

António Santos, painter of dreams

by Ricardo Costa

Painting is silent poetry, and poetry painting that speaks. Sentence attributed to Plutarch at Simonides, *De Gloria Atheniensium*, III, 346.

Web <http://rcfilmes.com/antoniosantos-en.htm>

Origin

He was born at Castro, a small mountain settlement built on the ruins of a Stone Age hill fort in the mythic remote Portuguese granitic region of [Trás-os-Montes](#), on a cold winter day, 10 January 1949. His first pilgrimage, two years later, lead him to a nearby humble village called Jou, belonging to [Murça](#) municipality. There he lived for twenty four years helping his parents eke out a living from heavy farm work.

Trás-os-Montes is originally inhabited, among other occasional migrants, by Iberian and Celtic peasants who cultivate small properties and feed goat shepherds, leading them up and down the mountains from «cold land» to «hot land» and vice-versa. Communal activities implicating inter-help social relations have been practiced there for centuries. Each village had its own communal shepherd and oven, where any family was allowed to back their own bread. Scattered villages on steep slopes were linked together with long and narrow stony tortuous paths. Work and feast were yearly celebrated in seasonal rites.

Migration



Migration is an inherent activity of those people. They migrate inside their motherland for survival. When adversity knocks at their doors (that starts happening more seriously in the sixties because an obsolete dictatorial regime makes them endure harder living conditions or forces them to escape fierce colonial wars), then most decide going much further in search of wonder working promises. One day, sooner or later, they start feeling some smooth breezing from distant countries. And there they go.

So the native migrant starts his long pilgrimages carried by auspicious dreams. First he moves to Lisbon. There he can't farm. There is no farming to be done in such a luminous city. In his village, he learned to build a house, to dig earth with a hoe, to repair a broken chair, to paint a wall. That's what he will make elsewhere.

1973. Age 26. As in Lisbon there is not much of that work to be made, as much better may be found further away, as distance does not matter to an innate pilgrim, he'd better go to Paris, a much more luminous place. And there he goes. In Paris he will

repair much better furniture. There he will paint much more imposing walls. There his sons will be born and more refined raised. There he will live much better. There he will stay for many rewarding years.



There he handles with noble matters and good paints. But also feels he has not gone far enough and decides to go still further. Childhood dreams haunt him at night: distant landscapes, ambiguous figures, primary intense colors. He knows dreams mirror real things. Tries to find them in his neighborhood but sees they miss. Then he understands what is missing are different matters and better paints: art work, his primary and utmost

destination. He needs to find them out and learn how to deal with them. Like a child, he needs go to school. Dreamed things live in a museum. And there he goes.

As he lives in Paris, he goes to the Louvre. There he attends courses at instructive ateliers. There he is initiated to understanding crucial knowledge and trained in essential techniques by outstanding masters. There he finds what he needs to sculpt and paint in a new way. There he assimilates what certain artists made in life and why they were so much obsessed in making what they made. There he clearly understands what he will make, where he will go at last.



Return



A pilgrim will go back home some day. He would not be a pilgrim if he had no return. He goes away, he goes on, he goes back in a continuous cyclic movement as he followed a straight line. Step after step, he walks forward, hoping to meet, wherever he goes, the places, the houses, the fields, the people of sacred motherland. In fact, the holly entities adored in distant places, even though they may be more sacred than at home, are not so credible. Certain declined, others were corrupted by Evil and turned into pagan gods. A pilgrim is not the same person when he leaves and when arrives. He comes back home purified after having been submitted to severe probes. That is why he goes: in search of grace until he returns.

Moving strait forward along meandrous paths will be the first and last big mystery he confronts. Meeting

dubious characters in such endless walks will not be the least (1, 2). He goes and returns at each step. Life is an elliptic progress full with mysteries. 2013: forty years of pilgrimage went by.

Man and Woman

Whirling, reality is distilled into fantasy. The process results into a thick liquid amalgam of matters and forms, bulks and fluids, crystals and colors, figurations and abstractions.



This alchemy is processed this way: feeling exiled in Paris, in London, anywhere, a man dreams more than he sees. What he sees around him is transfigured, becoming a hybrid of sightings and reminiscences. Ambiguous figures appear. Certain seem to be real persons enfolded with absent landscapes. Others are pure recollections, blurred images from motherland: people, houses, mills, paths, fields (3). That's why also uncouth woman bodies become archetypes: *America* (América), *Celeste* (Celestial), *Africa* (África), *Sun Light* (Luz do Sol), *Spring* (Primavera), *Red Rose* (Rosa Vermelha), *Blue Ocean* (Oceano Azul), *Lavender* (Alfazema), *Exotic Forest* (Floresta Exótica), *Terra Mater* (Terra Mater),

Asia (Ásia), *Europe* (Europa). Why? Because SHE is «Heir of Aphrodite / Goddess of Love / My muse, my mother, my lover / She was, she is and she will be the holiness whose existence I felt / Enough if you herald Love in your nature and be loved / Now and beyond eternity / So the reason of my existence will be stronger and more beautiful». So SHE is, young or old: rustic in her appearance (4).

