

A “great priest of civilization”:

Reinterpreting Victor Meirelles’ A Primeira Missa through newspapers

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Abstract

Using newspapers as primary sources, this article presents an innovative analysis of Victor Meirelles’ A primeira missa no Brasil (1860). Beyond canonical interpretations of Meirelles’ work as an erudite depiction of the beginning of Brazil’s history in 1500, the article demonstrates that for viewers of that time the painting also, and above all, represented the beginning of the history of Brazilian art in the 1800s. It demonstrates this by following general art debates in newspapers of the period, specifically in the years before and after the highly anticipated return of the young Meirelles from his European sabbatical. Debates in the press illustrate how Meirelles’ significance for nineteenth-century audiences in particular, and for Brazilian art history as whole, can only be fully decoded by situating the artist within Brazilian elites’ political-intellectual efforts to achieve European-style civilisational progress during the first decades of the post-independence period..

Resumo

Utilizando jornais como fontes primárias, este artigo apresenta uma análise inovadora de A primeira missa no Brasil (1860) de Victor Meirelles. Para além de interpretações canônicas do quadro como uma representação erudita do começo da história do Brasil em 1500, o artigo demonstra que para plateias do período a obra também, e acima de tudo, representava o começo da arte brasileira no século dezenove. Demonstra-se isso através da leitura da cobertura sobre arte nos jornais do período, especialmente nos anos antes e depois da chegada do jovem Meirelles de seu pensionato na Europa. Debates na imprensa ilustram como a importância de Meirelles para o público do século dezenove em particular, e para a história da arte brasileira como um todo, só é totalmente decifrada ao situar o artista dentro dos esforços político-intelectuais de elites brasileiras em alcançar progresso civilizacional, ao estilo europeu, nas primeiras décadas do período pós-independência.

On 29 March 1868, *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* lamented the “manifest decay” marking the occasion of the opening of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts’ (Academia Imperial de Belas Artes) exhibition in Rio de Janeiro. If the “number of paintings is exiguous”, the influential newspaper noted with sadness, the fact that most works did not possess any “original quality that characterise the production of great artists” was an even gloomier fact to witness (1868, p.1). The overall assessment of the state of art in Brazil read as an epitaph: “we regret to attest the degeneration of art among us [...] our exhibition is so modest that it touches on the limits of obscurity”. In typical mid nineteenth-century fashion, in which religious rhetoric often translated civilisational aspirations, *Diário* ended with a melodramatic reminder about the sacrosanct role artists played in societies: “Oh! Do not allow for Art to die, nor forget its generous and noble cultivators. In every civilisation, they are the great *priests of civilisation*” (*Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 1868, p.1) (Italics added).

However, amidst the mainly fateful tone of the article, there was also space for hope. Albeit the nation’s artistic damnation, the newspaper reminded readers that Brazil was still a country whose “splendour of nature”, “opulence of light” and “topographic accidents” impacted the “imagination of artists”. Therefore, it was fair to ask where the country’s own equivalents to “Raphael’s pencil, Van Dick’s brushes and Canova’s chisel” were located? In the context of the 1868 AIBA exhibition, an answer could only be found beyond the monotony of most works under display, the majority of which had been “watched and rewatched in previous exhibitions”. In this sense, *Diário* called attention to a few fresh, homegrown artistic productions that were “worthy of admiration”. These included the “porcelain photography, some exquisite portraits and the miniature works of (José Tomás Da Costa) Guimarães” (1868, p.1).

Among other works that “deserved commendation”, the newspaper paid especial note to the “notable” and “great oil portrait by Mr Victor Meirelles”. That Meirelles was one of the few names deserving public praise was probably no surprise to *carioca* readers living in Brazil’s then political capital and cultural powerhouse. At the time, after returning to Rio in 1861 after a long state-sponsored European period of study, Meirelles had obtained the AIBA’s prestigious position as professor of history painting – the highest genre in academic art - and was widely celebrated as one of greatest Brazilian artists of his generation. Above all, after producing his first large scale history painting, *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* (1860), Meirelles had given proof to the nation that Brazilian artists could also rub shoulders with their European counterparts.

Using newspapers as primary sources, this article presents an innovative analysis of Victor Meirelles’ *A primeira missa no Brasil* by reinterpreting both the painting’s subject

matter and the aesthetic-epistemological agenda shared by artists of the Academia Imperial de Belas Artes¹ and other intellectuals of the period. The article’s main claim is that the significance of Meirelles’ masterpiece for nineteenth-century audiences in particular – and for the history of Brazilian art in general – can only be fully decoded by situating the artist within Brazilian elites’ political-intellectual efforts to achieve European-style civilisational progress during the first decades of the post-independence period. By following general art debates in newspapers of the period, specifically in the years before and after the highly anticipated return of the young Meirelles from his European sabbatical, the article demonstrates how Meirelles’ work was not only seen as a depiction of Brazil’s ‘discovery’ by the Portuguese in 1500. Rather, it was also a symbol of how Brazilians themselves were discovering a national art in the 1800s. Beyond prevailing interpretations of Meirelles’ work as mainly a depiction of the beginning of Brazil’s history in 1500, the article claims that, ultimately, it represented the beginning of the history of Brazilian art in the 1800s.

The religious metaphor *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* employed to refer to artists, “priests of civilisation”, should not go unnoticed. Nineteenth-century societies were witnessing some of the most profound transformations in history. The world was trembling with the after-effects of the US, French, Haitian and industrial revolutions. Centuries of *Ancien Régime* stability gradually crumbled with the emergence of modern nation states, constitutions, slave revolts, liberal-secular agendas, working class camaraderie, and the first wave of decolonisation. Theoretical advancements in biology, chemistry and physics challenged religious dogma, while applied science powered steamboats, streetlights and machine guns.

