Portuguese maritime discoveries (COFFIGNON 1900:289). It is worth mentioning here that in order to remind visitors that the Portuguese had always been a nation of seafarers, the façade of the Trocadéro pavilion dedicated to the colonies showed a group of women symbolising the colonies who held a shield bearing the arms of Portugal.

As for Portugal itself, the phenomenon spreading throughout the Old Continent of hosting exhibitions did not pass unnoticed. As a result, the country that laid claim to possessing the first global empire (1415)



Figure 2. Universal Exhibition of Paris, 1878. Façade of the Pavilion of the Colonies. *O Occidente*, Vol. I, N.º 23, 1878, p. 177.

as well as the last European empire (1974) mounted several exhibitions: the Portuguese Insular and Colonial Exhibition in 1894, the Colonial Exhibition in 1934, both in Porto, and finally in 1940, but this time in Lisbon, the Great Exhibition of the Portuguese World. This one was to commemorate the double centenary of the Foundation of the Nation (1140) and the Restoration of Independence (1640).

The 1894 Exhibition in Porto commemorated the birth of Infante D. Henrique (1394–1460) but the 1934 event was the first that was truly used by politics as propaganda for the empire. The ‘Estado Novo’ regime of Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970), which had been consolidated by the 1933 Constitution, was inspired by the 1931 Colonial Exhibition of Paris to initiate a new colonial policy (based on the 1930 Colonial Act)<sup>5</sup>. The justification for such an event came from the idea that most Portuguese people had not the slightest idea of the reality surrounding their greatness, be it from the material point of view of the extent of Portugal’s territory, or from the moral, political, and spiritual point of view. These were the result of the historical fact of five hundred years of colonisation, and the contemporary fact that Portugal still retained the majority of her overseas territories. The exhibition paid particular attention to the fact that Portugal,

<sup>5</sup> Decreto n.º 18 570 de 8 de julho de 1930, published in the *Diário do Governo* N.º 156, I Série. Online at <https://dre.pt/application/dir/pdfgratis/1930/07/15600.pdf> (accessed on 16.1.2017).

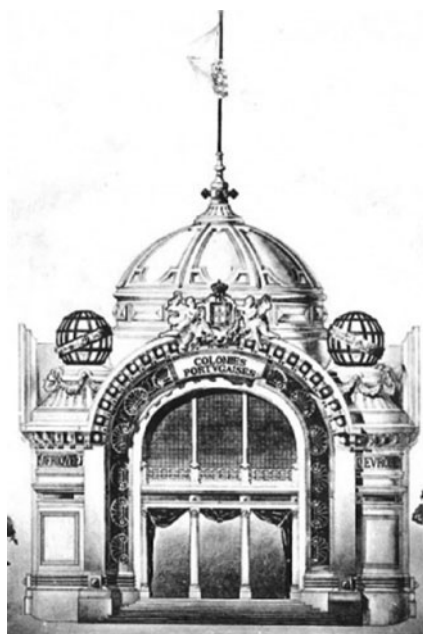


Figure 3. Colonies Portugaises. Carte réclame Sicard (éditeur). 1900. Paris, Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée.

“the country that through its discoveries gave new worlds to the World”,<sup>6</sup> was the oldest of all the colonising countries. The whole exhibition area was centred around the Crystal Palace, re-baptised the Palace of the Colonies, and was organised in such a way as to allow 338 institutional and private stands to be installed, as pointed out in the ‘Guia Oficial dos Visitantes’ [Official Visitors’ Guide] and in ‘O Império Português, Álbum-Catálogo Oficial’ [The Portuguese Empire: Official Album-Catalogue], both published at the time. The whole exhibition sought to show mainland Portugal the ‘life’ of people from the colonies in a similar way as had been done in Paris. Thus indigenous people from Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique, India, and Macau were all brought to Porto, and ‘villages’ from Timor and Guinea were set up next to a lake, thus bringing the recreated scenes ‘to life’. In addition to what was designed and built (monuments, pavilions, and kiosks) and a huge variety of exhibited objects (notably of indigenous and colonial art), a series of movable structures were erected (for example, an overhead cable car and a tourist train). As well as all this, there were colonial troops, theatre and cinema with a colonial influence, diplomas for attendance, and prizes. The event also promoted conferences and publications, parades and processions.