HE, young or old, is often her hateful violator. By nature, he is above all the MAN born out of her belly who fruits motherland. Ancestral myths illustrate this belief. She and he are part of the same. As such, there is no reason for violence between them. Both play the same game: creating human beings, producing something to help them survive. HE is the farmer, the reaper, the cart driver, the miller, the sewer, the crafty fox, the masked man in ageless rituals (5). SHE is his trusty companion in endless tasks. Both nourish from their common work. Both share common joys. Both like wild flowers (6, 7).



Pilgrimages and night travels

Pilgrimage means travelling in search of images desired by the soul of a pilgrim. Time travelling: space must be traversed and time spent for these images to be seen.



The pilgrim is now far away. Once Holly Land has been found and soul appeased, he starts being haunted by dreams that lead him back home. That happens because some god, who was venerated at his primeval sacred motherland, doesn't dwell there any longer and because, vulnerable to such contradiction, the pilgrim's poor soul teases him with senseless stories when he sleeps. For a painter, whose soul is particularly sensitive, facing the problem may consist in painting his dreams. So does António.



Travelling to and fro will be a hard, obsessive task. He goes to his village in Trás-os-Montes every year to solve the contradiction. There he makes exhibitions of his painted dreams as revenge, defying the whims of unfair divinities. He went to Paris obeying to the dictates of those welfare gods. Now he returns to his birth place, lost among high mountain ridges, to build a granite house surrounded with orchards and olive trees, where he will live and show all his paintings. Forever: his museum. «So the

reason of (his) existence will be stronger and more beautiful», in honor to sacred motherland. Paradise lost reencountered, gods will be ashamed and dark nightmares converted in luminescent dreams.



In animal farms, among creatures peopling Orwellian worlds, one will find some deserving to be depicted (8): cocks cockcrowing to convey clucking chicken, haughty snoring pigs overruling in contempt of submissive relatives, cats getting crazy with canaries, black dogs constraining pink rabbits, wolfs, donkeys, primates, goats and other well known beasts illustrating other senseless stories, stories that warm our feelings. Fables, like fairy tales,



appease our troubles, teach us certain truths, fill in our imagination. Old stories like those were often told at fire-place in the old villages of Trás-os-Montes. They also heathen a pilgrim's soul in remote places at cold nights. They also impel him to return.

Wind mills and bread



Wind mills are as well mitigating. They are white painted. Their white sails turn around day and night. Among their rods there are hollow gourds singing cavernous songs. Like people, they live and they die (9). Like moaning water mills (10), moved by the stream of the winter flows of capricious brooks, they patiently mill grain that will turn into bread (11). They also tell lulling stories. That's why, such as fairy tales, they make us dream.

In pilgrim's motherland, wheat is milled into flour in wind mills. Grain is harvested with labor and carried into the mills by humble lazy donkeys to make bread. Ancient peoples adored bread. Christians believe it is the body of Christ. This is the core of a colorful and stunning story that the pilgrim can't avoid telling. That's a story that must be told.



It must be told because harvesting means hard work in hot summer days. Peasants, bent on parched earth, sweat the whole day. Harvest covers vast golden fields scattered among steep hills. Shared with pain and joy, that work will last for weeks. At last, wheat plants must be hardly beaten so that grain is extracted for milling and flour produced. Then, after being kneaded, the flour mass must be backed before bread is ready to be served. Before bread may be served, earth must be sowed. Before earth is sowed, it must be ploughed. After earth is sowed, long cold winters must go by. Before winter nights go by, many tales must be told. This one must be told because it unveils a lot of things about men and women, about fields and skies, about clouds and winds, matters and forms, shapes and colors. To be told as it deserves, such a story must be painted.

