

# *Museum of Origins:* A Project to Think about Brazilian Art

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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to analyze the project of the *Museum of Origins* by Mário Pedrosa, as a solution to the fire suffered by the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, in 1978. Establishing as a guiding thread the concept of origins, which unites the first Brazilian museological institution – the Royal Museum (1818) – to Pedrosa's project, we seek to understand the limits and scope of the structuring systems around the recognition of identities in these spaces. The Museum of Origins, therefore, created new demands in the Brazilian museum context, by placing artistic productions from different origins in the same context of equality. Mário Pedrosa was one of the first authors to produce a critique of colonial domination in the political, economic, and artistic spheres, significant for the foundation of his autonomous thinking and willing to break with the hegemonic centers of power.

**Keywords:** Museum of Origins; Mario Pedrosa; museum narratives; diversity.

## **A brief introduction to *Origens***

The creation of the first Brazilian museum dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the king D. João VI (1767-1826), by the decree of June 6, 1818, transformed the official residence of the Portuguese royal family into the “Royal Museum” – today, the “National Museum”. The use of this building as a museum date back to the “House of Natural History”, known as the “House of Birds” due to the first ornithological collections organized by naturalists, as well as because it was a space for preparing indigenous ornaments to be sent to Portugal and abroad. Due to the intense flow of naturalists in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil, the ethnographic, archaeological and natural science collections defined the introductory museological vocation of a country in search of its “origins”, through the study of indigenous communities – extinct or living –, geology, botany, and native fauna.

The first cultural recognition of the “world here” (Brazilian land) occurred based on the museum and scientific models of the “world there” (European land). Our identity through the eyes of others was not exempt from the appropriation of interpretative schemes that, behind a supposed neutrality anchored in positivist science, measured the nature and humanity of this land by the

European ruler and compass. With the arrival of D. João VI and the establishment of the Portuguese royal family between 1807 and 1821, the functional and educational structures of the Modern State – the archive, the museum, and the library – reproduced the values of the original European matrix. Thus, the first museum in Brazil, the “Royal Museum and Cabinet of Natural History”, founded in 1818 – after the “Imperial Museum” in 1822, with Independence, and the “National Museum” from 1889, with the Republic State – was born with the identity of a science museum focused on Natural History; to provide its operation, the “Instruction for travelers and employees in the colonies on how to collect, preserve, and ship objects of natural history” (*Instrução para os viajantes e empregados nas colonias sobre a maneira de colher, conservar, e remetter os objectos de historia natural*) was translated from the original French and published by the Royal Press in 1819. This was a type of normative instruction that guided the procedures for collecting and shipping archaeological and ethnographic objects, as well as mineral specimens, flora and fauna, with the aim of learning about the riches of the land. The “Instruction” determined that the vocation of the first Brazilian museum would be utilitarian, based on a Cartesian scientific model appropriate to the mercantilist mode of production, since through research on nature it would be possible to map the unique products of the colony. If, on the one hand, the initial collections reflect the collections of expeditions subsidized by European kingdoms and national companies, on the other hand, they also replicate the commercial and cultural relations established not only with the Portuguese Colonial Empire, but also those arising from ties with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the Austrian Empire. Thus, the museum institution emerges from a civilizing narrative, based on the European model of recognizing the world, from a universal and cognitive character, that is, through knowledge of human and natural diversity. From this diversity arises the art representing the territory as scientific drawing, recording the landscape and colonial society, but also as that expressed in the objects of the native peoples.