But, as with any transitional period, tradition and modernity co-existed in institutions and beliefs of the time. The clashes and compromises between old and new were particularly evident in the efforts to reconcile two central discourses connecting people at the time: Catholicism and nationalism. In principle, the intrinsically trans-territorial and universal humanism of the Christian message could not be more incompatible with the border-based, civic tribalism of national discourses. Not to mention the Messianic notion of time – in which every contemporary event is vertically linked to genesis days and apocalyptic trumpets – with the linear, horizontally-facing chronology embraced by nationalists (Anderson, 2006). However, it took little until Catholic symbols began adorning national constitutions, anthems and iconography. From Europe to the Americas, national states zealously relied on divine authority to justify civic-ethnic sovereignty. Reaching across borders, Catholic theology was at the heart of national teleologies.

¹ From now on also referred to by the acronym AIBA.

Brazilians also used the combined lenses of nation-building and Christian doctrines to frame their understandings of the changes occurring in the period. Nineteenth-century newspapers are testaments of how national discourses relied on Christian metaphors to appeal to readers. A typical example is the enthusiastic Op-ed published on *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, in 1852, praising Brazil's "firm and colossal steps into the route of civilisation and progress". Interwoven in the essentially political analysis, a prophetic metaphor reminiscent of biblical verses² alerted readers that if civilisational advancement "was attacked or compressed", it "grew into a volcano" that "one day spreads its ardent lava over the foolish and imprudent who try to oppose God"(1852, p.3).

But like its religious predecessor, the modern gospel of nationalism balanced punishment by promising rewards to the faithful. Nations that observed what *Diário de Pernambuco* called the "religion of progress"(1857, p.2) were able to rise to the realm of civilisation. That Brazil was fulfilling this terrestrial prophecy was clear in the pages of *Jornal do Commercio*, which expressed an unreserved conviction that the country was "destined to occupy a very important place among nations of the globe" (1853, p.3). Not by chance, the newspaper found proof of Brazil's assured climb to the global stage both in the country's "gigantic steps into the road of civilisation and progress" and also in "our faith in God". The article summed up the double dimension of national development – which relied simultaneously on material feats and immaterial Providence - with a message in capital letters: "HOPE AND PERSEVERANCE" (1853, p.3).³

Few other Brazilians embraced such a hopeful and persevering approach to life and work in support national development like Victor Meirelles. Even those who were not particularly fond of his talent, such as eminent nineteenth-century critic Gonzaga Duque, had to concede that "like no other, [Meirelles] displayed an extraordinary desirous force" which had made him into one of the most "laborious students" (Duque Estrada, 1888, p.150) during his European study years. But, in addition to his "methodical, calm, patient" personality, which compelled the painter to "work every day" and whose habits "no human forces could change" (Duque Estrada, 1888, p.153), Meirelles' commitment to work also had to do with institutional pressures. As a recipient of a scholarship directly awarded by Emperor Pedro II, the young Meirelles understood that his future artistic career was at stake. Ultimately, it was also clear that the reputation of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, which had extended Meirelles' stay so he could complete *A Primeira Missa no Brasil*, depended on the artist's success. Particularly, Meirelles' sponsors were eager to see their protégé deliver

² Revelation 8:8-9

³ Unfortunately, the English translation does not capture the force of the rhyming message of the Portuguese words (ESPERANÇA E PERSEVERANÇA)

a work that would meet both the aesthetic and scientific criteria required by a history painting, then the most revered and complex *genre* according to Beaux-Arts canons. The burden of responsibility that Meirelles felt over his shoulders and brushes also related to the overlapping between religiosity and nationalism mentioned above. At the time, more than embellishing wall galleries, the ability to produce works of Fine Arts was a sign that a nation was headed toward civilisational salvation. As the *Correio Mercantil* remarked in the occasion of the 1865 AIBA exhibition, the “civilisation of peoples reveals itself in the measure of everything that manifests the progressive development of talent, which is Art”. The corollary, therefore, was that the “display of products of art” was never just an “artistic festivity” but the very “evidence of advancement and progress that a nation presented to other nations” (1866, p.1).

In such context, AIBA managers, teachers and students were understandably anxious for the redemptive day in which their artistic production (visual histories, in particular) would be fully recognised as a major contributor to the country’s spiritual and material development. Although the Brazilian state had supported Fine Arts training since the arrival of the 1816 French artistic mission⁴, it was only after Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre’s 1855 reform that the AIBA formally centred its artistic efforts on Brazilian themes and the development of a long-awaited ‘Brazilian School’ (Duque Estrada, 1888). But a Brazilian artist who, by using local motifs and traditions, could produce a history painting in the same fashion and sophistication as Europeans had yet to appear in Brazil. Relying again on religious analogies, although a temple had been raised (the AIBA headquarters) and doctrines were widely known and preached (the principles of academic art), Brazilians still waited for the redemptive coming of a history painter.

