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## Nino Cais' Aesthetic: European vs Brazilian identity - deconstructing colonial icons

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### Nino Cais' Aesthetic: European vs Brazilian identity - deconstructing colonial icons

**Abstract:** Nino Cais is approached as an aesthetic case study: how stereotyped colonial iconography can be subverted through a staged visual irony? In late past, European artists travelled to Brazil fulfilling anthropological missions: to register and make known the "New World", fulfilling political, scientific and/or pragmatic purposes. Cais conceives exotic iconographies that disable colonial political dogmatisms; he assumes a deep identity, opposing uniformity of taste, patterns of behaviour, proposing racial counter-movements and social criticism. He pursues cultural themes, interacting for strong convictions, subverting stereotypes by staging a new iconography – presenting himself as a singular 'projected/introjected' self-portraits; deconstructs decolonial stereotypes, thus ensuring an aesthetic and ideological precision without shackles.

**Key words:** Aesthetic Standard of Taste; Decolonial artistic procedures; Deconstructed Iconographies: Nino Cais; Staged photographs.

### Estética de Nino Cais: Identidad europea versus brasileña – deconstruyendo íconos coloniales

**Resumen:** Se presenta el caso estético de Nino Cais, al analizar cómo la iconografía colonial estereotipada puede subvertirse a través de ironías escenificadas. En el pasado, artistas europeos viajaban a Brasil, cumpliendo misiones antropológicas, propósitos políticos, científicos y/o pragmáticos. El paisaje, las gentes, el patrimonio despertaron extrañeza en el público europeo, fruición pintoresca frente a la norma estética del gusto. Cais concibe autorretratos/iconografías exóticas que deshabilitan los dogmatismos políticos coloniales; apunta la profunda auto-identidad, contra de la uniformidad de los patrones de gusto y comportamiento, proponiendo contra-movimientos raciales y críticas sociales. Su obra equipara metas existenciales y convicciones gregarias, deconstruye los estereotipos decoloniales, garantizando una precisión estética e ideológica sin trabas.

**Palabras clave:** Fotografías escenificadas; Gusto estético; Iconografías deconstruidas: Nino Cais; Procedimientos artísticos decoloniales.

### Estética de Nino Cais: Identidade Europeia versus Brasileira – desconstruindo ícones coloniais

**Resumo:** Nino Cais é abordado como um caso de estudo estético: avalia-se como a iconografia colonial estereotipada pode ser subvertida através de uma ironia visual encenada. Outrora, artistas europeus viajavam ao Brasil, cumprindo missões antropológicas, cumprindo fins políticos, científicos e/ou pragmáticos. A natureza, a paisagem, os indígenas e seu patrimônio suscitavam no público europeu estranheza, fruición pitoresca aferida à norma estética do gosto. Cais concebe autorretratos/iconografias exóticas que desabilitam dogmatismos políticos coloniais; visa a auto-identidade profunda, contrariando a uniformidade de gosto e padrões de comportamento, propondo contramovimentos raciais e críticas sociais. Sua obra equaciona metas existenciais e convicções gregárias. Interagindo encena uma nova iconografia; desconstrói estereótipos decoloniais, garantindo uma precisão estética e ideológica sem grilhões.

**Palavras-chave:** Fotografias encenadas; Gosto Estético; Iconografias Desconstruídas: Nino Cais; Procedimentos artísticos decoloniais.

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## Introduction – about travels and travellers

It is as if the journey, the traveller and his narrative reveal all the time what is known and what is not known, the near and the remote, the real and the virtual. (...) What is present and what is past, near or remote, is revealed in the report, description or interpretation of those who take advantage of the materials collected on trips, imagining the ways of being, acting, feeling, thinking or imagining that can constitute the other<sup>1</sup> (IANNI, 2003, p.13-15).

The historical reading of artistic creations is not limited to known historiographical archives (documents, images and writings) and collections. It is mandatory to identify which data are missing, namely those that have been “erased” from books and other material supports. We have to dig into the primary sources, applying the most reliable methodologies. In other words, it is necessary to detect which determinations still prevail, which conceptual patterns have guided the Historiography of Art and Heritage, and provide the necessary additional data. On the other hand, settings and interferences (in the good and bad sense of the term) must be considered, and seek other disciplines that enlighten the knowledge of arts, cultures and human heritage, transporting circumstances of the environment, timeline ideas, mentalities, convictions, dogmas and contingencies (induced or explicit). That is, research territories in spread out mood. Then it will be necessary to restart surveillance; to adjust contaminations that amplified prejudices or assumptions - loaded with unilateral constrictions. It is necessary to map the iconographic terms that configure distorted understandings, eroded by axiological, political and social blindness of “georeferenced worlds in human chronology”.

The concept of travel is closely associated with education, culture and identity construction, increasing an inseparable and generous triad when generating literary and artistic creations. To travel from Europe to Brazil (and vice-versa) during the past four centuries – since 1650 until nowadays assumed different causes and goals. We will emphasise intellectual and artistic travels, thus its various purposes within: scientific missions, political/diplomatic missions, artistic missions. Brazilian Contemporary Art reveals a commitment towards the first iconographies produced in Brazil, and use it for reactivating ideas and deconstruct axiology on anthropologic and sociological issues.

