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Feminist Activism Through the Arts in Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century. A Diachronic Comparative Study Between Portugal And Brazil

By Isabel Cristina Carvalho^{1*}, Heemann, Christiane², Oliveira, Teresa³

Abstract

Brazil and Portugal are two countries that, although geographically located on different continents, share a history (from 1500 to 1822 when Brazil was a Portuguese colony) and the same language (Portuguese), and both have very high rates of domestic violence and situations of gender inequality. Growing fundamentalist and ultraconservative parties around the world are threatening gender equality and women's conquest for rights. In Portugal and Brazil, new parties with extremist discourses and ideologies that perpetuate patriarchal societies are also growing. It is crucial to continue breaking paradigms and remembering history, particularly the moments marked by the struggle for human rights. Many women have fought for their rights, advocated for gender equality, and worked toward building women's citizenship in and through education. Looking particularly at Brazil's post-independence period, we conducted a diachronic comparative study of feminist activist artists from these two countries and found inspiring examples of feminine resistance and resilience. We analysed different female approaches that surprised us with their originality and creativity. We looked at the similarities and differences between how Portuguese and Brazilian women with access to culture and art—painting, music, literature, etc.—positioned and manifested themselves in the face of these social and cultural inequalities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The women artists that we studied have reached professional status as artists, which has allowed them to become financially independent. Thus, they have been able to leave the private sphere and enter the public and international sphere.

Keywords: Art activism, Equal rights, Feminism; Gender biases, Women empowerment.

Introduction

At the turn of the 19th Century, a group of pioneering women from Portugal and Brazil used creative and artistic practices as a form of activism, criticism, and resistance against social customs and stigmas that women were struggling. We conducted a diachronic comparative study of Brazil and Portugal, two countries that are on different continents, yet share a history—Brazil was a Portuguese colony from 1500 to 1822—the same language (Portuguese), and very high rates of domestic violence and gender inequality (Lisboa & Pasinato, 2018).

These examples of feminist activism presented here showcase women who have fought for their rights and policies for gender equality, against gender prejudices, and rallied for women's citizenship in education and the arts. What possibilities did Portuguese and Brazilian women have at the end of the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century to dedicate themselves professionally to painting, music, or literature? Painting, playing, and writing were accepted and

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even encouraged feminine practices among the elites (Beleza, 2010), but there was a distinguishment between creating art in the private, domestic space versus in the public space (exhibiting or publishing). When suffragism and feminism were ideas and practices that circulated internationally, how did Portuguese and Brazilian people who had access to painting, music, and literature position themselves in the face of these debates? Was the language sharing reflected in the same artistic expression, or were there differences? Given the socioeconomic and highly patriarchal context of each country, how did these women distinguish themselves through the arts? Considering art as a means of questioning, the objective of this study is to investigate the areas in which women have excelled as artists and how they have achieved greater visibility through their works.

Methodology

Our methodology concerns the relationship between thinking and researching: “The key concern here is the impact of the organization of the investigation and the structure of the data analysis on how the investigator thinks about the subject” (Ragin, 1987:165).

This research is a diachronic comparative study with a qualitative methodology. According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994: 4), qualitative research is many things simultaneously: “it is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field”.

The units of analysis in this study are painting, music, and literature production from Portuguese and Brazilian women artists. This study highlights the possibilities and limits of artistic creation in Portugal and Brazil through an analysis of case studies as well as specific women’s initiatives in education, legislation, and equal rights policies.

The analysed data is visualised through a timeline. Timelines are a visual, arts-based data collection method, derived from a broader framework of graphic elicitation designs (Bagnoli, 2009) and are created from life events arranged chronologically, with a visual indication of the highlighted facts. Lor (2019) points out that case studies may take on many forms and can be used within any paradigm. Within the chronological period of the study, there are more examples of feminist artistic activism in the two countries than those marked on the timeline. However, only those who had a more active and visible role in feminist activism were considered.