Meirelles’ 1860 debut cannot be understood without taking into account the pressures and anxieties of this nationalistic artistic context. Newspaper coverage of the period reveal how Meirelles was perceived as this long expected person. Other scholarship

⁴ The expression French Artistic Mission refers to a group of artists and artisans invited by King D. João VI to officially inaugurate and develop the teaching of Arts and Crafts in the colony, during the period the Portuguese court was in exile in Rio de Janeiro. The dramatic 1808 transmigration of the Portuguese Royal Family to the colony of Brazil, fleeing from Napoleonic forces, brought rapid changes to the capital at Rio de Janeiro. Beyond the immediate task of finding proper accommodation for the Royal Family and its entourage of an estimated 20,000 nobles and courtiers, the tropical colonial city needed to replicate the metropolitan atmosphere of early nineteenth-century Lisbon. Massive cultural, urban and landscape projects included the construction of libraries, gardens, avenues, universities, museums and other scientific, cultural and artistic institutions. Even though the French Mission’s formal existence was relatively short, being impacted both by the return of the Royal family in 1820 and the independence of Brazil in 1822, its works had a great influence over nineteenth-century Brazilian art. Joachim Le Breton, the mission’s first chief, was responsible for writing a document structuring the academic rules, neoclassic tendencies and systematized teaching methods which would be adopted by the Royal Academy of Arts and Crafts and, later, during the first years of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts (AIBA) officially founded in 1826.

holders (*pensionistas*) had travelled to Europe to learn from French and Italian masters. Like Meirelles’, their studies abroad had also been praised and seemed to “compensate to some extent the sacrifices that the state does in the benefit of the Arts” (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 1855, p.2). But, due to his combined work ethics and talent, the young Meirelles clearly stood out from the rest. While other artists “sent back one or two drawings, Victor Meirelles sent ten or twenty” and that is why the Emperor and the tutors from AIBA “felt they had found the artist they searched for” (Franz, 2007). An enthusiastic note on *Correio Mercantil* exalted how Meirelles was exceeding all expectations by observing that the “last drawings sent by our talented compatriot attest his extraordinary progress in classic studies” (1858, p.1). But more than other fellow *pensionistas*, Meirelles was not just sending back decent works. Rather, as the newspaper added, he had also been winning prizes and praises in Europe such as being “awarded in the contest of June this year with the third prize from France’s Imperial school and obtaining in the perspective contest the first honourable mention” (1858, p.1).

It is noteworthy how *Correio* makes prophetic references to the promising days ahead. The young Meirelles had not even returned to the country but was already being lauded as a “new professor” of the AIBA, and as someone “who will be no doubt one of its most brilliant ornaments”. Meirelles had only outlined his ideas for *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* in Paris but contemporaries across the Atlantic were certain that he promised “to Brazil [to become] a history painter of illustrious merit”. Although Meirelles was still technically a student himself, the newspaper already extended “congratulations to the future disciples of the Academy, who will have the pleasure to receive the lessons from a master of undeniable talent” (*Correio Mercantil*, 1858, p.1).

Not only newspapers editors praised Meirelles. Emperor Pedro II himself and his wife, Empress Teresa Cristina, had directly visited the AIBA “for more than 1 hour and a half” during which they saw “with satisfaction” the “last works sent from Paris by the diligent boarder Victor Meirelles” (*Correio Mercantil*, 1858, p.1). Official government reports also commented how the “*pensionista* Victor Meirelles, history painter, had moved from Rome to Paris to perfect his drawing and in the anatomic-physiologic” skills. The reports also celebrated how his works sent to Brazil “proved [Meirelles’] great advancement” (Ministério do Império, 1856, p.77) and, more importantly, how European peers had recognised Meirelles’ “laborious” work by awarding him “one more medal in the Paris Academy” (Ministério do Império, 1859, p.3).

Despite public admiration, the young Meirelles’ was not immune to criticism. In another article detailing the 1860 AIBA exhibition, *Correio Mercantil* devoted several

paragraphs to a severe evaluation of Victor Meirelles’ performance as a student⁵. This critique was necessary, argued the newspaper, “specially because the Academy expects a lot from this scholarship-holder” (1861, p.2). A sarcastic comment added that “the state also should” hold high expectations for Meirelles “given the great expenses with him” as “the *pensionista* who received more favours from the government” and “had more time of allowance”(1861, p.2). The article was blunt not just in exposing the shortcomings in Meirelles’ techniques in “drawing of figures” but also questioned his very integrity by asking whether the excellently painted “collection of types” had actually been authored by him: “Were they *done* by Mr Meirelles? That is the question” (italics original). But the major blow was directed at the chief task Meirelles’ had to complete during his European studies. The newspaper concluded that “in relation to the sketch [sent to Brazil] of the painting *A primeira Missa no Brasil*”, it was “full of faults in the colouring, in the disposition, and in the historical part: there are improper garments, inexplicable attitudes and the nature and place are thinly studied” (1861, p.2). However, despite the corrosive assessment of Meirelles’ techniques and ethics, the article concluded with an ambiguous message, mixing warning and hope, for the fate of the work Meirelles was finally bringing from Europe: “the large painting could generate effect” but only if the finished piece did not display the “errors and anachronisms” seen in the draft Meirelles had sent to Brazil. But for this to happen, added *Correio*, the young painter had to follow the steps of European masters such as “Paul Delaroche, who did not put in a painting anything that was not *really historical*” (1861, p.2) (italics added).

Canonical interpretations of Meirelles’ *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* have focused precisely on the painter’s dutiful efforts to confer historicity to his artwork. This tradition dates back at least to Luis Gonzaga Duque Estrada’s influential book *A Arte Brasileira* (1888)⁶. Gonzaga Duque’s essay is largely devoted to drawing connections between the way Meirelles’ introverted and humble personality favoured the placid and poetic ways with which he painted nature, especially large landscapes, but did not particularly serve him

⁵ It is important to note that Meirelles’ works would continue to face fierce public scrutiny throughout his long, prolific artistic career. The most well-known criticism directed against Meirelles occurred during the 1879 AIBA exhibition, when his *A Batalha dos Guararapes* was exhibited side by side to another history painting many regarded as a new Brazilian masterpiece, *A Batalha do Avaí*, by his AIBA colleague Pedro Américo. The negative reviews of Meirelles’ work were such that the otherwise reserved painter eventually decided to defend his artistic reputation using the pages of *Jornal do Commercio*.

