



DISCOVERING A HERITAGE Wolney Unes¹

The decision about what to preserve is an active choice. The heritage, facts or people which are chosen will live on, rescued from the darkness of oblivion. It is the quest for eternal life.

Every day we must decide what to preserve, what heritage we want to maintain as symbols of our existence. This entire heritage forms our cultural canon and concepts such as authorship, fidelity and originality can be used to define it. In times of emphasis on the receiver, views and readings change, and artifacts from the past take on a new dimension. Should the way we perceive this heritage change, then the set of prescribed and recommended heritage must also change.

So against this background, this short article sets out to discuss the significance of incorporating the Art Déco heritage into the national Brazilian artistic and architectural canon. But, before doing so, a quick reminder about memory would be appropriate.

Inventing the past

Le passé: ce qu' une nation a de plus sacré, après l'avenir.
Victor Hugo, 1825

What shape does time have? It could be a continuous line, with a beginning and an end. Or would it be a spiral that always returns to the same point? Undoubtedly,

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there are still other possibilities. It is just one of those open questions where the answer matters less than its wording. And the wording of this question is always important whenever we talk about heritage.

For the Andean peoples and for the Celtic and Far Eastern cultures, the shape of time is circular, with an eternal re-birth. The Judeo-Christian culture has established a linear way of looking at time: a long line with a clear beginning, distinct landmarks and events which follow each other and a definite end – as the different scriptures have said.

This way of looking at time describes our conceptualization both of the past and of memory. Along that long continuous line, we place landmarks to help us situate ourselves. Based on these starting and finishing points we situate other events which familiarize us with the long line. As we move forward along this timeline, the landmarks increase. And so our memory of the past never stops expanding - facts, people, dates and heritage. The process for selecting this heritage and its very nature will define our cultural memory. Thus, to trace the history of what we now recognize as *historical and artistic heritage*, is to follow the story of the process of selection and identification of this heritage.

A circular line, on the other hand, does not allow for the accumulation of landmarks, since a new line will always be superimposed on the previous. It is worth remembering the ancient Shinto practice of building temporary temples and shrines, because the process of construction rather than that of preserving is what embodies the symbolism of rebirth.

But, coming back to the West, the protection and preservation of cultural heritage as we know it today would seem to have started around 1400, as noted by Françoise Choay. But this concern undoubtedly had earlier origins.

An important antecedent can be found, for example, in the motivation of the Ptolemaic organizers of the Alexandria Library: to bring together in one place the whole of the world's written memory. And then preserve it.

Later on, Christianity, in the wake of Judaism, emerged as a religion based on the written word, which had to be preserved. The new religion immediately set to defining its canon: its own writings, and in addition its music and architecture. Defined in councils, these canonical precepts would influence all the procedures to follow. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity crystallized this policy of conservation and preservation. The date suggested by Choay, therefore, marks the beginning of a kind of secularization of this concept: from outside the Church would appear the first attempts at identifying a cultural heritage – historical and artistic? – which should rightly be preserved. This heritage would define our secular artistic canon.

And since the model had been the Judeo-Christian religion, a culture of word and writing, it does not seem merely coincidental that this concern started with literature:

By way of classical texts that his philological and critical reading seeks to restore to their original purity, Petrarch unveils an unknown antiquity, upon which he confers the adjectives holy and sacred [...] The purifying reading of the poet, who wishes to read the verses of Virgil without barbarism and glosses, discovered and founded the phenomenon of historical distance. It would be left to his humanist successors to excavate it even further. (CHOAY, 1992:36-37)

So, it was because of this growing interest in the secular literature of Antiquity that this desire to get to know the environment in which those works had been conceived that Rome, the birthplace of these authors, sparked interest. Then all roads started to lead to the eternal city, in a pilgrimage unprecedented in all its history. Out of interest in this environment arose what Choay calls “the Petrarch effect” (“*effet Pétrarque*”):

However, without exception, these visitors are not interested in the monuments themselves. For them, the testimony offered on the past by the text still holds sway over all others. It is especially Cicero, Livy and Seneca that humanists evoke and invoke in their context. (ibid. 38)

The Petrarch effect, even if it originated in literature, quickly affected the fine arts and architecture and started “a dialogue without precedent between

artists and humanists” (ibid.). And more than having their appetite whetted by a historical relationship, or by an instinct to preserve landmarks of the past, the artists were interested above all in the model character of the works: “These are models, capable of inspiring an art of living and a refinement, that only the Greeks had known” (ibid. 27).

