

Athos Bulcão: the tenuous line between art and architecture

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Along his 90 years¹, the hands of Athos Bulcão metamorphosed into paintings, masks, drawings and photo messages. Architecture, however, was the most benefited from his talent as an artist. With Athos, art amalgamates with architecture after years of partnership with Oscar Niemeyer, João da Gama Filgueiras Lima (Lelé), Helio Uchôa, Milton Ramos, Sérgio Bernardes, Glauco Campello, Sérgio Parada, among many other architects that defined Brazilian contemporary architecture.

Athos developed his paintings in Burle Marx's²; atelier, a chromatic palette was learned from Cândido Portinari³, but it was with the sensibility of a talented artist allied to the partnership initially made with Niemeyer⁴ that the vast architectonic world was unveiled to Athos. Making use of a varied repertoire of materials, e.g. tiles, ceramic, wood, formica, iron, glass, marble and concrete, the artist fills our eyes. He transforms uninteresting surfaces – façades, gables, panels, divisions and walls – into masterpieces. Colors, contours, reliefs, geometries and materials enliven the environment.

Not only are the materials applied important in the space interpretation, but also the color used to intensify the sense of movement in architecture. “In Brasilia for 50 years, Athos Bulcão made this landscape a friend and partner. He reflected natural light into architecture, articulated elements in order to create unexpected rhythm and movement, colored internal spaces with the sky of Brasilia, with red soil, with lightning, sunrise and sunsets, rainy days and drought, construction and poetry, enchantment and passion.”⁵

His tiled murals and reliefs are decisively present in palaces and buildings projected by Niemeyer around the city: Alvorada Palace chapel (1958), National Congress (1960, 1971, 1976 and 1978), Itamaraty Palace (1966, 1967, 1968 and 1962), Claudio Santoro National Theater (1966), Supreme Court (1969), Jaburu Palace (1975), Metropolitan Cathedral of Brasilia (1977), Juscelino Kubitschek Memorial (1981), Planalto Palace (1982) Panteao da Liberdade da Democracia Tancredo Neves (1986) among others. The partnership with Lelé, started in Brasilia in 1962, produced a set of creations extending from architectonic furniture (divisions, partitions, doors and walls) to geometric abstract panels. His creations liven up internal environments in Sarah Kubitschek hospitals⁶, the Court of Audit (TCU)⁷ and in many other projects developed by the technique of mortar⁸: nurseries, schools, runways, urban equipment etc. Since the 1990's the

¹ Athos Bulcão was Born in Rio de Janeiro on July 2nd 1918.

² In 1939, Athos met Roberto Burle Marx, of whom he became a friend for life.

³ Athos Bulcão was Portinari's assistant in the creation of the tile panel of Francis of Assisi for the church Pampulha church (1945), project of Oscar Niemeyer.

⁴ In 1943, Athos met Niemeyer; in 1955, started his collaboration to the architect; in 1958, moved to Brasília, but throughout his career He participated in several Niemeyer's projects in Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro and, abroad, in France, Italy and Algeria.

⁵ Costa, Marcus de Lontra, *Athos Bulcão [construção e poesia]*. In Athos Bulcão [construção e poesia], Brasília: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2002, p. 07.

⁶ Started in 1980, with headquarters in Brasília.

⁷ The first built was in the state of Bahia in 1995.

⁸ Implemented by FAEC – Fábrica de Equipamentos Comunitários – Pré-fabricação em Argamassa Armada (Salvador, 1985-1989) and now with CTRS – Centro de Tecnologia da Rede Sarah (Technology Center of Sarah Hospitals), started in 1992 (Salvador).

hospitals belonging to Technological Center of Sarah Hospitals (CTRS) have the biggest collection of his recent production.

Under this approach, Lelé's⁹ declaration, friend and obstinate cooperater, brings to light the relationship between the artist and the architect, revealing us the meanders of a fruitful relation, in which art is completely integrated with architecture.

Cláudia: Lelé, I would like you to talk about the importance of Athos Bulcão's in Brazilian architecture and also in architecture in general.