⁶ As documented throughout the article, prior to Gonzaga Duque, several commentators had already noted the historical erudition of Meirelles’ work. However, it is only with *A Arte Brasileira* that a systematic art historiography begins to emerge in Brazil. In this sense, despite his partial and contradictory account of decades AIBA’s works and debates, Gonzaga Duque helped to lay the groundwork for foundational interpretations of national artworks such as *A Primeira Missa*, while also setting a periodisation of art history in Brazil that is still influential today.

when depicting the ferocity of battle scenes.⁷ Although not an enthusiast of Meirelles’ oeuvre, Gonzaga Duque recognised that *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* became “a true [artistic] triumph” largely because of the painter’s correct choice of subject matter, one that matched his personal “ideas and intimate convictions”. The theme of the peaceful encounter between Indigenous peoples and Europeans depicted in *The First Mass* aligned with the “poetic sentiment with which [Meirelles] interprets nature”, his “gentle and harmonious” techniques of colouring, his skilled “aerial perspectives”, his precise and methodical skills in drawing, and his “subtle and nuanced opposition of shadow and light”, all of which had helped to “spiritualise” the final composition (Duque Estrada, 1888, p.153).



A Primeira Missa no Brasil (The First Mass in Brazil), by Victor Meirelles, 1860.

However, in addition to concluding that the painter’s timid personality and gentle painting techniques suited the depiction of non-belligerent themes, Gonzaga Duque also

⁷ This was an increasingly popular history painting sub-genre for Brazilian audiences, especially during the nationalist fervour of the War of the Triple Alliance period (1864 to 1870), in which Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay joined forces against Paraguay.

suggested that Meirelles' work was particularly successful because of its historiographical accuracy. Specifically, he praises the painter's visual summary of all that could be said about the colonial event in question, namely, the Catholic mass celebrated on May 1 of 1500, which blessed the lands Captain Pedro Álvares Cabral unilaterally declared as a new possession of the Portuguese Empire:

(Victor Meirelles') first mass could not be but what is there. It had to be, necessarily, that arrangement, an altar, a priest officiating, another serving as acolyte, the Portuguese garrison watching the divine ceremony, the gentiles cautiously coming closer, admiring, imitating what they saw being done. This is *what history tells us and nothing more*. (Duque Estrada, 1888, pp. 145-6) (Italics added)

Implicit in Gonzaga Duque's quote is the assumption that Victor Meirelles' merits rested simultaneously on his talents both as painter and historian. That academic history painters should depict a faithful historical account (and nothing more) was a pleonastic statement for time. Meeting historiographical criteria was a prerequisite in the training of any aspirant artist wishing to reach the premier rank as history painter. In this respect, Stephen Bann has noted that the source-based methods and first-hand accounts that informed the works of painters at the time were a direct result of the historical fever that characterised the romantic epoch as a whole, which were being informed by the works of professional historians, among which the works of German historian Leopold von Ranke about the objectivity of history occupied a central place (Bann, 1995). Bann's study of Paul Delaroche revealed how one of France's most accomplished nineteenth-century painters incorporated various historiographical methods in his paintings, including archival research and travel in order to expand his in-depth knowledge of his subject matter (Bann, 1997, p.155). Similarly, Peter Burke went so far as to suggest that nineteenth-century history painters in Europe should "be regarded as historians in their own right", since they not only "learned from the work of professional historians" but also conducted original and meticulous research that contributed to the interpretation of the past (Burke, 2001, p.158).

The close relationship between historians and artists in nineteenth-century Brazil is a well-known theme. Particularly, several publications have addressed the way works of art produced at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts were closely informed by research and publications coming out of the leading institution for history research, the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Brasil (Castro, 2005; Christo, 2009; Coli, 2005; Oliveira, 2013; Schlichta, 2006). More than mere complementary proof of erudition, it was expected that

Brazilian history painters drew on the “methods of work of historians and follow their publications” as part of their AIBA training (Christo, 2009, pp.1153-4).

The way history painters in Brazil had to rely on primary and secondary sources to authenticate their visual narratives is key to understand the positive appraisal of *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* by Gonzaga Duque. Underlining his art critique was the recognition that Meirelles’ work had been able to meet *both* artistic and historiographical standards of the time. Although Meirelles’ fundamentally religious subject matter could easily have led to metaphysical extrapolations, Gonzaga Duque praised the painter’s for a strictly historiographical visual interpretation. Implicit in the art critic’s approval was also the recognition that Meirelles had made competent use of the most reliable primary source regarding the Catholic mass celebrated in 1500: the letter to King Dom Manuel I written by the Portuguese naval fleet’s notary Pero Vaz de Caminha, popularly known as *A Carta de Caminha* (*The Letter of Caminha*). Signed on May 1, 1500, Caminha’s letter is the best known of only two documents⁸ that survived the Portuguese expedition that departed from Lisbon on the 12th of April, commanded by Captain Pedro Álvares Cabral who sought the rich Calicut trade markets. According to traditional interpretation, Cabral’s vessels sailed westward as far as possible from the African continent in order to avoid the calm Gulf of Guinea. After many days sailing, the crew eventually disembarked on an unknown landmass which they immediately claimed for the Portuguese kingdom. Caminha’s letter is a detailed account of the so-called “discovery” of the land that the Portuguese initially named Terra de Vera Cruz (Land of the True Cross), but which subsequently was renamed Brazil due to the abundance of a tree called Pau-Brasil (Brazilwood). Because of its meticulous description of the landscape, fauna, flora and, particularly, of the first encounters between local Indigenous Tupis and the Portuguese, the *Letter of Caminha* is cherished both for its intrinsic historical value as the oldest record of the Portuguese colonisation in the Americas and, more importantly, as a foundational narrative for the formation of the Brazilian nation. For all its symbolism, Caminha’s letter is often referred to as “the birth certificate” of Brazil (Bosi, 2006, p.14).

