

Amadeo Souza Cardoso, A Mexican and a Mohican: Hybridity and Coexistence in the Paintings of 1917

Memory Holloway

on Corcoran Gallery of Art. *At the Edge*.

A Portuguese Futurist: Amadeo Souza Cardoso.

Washington D.C.: Corcoran Museum of Art, 1999.

An overview of Amadeo Souza Cardoso's artistic career

In 1908, just two years after he arrived in Paris, Amadeo Souza Cardoso wrote to his friend Manuel Laranjeira, "You are mistaken if you think that I will remain in France. No, I love my country and the land, I am deeply homesick, *tenho saudades imensas*. I can't live without sun."¹ When he realized that he no longer needed to be in Paris, he explained, he would return home. Portugal, he said, had inspired him in all his work. From the outset, Amadeo had known, had manufactured, the polarities that structured his work. Paris represented the future, modernism and possibility; Portugal, the past, a miniscule audience, divided against itself and provincial limitations. Yet in his paintings, particularly those done in 1916 and 1917, after his return home, Amadeo managed to merge these contradictory experiences.

Modernism, as Ernst Bloch once pointed out, might be seen as the unexpected coexistence of realities from markedly different historical moments, the "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous," or the "synchronicity of the non-synchronous."² Peasant fields and factories, handmade shoes and production line automobiles. Once back in the Minho, Amadeo was confronted with the coexistence of handcrafted objects in a pre-industrial mode, and the visual language he had practiced that was disconcertingly modern. Locally made folkloric carvings and terra cotta pots are fitted into a pictorial scheme that suggest the most advanced visual thinking of the time: Cubism, Futurism, Orphism—all of them were familiar to the artist.

Amadeo, as he made clear in his letter, had wanted to *choose* just when he would return, a choice, however, that circumstances made for him. In 1914, at the very moment that he returned to his home near Amarante for summer holidays, World War I broke out. Unable to leave and restricted by the war, the artist never again returned to Paris where he had remade himself. Four

years later he died of the Spanish influenza epidemic that cut across Europe. He was thirty years old.

Amadeo's letter describes a condition that affects all those who travel and live elsewhere and then return to their native land to find both themselves and the place they left altered. It is a modern story of emigration and return. It is a story of desire and ambition that turns on the absence of enabling conditions in Portugal for an artist resistant to the prevailing conservatism. Significantly it is a story that reveals itself most notably in pictures, for it was precisely during Amadeo's last four years on his return to Portugal that he most fully realized the international language of modernism in the context of his native land.

In those last 4 years between 1914 and 1918, Amadeo painted at home on the family's estate in rural Minho in northern Portugal. The occasional trips to Lisbon to meet with poets and other artists at the Café Brasileira were not sufficient to alleviate the sense of isolation that permeates his last works. And yet they are among his most remarkable, revealing a powerful ability to assimilate what he had seen in Paris.

While abroad he had refused to settle with only one way of working. He described himself as an "impressionist, cubist, futurist, abstractionist. A little bit of everything."³ In Paris, Amadeo was like the many other polyglot exiles who coagulated first around Montparnasse and then Montmartre. Like Picasso, his first contacts were with friends from home, friends with whom he slowly lost contact as he grew more familiar with avant-garde circles. His restless moves from one studio to another brought him into contact with other artists working nearby. At the Cité Falguière he met Brancusi and became Modigliani's closest friend. Within five years of his arrival, he was showing work in key public exhibitions in Paris and the United States: from 1911 he entered work in the Salon Automne and the Salon des Indépendents, and received critical attention from Apollinaire and André Salmon. In 1913 his work was introduced to an American audience at the Armory Show in New York. He had quickly and adroitly established himself as a serious artist who had turned his back on the caricatures that had occupied him in Portugal, and made himself known for the stylized exoticism of his drawings. "He can remake paper into an Oriental carpet," wrote one critic of his *XX Dessins*,⁴ claiming that the artist could transform the present into the Persian century. For the French, Amadeo was an exotic, "a Mexican, a Mohican," a son of explorers and transatlantic adventurers.⁵