What is the common thread that connects the first Brazilian museum to the Museum of Origins proposed by Mário Pedrosa (1900-1981) in 1978? On the other hand, under what fracture do we perceive the distance between these models? According to Froner (2015, p.166), in the museum systems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the territory of a specific narrative and worldview is constructed: Western civilization, which through its art, culture, history and scientific knowledge constructs a particular worldview that divides the “I” from the “Other”. The collection is just a way of marking this distinction. Recognition of “similarities and dissimilarities”. In this hegemonic and homogeneous relationship, the museum is yet another operational instrument for the sedimentation of a Europeanizing civilizing model. In what way and to what extent does Pedrosa’s proposal redefine and resize this totalitarian paradigm, sectarian by nature? One of the clues lies in the use of the plural proposed for the museum’s proper name – Origins –, denoting that in the field of Brazilian relations, Afro-Latin American par excellence, the sources are multiple, the interferences intertwined, the narratives plural and diverse, because, in an

anthropophagic soul, the broth of culture is multifaceted. But make no mistake, this multiple character does not make our representative existence, composed of collections, fragmented. Rather, if the layers of meaning of historical time establish a guiding thread for the Western understanding of culture, the imaginary confluences of distinct traditions can find in the heterogeneity and dissimilarity the basis of our cultural and artistic production that are revealed – sometimes – in the curatorship and museum's narratives.

However, it is impossible to understand the construction of museum agency systems in Brazil – or even in the context of Latin America, based on its geographic and cultural insertion – apart from the international scenario. If today we observe the collapse of traditional arrangements, based on the emergence of categories that reformulate thought patterns through the understanding of new phenomena – such as the activism of excluded voices from the LGBTQIA+, black, indigenous communities, and female voices –, projections for conceptual innovation occur slowly, mainly due to the elitist and conservative nature of the structure. Postmodernity presents a subversive sense of temporal disjunction fostered by technological disruption, the disqualification of intellectual models and the absence of a social paradigm in the field of culture broadly perceived from previous categories based on the singularity of values, that is, to disqualify the cultural system that formulated the operational concepts of the museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; rather, our intention is to note how Pedrosa appropriates and subverts the previous model with the proposition of the “Museum of Origins”. Our main questions revolve around a few issues: how was it conceived and conceived? What reflections were used to shape it? What concerns were projected by Mário Pedrosa and how did his previous experiences – such as his relationship with Nise da Silveira (1905-1999) and the “Museum of Images of the Unconscious”, from 1952; the proposal for the “Museum of Brasília”, from 1958, and the project for the “Museo de la Solidaridad”, in Chile, between 1971 and 1973 – influence the proposed program? Finally, how was this proposal updated?

### **Pedrosa in-between places: criticism and academia; the museum and politics**

Before delving into the specifics of the “Museum of Origins”, it is important to emphasize that, due to the depth of the subject matter, our intention was to propose a critical review, based on the systematization of the material related to the theme, through the reading of the bibliography related to the object of research, cataloging and cross-referencing of significant references for our analysis, which allowed us to have a fluid, sensitive and contaminated vision, especially, by the questions raised, throughout our investigative path.

Mário Pedrosa is one of the most important theorists in the history of Brazilian and Latin American art criticism. Among the reasons that led him to earn this distinction is the peculiar way in which he moved between art and political activism. He never separated the social revolution from avant-garde art and therefore developed a more horizontal and organic way of thinking

focused on the socioeconomic reality of Brazil. Pedrosa committed himself to investigating singularities that marked national production amidst the plurality of the diverse cultures that exist here. His reflections provided us with a transgressive exercise in looking at Brazil in Brazilian art, showing us the need to “seek new experiments, affirming difference, variation, and resistance to the subjection of identity and individuation” (Adrião; Cabral; Toneli, 2012, p. 210).

If in the 1930s, he began to stand out based on a critique focused on the social function of art, with his initial focus on the exhibition of the German engraver, Käethe Kollwitz (1867-1945) in Brazil, in the 1970s, we observed in Mário Pedrosa an even more latent desire for the birth of a large collective production interested in returning to the roots of Brazilian art, emphasizing, mainly, our position as a country marked by European colonization, belonging to Latin America. It is during this period, having just arrived from yet another exile<sup>1</sup>, that the theorist would formulate one of the most significant projects of his career, in which he deposited the last breaths (so to speak) of modern utopia and the synthesis of his beliefs in the formulation of a kind of genealogy for the artistic field in Brazil. This was the “Museum of Origins”, a proposal initially created as a solution to the fire suffered by the Modern Art Museum (MAM) in Rio de Janeiro in 1978 (Leal, 2021). Despite all the commotion caused by the MAM tragedy, this episode was seen by many intellectuals (including Mário Pedrosa himself) as an opportunity to rebuild the museum in line with new, more democratic institutional models for community use, aiming beyond its structural update and security measures, “to modernize its conception as an instrument of action, knowledge and pleasure for an entire people” (Pontual, 2013, p. 465).