Masks and men

In the stony villages of Trás-os-Montes, masked men celebrate cosmic events every year. That leads to a different version of the same story. For twelve days, when winter is announced with loud thunders and strong rains, like devils, invoking chaos, darkness and death, allowing themselves heretical liberties, transgressing social rules, they chase young women and hit them with pig bladder balloons or noisy rattle collars to excite them. They join in groups to play an impromptu satirizing their neighbors, mocking about a deceptive affair. Doing such things, they replace Satan, who is forced to stay in

Hell as long as they act. For about two weeks, when spring dawns covering the fields



with green and vibrant colors, other masked men appear, representing different characters and playing different roles. One of the most celebrated is the Fox, whose rites are used to initiate village boys to adult age. There, like in ancestral African cultures, like in certain rites of the Dogons (12), the Fox defies God, his almighty father, and dares to replace him in shaping the World. God is envious and cruel. Ashamed, he takes His revenge pursuing the poor Fox wherever he goes, whenever he moves, by



the intermediate of hateful agents.

Each mask represents a typical character. The pilgrim painter paints seventy five of those figures. Around them and close to the corners of each frame, he traces forms and forges colors to help us discern the «original and functional contents» of such characters (13, 14).

Night travels and eternal return



The gloomy atmosphere involving those seasonable rituals is not much different from the environment of dreams that invade pilgrim's nights. He dreams a lot and can't easily forget what disturbing apparitions haunt his well deserved rest after painful days of work. Dreams host intricate mysteries of Life.



Why does he meet enigmatic customers following his steps when he moves across familiar landscapes? Why do they appear when they are not requested? Why do they go away when they should stay? Why do they stay when they should have gone? Why do they insist in uttering senseless or ambiguous things? Why do they say nothing when they should talk? Why do they reveal truths that sound like lies? Why some lies they tell may be truths? Why do they deny themselves? Why are certain of those customers snow white like angels, other gray like shades, other coal black like demons? Other red? Other blue? Why do they follow the pilgrim when he

should stay alone? Why do the places where they are sighted come into dreams? Why are such houses, such paths, such fields, such rivers ultimate places for pilgrimage?

As questions raised by all these painted dreams remain unanswered, as they are all sensitive matter, the pilgrim tries to overcome each dilemma questioning each of his dreams with words: writing painted poems. Sensitive words may lead to a better discernment of forms and matters.

The pilgrim paints eighteen dreams with names, among other nameless ones (15). Told in verse, like all the others, the first is melted bloom shed out from a wheeled burning



furnace surrounded by the white shades of a man and a lying woman, country houses, a group of workers breaking stones. Frightened, the dreamer, who is not yet a pilgrim, decides to go away (16). This will be the *Dream Number One* of a series of «Painted Dreams / Unfolded / On both sides» (17). *Dream Number Two, The Fall of The Poet*, is a foreboding. In a big room, high society people attend the pilgrim for his marriage. Lost, he ambulates across contiguous mazy rooms. A man, repairing a familiar roof, falls down. The pilgrim wakes up like a «Frustrated soul / fallen on the ground / In a closed room» (18). *Dream Number Six* starts when the pilgrim is requested to proceed to his divorce at a wide bureaucratic department. He feels unhappy and goes away to the movies. Sitting in front of the screen, he is challenged by the film's director to confess if he loves or not homeland and their people. He answers that's more than love, that's a passion. Light turns off. In the darkness, he feels like his sole had been discarded from his body. So he is when, standing on a road side, he sees noisy motorbikes arriving with threatening policeman on them, who start shooting against everybody. Hit by a bullet, thinking he had forgotten his age, he wakes up (19). His last dream, *Dream N. 18, The Rope Game*, is painted this way: «In a wide valley / Surrounded with mountains, I watched a traditional game / Six men pulling a rope / Three at each tip / Using all their strength / Among



them there were some of my friends / I couldn't understand who were the winners / And woke up» (20).



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Forms and matters

The pilgrim paintings are forms of expression derived from inspiration. He would not be able to paint if he was not inspired. As he paints complex matters, that means he was inspired from multiple sources. That is why his paintings are intense colored reveries. As he uses words to help decipher the visions he paints, that means he expresses himself inspired by elementary forms which merge into verse like ballads, like lulling songs.

His figures, traits and colors are similar to many of primitivism, like those of Paul Gauguin or Paul Klee, although borrowed from other primitive origins than those which inspired these painters. His coarse women, like those of Henry Matisse, are fauve but generated by quite different wild motives. His primitivism or fauvism is subtly used as a metaphor for such inspiring movements.

The pilgrim's symbolism, their *fleurs du mal*, express other «primordial ideas» than those proclaimed by the symbolist movement (21). The symbols he paints are not representation of ideas but figurations of realities: projections from the outside world into a mirror, sensitive matter bordered by a frame, pure truth just deformed by an imperfect window. Imperfect, such window changes its forms but not its colors or matters. Real things keep untouched inside the frame.