This was "Part One" of his career, pressed by historians into a typology characteristic of artists who travel from the periphery to the center. Like artists' biographies, the narrative of artistic discovery and success in exile is constituted by structural elements that are repeated, regardless of the origins of the artist or the center inhabited. As a story told at mid century, we could as easily substitute New York for Paris. It goes something like this. Recognizing the limitations of one's country or place of origin, the artist leaves for what is perceived as a cultural center. Initially, protection and proximity are sought with others of the same national origin. The artist assimilates cultural signs and is in turn assimilated into the culture, meanwhile appropriating newly discovered idioms. The artist transforms these through a series of misunderstandings, misreadings, and reinventions based on individual and national perspectives, eventually, though not always, formulating an individual visual language. We do not have to look far for examples. Picasso, Mondrian, El Lissitzky, de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Amadeo, all came from 'elsewhere' in search of something beyond the limitations of their original place.

In Paris, Amadeo tried on all the diverse stylistic possibilities available, some of this, some of that, "a little bit of everything," as he said. He paid close attention to the disks and spectral colors of Sonia and Robert Delaunay, who later reciprocated by taking up a six month residence in 1916 in Valença de Minho.⁶ For a time around 1911-12 he advanced a decorative orientalism lifted from the Diaghilev Ballet Russe and André Derain. He toyed with the zigzag lines and futurist speed of the Italian Futurists Boccioni and Severini, and kept a close eye on the primitivizing references in Picasso to African masks. Nevertheless, it was not until 1913 that he began to seriously dissect objects and deconstruct conventional space along cubist lines. The shift was abrupt, his subject mundane, the locus familiar rather than foreign. The large kitchen at Manhufe, with its massive arches and heavy wooden furniture, the safe center of family and tradition, was transformed into a dynamic, throbbing, noisy space based on a fractured vocabulary gained from his experience in Paris.

It is precisely this picture that marks a sharp turn in which the artist veered away from his former eclectic exoticism in favor of what he described in a letter to an uncle as an 'inventive' process that seemed more valid. No more "Romanesque psychology," he wrote, and a refutation of "feeling" and "descriptive" work. This "notable evolution" in his work (his words) was

based on a rejection of mimetic representation in favor of a slow shattering of the object into fragments. It would take another three years for him to fully realize the extent of his discovery.⁷

"At the Edge," the catalog of the Corcoran Gallery of Art

Amadeo's dizzying range of tendencies was charted in the exhibition of his work at the Corcoran Museum in Washington, D.C. in the Fall of 1999 in one of the first major exhibitions of a modernist Portuguese artist to appear in the United States.⁸ Along with a catalogue with essays on various aspects of the artist's relation to the avant-garde circles and exhibiting practices of the time, the exhibition made clear that Amadeo was in fact at his most inventive once back in Portugal working in isolation. Why this is so will become apparent once we look at three paintings from 1916 which stood apart from the others in the Corcoran show. At the time, letters to Walter Pach and others, indicate that Amadeo had no intention to stay at the family home in Manhufe in the Minho. "In the first two weeks of January (1917), I will be back in Paris, at your service at 27, rue de Fleurus," he optimistically wrote in November 1916 to Pach. He had plans for an exhibition in Paris and New York, with de Zayas,⁹ and was making final arrangements for his Porto and Lisbon exhibitions.

At this point, it is useful to take note of the effects of the contact that Paris had on him, namely Orientalism, machine imagery from Futurism and Cubist fragmentation. Initially, around 1912, we find him working in bold pen and ink drawings of *XX Dessins* that convey escapist fantasies, not unlike the orientalism of the Diaghilev Ballet Russe. (*The Tiger*, Corcoran, 119.) His contemporaries immediately recognized his leap into a constructed world of the exotic and primitive, and suggested that his sheets of paper were like Oriental carpets and Flemish tapestries.¹⁰ As much as some of the critics liked them, these works carry with them the residue of an earlier way of thinking that the artist would soon shed. They contain within them stylizations based on symbolist narratives, crossed with the arabesques and sinister overtones of the Art Nouveau of Aubrey Beardsley. If these seem strangely out of step with the Cubist work being done at the same time by Picasso, Braque and Gris, we might remember how far the artist had veered from the naturalism that characterized both painting at home and even more those Portuguese expatriots who had traveled to France. In just four years Amadeo had established a distance between himself and the tonal realism of Emmerico

Nunes and Armando and the gloomy naturalistic nocturnes of Antonio Carreiro, and in part his disdain is registered in the elegant linearity of his drawings.