Artists and travellers had arrived from European countries, mainly from England, France, Austria, Germany and Holland. An overviewed list of British and Irish travellers to Brazil was

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations from Portuguese are by the author.

presented by Leslie Bethel (2003), sharing traveller's names from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until 2000. Several of these travellers - and from the mentioned other countries - produced drawings, illustrations and paintings though some of them were not "professional" artists but writers, diplomats, scientists, merchants or just displaced members of the families – mostly the wife's. According to Bethel, Mrs. Nathaniel Kindersley, perhaps the first woman-writer "known to have written an account of a visit to Brazil: *Letters from the island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*<sup>2</sup> (London, 1777)" (BETHEL, 2003, p. 19). Maria Graham (1785-1842) became broadly celebrated for her residence and research<sup>3</sup> published in *Journal of a voyage to Brazil and residence there, during part of the years 1821, 1822, 1823* (London, 1824).

The paradoxes of travel are recurring theme/source for aesthetic and critical thinking. Contemporary essays on exemplary intellectual/aesthetic journeys spread intimate goals and commitments of poets and artists as a guarantee of lucidity and prospective vision: Goethe's *Travels in Italy* (1787), Stendhal's *History of Painting in Italy* (1812/1816), Turner's *Journeys in the Alps or Venice*, John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851) or *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* by Laurence Sterne (1768), just to evoke emblematic titles concerning European Travels. If addressing Brazilian experiences, a remarkable list according to the same period is to be considered. Few Portuguese travellers were driven to those missions, regarding philosophic/scientific, literary and iconographic productions.<sup>4</sup>

During the past two centuries, Travel Literature and Artists-travellers productions increased along with the relevance of the noteworthy discipline: Theory of Travel carried out by authors who study its foundations and accomplishments, case of Michel Mafesolli, Michel Serres, Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux or Michel Onfroy after philosophical writings from Montaigne, J.J. Rousseau, Diderot, Hegel, F. Nietzsche (CHEVREAU, 2009, p. 56). The travel phenomena drove to reflections on journeying and its protagonists, in order to define and shape the *traveller's* profile – in a philosophic perspective. Nietzsche published *Le Voyageur et son Ombre* (1879); Alain Babeau, *Les Voyageurs en France depuis la Renaissance, jusqu'à la Révolution* (1885) and quite a few followed, theorizing both concept and practise of intellectual/artistic journeys. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after 1960, it is noticeable Jacques Derrida, philosopher and traveller, "qui souhaite en finir avec l'eurocentrisme de la philosophie et milite pour une philosophie cosmopolite" (CHEVREAU, 2009, p.10).

<sup>2</sup> Digital version available at:

[https://ia803101.us.archive.org/3/items/lettersfromislan00kind\\_0/lettersfromislan00kind\\_0.pdf](https://ia803101.us.archive.org/3/items/lettersfromislan00kind_0/lettersfromislan00kind_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See. Lambert, M.F. (2020).

<sup>4</sup> In the last decade, my research has one of its focus on the study of women travelers who conceived writings and visual productions – from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Accomplished travels and journeys portrayed humankind symbolic chronologies, relating *Zeitgeist* and notions of the closest and the furthest *Umwelt* to be experienced by travellers-writers-philosophers. Photographers, after draughtsmen and illustrators, were an outstanding support for visual scientific registrations. Thus, they produced both realistic or imaginary narratives and iconographic subjective creations.

Nino Cais reflexions about history and anthropology, society, travels and personal identity are sharp and thought-provoking. Namely, if attending to his traveller's portrait series it is understandable that he stages figural situations. Himself as a traveller that does not need to accomplish his *in-presence-journeys*, neither in space or historical chronology. In art and literature creations, this statement and decision is commonly known when recalling Emmanuel Kant or Fernando Pessoa, among others individualities. Neither of them travelled, circumstance that did not armed none of their thinking and literary activities – on the contrary. Last year, an article was published about Bernardo Soares' *Non accomplished journey* (LAMBERT, 2021), believing that his non-travel activation resulted in a broader accuracy to deepest reflections and correspondent impact towards self-visionary experience of time and space, being able to share it with readers and followers.

### 1. Once *Picturesque Journeys* and Visual Metamorphosis [Brazil]

But the picturesque is not just the common denominator of a certain type of publications; it is an aesthetic category, to which we can attribute the value of an instrument that specifically serves the purpose of apprehending the experiences lived in a scenario different from the traveller's everyday world. Being, fading and appearing elsewhere presents a series of studies held in the interstice of conversations centred on reflection on the artist's creative process, in which the common bond of metamorphoses emerged (DIENER, 2008, p.60).

There was no way of escape anywhere.

We invented paths with the new words (BARROS, 2010, p.463).

Scientific areas intersected – made concomitant by the awakening of a philosophical, scientific, literary and artistic conscience, possible to be implemented following the departure of the Portuguese Court to Brazil in 1808 and the subsequent opening and movement of its ports. Had preceded this opening, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement in the captaincy of Pernambuco, of the Dutch group (*circa* 1637-1644), under the tutelage of Count Maurício de Nassau – accompanied by the scientist and artist George Marcgraf (1610-1644) and the painters Albert Eckhout (1610-1660), Frans Post, (1612-1680), Zacharias Wagner (1614-1668), true pioneers in these registers. They

established exemplary iconographic features, shaping aesthetic “role models”. Brazilian population included three main typologies: white/mestizo; black and Indian, as seen in historic iconography portrayed in situ.

Frans Post disguised, hid figures in the landscape, underlining georeferenced belonging and visual acculturation. The main racial characters portrayed by Eckhout undertake the composition's *solo* role, our attention converging straight to these *charismas*. Their insertion matches a structured conception, as if they were at a time suspended and detached from background landscape. As for Eckhout's still-life compositions, he highlights native botanic species that are accomplish both documentary and decorative purposes, deeply aestheticized in a suggestive anthropologic/ethnographic milieu. Artistic *virtuosi* legitimation prevails, believing humankind in its mythical and scientific dimension (in epistemological shapes of time).