The Sociocultural Context in the Transition from the 19th Century to the 20th Century

Portuguese Context

In the second half of the 19th Century, with the development of the national economy (mercantilization of the economy), the upper bourgeoisie acquired greater political and economic importance at a time when the middle classes were growing. The bourgeoisie's class consciousness began to emerge. The affirmation of the bourgeoisie that had dominated government since 1870 (during the period of expansion of liberalism) coincided on a cultural and intellectual level with the appearance of the Romantic Movement, marked by the appreciation of imagination, feelings, and individual freedom (Pimentel & Melo, 2015).

At the beginning of the 20th Century, Portugal was marked by some important events that would change the sociocultural and political paradigm of Portuguese society. Portugal was already facing economic difficulties with the Monarchy when it began the 1st Republic in 1910 (1910-1926), and with its participation in the Great War of 1914-1918, its economic situation worsened and gave way to uncontrolled public accounts. There was a disproportional asymmetry between

Republican Portugal, which was essentially urban, and the rest of the country that was mainly rural and conservative (Amâncio, Tavares, Joaquim & Almeida, 2007).

Brazilian Context

From 1840-1889 the Second Reign of D. Pedro II can be divided into three phases:

- First Phase (1840-1850): a period of consolidation of the new government;
- Second Phase (1850-1870): a period of political and economic stability;
- Third Phase (1870-1889): the decay of the monarchist-slave empire gave way to the Republic.

From 1890 to 1939, Brazil's economy turned to foreign trade. Coffee dominated agricultural production, although cotton cultivation took increasing importance from 1890 onwards. During the First Republic (1889-1930), the need to increase domestic production led to the creation of manufacturing establishments in Brazil. Cattle were farmed in latifundia. Coffee and cattle estates were in the hands of the colonels, who also owned the large trade.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the Brazilian population was generally composed of: an elite that held the political power; a middle class (an urban group made up of civil servants, small businessmen, and liberal professionals); factory workers; Sertanejos (people from the Sertão who worked in the fields or as livestock farmers and lived in great difficulty partly because of the adverse conditions in the environment, partly because of the greedy exploitation of the landowners); and mainly Italian and Japanese emigrants who, at the beginning of the Century, flocked to Brazil in large numbers and introduced significant changes, such as unionism, socialism, and anarchism. The emigrant's role in the development of Brazilian society was crucial. From an economic point of view, the emigrant replaced Black people as a labour force (Magalhães, 2018).

Women's Condition in Portuguese and Brazilian Society in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

During the period analysed in this comparative study, women did not have a legal personality. In Portugal, women's right to vote was only allowed in 1931. However, this right was limited to women who had a secondary or university education. Women could also vote as "heads of families" if they were widowed, divorced or judicially separated, or if their husbands were absent because they were in the colonies or abroad, and women could also vote if they had assets with their own family (Batista 2016). This represented a very small number of women; most came from social classes with the greatest economic power.

According to Portela & Freire (2010), from the second half of the 19th Century on, the purpose of women's education for the wealthy was to help women achieve successful marriages. These women were allowed to develop artistic activities in aristocratic salons, which allowed them to escape from domestic confinement to a place between the private and public; however, the readings that were permitted were controlled by parents and husbands, guaranteeing an intellectual limitation. In the transition from the 19th Century to the 20th Century, women gained more social standing and change appeared to be on the horizon. In these salons, women hostesses helped maintain the family's prestige while also guaranteeing their husband's wellbeing and professional success. (D'Incao, 2000); these women always remained submissive to them.

In Portugal, in 1926, opposition to the Salazar dictatorial regime was formed, and many artists defending this movement were persecuted by PIDE⁴ (Carpintéro, 2013), and many of them fled and/or were exiled abroad, particularly to Brazil. In Brazil, the right to vote was allowed in 1932, but it was also limited to women who had their income and to those who were married (with husband's permission) (Pinsky, 2015).

