

Contemporary Tile Work in Brazil

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MODULE AND LIBERTY

In his closing commentary about the exhibition of Osirarte in 1841, Ruben Braga predicted that the future of mosaic tile art would demonstrate “more simplicity, more singular harmonies. Purification,” in the sense that it would rest “on a semi-classical serenity, yet remaining free.” This future foreseen by the *carioca* chronicle writer is Athos Bulcão. Tile art, perfectly integrated into modern architecture, where tiles are seen as modular composition on industrial scale, reaches its height in Brasília with Athos Bulcão.

A *carioca* from the neighborhood of Catete, one of the regular customers at the *Hotel Internacional* when Vieira da Silva resided there, assistant to Portinari at the Church of Pampulha, and later in his studio in Rio de Janeiro, Athos, 70 years old today, has been the most regular collaborator of the architect Oscar Niemeyer, since the construction of Brasília. But he did not only work for Niemeyer; his designs are in residences and buildings by João Filgueiras Lima, Glauco Campelo, Ítalo Campofiorito, and Fernando Burmeister, among others. Similarly, his work is not restricted to the federal capital, but is spread throughout Rio, São Paulo, Salvador and Recife, as well as abroad.

Undoubtedly, however, it is in Brasília, where he lives, that the essential pieces of his mural work are concentrated. There Athos created sculptural murals, reliefs, ample and inviting mosaic tile murals, in all his works, revealing perfect integration with the architecture. In fact, his works, even while fulfilling a decorative function, were never merely adornment, neither were they designed to make up for an eventual architectonic deficiency on the buildings. Athos works with the architect from the moment the space is defined in the blueprints, when he then discusses questions of color – another field in which he has performed magnificently. While creating, he carefully analyzes the location and type of work to be carried out. The mural comes out of this planning and when it is ready and applied, it usually mimetically absorbs the functions of the building, contributing significantly to a more inviting and functional environment. This occurs, for example, at the Sara Kubitschek Hospital in Brasília, in which the geometric signs adopted for the pattern immediately induce the interpretation of the hospital’s specialization, caring for motor dysfunction. In other words, they indicated the rehabilitating effort of the patients to recover the movements of their arms or legs.

Generally, Athos begins the design by making a drawing – the form – followed by color. For the tile layers, he prepares some possible combinations on serigraphic cards, but frequently gives them license to produce the mural as they wish. In other words, he does not concern himself with the artisan aspects of the tile, but with his intellectual conception – the process of production of his patterns is serigraphy, which is industrial, and the installation on the wall or mural is done by laborers, from the predefined

designs or randomly, resulting, in the latter, in arrangements of surprising visuality. Athos speaks of a “composition principle” to be freely applied by the workers. He states: “When white tiles are not used, I leave the free positioning of only one element to the criteria of the workers, a single ‘letter of the alphabet,’ to produce a design. And when instead of one ‘letter,’ there are two, the positioning of the drawing will still be freely applied.”

A good example of this spontaneous collaboration of the tile layer is the mural for the *sambódromo*, where the samba schools parade during Carnival, in Rio de Janeiro. Occupying the lateral faces of the Carnival Museum, which terminates the course of the samba avenue, the mural situated to the east was composed freely by the laborers. It is evidently more chaotic, but it is not less interesting because of this than the one to the west, which rigorously followed the compositions suggested by Athos. It is an extremely simple design, but one that achieved noteworthy visual richness. Two curved lines form buttocks, breasts, bodies and torsos that establish an immediate link, whether with the symbol created by Niemeyer (two hindquarters) for the *sambódromo*, or whether with the parade itself. In the end, what we see there, even without the appeal to color and the immediately distinguishable figure is the circumvolution of the samba dancers, a multitude in movement, that spinning of the *Baianas* making the audience rise, the glorification of the dance and the body. It is a mural that captures or reveals all the sensuality and even the eroticism of the parade. By freeing the imagination of the laborers, Athos actually resumes one of the traditions in Portuguese tile work, mentioned by José Meco who observed that “the [larger] tile also became the work of the [mosaic] tile layer, who knew how to almost viscerally apply the tile to the architecture, playing with the form and irregularities of the walls and demonstrating a deep understanding of the ceramic materials and their possibilities of cadence and color.”