The uniqueness of the European taste for the “exotic” assuming picturesque aesthetic condition at a time, when authorial issues and philosophical arguments about the “taste issue” were intersected. It is intended to draw analytical-reflexive proposals crossed with the contemporary productions of artists, in the case of Cais.

Initial topics are stated, contributing to what is a cartography of aesthetic education - through the respective socio-anthropological-poetic representations of the public (European and Brazilian), confronting pictorial chronologies distanced in a temporal arc of over 400 years.

Perhaps it was expected that the visual scenes would be presented, expressing suggestions of [multicultural] oppositions and/or contradictions between people (their customs, traditions, myths and cults), cultures and/or landscapes.

It should be said that in Frans Post's paintings, as in Eckhout's, the determining meaning does not indicate “shock” when working *in loco*, but rather presupposes absorption, leading to adhesion, through aesthetic appropriation, also with regard to the consolidation of the author/artist's self before the abroad. In the confrontation with the other recognized as the other, intersubjectivity enhances artistic identity. Their travels were not limited to fortuitous passages, but to stays that were translated into a more objective and complete observation – that is, understanding of the differences – interceded by the filters of the respective personalities and the norms of privileged artistic and aesthetic concepts of taste.

The philosophical journey would have the noble task of revealing hidden elements, unknown to the common people: “How many things does the surface show us that we could use, if we knew them? The voyage gives us all this vast news.” To conduct this adventure only wise men, educated in geography, arithmetic, geometry, plane trigonometry, natural history, physics and chemistry (RAMINELLI, 1998, p.161).

Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira<sup>5</sup> (1756-1815) led a scientific expedition in late 18<sup>th</sup> century known as *Philosophical Journey to Amazon/ Viagem philosophica à Amazónia* (1792)<sup>6</sup>. They departed in September 1783 from Lisbon sailing towards Belém do Pará: “to undertake the “Philosophical Journey through the captaincies of Grão-Pará, Rio Negro, Matto Grosso and Cuiaba” (PATAKA, 2011). The journey lasted for 9 years: “Rodrigues Ferreira's main concern was not so much ethnographic analysis - which did not exist at the time as a specific field of study - but the questioning of what the Indian represents in terms of a policy of definitive occupation of the area by the Metropolis” (HARTMANN, 1975, p.22).



**Image 1.** Drawing by Codina and Freire from V. Correa Filho, *Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira Vida e Obra do Grande Naturalista Brasileiro*. 1939.

[http://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo\\_digital/div\\_obrasgerais/drg62502/drg62502.pdf](http://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo_digital/div_obrasgerais/drg62502/drg62502.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> This Expedition was not the single one from Portugal as Domingues, Ângela Maria (2021) remarks: “In fact, this expedition was a mere, although relevant, component of an ambitious scientific and political-economic project, coordinated by the naturalist Domingos Vandelli and the gardener-botanist Júlio Matiazzi, which embodied the instrumentalized, pragmatic and utilitarian way in which science was conceived by the Portuguese Absolutist State, namely through the knowledge produced and collected through 'philosophical journeys' sent to overseas domains.” “No trilho da ‘viagem filosófica’ de Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira: uma breve história das suas coleções e sua disseminação”. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2178-2547-BGOELDI-2020-0109>

<sup>6</sup> About the original documentation left by Alexandre Ferreira, see: Domingues, A.M. 2021.

The group included, besides Alexandre Ferreira being himself a naturalist, the botanical gardener Agostinho Joaquim do Cabo, the draughtsmen José Joaquim Freire (1760-1847) and Joaquim José Codina (?-1790): “The expedition members' mission was to collect and prepare all products from the three kingdoms of nature that they found and send them to the Royal Museum of Lisbon, as well as to make particular philosophical and political observations about all travel objects” (PATACA, 2011).

Codina and Freire scientific drawings registered the diversity of landscape, vegetal and zoological nature, and portrayed native people from Amazon, their traditions and features; the group also collected diverse textiles, objects and artefacts, highlighting the famous *Jurupixuna* people' zoomorphic masks (HARTMANN, 1975, p.31) that – we consider – might be related (and inspired) Cais' *self-portraits with masks*.

When I camouflage the body, it becomes almost a sculptural mass less dictated, with a less precise rule of what is actually happening in the scene. The face points to some situation, be it a nostalgic, festive, joyful, cynical or bizarre scene. The face points to these paths. When I camouflage my face, I create a situation of masses, colours, volumes and textures (NINO CAIS' statement).



**Image 2:** Nino Cais. *Untitled. Serie Animals/Bichos*. 2010. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

The Napoleonic Wars in Europa interfered with travellers-artists interests and destinies. Many of them thought about new territories to fulfil their compositions faded by a newest aesthetic taste emerging. On the other hand, social and political conditions for their acquaintance changed when the Portuguese Court was established at Rio de Janeiro, running away from Napoleonic Invasion. So, a new route was established and these artists furnished new images to European audiences, being these artists emotionally affected, not only the picturesque *Umwelt*, also by the

differently native people inspired – some of them, at least – by Emile Rousseau and other Enlightenment philosophers.

