

"Watercolors of Brazil": Jean Baptiste Debret's Work

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The transfer of the Portuguese Court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, and the consequent opening of the ports to friendly nations, transformed the old colonial city into a destination for several artistic, diplomatic and scientific missions. Among them was the French Artistic Mission,¹ bringing together men of letters, architects, sculptors, and landscape and historical painters with a twofold civilizing mission: to make the city worthy of being the new capital of the overseas Kingdom and to establish an Academy of Fine Arts. However, the transfer of Portuguese courtiers and French artists to Rio always seems to be marked by the negative sign of a reality that discourages such efforts designed to establish a civilization.

Being of a rigid neo-classical background—a pupil of Jacques Louis David, who was a historical painter commissioned by Napoleon—Jean Baptiste Debret finds in Brazil the promise of a solution to his personal and professional crisis (he had lost a son and had separated from his wife, finding himself without professional alternatives after the end of the Napoleonic period). As soon as his ship touches land in Rio de Janeiro, he realizes the distance between the ethical and aesthetic values of his artistic practice and the reality of the colonial city in which he was to settle down and teach the fine art of historical painting.

In a watercolor done in the year of his arrival in Brazil, *Debret na Pensão* (*Debret in the Pension*), the artist captures this dilemma. The irony comes across in the opposition between the figures of the painter seated at the table and of the slave carrying a tray in the background. The slave's presence is ambiguous. He is presented as the point of convergence for the lines that

form the perspective of the inn's floor and roof. In hiding the vanishing point, he transforms the wall at his back into a more or less diffuse background and draws our gaze to the central scene: the artist seated at the table. Nevertheless, the structuring function of the slave's portrait can appear only in a doubtful manner, being obscured by the shadows of the watercolor.

The doubt concerning the slave's presence echoes the doubt concerning the artist's work itself. As with the *mise en abîme* in the works of the Dutch school, the shadowy presence of the slave necessitates a double vision, the adoption of another point of view from behind, as a counterpoint to our own frontal vision. It is as if the slave were looking both at the artist and at ourselves looking at the figure of Debret, making material the incongruity of the ethical discourse on the artistic work in a slavocrat society. At the same time, however, it is his presence that enables the functioning of the closed perspective of the inn.

The skepticism as to the real possibilities of an artist performing in that new world entails at the same time the necessary distance to exercise his work. If the traveler's narrative impulse finds its realization in its depiction of the particular data of that unknown universe, its foundation and consistency nevertheless elude him. The colonial city is not just uncultured, which would indeed be an asset for the French artists' missionary work, it is totally new; it doesn't even provide the material or social basis necessary to carry out the civilizing mission.

Only when he returns to France and publishes the narrative of his journey does Debret recover the heroic sense of the mission:

Driven by the same zeal and the enthusiasm as the wise travellers who are no longer afraid of braving the vicissitudes of a long and oftentimes still dangerous voyage, we left France, our common homeland, to go and study a nature totally unknown to us and to leave, in that new world, the profound and useful mark, I hope, of the presence of French artists.²

To leave France to arrive in the New World, to return to one's homeland—in that trajectory, the travelling artist finds his *raison d'être*. In his Brazilian watercolors Debret takes up once again the counterpoint announced in that small space of his book between the *no longer*—"no longer afraid"—and the *still*—"a long and oftentimes still dangerous voyage." Debret's artistic novelty, that which makes him new on the European cultural

scenery, is suddenly seen as being old in terms of the totally unheard-of natural and social situation of Brazil.

His watercolors speak to us of the impossibility of moving from the old to the new, of establishing a relationship of continuity between those different worlds and, consequently, of creating a lasting impression of that adverse reality. Hard to seize, Debret tries to convert Brazilian reality into particular elements, into partial views, into anonymous and ill-treated characters, in exotic and insignificant details. The artist himself, in his book *Viagem Pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil*, presents his work as a "collection,"³ whose end coincides with his return to France and the publication of his memoirs.

The result of years of study in a distant land, the warm welcome Debret received in Brazil emerges as the lone and fragile compensation for the sorrow of not re-encountering any of his old masters and colleagues whose "immortal works remain to be admired, a glorious but very melancholic consolation, if consolation there is for eternal separation."⁴ In the work of the artist committed to documenting a strange reality, the attention paid to detail suggests his interest in the diversity of the world and, at the same time, his zeal in homogenizing it by means of a civilizing process.