However, it was perhaps the ‘Double Centenary’ Exhibition held in 1940 that became the great imperial parade of contemporary Portugal, commemorating

<sup>6</sup> A phrase that has now become iconic and appeared in bold type in the first Portuguese Colonial Exhibition’s leaflet, Porto, Lito Nacional, 1934 [Graphic visual].

as it did eight hundred years of history and imperial expansion. Belém, in Lisbon, was chosen as the location for the event, which was organised around the newly created Praça do Império. The choice was intentional as it validated the historicist discourse that was anchored in important moments of the nation's past and was so dear to the dictatorship. In addition, the square was surrounded by elements alluding to the Discoveries – Jerónimos Monastery, the River Tagus, Praça Afonso de Albuquerque, and the Tower of Belém, all symbols that referred to the golden days of the nation, the metropole of a vast empire. The choice of Belém was therefore not gratuitous given that it was fundamental to legitimating the greatness of Portugal's overseas history – it was from Belém that the ships set sail on their voyages of discovery and to which they later returned. Indeed, the event did not forget to include a historical section or to mount a colonial section.

With regard to the former, the following structures are worth noting: the Formation and Conquest Pavilion, the Independence Pavilion, the Pavilion of the Discoveries, the Sphere of the Discoveries, the Colonisation Pavilion, the Pavilion of Portuguese People in the World, and the Metropolitan Ethnography Section with its Regional Centre containing representations from the organisation of 'Portuguese Villages' and its Popular Art Pavilions.

In the Colonial Section installed in the Tropical Garden, there were indigenous peoples from the Portuguese colonies who acted as performers. This Section consisted of five pavilions (representing the overseas territories) and two streets (from Macau and India) which gave the space a 'picturesque' and exotic feel in a clearly fictionalised appropriation of the overseas possessions. This staging of the overseas experience led shortly afterwards to Diogo de Macedo (1889–1959) publicly defending the creation of a national Museum of Colonial Art. The idea behind this was to use the museum not only for conservation purposes but also as a preventive measure as it was believed that through educating the public, their sensibility could be nourished, and a taste for art encouraged. However, this wish was never fulfilled.

It should be mentioned here that the timing of the exhibition, although planned before the outbreak of the Second World War and adversely affected by the Spanish Civil War dragging on, meant that its success did not impact on the rest of Europe, which was suffering numerous crises at the time from which Portugal officially remained apart. Consequently, the only foreign pavilion in Belém was that representing Brazil.

The organisation of the Porto Colonial Exhibition in 1934 had served as a rehearsal for this much larger event, and Portugal's recent participation in the universal exhibitions in Paris in 1937, and New York and San Francisco in 1939, provided an experience that helped build an international perspective on exhibitions. Overall, the programme was extensive and ambitious. The exhibition was seen as a way to demonstrate progress besides also being a space to display the

new Portuguese paradigm of developing infrastructures in her overseas colonies, which attested to the country's ability to achieve its goals. As to the exhibition area and surroundings, the expropriation of land adjoining the future exhibition area and the eviction of local residents must be mentioned as should the demolition of a considerable number of buildings that, in just eleven months, gave way to a historical city made of stucco, wood, plaster, and paper. The building of access roads and infrastructure (the Lisbon-National Stadium motorway, the Marginal coast road, and the Belém ferry terminal), the connection of the national radio station, Emissora Nacional, to the colonies together with a variety of works carried out to improve, remodel and renovate existing structures all served to enhance the entrepreneurial role of the 'Estado Novo' and consolidate it in the eyes of the public. As for the overseas territories, the event highlighted Portugal's entrepreneurial skills by exhibiting models and pictures of the pioneering works built in the colonies – bridges, railways, dams, art centres, hospitals, and schools. It was a whole building programme following the metropolitan pattern and undertaken in the image of other European empires.