Nevertheless, these black and white works are those of an artist just arrived at the center, not yet at the edge or on the edge. Within two years Amadeo had made friends with whom he shared a commitment to refashion painting and sculpture. Like them, Picasso, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, and the expressionist artists of Germany, he moved through this utopian phase of early modernism that preceded the war. Content to find his own way, he joined no movements. He practiced no single style, preferring instead to reshape each one according to his own point of view. Amadeo was literally and metaphorically always on the move, in a restless drive to define what it meant to be from the margins, what it meant to be a Portuguese artist in Paris. One critic, Louis Vauxcelles, who detested Cubism expressed an astonished pleasure at the *XX Dessins*. "This young Portuguese man is *someone...*" he wrote with unsurpassed enthusiasm for the undulating and elongated figures. The critic was thrilled with what he saw as the mysterious play of distant civilizations, a kind of decadent Byzantine exoticism, and along with others, he suggested that these strange figures were invented by someone who had direct experience with this odd mix of Mexican, Polynesian and Aztec divinities. To make his point, he added in surprise, "Besides all this, he is Portuguese."¹¹

What did Vauxcelles, mean, *besides*? In addition to? In spite of? Because of? The critic had mentioned that his drawings evoked the equally exotic of other distant, unknown cultures, in a certain sense from nowhere, or at least nowhere well known.

Like them, being Portuguese placed Amadeo on the border between the center and the periphery in what has to do with self-perception and national identity. The sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called being Portuguese a condition of the semi-periphery, and argues that Portuguese identity is best understood as a border identity.¹² Being Portuguese was a position, rather than a root, an ever-open identity, with a natural capacity to be everything and everyone. As master of these multiple identities, Fernando Pessoa, writing under the banner of the heteronyms Álvaro de Campos, declares, "For me, it's no big thing if I don't form a link with Portugal, since I have no roots."

Being Portuguese and being a modernist, it has been said, was a blank space awaiting to be filled in. Amadeo's blank space was the canvas which he

made into a hybrid of all that he saw: the cubism of Picasso, the futurism of Marinetti and the Italians, the abstract principles of Robert and Sonia Delaunay. If we are to identify his way of working, it will be this hybridity, this drive to put things together to fill that empty space. Three of his last works, done between 1916 and 1917 show his solutions.

What we are in search of here is some manner of understanding how once back in Portugal Amadeo made the artistic decisions that enabled him to produce the strength of the work of 1916. He had already said that he would no longer take mimesis as the basis for his work. What did he put in its place? In short, these hybridized works, pieced together out of fragments that offer multiple readings, with linguistic references on the surface of the picture, and titles that metonymically string together the objects of the canvas.

With its puzzling title, *Keyhole-Birth of the viola-Bon Ménage. Avant-garde Strawberry* of 1916 is one of the critical pictures painted on his return to Portugal, and Amadeo alerts the viewer to his use of text as an annotation to the painting. The keyhole functions on three levels: it is the hole of the violin; it is a target that bulges outwards and calls attention to the surface (we remember the Portuguese notion that identity had to be filled in); it is also a keyhole, which suggests gazing into a private space, and it is part of a face with wavy hair painted to the right and a mouth formed both frontally and in profile. To emphasize its multivalence, Amadeo locates the keyhole at dead center.

In Portuguese keyhole is *buraco de fechadura*, literally hole of the lock, and the hole here locks the picture in place by dividing one half from the other. Down the middle runs a rectangle of orange which doubles as a face in profile and a full frontal view with hair to the right and an open black moth at the bottom. Why this structure? If we investigate further, the division is clear: to the left, those Portuguese things that are part of a folk tradition in the Minho in the north: ceramics in various shapes, folk dolls in local dress and at the bottom, separated from these objects framed on postcards; to the right of the head which gazes to our left is a spread of geometric items that suggest industrial objects and musical instruments familiar to the artist. This is modern urban life as an antidote to rural life on the other side of the picture, the life of the street, the café on the corner and all those things associated with cosmopolitan sociability. Along with "art," suggested at the lower right by the stenciled letters "RT," this is the exciting world of drinking, shopping and loitering. Amadeo directly points to the split that divides his world:

regional, marginal, and home on the left; international, central and Paris on the right. Once back home, those objects of everyday life at the family's estate at Manhufe were more visible than before, and began to invade his work at every turn.