Because of its descriptive value, historiographical weight and national symbolism, Caminha’s words were a necessary reference for Meirelles’ creation of his first grand-scale history painting at the conclusion of his nine-year study in European academies. Although living in Rome and Paris during this period, Meirelles continued to be diligently supervised by his Rio de Janeiro-based tutor, Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre. In their active

⁸ The second one, popularly known as the Letter of the Master João, is a more technical account of the voyage written by the astronomer-physician who travelled in Cabral’s fleet, João Faras.

correspondence Porto-Alegre recurrently instructs the young painter to use Caminha’s letter for the creation of his painting. In an 1859 letter, for example, Porto-Alegre explicitly reinforces how he had “recommended [Meirelles] the reading of the Letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha, who came with Cabral on the occasion of the Discovery. It will inspire you” (Mello, 1982, p.60). In addition to the unmediated account and detailed information that only an eyewitness account could provide, Porto-Alegre knew that the use of the sixteenth-century document would – in accordance to a historian’s methodology - add historical credibility to his student’s art piece. In simultaneously holding positions as an AIBA teacher and a member of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Brasil (IHGB), Porto-Alegre was aware that the narration of history at the time would only “flourish” in accordance with a “religious respect to the truth” (Porto-Alegre, 1856, p.353).

Contemporary Brazilian art critics and historians have provided ample evidence that Victor Meirelles indeed followed Porto-Alegre’s guidance (Cardoso, 2008; Couto, 1998; Coli, 2005; Mello, 1982; Oliveira, 2013; Turazzi, 2009; Xexéo, 2008). Comparisons of the nineteenth-century canvas and the sixteenth-century document make clear how Meirelles’ composition attempts to visually translate specific passages of *The Letter of Caminha*, especially the moment when Friar Henrique celebrated the Mass and the Portuguese sailors were joined by “about fifty or sixty of them [Tupinikins] (...). When it was time for the Gospel and we all stood up in uplifted hands, they stood up with us and lifted their hands, remaining like this until the end”. (Caminha, 1500, p.13).

Back in the 1800s, mindful of the overlaps between history writing and painting, the organisers of the AIBA exhibition of 1879 added a reference to Caminha’s Letter to confer extra authority to Meirelles’ painting under display. The AIBA exhibition catalogue that year included a historical summary that introduced Meirelles’ work by directly quoting Caminha’s description of the 1st of May 1500 mass; details included how the Portuguese “walked in procession” carrying the wooden cross and a “raised flag of Christ, chanting religious psalms”. In addition to affirming that the “savages [Tupinikin] gave great attention to the sacred ceremony”, the historical summary also documents Caminha’s mention of an “old man who seemed to understand and explain to the others the holiness of the event” (*Academia Imperial de Belas Artes*, 1879, pp.36-7).

But citing primary sources – either directly in the subject matter or via curatorial labels - was not the only way nineteenth-century history paintings could claim historical accuracy. Interpretations of Victor Meirelles’ work also recall how the young painter relied on another common validation strategy: citations of previous works of art. Academic painters at the time maintained an intense self-referential dialogue with the history of

European art. Beginning artists like Victor Meirelles often “quoted the masters that preceded them” as a proof of artistic maturity (Coli, 1998, p.376). Just as professional historians customarily legitimised their writings by rhetorically quoting classic texts, academic painters made strategic use of the “repertoire of models” and “iconographic references” available in the European painting tradition “to compose their own solutions or their own models” (Rosemberg, 2002, pp.74,78). While living in Paris, Meirelles found in the works of French master Horace Vernet a particularly appealing reference for the making of *A Primeira Missa no Brasil*. One of the most admired military painters of his time, Vernet had produced in 1854 a relatively well-known painting based on another Catholic mass that celebrated European colonisation, *Première Messe en Kabylie*. Vernet was an eyewitness to the mass celebrated as a result of the French conquest of Algeria and, therefore, was “a witness to an event parallel to the one Meirelles should build for Brazilian art and history (Coli, 2005, pp.32-3).

Although the almost identical staging of the altar and the priests gave rise to accusations that *The First Mass of Brazil* plagiarised the *Première messe en Kabylie*, most art critics and historians consider Meirelles’ reference to Vernet’s work as legitimate and necessary. As the acknowledgment of prior models was expected from aspiring academic painters, the young Brazilian painter might have been criticised if he had failed to cite such a work. As Meirelles’ himself stated, this was especially true for painters working in a country such as Brazil, in which “art was still in its infancy” and whose “artistic production, as well as art criticism”, therefore, could not “but follow the principles of those nations where both of them have better blossomed” (quoted in Duque Estrada, 1888, p.144).