### 3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From the end of the 19th century, the Great Exhibitions cultivated the people's fascination with the exotic and colonial possessions. This reflected the growing importance of the imperial colonies and the growing emphasis given to the arts and to (extra-)European culture. The authorities who presided over their organisation sought to convince the public that the metropole provided the source from which the modern era and progress flowed, building itself up as the matrix of a 'superior' civilizational culture. To highlight this perspective, extensive scenic sets were built reproducing the overseas territories. Their purpose was to display a miniature version of the resources of the empire. In fact, the 19th century exhibitions encapsulated what the century understood as modernity while the 20th century events showed it as contemporaneity. Progress built upon science and industry, and cosmopolitanism based on the idea that human knowledge and production were transnational, objective and without limits, organised as the expression of supranational progress, ended up providing symbolic material for the cult of the nation, for the construction of nationalisms, and for the propagation of the importance of the imperial colonies.

From 19th-century display cabinet to the current 'exhibition-spectacle', these exhibitions have proved to be factors in development and (trans)national affirmation. In addition to mobilising extraordinary resources, they have contributed to the urban and architectonic development and have collaborated to spread knowledge of science and technology, ideas and principles, culture and civilisation. Even though



Figure 4. EXPO'98. The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future". Lisbon, 1998.

the first exhibitions tended to veer towards the hegemony of the host nation, since the second half of the 20th century the emphasis has been on the dialogue between peoples and nations, thus greatly contributing to 'institutionalised international cooperation'. The future tendency increasingly seems to be one whereby permanent structures and infrastructures that can later be used for different purposes or even designed with this in mind, should be an outcome of the exhibition, thereby increasing the scope of the importance of culture and art in relation to progress on a global scale. In this respect, the growing self-affirmation of countries that were once territories belonging to European empires does not prevent them from referring to the colonial period of their history but now focuses on it in the light of the post-colonial dynamic.

The last major international exhibition of the 20th century, Expo '98, was held in Lisbon in 1998, and it dealt with this universe. Its theme was 'The Oceans, a heritage for the future', and it celebrated the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Vasco da Gama (c. 1460–1524) in India in 1498. This is an indication of how even at the close of the 20th century colonial echoes and spin-offs still resonated and had a place in the world: a different place to be sure, a place of inheritance and testimony to a unique age, and one from which the new autonomous nations were carved.

In the final analysis, it is important to be aware of the major role played by art and progress in the building of imperial representations, a role that allowed the metropolitan population to discover and be seduced by faraway exotic places with growing success. This contributed to an increase in travelling and colonial tourism as well as to the construction of a coloniser-colonised image set with a strong nationalist flavour. As exponents of a European ascendancy that sought to serve as one model for colonial globalisation out of all the disparate theories and practices, the Great Exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries showed how progress engendered by the Industrial Revolution was the right path to take to build the so-called 'world of tomorrow'.

This paper had the support of CHAM (FCSH/NOVA-UAc), through the strategic project sponsored by FCT (UID/HIS/04666/2013).

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Ageorges, Sylvian. (2006) *Sur les traces des expositions universelles – Paris 1855–1937*, Paris, Parigramme.
- Aimone, Linda; Olmo, Carlo. (1993) *Les Expositions Universelles 1851–1900*, Paris, Éditions Belin.
- Allwood, John. (1977) *The Great Exhibitions*, Londres, Studio Vista.
- Coffignon, A. (1900) *Le Pavillon du Portugal. L'Exposition de Paris*. Encyclopédie du siècle. Paris, Libr. Illustré.
- Findling, John. (ed.) (1990) *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851–1988*, New York, Greenwood Press.
- Greenhalgh, Paul. (1988) *The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Guerreiro, António. (1995) *Exposições Universais: Paris 1900, Lisboa Expo 98*.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990) *A Era do Império 1875–1914*, Lisboa, Editorial Presença.
- Martins, João. (2000) *Arte Efêmera em Portugal. Pavilhões Portugueses nas Exposições Universais do Século XIX*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Souto, Maria Helena. (2011) *Portugal nas Exposições Universais 1851–1900*, Lisboa, Colibri.