In this sense, we believe that the “Museum of Origins” project serves as a tool for Pedrosa to consolidate his genealogical narrative on Brazilian art, compatible with the needs of the local context. The initiative also served to echo the debates in which the critic was inserted in the international artistic system, such as the Round Table of Santiago de Chile, held by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1972. This event is considered a milestone of profound changes around museology, with repercussions on the role of museums as agents of cultural inclusion, affirmation of the identity of social groups, recognition of diversity, economic development and reference for public cultural policies in Latin America, thus characterizing the advancement of the museological field in the region in terms of institutionalization and cooperation.

The Santiago Roundtable was an event that was part of its time, understood as the tumultuous 1970s in Latin America, particularly in Chile, and was part of it and with it. Despite the delayed results in Latin America, it made choices and was guided by critical thinking. In the uniqueness of this part of the Americas, the event highlighted

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<sup>1</sup> The first exile occurred between 1937 and 1945, during the Estado Novo. Upon returning clandestinely to Brazil in 1941, Pedrosa was arrested and later deported to the United States due to his role in the creation of the Leninist Workers' Party in 1936. During his stay – prior to the McCarthyist reactionary movement – he worked in the film section of the Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs in New York and as a correspondent for *Correio da Manhã*. The second exile (1970-1977), resulting from the 1964 coup, was marked by his stay in Allende's Chile (1907-1973).

the plurality of man's relationships with the world and his responses to the wide variety of its challenges. (Alves; Reis, 2013, p. 131).

Mário Pedrosa was very sensitive to such issues, especially regarding the importance of museums in the contemporary world and their contribution to educational and social development plans. Therefore, we cannot deny how much the thinking about the “Museum of Origins” was contaminated by the climate of political and cultural effervescence<sup>2</sup> he experienced in Chile, in the early 1970s. It is also important to remember that, at that time, Pedrosa was exiled in Santiago (from 1970 to 1973), an experience that encouraged him to learn more about Latin America and to reflect on the artificiality of the disjunctions between high art and popular art.

Alongside the Spanish critic José María Moreno Galván (1923-1981) and the Italian painter Carlo Levi (1902-1975), Pedrosa was one of those responsible for the conception of the “Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum”, an institution created based on a unique and differentiated proposition, until then, in the field of formalization of museological proposals, because its collection was promoted through direct donations from artists, without the mediation of collaborators, supporters or patrons. The works offered came solely from the enthusiasm of the artists in the face of the socialist experience lived by the Chilean people at that time.

To make the idea a reality, Mário created and presided over the “International Committee for Artistic Solidarity with Chile”, which included artists, art critics and museum directors from several countries. Pedrosa used his respect, prestige and knowledge gained as an art critic to mobilize visual artists from all over the world. Chilean embassies became recipients of donations, with some works going directly to the Latin American Art Institute in Santiago [...] In his speech, Salvador Allende thanked the artists who had donated and would continue to donate works to the people of Chile for their solidarity, and he also thanked those who, like Pedrosa, had obtained donations through their contacts and influence. Paraphrasing Mário, Allende said that this would not only be a museum, but it would be the Workers' Museum, a place where culture would no longer be the heritage of the elite, but of those who had been rejected until then, such as the workers of the land, the mills, the factories and the coast. (Zoli, 2011, p. 234-235).