In 1816, several artists travelled to Brazil as part of the *French Artistic Mission*<sup>7</sup>. Two of them became emblematic art history references: Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848) historical painter who accepted the journey, perhaps to ease the pain from his young son dead; Nicolas Antoine Taunay (1755-1830), landscape painter; Charles Simon Pradier (1786-1848), engraver; Grandjean de Montigny (1776-1850), architect; and also the Ferrez brothers [Marc Ferrez (1788-1850); Zepherin Ferrez (1797-1851)]. The group was led by Joachim Lebreton (1760-1819), under D. João VI patronage, who desired to found in Rio de Janeiro an Academy of Fine Arts. Then followed the *Austrian-German Mission* (1817) to Brazil, accompanying the future Emperor Pedro I's wife, Princess Leopoldina, entourage: Von Martius (botanist), Von Spix (zoologist) and Thomas Ender (painter: (1793-1875). Before leaving for their larger expedition (1818) heading São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Bahia, Pernambuco, Piauí, Maranhão, Pará and Amazon, the two scientists studied Rio de Janeiro native nature and landscape. During that period, Thomas Ender remained in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais, documenting these regions' landscape and people. Later on, the German painter Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858) joined another expedition, under the concept of *Philosophic Journey*, conceived and organized (1821) by Baron Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (1774-1852) - physician, botanist, zoologist, anthropologist, philologist and navigator - and sponsored by Russian Tsar Alexander I “[from] a country that sought to equal in importance to other European powers in the field of scientific knowledge”. The Baron gathered 39 people in the group (Candido, 2013<sup>8</sup>): Ludwig Ridel (botanist), Wilhelm Freyreiss (naturalist) and French artists Hércules Forence (1804-1879) and Aimé-Adrien Taunay (1803-1828).

What kind of Brazil was the one J.B. Debret, Nicolas Antoine Taunay, Thomas Ender, Aimé-Adrien Taunay, Johan Moritz Rugendas<sup>9</sup> bequeathed to us? Nino Cais works about it and proposes some clues and guidelines to wonder and question about it, further more than the main unveiling uses to accomplish.

During J.B. Debret Brazilian stay, meaningful work was produced, engaged and differently interpreted along centuries, according to ideological/social mentality and moral patterns. He was known as a “philosopher painter, as his presentations of Brazilian reality were always guided by a reflection on the progressive evolution from barbarism to civilization” (STRAUMANN, 2005, p.9). Debret produced academic portraits of relevant figures such as D. João VI and Dona Carlota

<sup>7</sup> <https://heritage.bnf.fr/france-bresil/fr/mission-artistique-1816-article>

<sup>8</sup> *Expedição Langsdorff na Brasiliana Digital*. <https://hdbr.hypotheses.org/3605>

<sup>9</sup> Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil* (journey between 1827 and 1835) published in Paris.



Joaquina. His *Picturesque and Historical Journey to Brazil*, published between 1834 and 1839, included 220 engravings on 151 boards, influenced contemporary artists in Brazil and Portugal, highlighting Adriana Varejão' Series, Vasco Araújo's installations, among other iconographic and critic contemporary quotes. Regarding Cais' approach/appropriation to Debret's *picturesque coloured engravings* we selected: *Emperor Pedro I Coronation* and the representation of the *First slave couple wedding* celebrated in 1822.

Debret's visual production, given their high number, more than 1000, became both source of aesthetic uncommitted delight and feed for post-critical and post-colonialist treatments:

It is a consensus among scholars how much Debret's work was responsible for shaping a visibility of the Brazilian past of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, framed, above all, in the most diverse plates that make up the picturesque and historic trip to Brazil, published in Paris, between the years 1834 and 1839 (LIMA JUNIOR, 2021, p.3).



**Image 3:** Left – Nino Cais version ©Courtesy Nino Cais; Right: J.B. Debret. *D. Pedro I Coronation*. Engraving from *Viagem Pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil*.

[https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Jean-Baptiste\\_Debret\\_-\\_Coroa%C3%A7%C3%A3o\\_de\\_D.\\_Pedro\\_I.jpg](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Jean-Baptiste_Debret_-_Coroa%C3%A7%C3%A3o_de_D._Pedro_I.jpg)

Despite the range of subjects that Debret illustrates, historians of Brazil have usually only reproduced his images of Afro-Brazilian slaves. This is understandable, given the political, social and economic interest in the topic and the fact that Debret is one of the few artists who portrayed the horrors of slavery in Brazil at so early date

(BUONO, 2007, p.71).



Image 4: Left – J.B. Debret. *Marriage Ceremony*. C. 1816-1831.

<https://gyovanacarneiro.com/page/5/>; Right – Nino Cais Version. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

The group is portrayed as beheaded, losing each figure his or her direct face racial recognition. All of them lost their identity, becoming societal symbols. Thus, its semantic, polysemic content was dissected and worked from within to reach deeper (unveiled) layers – it is the exercise of a dysfunctional actuality managing over the original compositions by Debret. For his part, and as for Nicolas Taunay, heed the warning of the Brazilian art historian: “Taunay never got to see Brazil. Being a landscape painter, he used the country only as a subject for new paintings, but he always fitted it into a prefabricated mould that he followed for over forty years. Nothing changed his palette” (LAGO, 2008, p.22). Pedro Corrêa do Lago, referring to Debret’s methodology of artistic production, points out in his *Catalogue Raisonné* (2009): “...these watercolours were made patiently, over the years, as a embroidery of Brazilian daily life, becoming worked and definitive images that – often after 10 or 15 years – needed little to be corrected when the artist took them back to make his book” (LAGO, 2009, p.12).