Feminist Activism through the Arts

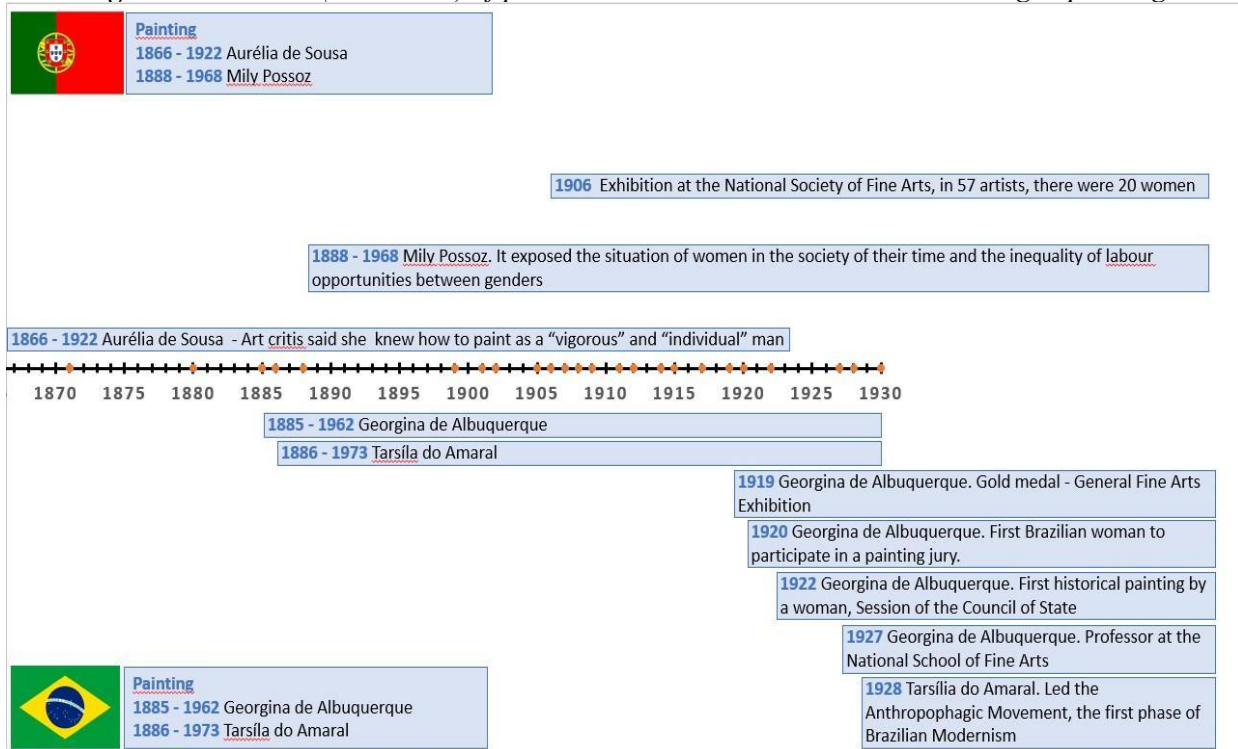
Painting, literature, or playing a musical instrument were accepted and even encouraged feminine practices among the elites, but these new frontiers were allowed only in private domestic spaces, not in public exhibitions or publications (Vaquinhas, 2000). When suffragism and feminism were ideas and practices that circulated internationally, how did Portuguese and Brazilian women who had access to literature, painting, and music position themselves in the face of these debates?

Painting

The Imperial Academy of Fine Arts played a crucial role in the Empire's political project of nation-building; Figure 1 shows how this boosted artistic production and gave the nation a cultural identity (Pereira, 2012). Art critics of this period placed women into one of two categories: their art was either considered typical women's art in that it was minor, amateur, and unoriginal, while some women artists were viewed as masculine, as capable of going beyond the limits of gender and masculinizing their work. The difficulty that women faced was to paint like a man without ceasing to be a woman.