Another important aspect of the proposal is the fact that the Brazilian critic, influenced by his closeness to the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1977), also exiled in Chilean territory, began to direct his attention to research into Brazilian indigenous artistic production<sup>3</sup>, as well as for the production of African or Afro-descendant matrices – bringing to the debate

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<sup>2</sup> The government of Salvador Allende (1970-1973) developed an intense political program against imperialism, with great impact both inside and outside Chilean territory. Among the main decisions were the nationalization of the country's natural resources (such as copper mines) and agrarian reform. In addition, art and culture contributed to dynamizing the social content of the political actions proposed by Allende, seeking, above all, the development of a decolonial and collective artistic production, aimed at responding, in general, to the Latin American reality.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the fire at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, Pedrosa was preparing an exhibition for this institution, in partnership with Lygia Pape (1927-2004), on indigenous art, entitled “Alegria de Viver, Alegria de Criar” (*Joy of Living, Joy of Creating*). The exhibition was supposed to open in 1979, but due to the tragedy it was canceled. In 1983, Darcy Ribeiro published in Vol.1 “História Geral da Arte no Brasil” (*General History of Art in Brazil*), a fundamental text for a less reactionary and exclusionary view of Brazilian indigenous art, under the title “Arte Índia” (*Indigenous Art*).

their concerns regarding the decolonization process undergone by African countries since the 1950s –, introducing excluded voices into the curatorial field of projections. In his proposal, black and native voices were not introduced into the project by the deviation of the other – exotic and stripped of self-identity –, but as protagonists of a silenced history. All these demands, therefore, were fundamental for the construction of the ideological basis of what would become the “Museum of Origins” project.

Mário Pedrosa was one of the first authors to criticize colonial domination in the political, economic and artistic spheres. This aspect was significant for the foundation of his autonomous thinking, distant from the hegemonic centers of power. Pedrosa “elaborated a critique of the world, within which he situates his art criticism, that could provide access to a universal vision” (Bompuis, 2019, p. 290). The “Museum of Origins” not only sought universality but also to reflect what was Brazilian in Brazilian art. The project was organized into five independent museum centers: “Native People Museum”, “Museu de Arte Virgem” (Museum of Images of the Unconscious), “Modern Art Museum”, “Black People Museum”, and “Popular Art Museum”. In addition, its activities included theoretical and practical learning courses focused on discussions on art history and cultural anthropology with specialized sections on urban culture, rural and tribal communities and festivals worshipped by the Brazilian people, such as Carnival:

The museum will be designed to give the public an accurate picture of the creative and artistic evolution of humanity, from prehistoric cave art to the art of our days. Everything that is representative of each era, of each culture and civilization, of each school will be present in the museum. In this way, the museum will provide the most complete panorama of the artistic evolution of all peoples and will offer the Brazilian people and future generations an exceptional documentary with which their artistic and cultural education will be visually and in the most satisfactory way possible (Pedrosa 2016 apud Pucu, 2019, p. 452).

Mário Pedrosa highlighted in his projects the resources that each unit made available and those necessary for the functioning of both. According to the critic, the Museu do Índio already had a rich collection, but did not have an appropriate location. The “Museu de Arte Virgem” or “Museum of Images of the Unconscious” also presented a set of important works and, unlike the previous center, had its own space that only needed renovation due to the precariousness of its facilities. The Museum of Modern Art, in turn, should reconstruct its heritage with an emphasis on Brazilian production: from the first representative figures of impressionism, such as Eliseu Visconti (1866-1944), to the following generations: Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), Anita Malfatti (1889-1964), Volpi (1897-1976), Cândido Portinari (1903-1962), Di Cavalcanti (1886-1973), among others. In addition, it would have Latin American, European and North American rooms; concrete art, neoconcrete art and spaces for temporary exhibitions. As for the Museum of the Negro and the Museum of Popular Arts, they would need to form their collections considering the acquisition of pieces brought from Africa (in the case

of the former) and artifacts collected in the most varied regions of Brazil. Regarding the museum's administrative structure and sustainability strategies, Mário believed that the space should be public or mixed in nature, in addition to having "organizational and artistic freedom, so that it would be protected from 'variations in orientation and administration, the result of untimely and bureaucratic political interventions that are not at all advisable'" (Pedrosa 1995 apud Pucu, 2019, p. 465). In other words, it was a matter of designing another form of institutionality, where the dialogue between each unit in question would be contemplated, which is why the "Museum of Origins was not an end in itself, but an instrument for mobilizing the concepts of art and artist.