Nevertheless, one of the most challenging illustration reviewed by Cais is Debret’s representation of a Slave public punishment:



Image 5: Left - Nino Cais. Jean-Baptiste Debret. *Untitled Serie Viagem Pitoresca*. 2011; Right – J.B Debret. *Execution of an escape punishment*. 1830. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

[https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:L%27Ex%C3%A9cution\\_de\\_la\\_Punition\\_de\\_Fouet\\_by\\_Jean-Baptiste\\_Debret.jpg](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:L%27Ex%C3%A9cution_de_la_Punition_de_Fouet_by_Jean-Baptiste_Debret.jpg)

The focus – now readable in those iconographies – reasons, evaluates and “rereads” the representation/referential of social/communitarian episodes (colonialists *versus* slaves and native people), landscape, nature and its protagonists in two ways: from Europe to Brazil and vice versa. And how much the iconographic fables ensured, demystified, denounced and/or shook the anticipated and prejudiced representations, their stereotypes and related derivatives. To this end, remember some emblematic cases developed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in addition to the formerly mentioned.

## 2. (Overwhelming) Aesthetic sense of Picturesque

Traveling is not just good for men,  
It's also good for the routes themselves.  
have men to walk through them (TAVARES, 2010, p.210).

After Debret and Taunay detailed and accurate visual interpretations after reality, Thomas Ender and Rugendas' iconography displayed their virtuosity, facing a fantasist and artifice aesthetic rather than a faithful representative one, though revealing a “foreign” reality - suitable and available - for audiences and scholars emphasising their observers' intellectual consents and scientific assignments. In Brazilian artistic present scenery, one challenging approach, consists on a critic and revised historic perspective, revealing aesthetic and sociocultural engagements, as in the specific case of Nino Cais. He inserts additional symbolic elements into previous visual works being extremely faithful to his character and aims. He offers new looks over the colonial historical Brazilian iconography – advanced by European pioneer artists regarding that *once* new visual

physiology of territories and peoples.

The primacy of picturesque as aesthetic category prevailed along the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when experimenting the *New World* foreign territories. Traveller artists and writers faced those unknown places, gazing at landscape; they were surprised by ethnographic characters, the acting out of different people and communities. The first approaches to *picturesque* concept raised from Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints* (1768). Gilpin used to travel across England during the summer and then applied his aesthetic principles to landscape painting. Kant, also evoked and developed the concept, when reaching for Sublime, largely argued in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Uvedale Price, *An essay on the picturesque: as compared with the sublime and the beautiful; and, on the use of studying pictures, for the purpose of improving real landscape* (1794) developed furthermore the previous reflections about it. The category was mainly applied to the contemplation of landscape (nature), impelling the viewer to fulfil an extremely emotional aesthetic experience, being able to identify singular (native) topics only existing in a single context and background. That is how the concept currently was accepted and understood. Truly it fitted quite well if approaching foreign territories and meeting different racial and social groups of people.

In Debret's images, space operates heuristically: he can rely on his images of the spaces of wilderness, frontiers and urban centers to resonate with received categories and modes of perception for his nineteenth-century viewers and can thus shape their overall response to his subject. Into these familiar pictorial constructs, Debret interjects cultural peculiarities that make him an effective ethnographer for his European audience (BUONO, 2007, p.75).

When witnessing Cais' creations, we face conceptually intervened images – either pictorial or photographic – probing a loaded past, underlining a contemporary appliance of critical aesthetic picturesque. We gaze, and experience aesthetic enjoyment, feeling the presence of “suspending” thoughts and reasons. Such images are conceptualized in context of both private and societal imaginaries. This practice – driven by Cais - reviews the accumulation of each one's iconographic/iconological archive – in terms of unravelling successive layers, deciphering them... – being an improvement of the implicit aesthetic education. Aesthetic education is not built only from the reflections coming from the investigative and decided becoming, but, in particular, by the continuum of the perceptive process that gathers data, elaborating them and opening more and more our individualized archive. These improvements seek critical perfection in the aesthetic educational context, converging with the axiological margins of other disciplines that can be activated.

Aesthetic education definition is (still) taken from Schiller: corresponding to a stage of self-training, reaching for a complete assumption of the person's own identity associable to the 3rd level of education, as established in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).

### **2.1. Nino Cais: Sceneries, Artificial inner landscape and wall-papers**

During João VI reign in Brazil, as for in other European courts, an aesthetic taste for theatrical productions triumphed in its strong visual impact. Renowned painters were asked to design scenarios, in the case of the Portuguese reign, based in Rio de Janeiro, based on autochthonous motivations, expanding flora and fauna and adding the differentiating characteristics of the indigenous and displaced populations of Africa.

D. João was European [sovereign] and had a group of European artists working for him in Brazil. It should be difficult to convince these people to do something “inspired by Brazilianness”. (...) The *New World* represented a place where humans were romantic and easy going. It was for this reason that Debret portrayed Brazilian Indians as passionate and idealistic figures on his screens (VIANA, 2018, p.605-606).

In the painted “screens” designed by Jean-Baptiste Debret, the characters that portrayed the Indian and black type-figures stood out from landscaped backgrounds, according to aesthetic categories such *picturesque*<sup>10</sup> and *luxuriantly beautiful*. Even though, such specific staging's, commissioned by D. João VI to the French artists, contrasted greatly with the narratives and visual/painted documentation that denounced mistreatment and aggression against these same populations.

The civilized world won in the work of Debret theatrical representation. Indigenous people from the tropics and black men were represented in the theatre – despite not being recorded in the book as part of the world that was born as “a new civilized nation” that overlapped with local needs and traditions (VIANA, 2018, p.605-606).