Not only did Amadeo pick up collage as a way of playing with notions regarding representation. About 5 years earlier, while Amadeo was still in Paris, Picasso and Braque had already introduced junk from the street into their pictures and in so doing commented on the interlacing of ordinary things and those concocted by artists. *Entrada* of 1917 was literally his subscription card of entry into membership in the pre-war avant-garde. Here at the very origins of Modernism was the invasion onto the surface of the picture of the preexisting stuff of the world, picked up on the street or pulled from the drawers of the studio. It is surely this modernist urge to break down the centered hierarchical orders of the past that speak to us so urgently. So, at the very outset of the modernist movement was the promise of both a new self-sufficient aesthetic and an impure art world taken from the places where we live. Collage was the central invention of the avant-garde. It forced the viewer to consider the preexisting meaning of the material and the new artistic context in which it was placed. Accordingly, there would be no more barriers between the artist and the spectator, between the aesthetic experience and the experience of everyday life.

That everyday life of the metropolis—modernity to give it a name—was increasingly exciting. In Paris, print was everywhere, on enormous posters on buildings advertising everything—biscuits, doctors, dentists, shoe polish and pianos. Everywhere there was a competition for the eye of the consumer. Print was visible in the variety of typefaces enrolled to attract attention and to sell newspapers. No city, as much as Paris, was so marked by the variety of print, and none had so many talented artists bursting to record the look and excitement of modern life.

Amadeo, as a well-educated member of the minor nobility of the north, was fluent in French, and the appeal of this visual noise appears in many of his 1914 pictures. The unique appearance of Portuguese inserted in one of these pictures can be explained by a lack. The Portuguese language for Amadeo did not represent modernity in the same way that it saturated French. Even more, French was the *lingua franca* of the pictorial avant-garde, although Malevich and other Russians were comfortable in placing their Syrillic alphabet as lettered items in their paintings.

Entrada suggests an entrance into a domain that is both private and public: the familiar wallpaper frieze, the references to fruit clipped out and made to appear as though pasted onto bits of paper, the matches and guitar all point to the artist's full understanding of what he had seen in Paris, to things within reaching distance. But it also suggests a way of retrieving that time and place, whose access in wartime was now impossible. There is a nostalgia here for what is lost, one that matches an earlier longing for his home territory and the sun of Portugal while in Paris, a longing with its roots in romanticism: Anywhere but here, they said, any time but now. If *Entrada* demonstrates Amadeo's membership, it also was marked with a sign that said, "Closed for repairs."

One other, final late work can tell us even more about Amadeo's adherence to the avant-garde practices of deceptive picture making. By this I mean that collage at this point can hardly be distinguished from what is painted. We end up in a repeating circle: painted object, pasted object, painted object made to look like a pasted object. In this chaos of fragments, Amadeo defined femininity as visual deception, as an artificial transformation of appearances. Things, hairpins and beads, are stuck onto the surface of the canvas body. Bits of the body, breasts and bottoms, are dismembered and displayed up close. The artist resorts to a whole string of rhetorical devices: breasts are tulips and roses; woman is a spider who weaves a net, a Venus fly trap that devours its prey, so that the images are fragmented and jumbled as though thrown in the air and allowed to land at random, a card game of chance. The word *Coty*, the art and artifice of cosmetic transformation is the anchor that moors these images that float across the surface. What Amadeo says about female artifice is also the story of his art: it shifts from one style to another, fixing itself exactly nowhere.

I have argued that Amadeo's work took a turn towards independence and a sharpened sense of how to bring his two worlds together. For the most part Amadeo remained in relative isolation in the final phase of his life. In Porto, when he exhibited at the Jardim de Passos Manuel in 1916, a man stopped him in the street and once verifying that he indeed was the artist, knocked him to the ground.¹³ The reception was better in Lisbon.¹⁴