Due to the combination of personal talent, an ascetic work ethics and acute awareness of the aesthetic and historiographical ideals expected from him, Victor Meirelles came back to Brazil with a large-scale, realistic representation of Brazil’s foundational colonial event. Virtually every interpretation of Meirelles’ work to this date have focused on his efforts – an eventual success – in rendering a history painting that that met the European scientific and artistic criteria of the time. As mentioned, Gonzaga Duque’s book was a precursor of this longstanding interpretation that highlights Meirelles’ effort to render an accurate of what “history tells us and nothing more”. Of course, contemporary interpretations have gone beyond this positivist-Rankean interpretation of history by dissecting the multifaceted political, religious, social and epistemic biases that shaped Meirelles’ understanding of history (Cardoso, 2008; Coli, 1998; Franz, 2007; Pereira, 2008; Rosa et al. 1982; Salgueiro, 2000; Schlichta, 2006; Silva, 2017, Xexéo; 2008). However, despite locating the artist as a man of his time, most interpretations still focus solely on the 1500 historical narrative Meirelles

depicted and not on the historic event he spearheaded in 1861. Jorge Coli, the most influential and sophisticated scholar on the topic, concludes a well-known essay essentially by echoing Gonzaga Duque’s opinions one century earlier that Meirelles’ painting became a “visual truth of the episode narrated in [Caminha’s] letter” (2005, p.41). Coli suggests that Meirelles’ greatest achievement was using the “demiurgic power of art” to make nineteenth-century audiences feel as if they really “watched the first mass in Brazil” (2005, p.39). However, by narrowing his analysis to the - no doubt important - illusionist features of all great history paintings, Coli’s essay misses the point that audiences of the time were witnessing the blessing of a contemporary event as well. Similar to Coli, Donato Mello Junior (2008, p. 35) also praises Gonzaga Duque’s “serene judgement” that Meirelles’ merit resided in his refined representation of a historical fact. While Junior incidentally mentions that Meirelles initiated the genre of historical paintings in Brazil (p.43), he does not explore the broader symbolism and significance of Meirelles’ painting to audiences at the time. The literature review on the topic shows that only Salgueiro directly attempted to answer the questions of “for what audience?” and “with which intention?” Meirelles had created his painting (2000, p.137). However, even this paper falls short in examining the full implications the completion of Meirelles’ painting had for his contemporaries. Like other contemporary art historians, Salgueiro (2000, p.139) correctly highlights that the exhibition of *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* had a twofold personal and national significance: first for Meirelles, as it meant the artist’s “consecration”, and second for Brazil as a whole, as the country took another step towards the goal of “forging an imaginary of a civilised country”. However, to prove the latter, Salgueiro’s analysis is again limited to Meirelles’ portrayal of history inside the canvas, not the historic meaning it had for outside audiences. Like others, her essay is mostly devoted to Meirelles’ selective representation of the encounter between Indigenous and Portuguese in a favourable light, devoid of any physical conflict, cultural clash or moral obscenity that could jeopardise the Romantic image of a harmonious start to Brazil’s history in the 1500s. Like most interpretations, Salgueiro focuses solely on the importance of Meirelles’ painting in giving Brazilian audiences an “*imagerie* of its history” (2000, p.139) but not on the simultaneous fact that those audiences were also seeing history in the making.

Art historical interpretations have capably addressed the formal qualities and aesthetic-historiographical references behind the making of Meirelles’ painting, which culminated in its sharp blend of scientific erudition, artistic symbolism and technical finesse. But a full explanation of the success of *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* is only found outside the canvas’ perimeters. Adding another layer of nuance to established interpretations, by drawing on insights from people who witnessed *A Primeira Missa*’s debut, it is essential to

point out that Meirelles' celebrated work had as much to do with its meticulous historical depiction as with the fact it was perceived as historic event *itself*. The complete image covering the canvas is only seen in light of the social fabric behind it. To be fully decoded, Meirelles' historical narrative must be interwoven in the discourse of progress of his contemporaries.

As seen in the first pages, mid nineteenth-century newspapers often wrapped the notion of national development in the veil of religious jargon. Additionally, the progress of a nation was always tied to its ability to prove scientific and artistic accomplishments. As *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* unreservedly put it, it was Brazil's "duty" not just to "pursue progress" but also to use it to "propel the vast populations that occupy its vast territory" (1860, p.2). Interconnections between progress, science and the arts were again evident as the newspaper celebrated that the Brazilian empire was "already home to litterateurs and poets" and the "mathematical sciences have notability" and "the financial and bank investigations are not far behind". Significantly, although the newspaper highlights the growth and maturity of literary and scientific fields, the comments about the Fine Arts focus entirely on the field's potential and imminent glory. Different from the established achievements of other areas of knowledge, the "Fine Arts are in their dawn", noted the newspaper, but adding that they "promise a brilliant future" (1860, p.2).

The rays of this promised future seemed around the corner to many of those living during the time of Victor Meirelles' return from Europe. Despite the predictable criticism, art-goers of the time were still optimistic that Brazilian art production, such as those displayed in the 1860 AIBA exhibition, were a "good augury to the future" (*Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 1861, p.2). Despite admitting that the fate of Brazilian art was still an open-ended issue, and that "everything was still in question", newspapers could still conclude that they had "no doubt that national artists can strive to secure their place in the great family of cultivators of progress" (*Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 1861, p.2). Much of this optimism had to do with the recent efforts by AIBA teachers and students, especially after Porto-Alegre's reform set to modernise teaching and reach the grand goal of developing a Brazilian school of art that would fulfil the country's desire to be "equal to the 'cultured' nations of Europe" (Squeff, 2009, p.111).