⁴ Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado (PIDE) - International Police and State Defense

Figure 1: Timeline (1865-1930) of production and artists who were outstanding in painting



One way to study women’s artistic practices during this period is to analyse the catalogues of the annual exhibition that took place in the National Society of Fine Arts. In 1906, the number of women artists exhibited in the oil painting section was significant: out of 57 artists, there were 20 women featured. In the 12th edition in 1915, 16 women out of 78 total artists were featured in the exhibition’s main category, oil painting. This was a significant number that contrasted with their invisibility as artists during this period.

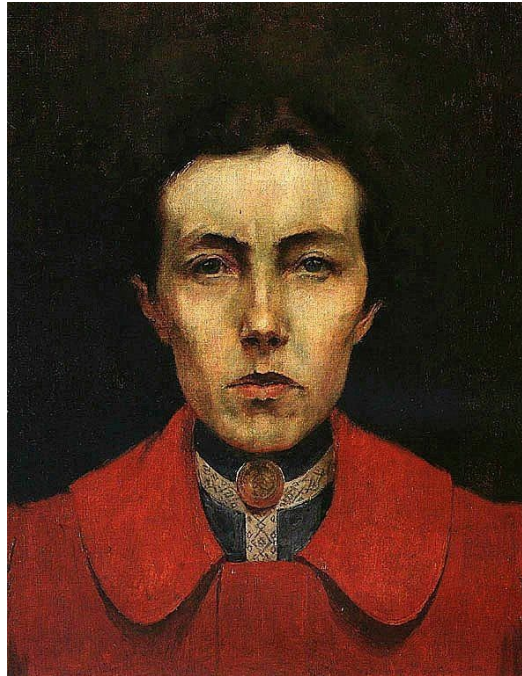
Another way of studying the place occupied by women artists is to analyse how art critics identified and described their works. In historical contexts where being a woman and an artist was an exception, the way their works were perceived was also marked by gender discrimination. In this period, the Portuguese painter Aurélia de Sousa (1866-1922) stood out as a woman in this male-dominated field. Critics at the time mentioned that she painted "like a man" because they did not want to recognise her as a woman artist (Silva, 2004). Aurélia de Sousa was also one of the first women to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Lisbon, Portugal. Figures 2 and 3 highlight the painting Aurélia de Sousa made of Saint Anthony with her face; she painted herself dressed as Saint Anthony and represented herself with strong, masculinised hands.

Figure 2: *Santo António* (ca. De 1902). Oil on canvas. 175x139cm. Collection SOSS, Porto



Source: Silva, 2004.

Figure 3: *Self-portrait of Aurélia de Souza* (ca. De 1900). Oil on canvas. 45x36cm. Soares dos Reis National Museum Collection



Source: Silva, 2004.

Another Portuguese artist of significant importance in women's activism was Mily Possoz (1888-1968). She was one of the most prominent artists of the first generation of Portuguese modernist painters. Through her art, she exposed the situation of women in the society of her time and the inequality of labour opportunities between genders.