So, what fascinated the humanists was the refinement and perfection of the works and the wealth of materials. Studying these works and analyzing them was a way of achieving aesthetic perfection in their own time. The aim of studying these works was to draw up a set of models which would serve as a starting point for present creation.

It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that there was an awakening to other aspects of the cultural heritage of the past, now clearly artistic. One of the first scholars to systematize this heritage and develop new knowledge was the Viennese Alois Riegl, responsible for structuring the history of art itself as a discipline.

Riegl enshrined the notion of the “intentional monument” (*gewolltes Denkmal*), according to which the building of the symbolism of a monument happens in the present (RIEGL, 1903:20). The past is built today; its meaning emerges from what we do with it in the present. The symbolic value assigned to an artistic, cultural object is a value of the present, established in the present – not necessarily coinciding with the original value.

Defining heritage

In Brazil at this very moment, we are in the process of training to accept Art Déco as heritage. Right now we are in the process of trying to define if these works should be preserved, or if they should be given the status of monuments, of immutable objects, of historical works. This moment is part of the preparation for the historical acceptance of the past. Or in the words of Bacher:

We recognize and accept only those monuments of the past for which we have been programmed in the present, for which, through the present - basically through the art of the present - we have been prepared to recognize. (BACHER, 1986:20)

And in this context, the role of the Goiânia heritage is of fundamental importance, because it was the first initiative of this type. In December 2002, the Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage approved the listing of the

Goiânia Art Déco architectural collection. The significance of this listing went far beyond the mere recognition of the supposedly aesthetic properties of the Goiânia collection, which was evidently known to be plain and simple. What matters most here is that this was the first set of Art Déco architectural works recognized in the country, an official act of recognition of the style, an initiative that would provide space for a discussion of its value in terms of national architectural production.

The Goiânia example sparked action elsewhere in the country as was the case of Cipó in Bahia or the recent studies in Aracaju. Recognition of the aesthetic quality of already established monuments, such as the Rio de Janeiro Cristo Redentor or Salvador's Lacerda Elevator, had also begun. Every Brazilian has a picture of these in mind but few recognize them as Art Déco monuments.

In conjunction with these initiatives, there is another issue which has just barely started to be formulated: people have begun to notice the presence of a sizeable collection of Art Déco architecture in Brazilian towns all over the country. This reinforces the absurdity of the total lack of attention to the style in Brazil; no surveys on this heritage have been done. And this leads us to an immediate question: what is, after all, the importance of Brazilian Art Déco?

While not possessing the exuberant tones of the North American or British Art Déco, the national variety does show certain aesthetic qualities. What is more, because of its geographical and quantitative dissemination, it is a landmark in the country as it can be found extensively all over, including in large sets of buildings.

As we discussed elsewhere (2002, 2008), this could be attributed to the fact that Art Déco architecture was adopted by Brazil at a time when the country was experiencing great economic growth, with industrialization and urbanization. In the early twentieth century, Brazil was a sparsely populated country of small towns and almost no industry. Large tracts of the country still remained unknown and unexplored, and the population was concentrated along the coast.

From the 1920s onwards, the country began a process of industrialization and occupation of the empty hinterlands. The Getúlio Vargas era gave the country an industrial policy, which led to an urban explosion. Towns emerged in the hinterlands and the demand for housing grew as never before.

