

## Praying in the Sand: Paula Rego and Visual Representations of The First Mass in Brazil

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On May 1, 1550, Pero Vaz de Caminha wrote a letter to the king of Portugal in which he described in great detail the First Mass in Brazil, celebrated on April 26.<sup>1</sup> In his letter, the writer, an educated government official, described how he and others who had disembarked had set up a cross on the southern bank of a river so that it might be seen to the best advantage. "There," he writes, describing the scene, "the admiral marked the place for a pit to be made in which to plant the cross."<sup>2</sup> Once the site was ready, friars, priests, and the rest of the arriving party carried the cross in procession, a ceremony observed by a large gathering of local inhabitants.

After the cross was planted and an altar set up by its side, Friar Henrique de Coimbra preached the gospel of the day, which was Pascoela, the Sunday after Easter. The passages included the resurrection of Christ, the disciples' strange sightings of Him, and the doubting Thomas, all stories that seemed appropriate to the discovery of this new land. To the place where they landed, the Portuguese had given the name of Porto Seguro, as if to sum up their impression of this reef sheltering port.

Along with the Portuguese, Caminha reports that fifty or sixty "people of the place," as he calls them, were also on their knees. When the Gospel was shown, they followed the Portuguese and arose and lifted their hands; when the Portuguese sat, the local people sat. When the Portuguese knelt, they knelt. And when the priest gave those who remained after the Mass a tin crucifix, each man kissed it as it was hung around his neck. All this led Caminha to observe that these people were ready to accept Christianity. They

lack nothing, he says, to become completely Christian, except understanding our language, for they accepted all they saw us do.

Caminha's letter, based on the acutely observed details recorded in his diary, has been acknowledged as the founding narrative of the discovery of Brazil, and its representation in paintings and engravings constitutes a parallel history that illustrates and celebrates Portuguese expansion and conquest. Yet both text and image place in sharp relief the use of conventions, of travel narratives and letters as well as the visual conventions of representing exotic peoples.<sup>3</sup>

Caminha already had half a century of the genre of discovery narrative behind him, although his rare gifts as an observer and narrator distinguish him from earlier writers.<sup>4</sup> Unlike some of them, who described the imagined indigenous population as monsters (people born with tails, one-eyed men, people with their eyes on their shoulders),<sup>5</sup> Caminha carefully observed what he saw and described it with accuracy. It was, in fact, his highly visual account of the landing of the explorers and their subsequent celebration of the first Mass that prompted artists to represent this scene in painting and engraving.

Among those representations is Paula Rego's *First Mass in Brazil* (1993),<sup>6</sup> which refers to a painting of the First Mass by Victor Meirelles,<sup>7</sup> which also refers to a painting by Horace Vernet. Rather than seeing the link between the two pictures as one in which the earlier artist "influenced" the later, we might view it instead as a way in which Rego reconfigured what was handed down. To see Rego's picture is to take into account the ways in which earlier images of the First Mass are fully mediated by her own idiosyncratic and personal readings in terms of the colonization of dual territories: land and the female body.

Although Meirelles' painting *The First Mass in Brazil* remained in Rio de Janeiro, the engravings based on it were commonly seen in homes across Portugal in the 1950s under the Salazar regime. Historically, the engraving or reproduction of a painting circulates more widely than the original painting. Engravings are portable, made with relative ease and, because comparatively inexpensive, can be widely owned, a development that led Walter Benjamin to observe that even the most perfect reproduction is stripped of its unique existence in time and space. The mechanically reproduced object no longer has the same history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence, he writes. More importantly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations that would be out of reach for the original

itself.<sup>8</sup> This was precisely the case with the engraving of the First Mass which Paula Rego saw as a child. Its popularity depended on the fact that its meanings were multiple and could be read according to various points of view. On one level, the engraving worked as a reminder of the success of Portuguese exploration and discovery, and of a physical and linguistic empire. It also functioned as a reminder of the power of Catholicism as a mechanism of control of the local people. Caminha was well aware of this possibility when he wrote that “any stamp we wish may be easily printed on them, for the Lord has given them good bodies and good faces, like good men.”<sup>9</sup> Further, it worked to suggest an originary moment of colonizing and civilizing the local people, and of bestowing European culture on a populace seen as primitive. Yet on a darker level, and one less acknowledged, it worked as a reminder of loss: loss of the colony, loss of wealth, loss of control. Finally, it worked as a reminder of immigration, of familial ties and of links to Brazil.