Lelé: Athos Bulcão is an exemplary character in plastic arts not only in Brazil, but worldwide. Nowadays, I don't know any artist who has integrated so deeply his or her art to architecture. In Renaissance, a period when plastic art only complemented this science, Michelangelo Buonarroti outstood as an energetic precursor of this integration. In the gothic architecture it happened especially with sculptures and vitrals. Despite the proposals of Fernand Léger and Mondrian to integrate the work of plastic artists with architecture, after the coming of the modern architecture, it only happened significantly by the hands of Athos Bulcão. He is the most characteristic example in the whole world, thanks to his connection to Oscar Niemeyer, especially in Brasilia. Oscar was a precursor. He suggested Athos to work with Portinari in the creation of the tiles for the Pampulha church and then brought him to Brasilia, where they developed many works together. This integration of Athos with Oscar was very intense. Athos interferes in such a deep way in the architecture that it would be impossible to imagine the National Theater without the elements he studied for the facade¹⁰. The sculptural elements should perfectly fit the profile of the theater, creating shadows and reinforcing the structure simultaneously. The integration is given after the moment that the art proposed by Athos meets the needs of the architecture project and all the work of Athos reflects this interference. In my case, throughout the 50 years I had the opportunity to work with him, I learned a lot of things, including mastering the colors, something innate for Athos. I also emphasize his work as a painter, being in the figurative painting or abstract painting, both of great importance. But, undoubtedly, the biggest characteristic of Athos's work was this integration of art with architecture. For the tiles he was inspired by our colonial architecture, Portuguese and Arabic heritage. But the product reflects a very Brazilian language, deeply integrated with Oscar's architecture. The same happened to me, especially in the projects for Sarah Hospitals. I think that talking about Athos as if he belonged to Brasilia is restricting his work. Athos is a universal artist, his proposal is universal. If most part of his work is found here, in Brasilia, this is due to his strong connection to the city.

Cláudia: When did Athos come to Brasilia?

⁹ Interview held in July 7th 2008.

¹⁰ Projected by the artist in 1966, the parallelepipeds and white cubes of the same height in concrete cover all the surface of both lateral sides of the National Theater of Brasilia. Lacking maintenance, the structure was damaged, affecting the iron fittings that hold the concrete. Nowadays, the panel is under repair and the block will be substituted.

Lelé: In 1958. I came here a little before, in 1957, because I came to work in the construction of the city.

Cláudia: Did he come invited by Niemeyer?

Lelé: He came in Niemeyer's team.

Cláudia: Where did you meet him? In Rio de Janeiro?

Lelé: Athos is carioca (from Rio). He had already made some works with Niemeyer in Rio de Janeiro before he came to Brasília. He had been a painter working with Portinari, but in Brasília the work with Niemeyer was highlighted due to the great amount of works performed. Niemeyer's palaces always had Athos's participation.

Cláudia: What was the first Niemeyer's project in which he participated?

Lelé: It was a project in tiles he made for Sul America Hospital in Rio, in 1955. In Brasília this cooperation started after 1958, with the blue tiles covering the external walls of Our Lady of Fatima church¹¹.

Cláudia: Athos also has a big production of water paintings, pictures, masks...

Lelé: Also drawings. He is a great designer. He learned a lot about colors with Portinari, since he used a mixture of the paint for him.

Cláudia: In his work, especially when linked to architecture, Athos used to apply a lot of materials. His art is in tiles, wooden panels, decorative elements, etc. Is the mastering of color comprehensive, regardless the material used?

Lelé: I think so. Athos is a complete artist, one of a kind. For the plastic artist, the perception of the architectonic space is very important. The artist who performs only canvas painting cannot have this perception. But when the artist interferes in the architecture, when he is also required to work as an architect, this competence (which Athos had throughout his professional life) is developed. The key point is space visualization, thus this interaction with the architect. Most times the artist is extremely outstanding in canvas painting, but cannot visualize the built space.

Cláudia: How did he learn to work with the architect? How did this interaction take place?

Lelé: Doing it. He claims to be a self-learner and I think he really is. Everybody is influenced by someone else. He said to have received strong influence from Paul Klee, Fernand Léger, but it doesn't mean that he was not a self-learner. He has always been a self-learner. He managed to find his way by means of this constant practice, especially with Oscar Niemeyer.

Cláudia: Is it true that almost all of your projects have works of Athos?

¹¹ Known as *Igrejinha da 307/308 Sul*, it was the first masonry church in Brasília, inventoried in April 1982 by the government of the Federal District.

Lelé: Yes. In my specific case I develop projects in industrial scale, as schools and nurseries in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia. These projects constantly have the Athos's integration in doors, with repetitive elements, I mean, the art of Athos is also incorporated to industrial language, thus the number of reproductions. His tiles follow the same production line. Because of this, my work with Athos was immense.

Cláudia: How is your work relation with Athos? Is there freedom for creation or you guide him to what you want?

Lelé: No, we always work together, especially when using industrialized material. As an example, we discussed how a mortar panel would be worked under smaller thickness, a process that is improved along the prototype creation. It is evident that he has the final word for the artist manifestation, but we always work together.