### **Some considerations...**

In light of the issues raised about the Museu das Origens, we believe that this proposal shows us a certain interest on Pedrosa's part in returning to our most remote past as a means of renewing Brazilian artistic production. According to the theorist, art was experiencing a moment of crisis caused by the expansion of capitalism in the world which, among other problems, had caused the castration of creativity. It was in this context, especially from 1975 onwards, that Mário Pedrosa began to write more clearly about a certain instability in the field of art and the urgency of finding other possibilities outside of the European historical approach. Thus, when he launched the "Museum of Origins" project, he sought to take advantage of all the movement caused by the fire at the MAM in Rio de Janeiro to radically change its direction and recover other existing museums, because he argued that this would enable the development of a network between institutions, in order to preserve what was most invaluable in each one, enhancing their existence. The "Museum of Origins" not only met the new demands generated by the international art circuit, but also created new ones by placing, for example, the production developed by psychiatric patients and children on the same level as the works of renowned modernist artists. Pedrosa's proposal originated from a catastrophe: the fire at the MAM-RJ. Invited to participate in the "Permanent Committee for the Reconstruction of the MAM", on September 14, 1978, at a meeting held at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, he presented his proposal<sup>4</sup>.

If in the anthropophagic Brazil of the first half of the 20th century, all that mattered was to devour what was not Brazilian, this renewal of the art circuit in the 1970s would take place precisely in what had been rejected in the previous decades. In his words, "all modern art was inspired by the art of peripheral peoples, so nothing could be more appropriate for the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro than to present this art that we have in abundance, alongside a collection of contemporary Brazilian and Latin American art." In his plan, the collections of the already existing "Native People Museum" and "Museum of Images of the Unconscious" would be

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<sup>4</sup> The original document is published online on the Memória Lage website and was also published in *Jornal do Brasil* on September 15, 1978, and in *Arte Hoje* in October 1978. Available at: <https://goo.gl/nQt7si>. Accessed on: March 3, 2022.

incorporated into the project. The “Black People Museum” would consist of pieces brought from Africa and Afro-Brazilian works, mainly for religious purposes. The “Popular Art Museum” would consist of pieces collected from various regions of Brazil. And finally, the Modern Art Museum would have a collection representing Brazilian art, with works from different generations, from Eliseu Visconti to the artists of the 1970s. The “Museum of Origins” would also have Latin American rooms, European and North American rooms, concrete and neoconcrete art rooms, as well as temporary exhibition rooms (Nascimento, 2019, p.897).

However, Pedrosa's proposal was not put into practice. We can see that its “failure to get off the ground” reflects a society still attached to traditional values and provincial in its understanding of the agents that produce art, without taking a closer look at the narratives of the many groups that constitute it. We must also emphasize that, as innovative as it was for its time, the “Museum of Origins” did not break with the ideal of modernity. This is justified by several reasons, starting with the fact that its museum centers were conceived in a categorized and non-coexistent way. Modern rational thought, the search for order and the urgency of defining a genealogy for Brazilian art are some of the issues that are still latent in this Pedrosa project.