As a result, the engraving of the First Mass in Brazil was a success because all of these meanings co-existed at the same time. In this sense it might be compared to the same kinds of operation on a mythical level that similar paintings and engravings have for North Americans. One thinks of Emanuel Leutze’s *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* or Grant Wood’s *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*.<sup>10</sup> All of these narrate significant historical moments of the nation in what Homi Bhabha has described as a “language of national belonging,” even when these narratives might be those of genocide, death, failure and control as well as those celebrating heroic deeds.<sup>11</sup> These narratives work on the level of what Barthes called myth or depoliticized speech, things that just “are,” things that have no territory of contestation. As for the engraving, it presents things as they “really” were, and we are asked to witness what happened in this First Mass, and to agree to its configuration as a “natural” development of events. Moreover, the engraving is already one step removed from the original painting, since the very process of making an engraving results in a reversal of the original image on which it is based.<sup>12</sup>

In her painting *The First Mass in Brazil*, done in 1993, Rego called the engraving into service to support a surprising range of additional meanings. For one, it had hung in her old nanny Luzia’s house in Ericeira, north of Estoril, near the villa of her paternal grandparents where she spent summers; thus, in including it in the painting, she summoned a figure who had featured as a significant source of love in her childhood. But even more, in compositional terms, the engraving cuts fiercely across the painting in a way

that divides it into two parts, both of which deal with the same topic, that of the colonizing forces of *pátria* and patriarchy.

In the top part, that of the engraving, the land and its people are claimed in the name of God and King, with the cross of Sagres as a metonymy linking the two. Below, in the lower half of the picture, is the colonized body of woman, marked by her pregnancy, reclining on a garment of scarlet, with a blue vestment with the outlines of an anchor and a ship from the voyage. In one sense, we can read the engraving as though it were a real, though distant event viewed through a window, a tactic familiar to modernist painting (one thinks of Matisse), where its use leads us to ask whether we should regard painting as a window onto reality, or as the flat surface of a wall made up of abstract marks on a surface. For Paula Rego, the engraving with all of these multiple meanings acts sharply on the figure below.

How are we to read this reclining figure? As a woman abandoned for another shore? As a woman who is a victim of her own desire? As a woman sacrificed? Or can we see these two parts of the picture as a commentary on power and control? Furthermore, there is no continuity of time in this narrative; rather, time is assigned a fluidity that surges between present fact (Paula has said that her daughter Victoria was pregnant at the time), an originary history (the discovery of Brazil in 1500), and models of pictorial history of the nineteenth century, that moment when the exotic female Other comes into play.

On one level, the picture is about sacrifice. There is religious sacrifice enacted by the priest on the shores of Brazil who raises the chalice at that moment in the Eucharist when Christ the Lamb of God is sacrificed for the salvation of the world, his blood now wine. There is the sacrifice of the turkey for human consumption, with Luzia, the nanny in a blood-stained apron. And there is the enigma of the girl who ponders her unwanted pregnancy.<sup>13</sup> Yet there is far more that we can bring to the picture, including intertextuality that links the positions of the body in this picture to many others. Rather than seeing this as a painting about sacrifice, I will argue that Paula Rego uncovers the operations of colonizing the Other and the overarching practice of control that extends both to the so-called exotic figures of the people of Brazil, as well as to the female body. To do this, she uncovers the ways in which the very positioning of the body itself carries meanings.

To see how this body positioning works, and the differing meanings of a face up, face down or lateral position, we have only to turn to two well-

known examples from the nineteenth century, those of Manet and Gauguin. In his letters from Tahiti in the 1890s, Paul Gauguin expressed doubts that what he had been doing was sufficient to confirm him as the leading avant-garde painter of his time. Specifically, he was provoked by Manet's *Olympia*,<sup>14</sup> which lay behind a painting that he began in 1892, a work that has been judged the most significant and controversial of his career. Gauguin called his painting *Manao Tupapau*, which translated from the Tahitian is known as *The Spirit of the Dead Keeping Watch*, or *The Specter Watches over Her*. In it, Gauguin attempted to record the superstitious fears of the local people, in particular their notion of the spirits of the dead. The scene shows a young girl stretched out on a large couch in an interior hut at night. Behind her is the ghostly figure located at the bottom of the bed, one that either watches her, in which case her apparent fear is explained, or watches over her, in which case the reason for her need for protection is made clear.