From his arrival back in Portugal, work had provided him with a way of managing and materializing distance, what we might call a period of mourning and melancholy. Painting was the main outlet for the sense of separation and isolation, recorded by Amadeo in his portraits based on African masks. T.J. Clark, in his recent book on the failure of modernism,

points out that as descriptions of the object world, modernist painting showed an object world divided and shattered. Amadeo called upon Cubist form to describe the world in which he found himself. "The point is Cubism's annihilation of the world," Clark writes, "its gaming with it, its proposal of other, outlandish orders of experience to put in the world's place."¹⁵ As if to reactivate his connections with the European avant-garde, Amadeo, called on all that he knew in those paintings done after his return to the Minho. Using the African mask as a foundational scaffolding in *Grief Head Cigarette Holder* of 1914, he constructed an elongated head that we read as an icon of suffering, both in shape its acid green (Corcoran, 147). The movement of the hand across the surface in broad violent strokes hacks away at the head, as if the aggression of paint could release the tension held in check. That aggression, as his friend Almada Negreiros also knew, would be the banner under which Italian and Portuguese Futurists would march. Amadeo's part would be brief and he would never really adhere to the principles set forth by Portuguese Futurists. Almada Negreiros in his Futurist Manifesto of 1917, just one year after this mask was done, called on the youth of his generation to "eliminate the sentimentality of *saudades*, the regressive romanticism. Portugal is a place of weakness, a decadent country. We must create a Portugal for the 20th century."¹⁶

Amadeo's portrait mask has none of this shrill call for destruction that Almada had gleaned from his contacts with Marinetti, whose efforts to convert others to his way of thinking gave him the name of the caffeine of Europe. Yet it was only in this last phase of his work, in which he envisaged that the machine could bring forth a new order, that he went beyond his place at the edge to finding himself on the edge. His paintings of humans now took on the attributes of robots (*Retrato de médico*, Corcoran, 160). With their mechanical parts, they point to an age when technology will improve the world. In his last paintings Amadeo projected a future which held hope for both painting and for Portugal. Painting would enable Portugal to look into the future, and would itself construct a world based on a new mode of seeing and thinking. Painters and readers, Amadeo believed would bring the future to us all.

Amadeo lived only one year longer after making these last utopian works. In his brief twelve years he opened a space where Portuguese modernism could then develop. For this reason Fernando Pessoa recognized Amadeo as the most important artist of his time.

Notes

¹ José-Augusto França, *Amadeo Souza Cardoso: O Português à Força* (Lisboa: Bertrand Editora, 1983) 89.

² Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and Dialectic," *New German Critique* no.1 (Spring 1977): 22-38. In discussing Bloch's model, Frederic Jameson gives as an example, Kafka's *Trial* in which the organized modernity of business routine coexists with the archaic legal bureaucracy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's political structure. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 308.

³ Interview with Amadeo Souza Cardoso in *O Dia*, 4 December 1916. In Corcoran Museum of Art, *At the Edge: A Portuguese Futurist. Amadeo Souza Cardoso*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Museum of Art, 1999) 188-89.

⁴ França, *Amadeo* 37.

⁵ França, *Amadeo* 38. "Cardoso, na sua arte, está ainda em avanço, porque, na verdade, ele é mexicano, moicano, revindicta da velha terra americana nesse filho de portugueses que partiram à conquista e à descoberta transatlânticas." Louis Vauxcelles also identified him as an exotic, inspired by Polynesian gods, Patagonians, Mexicans, and Aztecs.

⁶ The importance of the Delaunays in representing international modernism in Portugal is the subject of Rosemary O'Neill, "Modernist Rendez-vous: Amadeo Souza Cardoso and the Delaunays," in which she outlines a collaborative plan between these artists, for exhibitions to be generated from Vila do Conde, to be known as the Corporation nouvelle. The plan never materialized. *At the Edge* 61-78.

⁷ *Cozinha da casa de Manhufe* 1913. Amadeo Souza Cardoso to his uncle Francisco José Lopez Ferreira Cardoso, 1912. In *Centenário*, 1987, 64. Quoted in *At the Edge* 132.

⁸ Corcoran Museum of Art, *At the Edge: A Portuguese Futurist. Amadeo Souza Cardoso*, Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Museum of Art, 1999. With essays by Lourdes Simoes de Carvalho, Joana Cunha Leal, José-Augusto França, Kenneth E. Silver, Rosemary O'Neill, Laura Coyle and Pedro Lapa. Catalogue by Rui Afonso dos Santos.

⁹ Amadeo Souza Cardoso to Walter Pach. Quoted in Corcoran, 186.