When looking with accuracy at the European artist's landscape paintings – from 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and even early 19<sup>th</sup> century evoking Brazilian physiology – natural and cultural (humanized) landscape: multiple episodes and group characters, fictional and objective prejudices are recognisable, some became upmost and prevail over more documentary procedures – undertaken since contemporary anthropologic/ethnographic/sociologic perspectives. The change of scale was quite easy to solve and even accentuated the aesthetic *stimuli* regarding the audience. As digital viewers, if not at a gallery or museum, in presence of Cais' works, we may discover small details as iconographic riddles he sets up in his compositions.

<sup>10</sup> See: Edmund Burke, Op. Cit.

Nino Cais assumes different proportions either when establishing compositions with a single image reference – Jean-Baptiste Debret, for instance, or when he chooses *picturesque* fragments, applying irony and irreverence thought, so subsumed iconographic meanings can be unveiled and meaningful. In *Cuando estoy durmiendo* (2018), works presented in Gallery Gachi Prieto (Buenos Aires), he adds two, three or even four layers (of various illustrated paper materials) upon the primary support-surface, hiding the original visual signs selected from postcards, old photos, advertising folios, envelopes or other topics of this kind. Image over image, a kind of palimpsest methodology erasing its previous attempts and functions: personal, social or political contents, goals and ideas.

In the 19th century it became popular in Europe to decorate houses with wallpaper with scenes from paintings, within a taste of picturesque aesthetics: landscaping inside bourgeoisie homes. Paintings representing Brazilian nature, landscape, characters and episodes were taken in its decorative sense, and also transposed to (furniture) screens. One of the most known for the dazzling wall papers was Jean-Julien Deltil (1791-1863) - *Views from Brazil*, c.1829-35. Deltil was Debret and David student at the Parisian Academy of Fine Arts and began working in 1818 at a wallpaper manufacturers and after 1835 for the company *Zuber & Cie*.



**Image 6:** Jean-Baptiste Debret. *Landscape for scenery*. C. 1817-1829.

<http://pdf.blucher.com.br/s3-sa-east-1.amazonaws.com/designproceedings/cidi2017/058.pdf>



**Image 7:** Jean-Julien Deltil, after Johann Moritz Rugendas. *Views from Brazil*. C. 1829, Xylograph and painting on paper. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean\\_Julien\\_Deltil\\_-\\_Vistas\\_do\\_Brasil.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Julien_Deltil_-_Vistas_do_Brasil.JPG)

The Brazilian designed motifs were much appreciated and, even today, there are still, in reasonable condition, vestiges of those papers lining the walls of ancient Portuguese houses. And, if we fell so, these wall paper scenes can be purchased online<sup>11</sup>. Inside their home people experienced unaccomplished travels or the lingering ones: the picturesque entered in a European or Brazilian familiar aesthetic mood. Sceneries exist in a public dimension, but also in more intimate structures and fittings.



**Image 8:** Nino Cais. *Untitled from the Serie Décor*. 2009. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

## 2.2. Nino Cais: Self-portrait as accomplished Traveller

Why not, also, stage your own trip, portray yourself as if you were in a paradise destination, standing out from a fantasy background like the scenarios that existed in the early days of

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.meisterdrucke.pt/impressoes-artisticas-sofisticadas/Jean-Julien-Deltil/830856/Vistas-do-Brasil,-c.1829-35.html> and <https://www.pba-auctions.com/lot/20562/4361480>

professional photographic studios? Remembering, therefore, when having your own portrait involved meticulous preparation, fulfilling a performative act, which implied the previous and stereotyped choice of a scenario suited to the circumstances and social position of the sitter. The “industry” of studio photography was soon introduced in Brazil by European professional photographers and got to be very widespread along the territory. Cais, in a certain post-modern mood, conceives sceneries inspired by foreign culture *clichés* and merges himself into it, facing the spectator.

Bernardo Carvalho, Brazilian writer, wrote: “you are always looking for someone in the landscape” (2003, p.115). It is plausible to admit inner and outer landscapes that merge and interact in this kind of intentional act of creating polysemy and, for, generate visual counter senses. When a presence is locating oneself inner landscape, it may demand to be unfold by others – aestheticians, readers or spectators. Looking for someone inside the “landscape” does not oblige physical displacement, one can stand still, and staging a cautious theatrical pose, and thus get a “meaningful” journey, even an overwhelming journey.

Nino Cais accomplishes self-journeys - *Travellers Series* - staging a self-traveller character, without facing destination as an exogenous or imperative circumstance to aim. Travelling suppose being able to produce further knowledge: nineteenth century picturesque travels in Brazil and South American were expected to bring out scientific issues along with an aesthetic iconographic experience for those who accomplish such adventures. In contemporary art, reactivating past iconographies became almost trendy in Brazilian Art, thus reaching out for decolonial procedures and socio-anthropological criticism.

Which destinies are the ones performed in Cais' Serie *Travellers*? If looking with accuracy at these photographic compositions, we recognize some visual elements, both natural and cultural stereotypes from India and Eastern territories. For sure, these photos register performance assumptions by the artist. He reasons and outlines the scene, as told before, in a contemporary *tableaux-vivants* mood. Freezing each episode, he performs a short story calling for the spectator understanding and /or imagination. The Brazilian artist seems to cope with Gonçalo M. Tavares (2010, p.105) lines: *A foreigner is always a novelty, both verbally and in the number of habits/ he brings to the landscape.*





Image 9: Nino Cais. *Untitled.2009* (3 photos). ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

The plain domestic objects set in the composition refer to a vulgar, a home environment “dress code”, again detached, taken from its setting. He anthropomorphises objects and external - self-home-domestic or appropriated painted - landscape. Several objects represent different races, species of humankind, underlining anonymity. Although being an industrial material it seems to possess a sort of organicity. All the gathered elements are linked to each other in unusual terms, but attain a harmony and balance highlighted by the solo human presence. The artist is placed in the centre of the composition, dividing in two parts the image. The objects he holds deliver astonishing, or at least unexpected meaning. He moves between metamorphosis, transfiguration, camouflage and ontological unveiling.