Deformed, they will simply be perceived by surprised, disturbed eyes which initiate dreams. Realistic projections will turn into surrealist visions. Once more, a truthful significant, image or word, will turn into metaphor. The result will be stronger if images and words mix together. That will lead to an exciting fantasy, to an intricate metaphor that will not betray its motive.

If *cinéma vérité* exists even when contaminated by fantasy, one may assert that *peinture vérité* exists as well. If *truthfull cinema* may coexist with fiction, so does *truthfull painting*. Jean Rouch, French filmmaker and ethnologist, who coined such an expression, stated once that an accidentally blurred sunset shot, that seemed false like a painting in a documentary, was in fact more truthful and beautiful than any sharp, perfect shot.



Among all other human motives in António Santo's tableaux, ethnographic themes of his motherland dominate. Blending in painted representation truth with fantasy, still image with narrative poetry, personal primitivism with visceral fauvism, ageless symbolism with provocative expressionism, crude figuration with involving abstraction, primitive surrealism with genuine ethnography, mixing all those ingredients with a big wooden spoon like old women in Trás-os-Montes would do to cook nutritious meals, the pilgrim makes a broth more tasty than the stone soup made by any legendary friar (22). That is no lower achievement. (23 to 34)

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NOTES

inside text:

- (01) [Green woman with fire ball](#) (Paris dreams)
- (02) [Time balance](#) (Londres)
- (03) See *pages 1 to 5* at Artmajeur [portfolio](#)
- (04) *Introduction page* to the catalog for *Woman* (Mulher), first exhibition. See also [La Femme](#) at Artmajeur gallery
- (05) [Masks and Masked Characters](#) at AM gallery
- (06) [Page 3](#) at AM gallery
- (07) [The Bread Cycle](#) at AM gallery
- (08) [Beasts](#) at AM gallery
- (09) [Wind Mills](#) at AM gallery
- (11) [Water mill](#) at AM gallery
- (10) [From Grain to Breath](#) at AM gallery
- (12) [Dogon people](#) (Wiki article)
- (13) [Máscaras e Mascarados](#) – Article by António Cravo
- (14) [Le Renard](#) in [Paroles](#), interviews with [Jean Rouch](#), with the participation of António Santos
- (15) *Dreams out of series*, [Plane With Bird](#) [Arrival from abroad](#), archive
- (16) [Dream Number Zero](#), [Painted Poems](#), archive
- (17) [Dream N. 01: The Furnace](#), archive
- (18) [Dream N. 02: The Fall of the Poet](#), archive
- (19) [Dream N. 06: Film Screening](#), archive
- (20) [Dream N. 18: The Rope Game](#), archive
- (21) [Reference](#) to The Symbolist Movement at [U.C.P.](#)

(22) [The stone soup legend](#) (Wiki article) is an ancient fable told in many Portuguese villages. A hungry pilgrim friar bluffs a peasant whom he says he just needs a few ingredients to make a delicious soup with a stone he carries in his bag.

related to text:

(23) [The Long Conversation between Painting and Poetry](#) – website indexed themes

(24) [Between Art and Anthropology](#) (Google books). Arnd Shneider and Christopher Wright, eds. New York: Berg, 2010. 224 pp.

(25) Texts by [Susan Ossman](#)

(26) [Telling Stories Through Art](#) – Reference article at [The Museum Network](#)

(27) [Narrative Art](#) – Description at [M.O.C.A.](#), Los Angeles

(28) [Art: Narrative Painting Struggles For a Rebirth](#) – Article by Hilton Kramer, NYT, published April 3, 1981

In Portuguese

(29) [Máscaras de Trás-os-Montes na Maison de Sciences de l'Homme em Paris](#) – Article by Daniel Lacerda referring exhibition in Paris at the “House of Man Sciences” and published at magazine *Latitudes*, number 11, p. 79, 11 May 200

(30) *Máscaras Portuguesas*, Benjamim Pereira, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar/Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar, 1973, 156 pp.

(31) [Os dois países de Benjamim Pereira: uma homenagem](#) – Article by João Leal at [SciELO](#) (look for English references after text)

(32) [Article](#) referring winter rituals at Trás-os-Montes published at [Bragançanet](#)

(33) [Carnaval - Tradições em Trás-os-Montes](#) – Article by Ana Flor do Lácio about masks and rituals at carnival celebrations, published at [Recanto das Letras](#), 3 July 2011

(34) [Nós Por Cá “Tradições do Nordeste Transmontano”](#) – Master thesis by Mariana do Rosário at Trás-os-Montes University, July 2008, 122 pp.