

MARCELA DE NAVASCUÉS
AND THE ART OF LIGHT AT THE CÔA MUSEUM

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Since opening to the public in July 2010, the Côa Museum's temporary exhibition halls have showcased a variety of artists and diverse interests. These exhibitions perhaps lacked method, as without a structured program they were also the result of a divestment and administrative unintelligence that marked the years following the museum's opening.

A programming not fully thought through (without a target audience analysis) for a space with the particular features of a Pre-historic Art Museum, which was much more than a simple Interpretation Centre looking for its own identity within the Portuguese Upper Douro region, would likely be more suited for a generic museum operating in the mass tourism era.

One guiding line seemed to unite the majority of these exhibits, which was that they only displayed contemporary works of art (and where, curiously, archaeology was absent). But the presence of these works at the Côa Museum asked for more: that they somehow showed a connection to the spirit of the place, which was, perhaps, even more important than our attempt in finding some sort of direct link between them and the prehistoric past.

If the Côa Art is at the genesis of the absolute work of art existing as an installation in the landscape (a concept from our time that clearly originated in the Palaeolithic period), it would be tempting that its connection to our contemporaneity could be increasingly mirrored in the temporary exhibitions of a museum built for the Côa Art. This is the duality we find in the work of Marcela de Navascués. Contemporary art directly inspired by the timeless designs created by the artists belonging to Côa's ancient times. An exemplary loyalty to the Palaeolithic themes and a creative remake of the spirit of the place!

The connection existing between the Côa Art and contemporaneity was the reason behind the choice to include a contemporary work of art (in room G, final) since the very beginning of the museology project. This work was meant to wrap the permanent exhibition visit around the six museum rooms: a conceptual path between the Gravettian era and our days. 25.000 years of modern art; an inspiring concept that meant that ever since the origin of the Côa Art all the design formalisms and inventions featuring the art of our time had already been fully acquired. It started out with a sculpture by Alberto Carneiro (in the words of its creator "a mandala tree for the Côa artists") and the idea behind was to every year (or every 2 years) an artist would be invited to exhibit there in an attempt to honour both the original Côa artists and the art of our time. And thus enhance the museum's collection with modern art pieces created for that particular space. As always, excellent ideas were killed in gestation, and the work of Alberto Carneiro is only exhibited at times (it is currently missing). That room became multipurpose and therefore changed the overall museology project with a careless disrespect for an idea that surely cannot be replaced by a better one. But this too is part of the materiality of a museum.

This connection between prehistoric art and the wide artistic range from our time, which is now open to all kinds of experimentalism, was reflected from day one in the Côa Art safeguard movement, in the dam that ended up not being built after it was considered an unstoppable construction, and how all this influenced our current collective imagination.

Contrary to most exhibitions taking place at the Côa Museum, the recent works of Marcela de Navascués, which are now on display (September/December 2019), adopt and claim a direct connection with the Côa Art in its purest form. Having followed their genesis and exchanged many ideas with the artist, I can safely say that these works were even thought and created with the aim of being appreciated at the Côa Museum only. Like Alberto Carneiro's creation for room G, these works also belong in the Côa Museum.

This is more than an enough reason, other than their crystal clear creative originality, for these works to be seen at the Côa Museum first and only elsewhere outside the region after.

Marcela de Navascués, a Basque artist based in Porto, knows the Douro region and its wine stories well. She was therefore skilfully able to capture the idea that, for quite sometime, has been connecting the Côa Art to an art of

light, as opposed to an art of darkness, as commonly attributed to the art of the deep caves and what until the discovery of Coã was the idea behind the Palaeolithic art in general.

While trying to be faithful to the original models, and with a particular focus on the unique Palaeolithic anthropomorphism, Marcela turns the prehistoric models into the heart of her creations. The Coã schists are archaeologically reproduced with the utmost rigour; they emerge with a new look and immediately convey a set of emotions that can hardly be contained inside a single frame, where light and the use of polychromy play a key role. And the captions have a life of their own...

The prehistoric models stand out. They gain volume and feed on the light that enlivens them, yet remain truthful to the originals that only be seen by trained eyes on the surfaces selected by their primordial creators.

Marcela, who only hoped to be inspired by the Palaeolithic designs, could not resist including a very elegant deer (millennia of stylistic evolution in these highly elaborated, synthetic and geometrizing, contained shapes) from the 2nd Iron Age period ("Juventud divino tesoro" (The divine treasure of youth), as said in her Castilian homeland) among other representations from the Upper Palaeolithic artists. An outsider? Not at all! This is exactly how in terms of the Coã Art these figures also appear to the eyes of archaeologists-designers-decipherers. They overlap rich palimpsests that existed throughout thousands of years and stimulate us to reflect upon our own human smallness.

Framed surfaces of time, these highly sensitive works of art stand as a portrait of our time. Regardless of the far-fetched theories with which we try to encapsulate the outstanding Coã Art, what emerges and still moves us today is the creative freedom, which is also reflected on these works.

What better way to commemorate the nameless artists that we, the archaeologists, call Gravettian, Solutrean or Magdalenian? Mannerisms with which we delve into our undocumented ignorance, and where only the recovery of the artist's gesture has archaeological relevance; everything else is simply a nothing faded with time. The reality is that 25 or 30 millennia separate us from the skilful hand that narrated the symbolism of the spirit with figures of wonder...

What we admire the most in Coã's prehistoric artists is their absolute artistic freedom, which parallels with a pure domain over the art of drawing. Carved on hard schist are the lines that follow an apparent stereotypical shape and which

are, after all, so expressive and touching of humanity.

Within the Portuguese territory, the Côa Art is a prime example of how can we all be so far apart in historical time, yet so close in mythical time. Yes, the Côa Valley was our first and foremost school of Fine Arts.

It is theirs and our love for art that has kept alive these expressions from the past and which Marcela de Navascués, with a very feminine sensibility, knew so well how to capture in these works that are now on display at the Côa Museum. Her tribute is (also) extended to all those who contributed to the Côa Museum being erected.