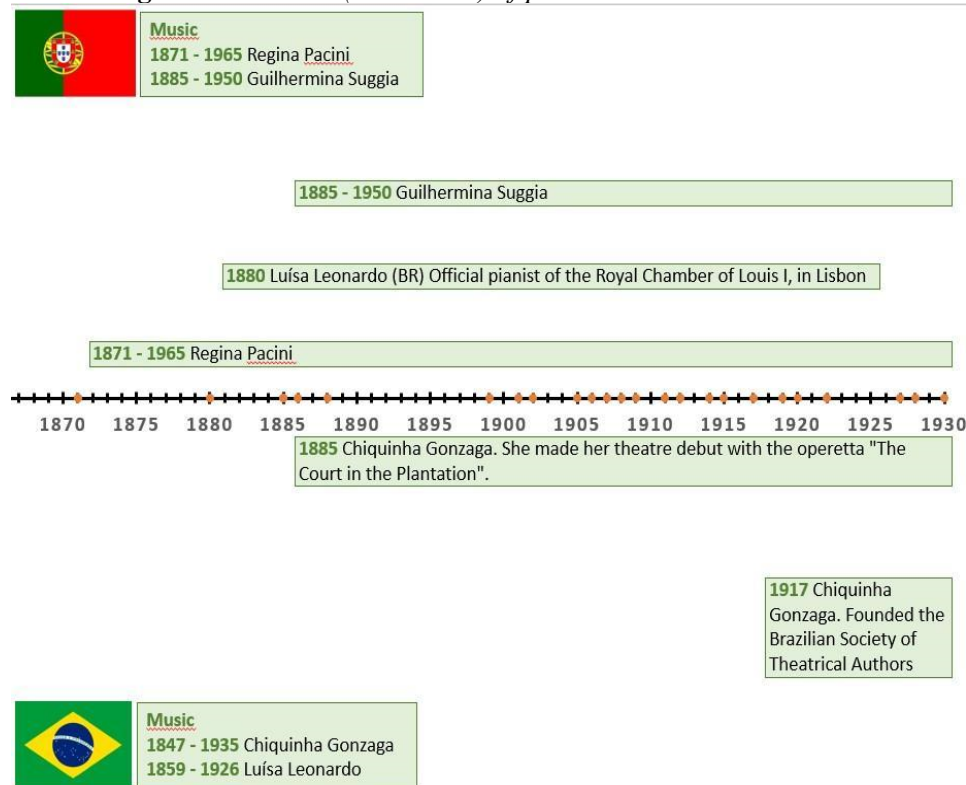
Georgina de Albuquerque (1885-1962) was a Brazilian painter, designer and teacher. Considered one of the first Brazilian women to succeed internationally as an artist, she was also a national historical painting pioneer. This artistic genre remained restricted to the male universe until 1922, when she exhibited her work at the Council of State Session. Georgina was also the first woman to be a director of the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), where she studied and taught arts. Georgina received the gold medal in the General Exhibition of Fine Arts of 1919. In 1920, she became the first Brazilian woman to participate in a painting jury, which allowed her to hold a successful Academy position. In 1927, Georgina became part of the National School of Fine Arts as a free-teacher.

Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973) was one of the most important painters in the first phase of Modernism. She is considered one of the representatives of this movement in all of Latin America. Tarsila was also crucial in creating the Anthropophagic movement (1928-1929); her painting *Abaporu* inaugurated the movement (Neto & Malta, 2019). Tarsila do Amaral and the poet Oswald de Andrade crafted the Brazilian artistic manifesto of the 1920s. Its main objectives were to use literary language and assimilate, but not copy other cultures.

Music

For years, feminine musical practices were confined to the private sphere, especially among the bourgeoisie and nobility; girls were allowed to sing or play instruments such as the piano at home. However, the passage from the 19th to the 20th Century (Figure 4) marked a change in the role of women in society and consequently in music; the first female soloists made an appearance, and women began playing “male instruments” like cellos.

Figure 4: *Timeline (1865-1930) of production and artists who were outstanding in music*



In Portugal, Guilhermina Suggia (1885-1950), the first Portuguese solo cellist, stood out. At the age of 5, her father, mentor, and protector started her on the cello. Guilhermina began giving concerts and received a grant from Queen D. Amelia to continue her studies. She asserted her place among other male artists as a soloist on the cello, an instrument considered just for men.

Regina Pacini (1871-1965) was the first woman soloist and lyrical singer (soprano) to make a brilliant international career. In 1888, at the age of 16, she debuted at the Teatro Real de São Carlos and was very well received by critics and the public who, at the end of the show, called her fourteen times to the stage. She was an excellent soprano who became famous across Europe.