In one sense, Gauguin appears to take an anthropological interest in the beliefs of the Indigenous culture. But the placement of the body suggests a more sinister explanation. She is seen from behind, and the unsettling position of her head and the way that it turns towards the viewer, who in the first instance is Gauguin, suggests that it is not the ghostly figure in the background who menaces her, but the artist himself whom she fears.<sup>15</sup> Both the body position and the averted gaze, suggest the counterpart against which Gauguin was working, Manet's *Olympia*, whose visual address moves in the opposite direction, towards self-confidence and a visual challenge to the viewer. Gauguin's Tahitian model lies face down; Manet's model, configured as the prostitute Olympia, lies face up, directly challenging the conventional portrayal of the odalisque. Marked as modern and a threat, Olympia stared back.

In all of these paintings, Rego's included, love, simple affection, physical desire and their consequences circulate in varying degrees. Olympia and the Tahitian girl were seemingly polar opposites. If Olympia touched on the desire for illicit sex, the Tahitian girl touched on the fantasy of the woman-child and passivity and it was surely this upon which Gauguin had seized in his painting that set an "exotic savage" in place. By contrast, Rego's painting sums up the *effects* of desire and assigns the burden to the woman who bears its physical traces.<sup>16</sup>

What we have seen so far is the way that particular poses carry hermeneutic weight and I want now to return to the young woman on the bed in Paula Rego's picture. I mentioned earlier the detail revealed by Paula

Rego that her daughter Victoria had been pregnant at the time. Among Rego's studies for the painting is a drawing of her daughter in which she lies in a deep sleep on a ticking mattress, her body swollen in the late stages of pregnancy. Underneath the bed are old-fashioned suitcases with brass brackets and leather handles, of the kind popular in the 1950s, exactly the time when Paula remembers seeing the engraving of Meirelles' *The First Mass* in her nanny's house. She lies on her side, a position that we associate primarily with odalisques, such as those by Velázquez or Titian. But in Rego's study we have the very image of maternity, of deep, undisturbed and untroubled sleep, unusual in the sense of secure calm that it suggests. When women are shown sleeping in painting they are frequently menaced by nightmares and by figures who come to prey, attack or control them through fear. Instead, Rego's drawing presents pregnancy as a state of assured self-containment.

What I am proposing is that only when the artist put together the woman in black on the bed, under the heavy weight of the meaning carried by the engraving, did there emerge a reading in direct contradiction to the fullness and health and plenitude of the drawing on the theme of pregnancy. That meaning, seen in the context of the colonization of Brazil, is the colonization of the body, marked by biology and institutions: the Church and the State. We can see this body as the expression of fecundity and possibility, or more plausibly in the context of the engraving as a physical expression of the forces of colonial and patriarchal power, identified by Gayatri Spivak as the two prongs of the post-colonial debate.

There is one other aspect of *The First Mass in Brazil* that merits attention, for it opens onto the work that has followed over the past five years. That is the aspect of horizontality and the ways in which it is made to carry particular meaning, in both the pose and the format of the picture. That meaning is subjugation and carnality: Nature rather than Culture, the primitive rather than the civilized, female rather than male.

By contrast, the vertical axis predominates in our culture as the axis of beauty. It reproduces the upright body of the viewer, what gestalt psychologists refer to as the fronto-parallel position. The vertical axis represents the moment in evolution when humans stood up and looked forward, from which point the carnal instinct was sublimated.<sup>17</sup>