Among homegrown talents, the works of Victor Meirelles stood out. From the artist's home province of Santa Catarina, newspaper *O Argos* had no doubt Meirelles was already "a Brazilian artist who honours the country that gave birth to him" (1861, p.2). As mentioned, even in newspapers that criticised Meirelles, harsh words were often

superseded by descriptions of his irrefutable talent and prospective glory⁹. After all, even if viewers could spot some “lapses here and there” in *A Primeira Missa*, these were “excusable for a painting so complex” (*A Actualidade*, 1863, p. 2). Prior to the arrival of *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* from Europe, *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* commented that the draft sent to Brazil demonstrated all the “defects and qualities of Mr Victor”. The newspaper identified a long list of artistic missteps in the draft, from the “non-harmonious yellow colour” used to depict the Indigenous tupinikins to the poor choice of overall lighting that deprived the composition from having more “originality and interest” (1861, p.1). However, the bitter phrases gradually ceded space to praise: “Despite his faults, Victor Meirelles must have talent”, noted the article. Following a similar pattern seen in other news coverage preceding his return, the review of Meirelles focused as much on the quality of his existing works as on hopeful projections about the young painter’s future contributions to the Brazilian arts. The many first-rate works sent back to Brazil were seen as a patent proof that “Mr Victor is or wants to be a painter” (1861, p.1). In addition to technical talent, the newspaper also added to the consensus about Meirelles’ tireless work ethic: “If [Meirelles] has any sins to confess, for sure it is not sloth”. Thus, Meirelles’ monkish devotion to his work could help him resist the temptations of the “customs of our land, where all of those who hold a brush in their hands see themselves as masters or geniuses”. But for this, Meirelles had to exert humbleness and not “believe himself already a painter” and instead use the time ahead to “study, we repeat, study continuously”. If Meirelles was able to “distrust his [existing] ease”, completed the newspaper in a nationalistic and oracular tone, he would “show Brazil that Art can be dignifiedly represented by its children” (*Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 1861, p.1).

A furious *Correio Mercantil* piece condemning the mishandling of AIBA scholarships for studies in Europe offers another remarkable evidence of how Meirelles could be criticised and sanctified at the same time. In a rancorous attack on how “art seemed dead in our country” since the time “Mr. Porto-Alegre began as director” and had stopped all “competition [to award] travels to Europe” (1861, p.1), the newspaper could not avoid commenting on the distinctive status the young Meirelles held at the time. Despite the fact that “forgetfulness had covered the Academy with a veil that the institution had put on itself”, the newspaper moaned metaphorically, Meirelles still had managed to secure “three years of allowance [...] and additional three, and then still, under the pretext of [making] a great national painting, two more years of allowance and extraordinary gratification”. Even

⁹ It is noteworthy how Meirelles would maintain this overall aura of respect even from his fiercest critics. Angelo Agostini, for example, despite the ironic scepticism that marked his art reviews in *Revista Illustrada*, would often refer to Meirelles as the ‘leader’ of the so-called ‘Brazilian School’, originally imagined by Porto-Alegre.

if marked by irony, the words used by *Correio* are revealing about Meirelles’ sacrosanct reputation, which allowed him to continue with his European wonderings: “this sort of *beatitude* was only plentiful to Mr Victor Meirelles de Lima” (1861, p.1) (Italics added).

Public disputes aside, the many personal letters Porto-Alegre sent to mentor his young pupil in Europe also attest the AIBA’s faith that Meirelles was the history painter the institution long awaited for. In addition to practical teaching advice, Porto-Alegre’s words are marked by a manifest prophetic tone. While frequently congratulating Meirelles for sending works from Europe that had filled the AIBA teachers “with great satisfaction”, demonstrating the student’s “salient progress” both in “technical and theoretical” aspects, Porto-Alegre also added that Meirelles’ creations “would, one day, give a new polish (lustre) to this Academy” (Porto-Alegre, 1855). In the same letter, despite criticising certain details with “paternal frankness”, Porto-Alegre emphasises how the young painter produced “hopeful works”, affirming that Meirelles’ studies revealed a fine “taste, intelligence and the finesse that denotes a *soul predestined* to the perception of beauty” (italics added). Relying on another religiously visionary expression, the Brazilian tutor confesses to Meirelles “with all love and frankness” how he wishes that [the Brazilian Academy] “become, one day, a temple of the Arts”. For Porto-Alegre, the young Victor Meirelles would fulfil this mission, since “the time would come when [Meirelles] would take care of [the AIBA] and give it the necessary boost”. Mingling teleological reasoning with spiritual overtones, he concluded by foretelling that Meirelles’ “mission was beautiful because the times are in your favour” (Porto-Alegre, 1855). In another of his letters, Porto-Alegre, who was also an acclaimed writer, dedicated a poem to Meirelles again marked by a spiritual tone. Playing with the double meanings of the artists’ first name “Victor” and the surname of his fifteenth-century source “Caminha” (which in addition to a proper noun, is also the imperative form of the Portuguese verb *caminhar* - to walk), Porto-Alegre wrote: “Read Caminha and march to glory, you artist. Since heaven called you Victor on earth, read Caminha, paint and then *caminha* to glory” (quoted in Coli, 2005, p.31).

As thoroughly documented, newspapers of the time could also match Porto-Alegre’s prescient optimism. Different from past contenders, Meirelles seemed to be different: “If an artist ever promised, it was certainly this young man” (*Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 1861, p.1). The 1860 report written by AIBA’s new director, Thomaz Gomes dos Santos, addressed to Emperor Dom Pedro II, also attests the extreme optimism that those inside the government had in Meirelles. The faith on the young painter’s future was such that the new director anticipated that the AIBA would offer Meirelles the prestigious role of history painter even before the young painter had set foot back in Brazil. This “justice”, explained Thomaz

Gomes dos Santos, was based on “the natural disposition, love of art, and the constant work he demonstrated as a disciple of this Academy”. The report summed up the national expectation around the young painter in straightforward terms: “in the scholarship holder Victor Meirelles de Lima, who soon will return from Europe, the Academy puts its most flattering hopes” (*Ministério do Império*, 1860, p.35).