In Brazil, music was one of the most important national art manifestations and reflected its cultural diversity. At the turn of the 19th Century, women composers, singers, and instrumentalists began to emerge; these women were recognized for their contribution to Brazilian music, helping make it a large part of their identity.

Chiquinha Gonzaga (1847-1935) was a pioneer in 20th Century Brazilian women's composition, a history of struggle and inspiring resilience. She challenged the limits imposed by the society of that time, battled for her recognition as a professional, and aside from being a composer and pianist of great talent, she was the first woman to conduct an orchestra in the

country, combining the popular with the erudite. She stood out in the history of Brazilian culture and the struggle for freedom and equal rights. The courage she faced the oppressive patriarchal society and created an unprecedented profession for women caused a scandal in her time. She was raised to be a lady, and at the age of 16, she had a marriage arranged by her father. At 18, she rebelled and decided to abandon that arranged marriage. She was accused of abandonment and adultery so that legally her husband would not have to support her. In 1885, Chiquinha Gonzaga conducted an orchestra that debuted in the theatre the operetta "A corte na Roça" and revolutionised the world of music. There was no female word for conductor ("female conductor") (maestro "maestrina"), and the press did not know what to call her⁵.

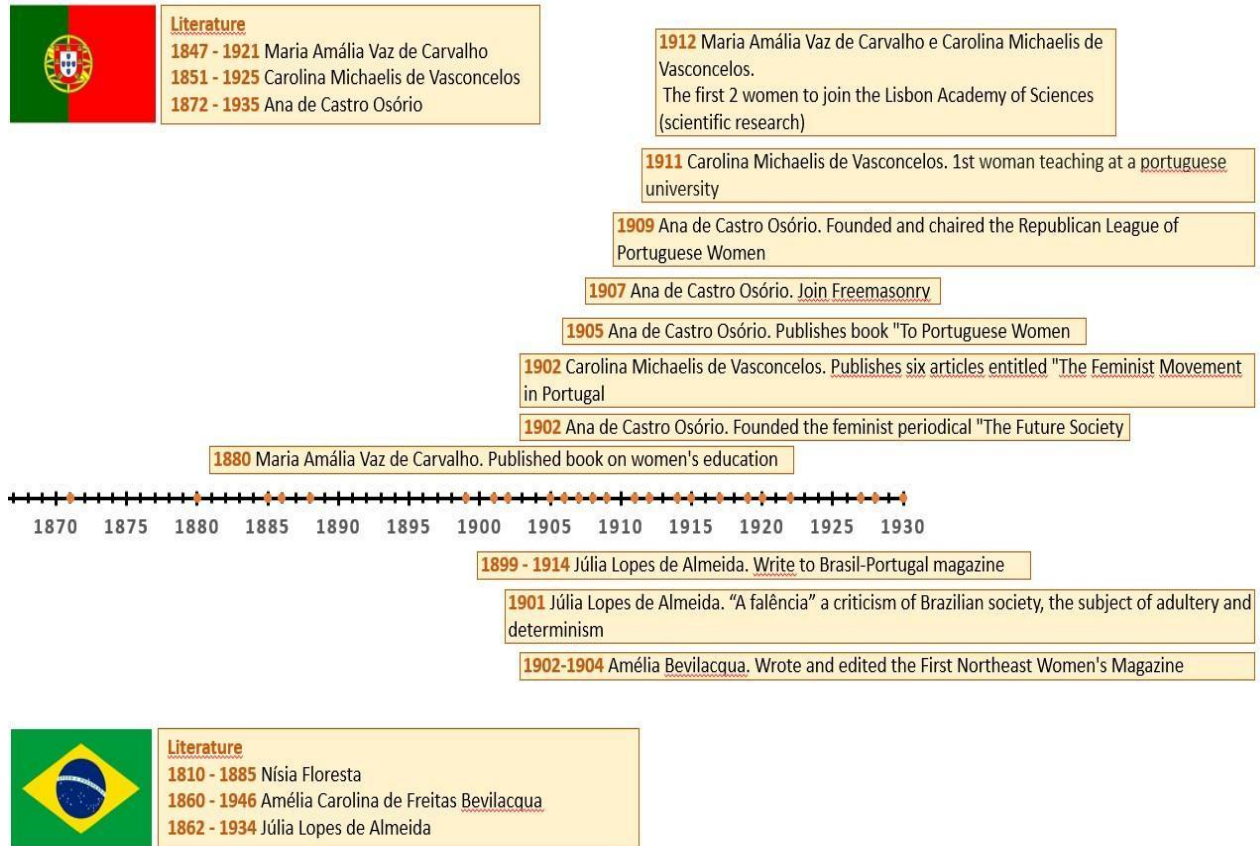
A political militant of great social causes, she denounced prejudice and social backwardness. Chiquinha Gonzaga composed the carnival march, which is eternally recognised in the famous Brazilian carnival. In 1917, she founded the first copyright protection society in the country, the Brazilian Society of Theatrical Authors. Chiquinha Gonzaga's participation in the Brazilian artistic scene was crucial for defining its musical identity at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Literature