Image 10: Nino Cais. *Travellers Series. 2011* (6 photos). ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

Let's analyse some of the self-portraits placed under the intentionality of being non-dislocated *Travellers*. The European yearned to look to see other worlds, he thought he would find

utopia materialized, in a (fixed) landscape after the trip (moving). After chewing the visa, he would transform it into watercolours, drawings and paintings, assuring them of words or sketches. The assumption of the real became a credible product, brought together by the ramifications displayed from the structures of the imaginary, converting itself to the indeterminacy of the fictional reality, converging on the idealized. Similar to the meanings that dominate the defining analysis of the concept of body, it should be noted, therefore, by analogy, that the “strange and foreign” landscape summons 3 aesthetic-anthropological dimensions: reality/factual, transfiguration/imaginary and absence/idealization. This triad moves forward, establishing a uniting grandeur: the symbolic landscape, subordinated to the demands (and hesitations) of the aesthetic experience. Remember that the landscape is never alone, nor is it singular. The landscape is plural, arising from the constructs of all those who report and record it. The trend, celebrated in the beginnings of the images that represent the “visa” in/from Brazil, disseminated in Europe, coincide in specific aspects and are distinguished by the technical approach that each artist assumes and develops. Perhaps, with an intensity similar to those that, in other eras, spectators and readers enjoyed to see in idealized compositions or read about foreign episodes mainly concerning the Far East or New World territories and will unfold people in the landscape.

### 2.3. The 20<sup>th</sup> century early years – intervened photography and postcards

Nino Cais stages his folded collages pages' clippings of landscape images and photo-portraits - Far East exacerbated backgrounds, revealing phantasies appealing for potential contemporaries' travellers to be yearned for the cause!

Different experiments had taken place aiming to introduce colour in still and/or moving images (TURQUETY, 2014, p.215). The challenge was solved under diverse strategies and techniques. The *Autochrome* became even more popular when applied by photographers during the *First World War*. For sure, the drama of war acquired greater convincing reality for spectators when soldiers and field sceneries were colored. The *Autochrome* technique became well-known after Albert Kahn's worldwide visual registrations' for the project *Archives of the Planet*. The *Autochrome* was developed and patented by the Lumière Brothers (December 1903), and suited noteworthy early colored photography, used by the photographs engaged by Albert Kahn for his ambitious mission *Les archives de la planète* - aiming to collect the visual knowledge of the World as it still was.

The French Louis Fernand Cuville used *Autochrome* procedures it in regular base, namely during his travels when portraying foreign people *in loco*. Cais worked upon Cuville's *Autochromes* that suited the best his aesthetic demands: portrait of oriental soldiers in the edge of the 1<sup>st</sup> World

War. Again the crossing between cultures, artistic evidences and social-ethic codes, as for *Orient*, another Series rising from historic images, after the printed *Autochrome clichés*.