With his tiled murals, Athos established one more connection between Brazilian modern architecture and the Baroque style. It is his own kind of Baroque, beginning in kinetics and in combinatory or mutational art from invariably geometric patterns which he creates, and in their arrangement, reveal a remarkably organic aspect. It is equally certain that geometric patterns already existed in Portuguese tile work in centuries past, as is the abstraction present in Moresque art, so intimately connected to the Iberian Peninsula. But despite all these ties to the past, Athos is undoubtedly the most radical of mosaic creators in Brazil, and also he who best understood its presence in modern architecture. Extremely discrete in his creation, Athos knew how to approach his work, with audacity and inventiveness, whether in an interior space – at the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the National Congress, one resting in the shadows, as a winter garden, the other in the light, like a tropical garden – or whether in an exterior space – that of a School at one of the “superblock” park areas in Brasilia, in which he manages to depict the maximum of vibrations with a minimum of elements. As he wrote for a dissertation about his work integrated to architecture, published in Switzerland: “I always refused to imitate the ‘classical’ drawings, of periods and that dominated artisanship. The beautiful bird’s beak arabesques of long ago cannot be transformed into ‘stamps’. I think this would be the equivalent to a type-writer that imitated the calligraphy of Louis XIV.” Fleeing imitation of the past, Athos accepts the challenge of the modern in its industrial dimension and even its economic dimension. Thus, not only

the factor of time, but also the economic factor guided the drawings to a percentage of white tiles, which is habitually one third of the total, as can be seen in one of his largest murals, that of the National Congress, in which he used 1,200 m² of tiles.

One of the first mosaic murals by Athos Bulcão, and also the only figurative one, is the one he made in 1957 for the outer walls at the *Capela de Nossa Senhora de Fátima* (Our Lady of Fátima Chapel) in Brasília. Over a blue background of varying hues, Athos incorporated a white bird in flight, a descending flight recalling the Holy Spirit, and the dark blue star reminds us of the Star of Bethlehem, announcing the birth of Jesus. This bird is also similar to a recurring form, already impressed on the visual memory of the inhabitants of Brasília, the pilot-plan, a central body with open wings. A white frame contours each blue unit, reinforcing the drawing and the actual physical presence of the tile, the materiality of one coexisting with the virtuality of the other –the drawing. The chapel is pretty and simple, like a drawing floating in air, a tent, or a cloth extended suggesting the curvature of a womb. And the tiles are integrated very well into the structural simplicity of the architectonic design, creating an inviting space even through the colors blue and white, reminiscent of the simplicity of Brazilian architecture, including the poor and spontaneous.

The Baroque influence can be equally noted in the design by Ítalo Campofiorito and Luis Mário Xavier for the residence of Ivany Valença, where we find trellis, roof and that cube erupting from the façade, breaking the symmetry, reminding us of the circular volume covered in tiles by Rossi Osir of the MEC building. For this equally as inviting home, Athos created patterns in ochre and green, capturing the visual distortions provoked by a wheel in movement.

At the opposite end of these delicacies, although still Baroque in its minimalist manner, is the architecture of João Filgueiras Lima, marvelously working the protruding concrete, creating daring volumes, with a strong impact of visual energy. We have an enormous mural by Athos Bulcão at the residence of José Silva Neto in Brasília, and contrasting with the crudeness of the apparent concrete structure, it is artfully constructed on the outer wall of the house, facing green landscape. The vivid colors and the pattern composed of triangles flying like the flags painted by Volpi create a fantastic contrast with the concrete. Another beautiful mural was installed at the residence of Celso Kaufman, designed by Elvin Dubugras, with tiles in green, blue and yellow, occupying two faces of the perimeter wall, developing a unique pattern, but one that results in a type of tropical flowering.

Always working from simple geometric forms, with straight or curved lines, Athos attains notable richness of vocabulary. The musical rhythm of the arrangements adds to the continuous movement, which does not allow the eye to rest, since it is always discovering new drawings, composing, deconstructing, and recomposing the visual building in an active process of participation.

The tile became important in the body of work by Athos Bulcão, making it possible to say that he is his own influence in his painting today, and not the contrary. Painting, because of its private character, artisanal and silent, certainly pleases Athos Bulcão the most, due to his being a calm and solitary man. Consequently, it is as if the tile leapt

from the mural to play on his canvases, as if it were a kite, or as if it transformed into rosettes setting the pictorial space into motion. So the exchanges between the tiles and painting of Athos Bulcão are renewed, as it has been seen in the work of Djanira and Vieira da Silva.