

Athos Bulcão

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Athos Bulcão is included in a long list of artists who developed works for well-known architectural projects. Above all, he was part of a selected group of artists that contributed to the final aspect of buildings in such a way that they ended up being as decisive for the result as the architects themselves.

We can remember some artists who marked key-works of the Brazilian modernist movement. Portinari, for instance, deserves a special mention for his panels and tiles at the Ministry of Health and Education, in Rio de Janeiro (1936/1943, a work coordinated by Lucio Costa, with the participation of many architects, among them Niemeyer and Reidy, having Le Corbusier as a consultant) and at the Saint Francis Church, in Pampulha (1943, a building by Niemeyer). Portinari – with whom Athos worked – followed the tradition of Portuguese tiles in large figurative panels. Another fundamental artist was Roberto Burle Marx, with tiles, tapestries and compositions of bricks and stones, or even stones from demolished buildings, even though his most striking and internationally recognized work was in the area of landscaping.

The most known and extreme case of this kind of relation between art and architecture in the 20th Century certainly is the University Library of Mexico City, of 1953, a rectangular 10-story tower entirely covered by stone mosaics by Juan O`Gorman (who was also an architect) representing the history of the country. This building “hidden” by the work of art was considered, during many years, one of the most remarkable and disseminated images of the country.

Athos came close to this at the National Theater of Brasilia. The lateral façades, one of them entirely facing the Esplanade of the Ministries, are completely dominated by the artist’s high-relief. Contrarily to the Mexican example, it is a totally abstract monochromatic composition that varies in light and shade effects, depending on the time of the day.

The presence of art in architecture is much more common indoors. One of the most remarkable cases in this context is also located in Latin America and was equally done in 1953: the auditorium of the University of Caracas. The monumental acoustic panels, which seem to float, were created by Alexander Calder and completely dominate the concert hall projected by the architect Carlos Raul Villanueva. Even if in more modest dimensions, Athos made works for several auditoriums, some of them reliefs with acoustic functions, such as the one at the Urban Military Sector of Brasilia (Niemeyer, 1971) and, above all, in projects signed by Lelé (João Filgueiras Lima), such as the Sara Kubitscheck Hospitals in Belo Horizonte and Fortaleza (1995), or the Court of Auditors of Cuiabá and Belo Horizonte (1997).

One of the most traditional forms of a striking presence of the artist in Western architecture is stained glass. During the 20th Century, Chagall, Léger, Matisse, among

others, left magnificent works in a medium that Athos didn't explore much. Among the most interesting exceptions are two works of small dimensions: the chapels of the Alvorada Palace, by Niemeyer (1957) and the one at the Administrative Center of Bahia (1975), by Lelé. The above examples demonstrate how much Athos' work is related to these two architects.

Doubtless, Athos' most notable contribution for Brazilian art is his tile works. His numberless pieces are surprising in their variety of colors and motifs. On one hand, his tiles strengthen the debated Baroque tradition in Brazilian architecture, for they make a reference to an ornament abundantly used during the Colonial period. The Portuguese tiles sent to Brazil were assembled according to rigid compositions, displaying religious and historical scenes or landscapes. Nevertheless, Athos often adds an element that deconstructs such tradition: even if, in some works, Athos chooses abstract compositions that follow precise drawings, his particular originality resides in the random placement of the tiles.

Surely, like all of us, Athos was probably marked by seeing in old churches tiles placed in the "wrong" position, clearly breaking a pattern, as the result of a worker's distraction or the lack of a specific piece. The artist plays with such "deviation" of tradition and, in most cases, delegates to the workers the choice of placement, only indicating what they couldn't – in general to avoid "well-arranged" results. Such rupture of order, connected to the tradition of tile works in Brazil, has been equally explored in our contemporary art, with great quality, both in form and content, by Adriana Varejão.

In many of his works, Athos employs more than one motif or different colors to emphasize rhythm and contrasts. But the most striking results are obtained when he uses a single motif, thanks to the placement in different positions. An exemplary case is the Niemeyer Building (a work by Niemeyer himself) in Belo Horizonte, 1960.

The best way of having a broad perspective of Athos Bulcão's art is to visit the three buildings projected by Niemeyer for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty) in Brasília, a true museum of his work. He is present in the palace from the pieces that form the granite floor to the walls covered with white marble low-reliefs (1966), and he also chose the colors of the auditorium. In the Ministry's Annex I there are the blue and white tiles (1968), in the 8th floor, a beautiful composition with four different motifs. In the main hall, there are two wood panels, painted in soft colors.

In the catwalk between the Ministry's Annexes I and II, behind Burle Marx's "garden corridors", there is another series of tiles, this time in yellow and white (1982). In the upper floor of Annex II, a three-story building known as "Wedding Cake", one finds three volumes covered with blue and white tiles: there are two different models (1983), both with three motifs in blue (light and dark) and white.

Among the works in the Itamaraty Palace, the Monumental Latticework (1967) stands out, in the mezzanine, with 22 meters long and 4.5 meters of height. Illuminated at night, thanks to the building's transparency, the work is seen from outside, creating a

singular effect in Brazilian modern architecture, for the work that is inside becomes the most important element of the façade with its concrete arches.

Another building that composes a great variety of works by the artist is the National Congress (Niemeyer, 1958). The white marble and black granite panel in the entrance hall (1960), the tiles of the green hall (1971) and the walls and screens of varnished wood are so well-integrated in the architecture that they serve as references to distinguish the different halls.

Athos' work acquires a rather different dimension when associated to Lelé's architecture. Niemeyer's architecture is characterized by surprise, curves and monumentality. Lelé's is focuses on the valorization of structural solutions. Athos' contributions for this another great master of our architecture do not seem like "works in exhibition", but elements of a more human scale and more modest materials that often may be displaced, like the panels or screens, or simply touched and used, like the playful objects and pieces destined to children's playgrounds. Athos created original and surprising works for the several architects with whom he worked and in spite of so many good examples of integration between art and architecture in our country, his work is able to outstand in the national scenario. Even though it has been highly valued from an intrinsically artistic point of view, his work enriched the Brazilian architectural language in such a way that it will be forever associated with it.