Hopes seemed to be justified as the future arrived early for Meirelles. Just months after his return to Brazil, the Brazilian Emperor and Empress paid an especial visit “to the pinacotheca where the painting *A primeira missa no Brasil* is located” (*Jornal do Commercio*, 1861, p.1). During the occasion, “HM the Emperor talked with the young artist for around one hour in front of his beautiful art piece”. More than discussing matters of art, the newspaper noted the symbolism of the visit in “honouring in the person of Mr. Victor those artists to whom they recommend the good productions, the efforts of talent or the constancy of work”. Not long after, the “imperial government” decided to “distinguish two artists who had talent and future” (*Correio da Tarde*, 1861, p.3), Meirelles and renowned musician Carlos Gomes, with the titles as knights of the Imperial Order of the Rose, then Brazil’s highest official recognition to those demonstrating loyalty and contributions to the state. Consecrating his return, and confirming the AIBA’s wishes, Meirelles was indeed “appointed honorary professor” of the Academy (*Correio da Tarde*, 1861, p.4). The next year, *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* published a note that “Mr Victor Meirelles de Lima, who occupied temporarily the AIBA’s history painting chair, was confirmed in this position” (1862, p.1). The *carioca* newspaper added that this “was a good choice” as “Mr. Victor is a distinct artist who had done excellent studies in Europe and given brilliant proofs of his talent” (1862, p.1).

The many proud references to Meirelles’ work seen in newspapers and other print media of the time are further evidence that all hopes deposited in him seemed to be coming to fruition. Soon after its first display on Brazilian soil, locals could cite *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* as a “majestic painting, a grand design with careful proficiency” that was already part of “our recent artistic history” and should serve as a proud nationalistic “shield to break the blows fired by our detractors” (*Revista Popular*, 1861, p.61). Opposite to martial metaphors, a literary magazine *A Mocidade* chose Edenic images to include Meirelles’ as the only painter among the flowers of “fragrant perfumes” that had blossomed in the “fatherland’s soil” (1862, p.6). Just a year after his return from Paris, Meirelles’ *A primeira missa* was the only painting belonging to the magazine’s select pantheon of living artists who displayed the “glorious standards that will perpetuate the artistic Brazil and its Brazilian creators (1862, p.6).

Not long after its unveiling, Meirelles’ painting had already begun its enduring path as a national visual bestseller, prompting visitors to Rio de Janeiro to declare “with satisfaction” seeing “many lithography copies of this superb painting sold in the [Royal] Court” (*Almanak histórico*, 1868, p.285). In less than decade, from a relatively unknown student, Meirelles would appear in the newspaper *A Reforma* as “a labourer for the intellectual regeneration of our cherished fatherland”. After years of intense devotion to his works, the newspaper suggested that Meirelles could finally “rest over your own glories” (1872, p.3). More than painting a chapter of Brazilian history, Meirelles had made history itself. Surpassing any of his tangible prizes, he had received the transcendental reward any nationalist could ever wish for, namely, ascending to the realms of national memory: “more than to himself, Victor Meirelles belongs to his people” (*A Reforma*, 1872, p.3)

Only within this broader social context is the significance of Victor Meirelles’ work manifest. Confirming Porto-Alegre’s prophetic letters, the young Meirelles returned in glory to Brazil after “eight years of assiduous studies” as the first painter of a large-scale history painting dedicated to a national theme to have the honour to be “accepted in the general Fine Arts exhibition of the world’s artistic capital” (*Ministério do Império*, 1860, p.1). *Jornal do Commercio* celebrated this unprecedented outcome stating that “the simple fact that this painting was accepted by the French jury is already good proof that this is a not work without merit” and emphasising that no other previous Brazilian work “could be compared to [*A primeira Missa*]” (1861, p.2). As *Gazeta de Campinas* joked, more than being “born as a painter”, Meirelles “was truly born to be a priest” because his first mass seemed better than the original (1871, p.2) (*italics added*).

Meirelles’ canonisation in life began after he proved successful in the crucial task marking the end of his European studies. It was not simply entering the Paris Sal6n. Nor it was just depicting a grand-scale and realistic portrayal of how the Portuguese had brought European civilisation to fifteenth-century Brazil. Rather, it was bringing himself European art standards to eighteenth-century Brazilians. Art critics and historians have correctly – yet narrowly – focused on *A primeira missa*’s intricate historiographical and symbolic representation of Brazil’s foundational encounter between Indigenous peoples and European settlers. However by restricting analysis to the portrayal of the 1500 Catholic mass, they have overlooked that Meirelles’ painting was the central piece of yet another, then contemporary, ritual. Beyond religion, it was art that played a redemptive role in this nineteenth-century nationalistic ritual. While the Portuguese Friar Henrique had brought the gospel to the Brazilian shores four centuries earlier, now Meirelles – a contemporary

"priest of civilisation" - was bringing again good news from Europe that confirmed Brazil's correct civilisatory path.

Just as the sculpted cross presented Indigenous peoples with a palpable symbol of spiritual salvation, so Meirelles' massive canvas provided eager audiences with an artistic model that promised to save Brazilians from cultural backwardness. Meirelles' choice of a historical episode that represented the beginning of Brazilian history in the 1500s could not be more appropriate to convey the most important message implied in his work, namely, that it represented the beginning of Brazilian visual history in the 1800s. That this historic event was greater than the historical portrayal should be clear today, just as it was for first-time viewers: "In sum, [A primeira missa] is already so important as to make history, and it will be marking the true date of birth of art in Brazil" (*Jornal do Commercio*, 1861, p.2).

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