In 1912, Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho (1847-1921) and Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcelos (1851-1925) were the first two women admitted to the Lisbon Academy of Sciences. Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho was a writer and poet. Through her work, she fought to recognize women's human rights, improve women's legal status, and the right to institutionalized education (Figure 5).

⁵ In Portuguese there is this distinction, but in English it is used to put the female word before the name.

Figure 5: Timeline (1865-1930) of production and artists who were outstanding in Literature



Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcelos was the first Full Professor at Lisbon and Coimbra's Universities and has published several works in Linguistics, Literature, and Ethnography. In September 1902, the newspaper "O Primeiro de Janeiro" published six articles, written by Carolina, entitled "The Feminist Movement in Portugal". These articles advocated for education as fundamental to discussing feminist issues in Portugal and promoted freeing women from ignorance and male prejudices.

Ana de Castro Osório (1872-1935) promoted the status of dignity and opportunity for women. In 1902, she founded the feminist periodical "The Future Society". In 1905, she wrote an important book, *To Portuguese Women*, addressing women's current status. In 1907, she created the ephemeral Portuguese Group of Feminist Studies. In 1909, along with other distinguished feminists, she founded and presided over the Republican League of Portuguese Women, which aimed at profound reforms, including the right to vote (Moacho, 2003).

The Modern Art Week of 1922 opened new paths for literature in Brazil. Nísia Floresta, the literary name of Dionísia Freire Lisboa (1810-1885), was a translator, journalist, educator, poet and essayist. She was considered one the first Brazilian feminist voices to rise up against the prejudices of patriarchal society. She fought for women's education, for the indigenous people, for the abolition of slavery and for religious freedom. Her own family even repudiated her for having abandoned her husband, whom she had married at 13. She began her writing career in 1832, publishing a free translation of a work in Recife (Brazil) that made tremendous success and a scandal in the 18th Century: "Women's rights and injustice of men", written by Mary Wollstonecraft (Butler, 2006).

Júlia Lopes de Almeida (1862-1934) was a novelist, chronicler and playwright. Considered a writer with progressive ideas for her time, she advocated abolishing slavery, republic, divorce, formal education of women and civil rights. Her work is known for its objectivity, criticism of Brazilian society, and developed themes like adultery and determinism. She also wrote for the magazine *Brasil-Portugal* (1899-1914). She was one of the most published writers in Brazil of the so-called 1st Republic (1889-1930).

Amélia Carolina de Freitas Beviláqua (1860-1946) was a lawyer, writer, journalist and pioneer in fighting women's rights in Brazil. In her discourses and literary texts, she fought against the social norms imposed on women.