Now to return to Paula Rego's picture, and to the *Dog Woman Series* (1994) that followed, is to find there a horizontality, in which woman as dog reveals a powerful physicality, an inner animal force. "To be a dog woman,"

the artist claims, “is not necessarily to be downtrodden, but powerful, utterly believable. It emphasizes the physical side of her being.”<sup>18</sup> The dog woman, the ur-image of female horizontality, required of the artist the courage to invest in areas previously left open: humiliation, love, loyalty and complicity, a certain female machismo.<sup>19</sup> Seen in these terms, the pregnant woman of *The First Mass* gains new strength in her horizontality as resistance to the colonizing forces of patriarchy. It may be fairly observed, then, that Rego’s *The First Mass in Brazil* calls into play all of the above, and marks out a territory in which the horizontality of the body and all that it evokes—nature, control, physicality—is a forceful match for the heightened verticality effected in that very instant when the Host is raised in the name of King and Country. If we read this picture as an allegory, the moment of subjugation is indeed the very moment when resistance and independence begins.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The description of the Mass transcribed into modern Portuguese by Jaime Cortesão reads as follows: “Ao domingo de Pascoela pela manhã, determinou o Capitão de ir ouvir missa e pregação naquele ilhéu. Mandou a todos os capitães que se aprestassem no batéis e fossem com ele. E assim foi feito. Mandou naquele ilhéu armar um esperável, e dentro dele um altar mui bem corregido. E ali com todos nos outros fez dizer missa, a qual foi dita pela padre Frei Henrique, em voz entoada, e oficiada com aquela mesma voz pelos outros padres e sacerdotes, que todos eram ali. A qual missa, segundo meu parecer, foi ouvida por todos com muito prazer e devoção. F.5/Domingo, 26 de Abril” *A Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha*, in Cortesão 233-234.

<sup>2</sup> Caminha 26.

<sup>3</sup> For a further discussion of the conventions of representing exotic peoples and in particular the representation of the female “other,” see Harriet Guest, “Figures of the Exotic William Hodges’s Work.” In Isobel Armstrong’s *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 283-96.

<sup>4</sup> Cortesão 18-22.

<sup>5</sup> Both Columbus and later Sir Walter Raleigh were so impressed with the unexpected scenery that reports of strange humans were presented as fact. “I have seen things as fantastic and prodigious as any of those,” wrote Raleigh in reference to these humanoid monsters (qtd. in Greenblatt 21-22.)

<sup>6</sup> Paula Rego, *The First Mass in Brazil*.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Meirelles, *A Primeira Missa no Brasil* [*The First Mass in Brazil*]. Meirelles’ painting is one of the most widely reproduced images of a painting in Brazil, and has appeared in scholarly publications, in art books, catalogues and journals, and on stamps and money. There have been other contemporary responses to the painting, namely that of Nelson Leirner’s *Terra à Vista* [*A Primeira Vista*], 1983/2000, which views the First Mass from a Brazilian point of view. Figures including miniature cars, planes, dwarfs and Snow Whites encircle a big paper pineapple while other figures emerge from the circle in a straight procession. The second to last row is of Indians and the last figure that of a large Christ. This is the First Mass, modern Brazilian style. I would like to thank Ruth Rosengarten for bringing this piece to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1985. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Caminha, in Cortesão 25.

<sup>10</sup> Emanuel Leutze, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*; Grant Wood, *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*.

<sup>11</sup> See Bhabha 176.

<sup>12</sup> An engraving is drawn onto a metal plate and when printed, appears in reverse. This explains the reversed image in Rego's painting, based as it was on an observation of the engraving and not the original oil painting by Meirelles.

<sup>13</sup> This sacrificial aspect is seen as the meaning of the picture by McEwen 207.

<sup>14</sup> Édouard Manet, *Olympia*.

<sup>15</sup> For a further discussion of this painting, see Sweetman 326-7.

<sup>16</sup> Considering how easily these poses of women can be summoned for particular purposes, we might remark on how few examples there are of the male body at rest rather than in a state of action. One of these is the Barberini Faun (200 BC), in which the openly erotic effect of a nude male laying on his back is modified by the realization that the subject is a satyr who has fallen into a deep and drunken sleep, making it a provocative study in homoerotic voyeurism. Illustrated in Boardman 206.

<sup>17</sup> This argument is fully developed in Rosalind E. Krauss, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled" *Bachelors*. New York: The MIT Press, 1999. 130.

<sup>18</sup> McEwen 215-16.

<sup>19</sup> Macedo 12-13.

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Paula Rego  
*First Mass in Brazil*  
1993  
Acrylic on canvas  
130x180cm  
Private Collection



Paula Rego  
*First Mass in Brazil*, detail