During the years he spent in Brazil, Debret strives to record the old customs rapidly being modified by the vainglorious contact with the European courtiers' cosmopolitanism. His long stay enabled him to witness the change in clothes, footwear, daily habits, in building, and even in the political situation, with the shift in status from colony to independent Empire in 1822. Precisely that same year, Debret writes to his brother François about the decision to publish his travel memoirs after his return to Europe.

In the first watercolors displaying the city of Rio, generally done on a miniature scale, the emphasis falls on the descriptive details of the house, of the bedroom and the atelier in which the artist settles. Sent to his brother, these pictures present above all the new daily lifestyle of the Frenchman in the tropics. As of 1822, however, he begins to compose complete scenes, besides doing hundreds of studies that later on will help him prepare the lithographs for his travel album. It is then necessary to use one's memory to reconstitute habits that were lost or had fallen into disuse. In the famous representations of *Jantar Brasileiro (Brazilian Dinner)* and *Interior de uma Habitação de Ciganos (Interior of a Gypsies' Home)*, or of the countless

salespersons, there is more than the fear of the speed at which the denizens of the city took pains to adopt European habits and style. There is indeed the manifest desire for a narrative ordering of those mnemonic images.

The reminiscence, however, is not only fit for the revival of the Brazilian past. It is also useful in bringing him again closer to France, giving new meaning to his civilizing task. As the same city that shamelessly adheres to new fashions denies civic sense, it is seen as being impervious to urbanity itself. Unable to civilize Brazilians, Debret takes on the task of documenting his travels as well as his specific temporality: his travel is a kind of temporal hiatus, an interval between departing and returning, charged with collecting and recording data.

The watercolor of 1827, *Um Cientista em seu Gabinete* (*A Scientist in his Chamber*), reflects upon that question. Books, a globe, stuffed birds, notebooks, and glass shelves can scarcely erase the instability of the network that sustains the scientist in his bathrobe and slippers, with chairs and benches as a precarious support for recording his knowledge. It is worth noting that in this watercolor there are many of the characteristic elements of *Kunstkammer* or “Cabinet of Curiosities,” which since the sixteenth century not only served as a model for collections, but also for scientific and artistic practice.

In the scientist’s chamber there appears, meanwhile, a diverse order of the taxonomic strategy that presides over those collections of curiosities from the new world. After ten years of coexistence with a colonial society, Debret speaks about a non-ordering physical presence, an instability that defies reason itself. The proximity of the back of the room, the shut door, the dim light that comes in through the window on the left, lend form to that discomfort. The scientist is the intersection between the arrangement of the objects of his occupation and the chaotic dispersion of his annotations on the floor.

Differing from other travelers, who stay only for a few months or years in Brazil, Debret spends fifteen years in the tropics. In that span of time, the promise of a new life becomes a threat to his cultural values; yet that threat in turn becomes the promise of material to be converted into discourse—promise of recognition amongst peers, a melancholic comfort for staying away from one’s homeland. In that movement, he needs to transform his study into remembrance, into a mnemonic calculation of times past, but also of the time that is lacking.

The images created by Debret, therefore, are not just meant to record a life gone by, but are also intended for the future, for the development of European art. In that regard, when structuring his memoirs, he places emphasis on duration as a phenomenon of memory, of that which since the very beginning is produced in the shape of what is absent, distant, disappeared. The very use of the watercolor—a technique that at the time was seen as preparatory—and the more or less peaceful acceptance of its fluidity and imprecision demonstrate that the artist conceived that set of works as something strange in his career. A strangeness that complements the difficulty of deciphering that New World and translates images into vestiges, fragments of an existence that abandons the empirical reality of the present in order to be transmuted into a memory of distance.

To write one's memoirs, to gather and select watercolors, to transpose them into lithographies, to order them according to topics, calls for the new direction embraced by the skepticism of the missionary artist. Medicine to Debret's disappointment with the actual civilizing possibilities, that special collection of images is not just the recording of Brazilian life at the start of the nineteenth century. It is, above all, the constitution of a specific narrativity, capable of turning the Brazilian characters, places and habits into something new and old at the same time, originary in its perennial need to be deciphered, but also dead as a memory.