Admittedly it was from the 60s onwards that the country experienced its greatest demographic and economic growth. In the early 60s Brazil had a population of about 50 million, the majority of whom lived in the countryside, but it ended the century with nearly 150 million people, two thirds of whom now lived in urban areas. This period presented the largest quantitative increase in architectural and urban production in the country's history because of its 200% growth in population and consequent demand for urban housing.

Meanwhile, it was in the interwar years that the greatest qualitative changes took place in terms of national life. These would pave the way for the subsequent numerical increase and urbanization. So, despite the relatively small architectural production of the 1920-50 period, it was of fundamental importance for the construction of contemporary Brazil. And this great increase in construction from the 20s onwards found its ideal partner in the Art Déco style, because Déco buildings boast of characteristics (especially the geometric and streamline variants) which do not make them exactly the most expensive. In 1938, a construction builder in Goiania, who was aware of this, wrote that “a large financial outlay is not necessary to give a building a truly modern aspect” (IBGE, 1942).

Brazilian Art Déco

Another appealing aspect of Art Déco architecture was the fact that, with its cosmopolitan pretensions, it offered the country a unique opportunity to move out of its isolation and become part of a global context. The construction of modern cosmopolitan buildings, and including in them an appreciation of its own indigenous features, such as Marajoara motifs, elements of the national fauna and flora and indigenous names, allowed the country to take its place



alongside the world's more developed nations, at least in terms of architectural production.

This combination of factors is responsible for the fact that Déco architecture is today one of the architectural styles most widespread in Brazil. Art Déco can be seen everywhere, in every region of the country, not only in houses and buildings, but also on park benches, lampposts, clocks, railway stations, street lighting, etc.

In fact there is no other style so productive in Brazil, as is shown by our collection of images. After spending more than fifteen years traveling throughout Brazil in the search for Art Déco buildings and monuments, our database now holds more than three thousand images. The final result of this research, a collective task by its very nature, cannot even be envisioned as yet.

Art Déco, as widespread as it is unknown, is yet invisible to the Brazilian eye. Even architects and art historians still remain silent about this heritage, which enshrines a vital moment of the history not only of Brazilian architecture but also of the migratory impetus and the establishment of towns in the desire to settle the immense empty hinterland of this continental-sized country.

The fact that Art Déco architecture enjoys such low esteem in Brazil is due to a lack of interest in this heritage (and vice versa). The loss of these buildings which witnessed the beginnings of industrialization in Brazil and the settlement of the hinterlands and urbanization would leave a void in the national memory.

Furthermore, the rediscovery of the Art Déco architectural heritage in Brazil plays an important role in rewriting the country's history of the arts. Today we still live under the shadow of the myth that the architectural

memory (and in many cases even the artistic memory) of Brazil belongs only to the Brazilian colonial period and that its main architectural production is that conventionally called Baroque (or Colonial). This myth leads to the widespread belief that there would be no artistic or architectural production in the country outside of this period, with the very few exceptions of Modernism, which further proves the rule.

So against this background, Goiânia appears as the Art Déco capital. In this process, no attempt was made to compare the Goiás collection with the huge number of Art Déco buildings in Copacabana, downtown São Paulo or Belo Horizonte. Nor was it intended to present the small Goiás buildings as being more important than the great national Art Déco monuments; in Goiânia, there are no individual buildings as aesthetically important as those in Manaus, Uruguaiana, Caruaru, Iraí, Cipó, among many others.

Nevertheless, when the listing of the Goiânia Art Déco collection was proposed, it was intended to draw attention to the fact that it is the only city in the country built during the height of the movement. It was intended to highlight how important it was that the public authorities adopted this style as a way of creating an image of renewal in a region which had been forgotten by the rest of the country.

More importantly still, the national listing intended to awaken the country to the enormous Art Déco artistic heritage it possesses. Goiânia was just an icon of the style in the country and it is in this spirit that we believe that Goiânia can resume that pioneering spirit that led to its construction 70 years ago.

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