Cláudia: Is it the same for decorative panels inside buildings, especially the ones from Sarah Hospitals?

Lelé: They are always produced under a purpose. It doesn't matter if they are tile panels or painted material, we always do everything together.

Cláudia: Does Athos give freedom to the construction workers in the tiles settlement?

Lelé: Just in some cases. Although he always have this creative ambition, to give this freedom, this is not always possible. Sometime the works is so rigorous that he is forced to draw the tiles organization strategy for the work. But Athos is formidable. It is difficult to find another visual artist who achieved what he did.

Cláudia: Tell me about the conception of the walls composed by moveable pivotal panels. For example, how was the panel composed by multicolor chromatic layers (1999) created, at Sarah (Centro de Apoio ao Grande Incapacitado Físico) in North Lake?

Lelé: It is a wooden panel. This wall separates physiotherapy from the circulation area, so it must have a certain transparency and permit the wind flow. Having noticed the objective of the project, Athos pursued this intention of creating an object that permitted transparence. For this, he plays with colors, developing the idea together with the architectonic project.

Cláudia: Do you stipulate the materials for the project?

Lelé: No. In this case he suggested doing it in colored wood. When he gave the idea of making those delicate painted elements, well, then I said that I thought that it couldn't be in iron, but in wood.

Cláudia: In the circular intermediate building at Sarah Rehabilitation Center in North Lake (1999), designed for children physiotherapy, how do children interact with art present everywhere?

Lelé: There, the pivotal panels, with colored geometrical drawings, are actually doors that turn around themselves, opening the space to the outside. Children use the central part of the circle as a ring, as if it were a circus. Since the technical support and the rehabilitation area were developed in the outskirts, sometimes it is necessary that this space be protected. But, undoubtedly, the environment is very festive, with those opening banners, and at the same time dynamic, for the space changes according to opening of the doors. Children love to be there, playing in the middle, under the intense light coming from the skylight. I always see architecture as a process that is developed along the project, along the work, and is defined when the user who occupies the space starts to use it. Architecture is not a static thing. Sometimes, with time, it changes, it is adjusted. Some other times, on the other hand, it proves to be bad and never reaches its objective. Architecture is to be used. It is an absurd to think the contrary. You don't just observe architecture. Architecture is for you to use it, for your welfare. So it has to be beautiful as all the others manifestations of the human beings. Men have to look for the beauty in everything they do, including in architecture. For this reason, thinking that beauty is not a function is also another mistake. We have to get to beauty by means of technique, of all the knowledge architecture demands.

Cláudia: The work of Athos is present in almost all the buildings you built. In the Sarah Hospitals it is an integrating part of architecture. How does art, in this case, contribute to the patient recovery? Does it act as a chromo therapy?

Lelé: Before we incorporated all these artworks to hospitals, the hospital psychology imposed the predominance of neutral colors to calm down the patient. I totally disagree with this psychology. Sarah is the opposite of this. It has very vivid colors suggested by Athos Bulcão. But these colors are the ones present in nature. Men have never needed to change the green of the plants to stay calm, much the reverse. Nature presents itself very colored. There is an incredible exuberance in the trees, in the plants. So, why is it necessary to have pastel green and neutral colors inside your house to reach this state? The idea of neutral colors was incorporated when the hospitals started to be very technological and the light had to be artificial. But the vibration of natural light leads us more effectively to calmness. The vibration of fluorescent lamps is not healthy. It was necessary to destroy a little bit these dogmas created by technological hospitals of the first half of the 20th century. This happened thanks to Athos Bulcão. His mastering of colors is fantastic and, in the hospitals, he found room to apply it. But, evidently, it is the good architecture of the hospital that provides the patients with appropriate spaces for healing, that offers them conditions to be physically treated. And good architecture does not regard color. Good architecture is a good architecture because it is good. I am not being self conceited in thinking that I am doing a good architecture, but I think that restricting the colors is limiting architecture.

Cláudia: Nowadays, do you still develop projects with Athos? Or he does not produce any longer?

Lelé: The new Sarah's hospital in Rio de Janeiro, in its final stage of construction, is the first project that we don't develop together. But, in his homage, I did the works of plastic integration by myself, always using the teachings learned from the master along all these years. Only now, with the advance of his Parkinson disease, Athos lost his motor control and the perception of colors and stopped producing.

Cláudia: Can we say that you will be his legacy, the person who will continue his work?