The “Museum of Origins” would also undergo extensions in later decades. According to Parracho (2019, p. 408), we can detect some influences in specific actions, such as the creation, by Dinah Guimarães, in 1994, of the “Mário Pedrosa Permanent Gallery” at the “National Museum of Fine Arts”, based exactly on the project in question. Also in 2000, Nelson Aguilar would inaugurate the “Rediscovery Exhibition” (Mostra do Redescobrimento) at the São Paulo Biennial Pavilion, whose centers would date back to Pedrosa's project, which, in fact, expressed an alternative route that was gaining strength in contemporary art. Furthermore, we believe that the project for Ibirapuera Park (1954) in São Paulo itself was influenced by Pedrosa's museum, since it refers to some of its centers when establishing the “Museum Afro Brazilian”, the Oca, the “Modern de Art Museum” and the Brazilian Cultures Pavilion. Despite the problematic concept of origins in Brazilian artistic production and the occasional nationalist clichés, it is interesting to highlight this episode as the beginning of a decolonizing action towards the development of a critical reflection on local art. The “Museum of Origins” serves as a supporting object for our analysis because it draws attention, from specific museum centers, to what Mário Pedrosa validated as the founding roots of Brazilian culture. This reason has opened the possibility of reconstructing narratives that until then had been silenced and repressed; of languages and knowledge subordinated to the idea of totality defined by modern European rationality.

Even with some weaknesses, Pedrosa's proposal allows us to learn about the contributions and stories of social groups that move on the margins of power structures, not because they wanted to be in this position, but because they were simply confined to this place of subordination by the capitalist system:



Based on the diagnosis that both the rhetoric of modernity and progress and the logic of coloniality and control are supported by a cognitive apparatus that is patriarchal (normalizing gender relations) and racist (based on racialized social classifications) (Mignolo, 2008; Quijano, 2014), decolonial options and decolonial thinking thus seek a genealogy of thought that is not based exclusively on Euro descendant thinking, but that can resort to explanatory categories and discourses that emerged in the languages and histories of subjugated Amerindian and African peoples. As an example of this decolonial practice that has always been present in Latin American history<sup>5</sup> (Amaral, 2021, p.5).

If we consider the experience of the “Museum of Origins” as having ended because it was not realized in the physical sphere, we would be restricting a certain complexity of Mário Pedrosa’s thinking with regard to his last phase (which we consider to be the one of greatest critical maturity), where, after going through so many political adversities, such as several exiles, he will strive more than ever to immerse himself in Brazil. According to Gullar (2000), Pedrosa is like Socrates who, even when death was imminent, left us a lesson to move forward, learning from the circumstances we faced. And so, with hope, the critic behaved in the face of an unwelcoming scenario: the avant-garde experience was dwindling and the revolution in which he believed was destroyed by imperialism. However, in a twist, Mário presented us with his famous text “Discourse to the Tupiniquins or Nambás”, written two years before proposing the Museum of Origins, and in it he sowed the seeds of what would become his last museum project, seeking in the origins of Brazilian culture the path to the rebirth of our own art.

From that platform ironically launched in the direction of the first dispossessed of colonization (the Tupiniquins and Nambás), Mário Pedrosa would soon extract the proposal for a Museum of Origins [...] Fearing the worst, in recent times he began to recommend to our artists that they renounce the established consecrating strategies, where they risked becoming specialists in the increasingly redundant business of images (whether politically correct installations, as we see today, or the glamorous look of galleries), and that they go out in search of collective gestures that at least announced the existence of life beyond the market” (Arantes, 2000, p. 51-52).).

From the “Museum of Origins”, Pedrosa shared with us the need to get back on track with our own history. It is like a journey to self-knowledge of who we were, who we are, and who we want to be. A museum in suspense, condemned in its essence to unfinishedness, but also full of potential, reminding us to always remember ourselves.

Today, research and publications seek to account for Pedrosa’s critical itinerary in Brazilian society, finding in the very plural aspect of his production – as a critical essayist, revolutionary politician, or promoter of museum curators and projects – the demands for renewal of a country in transition. The publication, in 2015, of Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents and Luiza Mader Paladino’s thesis, “A Opção Museológica de Mário Pedrosa:

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<sup>5</sup> Quote available at: <https://doceru.com/doc/110se1x>. Accessed on: September 7, 2023.

Solidariedade e Imaginação Social em Museus da América Latina” (2021), in addition to the numerous references presented in this text, demonstrate the relevance of finding in Mário Pedrosa, the Brazilian intellectual quality, capable of inscribing in the local-global elastic, own paths that seek to change rigid systems.

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