¹⁰ Jérôme Doucet, "Avant-propos," *XX dessins* (Paris, 1912, n.p.). Quoted in *At the Edge* 116.

¹¹ Louis Vauxcelles, *Gil Blas* (15 December 1912); published in *Centenário* 1987, 619. Quoted in *At the Edge* 116.

¹² Maria José Canelo, "Portuguese Modernism Unbounded: a Poetics for the 'Border Identity.'" *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies* (Fall 1998): 89-108.

¹³ This incident is reported by França, in *Amadeo* 117.

¹⁴ Amadeo described to Walter Pach the success of the exhibition in exaggerated terms, in a bid to further gain his interest in organizing an exhibition in New York. "It was a resounding success, sensational and unexpected [...] it is the first exhibition of modern painting in Portugal [...] by a young and strapping man, fearless, and who didn't give a damn for the public and its assessments [...]." Amadeo to Walter Pach, 15 or 17 November 1916. Quoted in *At the Edge* 186.

¹⁵ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 174.

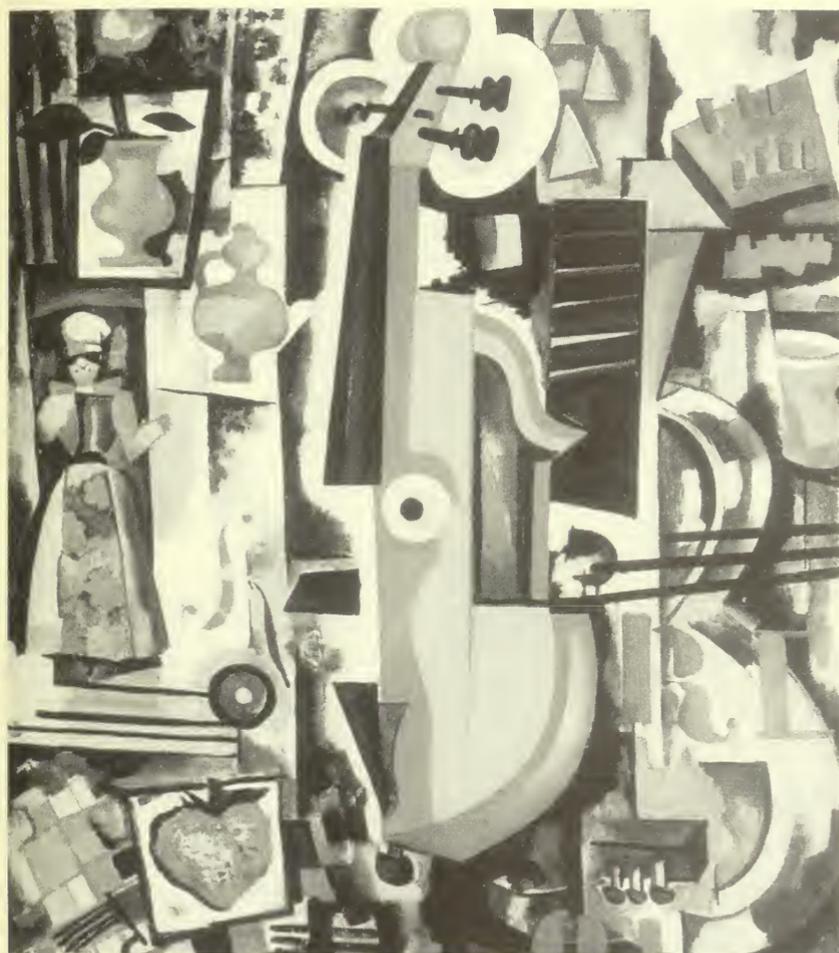
¹⁶ Almada Negreiros, "Futurist Manifesto," 1917, 38.

Amadeo Souza Cardoso

Trou de la serrure-Parto da viola bom ménage-Fraise avant garde, c. 1916

Oil on canvas. 70 x 58 cm

Collection Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.



Amadeo Souza Cardoso

Entrada, c. 1917

Oil on canvas. 93.5 x 76 cm

Collection Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.



Amadeo Souza Cardoso

Coty, c. 1917

Oil on canvas with collage. 94 x 76 cm

Collection Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.



Amadeo Souza Cardoso

The Tiger, 1912

Ink on paper. 25.2 x 32.2 cm

Collection Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.