Lelé: No, I am not that competent. After working a lot, together in this integration art/architecture, I am able to produce something. But the artistic creation itself is his entire task. Although I have learned something with him, I don't have this competence. What I am doing now is just a copy, in the strict obedience to architectonic integration. Short ago I did a tile work for two gables in the house of a friend, Roberto Pinho, in Brasilia. It is not a tile from Athos Bulcão. It is just a tile made by me, but with all the integration language. To value the structure of the gables, which he wanted to be light, very delicate, I covered them in tiles. Since I couldn't count on Athos anymore, I was forced to create this project by myself.

Cláudia: Can we say, thus, that architecture for you is based on a tripod composed by technique, function and art?

Lelé: Yes. In Roberto Pinho's house and in the last hospitals, as in the ones from Macapá, Belem and Rio de Janeiro I was obliged to develop art too, since I didn't find any plastic artist who identified with my works as Athos did. This is not something created from one day to another.

Cláudia: Can't you see any other artists in Brazil nowadays capable for filling this gap?

Lelé: Not that I don't see. I think that, potentially, there are a lot of artists that can do this, but it has to be deeply done, not in a superficial way. I am not criticizing any Brazilian artists, but besides the contact, the artist must be trained for this. Space visualization in architecture requires training.

Cláudia: How do you see Athos's art evolution along these 50 years?

Lelé: It is funny! Since he is a self-learner, and has improved, maybe he has, more and more, developed color perception. He has a great dominium over the colors. I learned a lot about colors from him, talking about the topic in our integrated works. They are logical things, they don't just happen. In the almost 60 years he dedicated to the work integrated with architecture, there was sophistication, a bigger and bigger perception of the architect's intention. As a friend and architect, I have always had the opportunity to discuss with him. The work was never isolated, never seen as something complementary, something that loses the sense.

Cláudia: Among the architectonic works of Athos, which one would you highlight?

Lelé: I don't highlight any one of them, but there are some projects in which his work was very evident, as in the National Theater of Brasilia (1966), which facade is always exposed. I also see the intervention in the entrance hall at Congress Palace (1960), with incisions of black granite and white marble as something very beautiful and sophisticated.

Cláudia: How about the colored panels at Itamaraty?

Lelé: Yes, the panels at Itamaraty are very beautiful, with the lattice in wooden structures and painted iron plates¹². They are very sophisticated works. They show this space perception that he has always had. But it was always like this. I followed all Athos's works, even the ones made for Niemeyer. He always discussed them with me. In the case of the National Theater, for example, he discussed with me how he could create the blocks. In the beginning, Oscar even thought about making incisions, curves, but Athos proposed the elements in concrete. We discussed how the block would be executed before they were put in the gables. I learned a lot from the work with Athos, especially about having the perception of art in the space. Perception has to be trained. It must be present in everything in life, even in music. And perception is developed by practice, by seeing. I make this analogy with all plastic arts, with architecture, with music. In that panel from the Congress, for example, the black incisions in the marble, that is something simple, looks like music. There are intervals, rhythm and musicality; if you look attentively, you may even wait for the sound to arise suddenly. This integration of art with architecture is a logical thing that nature teaches us each moment. Athos was able to realize an incredible work in this area.

Cláudia: Can we say that there was a school "Athos Bulcão" and that he is the master of a single work, his own?

Lelé: I don't see anyone doing what Athos did, maybe in the lack of knowledge.

Cláudia: But, hasn't he formed anyone?

Lelé: No, he hasn't. It is very difficult for these great artists to form someone. I, for example, am able to understand the work of Athos because I had contact with him all these years, but I don't consider myself competent to do it. We can understand a lot about music and not be able to play it. It is necessary to have a vocation, a gift. Some people have it, as Oscar, a genius, one of the big geniuses produced by humanity. But trying to do what Oscar did is almost impossible. It ends up being a mistaken caricature. I think people have to understand their limitations and do only what they are able to do.

Cláudia: If you could summarize in a few words who Athos was and his importance for architecture, what would you say?

Lelé: It is difficult because there is a very strong affective relation between us. And the relation I developed with him throughout my professional life exerts a strong influence in me. Maybe I could say that the importance he has to me is the same he has to architecture as a whole. I will miss him. I miss a lot his not working with me now.

Extremely touched, Lelé has a break before answering the last question.

Cláudia: Lelé, to finalize just complete this sentence: For you, Athos is...

Lelé: For me, Athos is the artist in our time who could better integrate art with architecture.

¹² This project, found at the no mezzanine of the Itamaraty Palace, dates to 1967. In 2005, it was repaired.