Paradoxically, the absence of a discursive unity capable of merging those fragments does not imply the failure of Debret's classicist values, but rather reinforces them. For instead of endowing each part with autonomy so as to refer us to the whole—what Wölfflin understood as one of the fundamental characteristics of the linear style—, it summons its autonomous value through the lack of correspondence to any totality. Perhaps this has been the great legacy Debret has left to Brazilian art and culture—the understanding that it would not be possible to articulate old and new elements into a coherent whole, since these elements are of different sizes and shapes. The alternative would be to take each element as a whole, simultaneously departure and return, blessing and curse.

In one of his studies, Debret shows a black woman sitting on a step, her back to the wall. In tatters, barefoot, abandoned, she surrenders to the support of the wall. In this watercolor there is no past, no future; neither scene nor action. In the fullness of that instant, the black woman is still, resting. There is a certain degree of pathetic grandeur in that rest; there can

even be noticed the vestiges of sensuality in the meeting of the woman with the stones and the ever-damp whitewash. Before and after there is pain, the brutality of a pro-slavery social order. It is there that the violence of abandonment and desolation lie, but also the postponement of pain, the present serenity, the only property of the slaves doomed to an existence whose actions are always devoid of freedom.

It is about that city deprived of a civic sense, whose beauty seems to emerge precisely from this absence, that Debret speaks to us. To snatch it from those scarce moments, from the intimacy of a private existence, calls for the artist's sensitive look and skeptical posture alike. In his watercolors, the existence of the beautiful comes from the weak, from the distance that memory can only bridge as a vestige. There is no—as some Brazilian scholars would like—enchantment with the gentle climate, the naturalness of habits, and the exuberant nature. There is indeed a renewed skepticism. From the objective standpoint, it perceives only the possibility of a superficial contact of the New World with European civilization, evident in the luxury of the vestments, in the brilliance of the honorary orders, and in the Emperor's particular interest in the development of the arts and sciences. From the subjective standpoint, it disallows any conversion to the New: it sustains the estrangement, the sensation of never having really arrived in Brazil at all.

Therefore, although most of the analyses on Jean Baptiste Debret's work tend to emphasize its documentary character and its relevance to the knowledge of daily life in Brazil at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in this essay I am proposing a different approach. Debret's work does not offer any set of empirical and verifiable data. It offers, rather, a collection of images, whose significance lies not in its capacity to decipher enigmas and to clarify experiences, but instead in its capacity to maintain the country as an enigma, something to be perpetually interrogated.

Notes

¹ Headed by the writer Joachim Lebreton, the French Artistic Mission arrived in Brazil on March 26, 1816. The artists that constituted it were Nicolas Antoine Taunay (landscape painter), Auguste Marie Taunay (sculptor), Auguste Henri Victor Grandjean de Montigny (architect), Charles Simon Pradier (recorder) and Jean Baptiste Debret (historical painter). Subsequently, the sculptor Marc Ferrez and the recorder and sculptor Zephirin Ferrez arrived.

² Debret 23.

³ Debret repeatedly defines his work as a collection: "I had at my disposal all the documents on the customs and habits of the new country I inhabited and that constituted the starting

point of my collection;" "I had the opportunity to constantly maintain, through my students, direct relationships with the most interesting regions in Brazil, relationships that enabled me to obtain an abundance of documents necessary to complement my already incipient collection;" "Chance thus led me to start, at the heart of a civilized capital, that particular collection of savages;" "That remembrance is a collection of drawings especially on the vegetation and the character of the virgin forests of Brazil" (27, 347).

⁴ Debret 347.

Works Cited

Debret, Jean Baptiste. "Introdução." *Viagem Pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil*. Vol. I. São Paulo: EdUSP, 1978.

Jean Baptiste Debret
A Scholar Working in His Library

1827

Watercolor

16.2x21.2cm

Arquivos dos Museus Castro Maya, Rio de Janeiro



Jean Baptiste Debret

My Studio

1827

Watercolor

16.2x21.2cm

Arquivos dos Museus Castro Maya, Rio de Janeiro



mon atelier d'interior a. n. g. j. 1816

Jean Baptiste Debret

A Brazilian Dinner

1827

Watercolor

16.2x21.2cm

Arquivos dos Museus Castro Maya, Rio de Janeiro