Results and Discussion

Taking as a reference the post-independence period of Brazil and conducting a diachronic comparative study of feminist activist artists from Portugal and Brazil, we found inspiring examples of feminine resistance and resilience. In this study, we analysed different women's approaches that surprised us with their acts' originality and creativity. This study presented similarities and differences in how Portuguese and Brazilian women with access to culture and artistic practice, from painting, music, and literature, positioned and manifested themselves in the face of these social and cultural inequalities in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century.

The analyzed data was shown through a timeline to visualise and analyse the connections in the initiatives of feminist activism through the arts aiming to give women greater access to education and promote legislation and policies committed to the defence of their rights. There are already some biographical studies concerning the artists discussed here (Moacho, 2003; Oliveira, 2006), but none analyse the two countries in a diachronic, comparative way to link the struggles of feminist activism in these two places. Access to publication and exhibition did not always translate into a feminist consciousness.

One can notice that in the second half of the 19th Century and early 20th Century, a feminist discourse began to take shape in Portugal and Brazil, expressed significantly by the arts, which made women's issues more visible.

Women painters also began to grow in numbers and leave the domestic space and move toward a public exhibition of their works. However, comparing the examples of feminist activists through painting, one notices a more dynamic, productive, and robust performance by Brazilian artists and activists. Some Brazilian painters managed to break through the barrier of their times and show their talents to the world. They have stood out and occupied a prestigious position on the national and international scene. Feminist activism for music occurred more or less at the same time in both countries. In terms of representation, several Portuguese and Brazilian actresses established cultural and learning exchanges.

In Portugal, feminist activism in literature stood out, and in Brazil, this movement was more vigorous in painting. From the three artistic areas analysed here, literature has stood out as the most practiced means of activism, which can be exercised in any medium and space without large instruments for its execution. On the other hand, its publication and dissemination promoted greater visibility and reached an international audience.

These pioneering women were mainly from the elite, but generally they had no institutionalized education. For future works, it is important to investigate the participation of women in the history of feminist activism in other areas of arts as sculpture, theater, and photography because the presence of women has not yet been sufficiently analysed in this period.

In studies concerning this specific period, the names of women were often omitted because, in these areas, men were mostly mentioned, and women's art was not considered worthy of recognition.

Conclusion

This period was characterized above all by the search for access to institutionalized education (academic instruction), artistic, literary and musical professionalization, property (of material goods), and therefore economic independence, as well as access to the public sphere and later the right to vote and to be elected. As feminism became increasingly activist, it also gained notoriety among anti-feminist views, displayed in newspapers and books—a sentiment that persists. This research included examples of women artists who fought against a patriarchal society and managed to become professional, a status that only belonged to men. This achievement also allowed them economic independence.

The timeline also showcased the very close relationship between Portugal and Brazil, an exchange and a great "cultural bridge" between the two countries that cross the Atlantic Ocean. Several Portuguese and Brazilian artists established cultural and learning exchanges. For example, in terms of literature, Júlia Lopes de Almeida, a Brazilian artist, wrote for Brazilian and Portuguese magazines and newspapers. However, access to publications and exhibitions did not always translate into a feminist consciousness.

This study highlighted that, in the analysed period, these women who were artists and activists were not yet allowed by law to exercise the right to vote. These women proposed a new way of conceiving their role in society and their socio-legal status, so they could later fight for their rights, as only men's value was recognized by law. The period studied was fundamental in pioneering activism that raised awareness of the socio-legal importance of women and led to women's suffrage in Portugal in 1931 and Brazil in 1932. From this conquest on, women started several activities that guaranteed them political representation.

These pioneering women inspired others from diverse social backgrounds and from other countries to express themselves to make their word credible, defend their points of view, and make feminist art a means of protest and awareness. The case studies analysed were based on a privileged education and came from an economically stable social class. The common point among these women is the fact that they have conquered the professionalization of their art, which allowed them to achieve financial independence, and with this status, they were able to leave the private sphere and enter a public and international one.

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