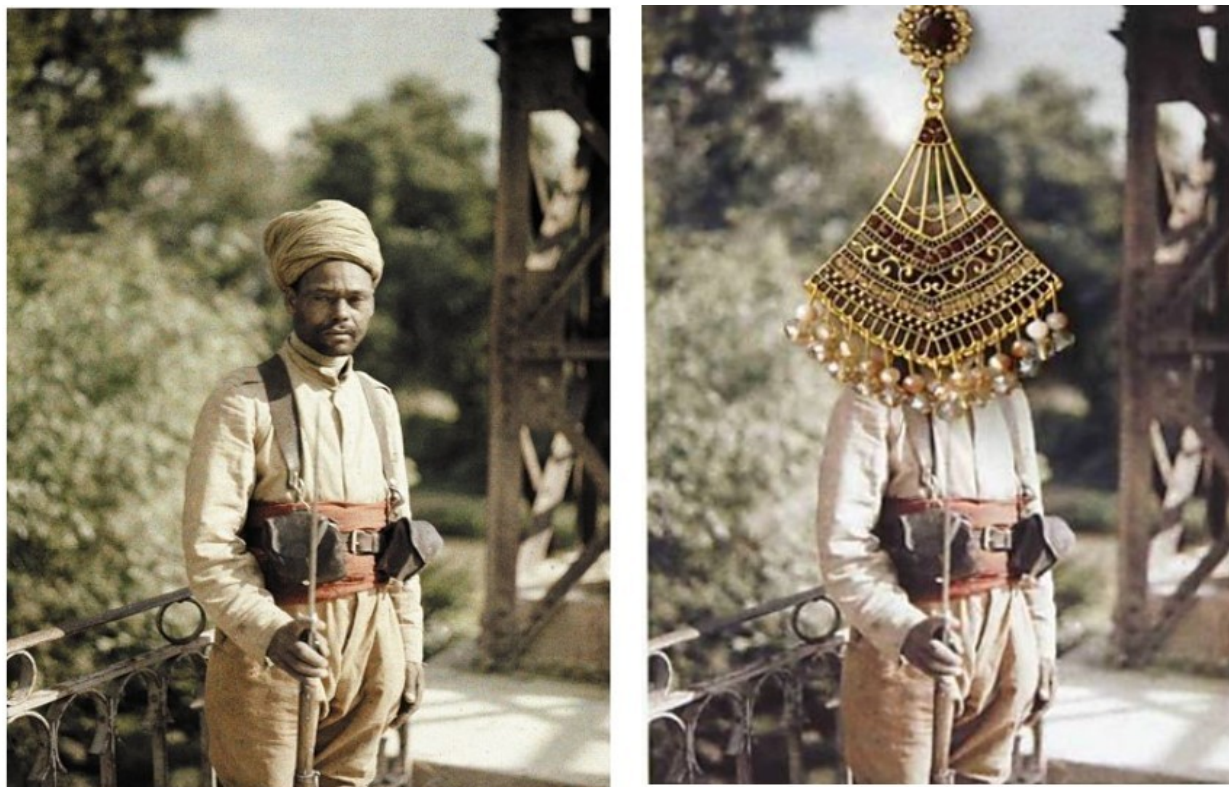
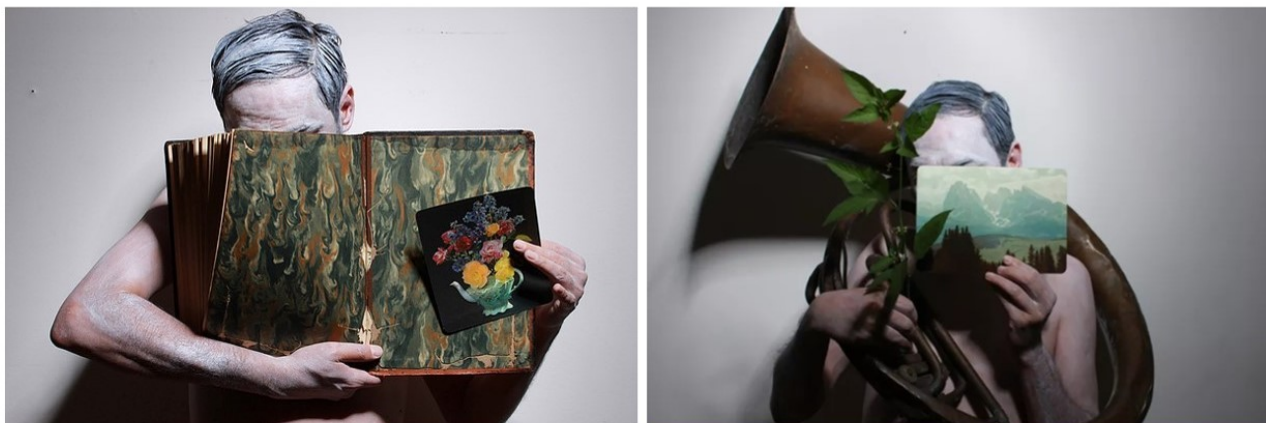


Image 11: Left – Fernand Cuville. *Autochrome First World War (1914-1918)*. Right: Nino Cais version. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

The technic is quite different from the above mentioned one, considering that Nino Cais uses 3D phony jewellery covering the human character seized by the print. The oriental stylish - small and glittery - jewels (earrings) covers the whole face of a soldier facing the spectator, a figure detached from a real life scenery, taken from its semantic [tamed] context.

*The Guards* is the last Series to be named, also coping landscape/scenery and human imagery: the artist body is also veiled by symbolic pieces evoking historic art creations, either famous painting reproductions, books or ballet dancer photos, mainly European. The artist seems to be a guardian of artistic heritage, facing unknown chronologic times and promoting an inquiring about their meaning and understanding. The “sitter” assumes artificial gestures, quite stiff torso and the hands holding against the unceasing downfall of human condition.



**Image 12:** Nino Cais. *Untitled*, from the series *Guards*. 2015. ©Courtesy Nino Cais.

Weird and puzzling existential time and georeferenced quotations arise from Cais' mythic images collections, revealing his careful choice in order to promote deep aesthetic feelings in the public.

Cais discloses his apparently fragile body, exposed against any unknown threat. His head is covered by decorative items, kind of Carnivals or Xmas props. His keen metamorphosis – according the various Series - assume multiple shapes, attributes and (inner) substances: “An organic, malleable and changeable thought, where one idea leads to another, an image calls to another, in a network of associations in constant transformation” (CAIS & ARDUI, s/d).

The artist was instigated by the fictional world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one of the texts from Greco-Roman antiquity that most contributed to the constitution of a European cultural matrix and which has echoes to this day both in literature and music and in the visual arts (CAIS & ARDUI).

Although Cais' work is centred on self-reference-body-self, his kind of self-portrait carries aesthetic intentions that transcend it. He produces a typology of self-portrait that charged by cultural mythologies on itself, crossing races and attributes. He decolonizes collective stereotypes by colonizing himself in a sort of negative mood.

By extinguishing the limits and distinctions between such disparate objects, Cais behaves like a sociologist of culture, a traveller without leaving home, who draws the map of a personal world on his own body. It is in this globalized body, which offers itself as a kind of totem, cultural constellation, or vehicle of multiple connections, that the artist fuels his work (2012).<sup>12</sup>

Recalling: all of these staged self-portraits - with coloured object and attributes - can be

<sup>12</sup> <https://sociedadedospoetasamigos.blogspot.com/2012/05/nino-cais-artista-plastico-brasileiro.html?m=1>

taken, following anthropological proceedings, such the ones established by Pedro Bosch Gimpera (1945) *Las Razas Humanas – África, América e Europa*, when seeing Cais' self-portraits series (2014-2015) *Races are identified and distinguished by the shapes and colours of the plastic objects with which they hide their faces*.<sup>13</sup> This project was developed in collaboration with the stylist Fernanda Yamamoto. Together they produced costume under entitled *Allegories*. Contamination is a recurring word in his vocabulary, expressed in his ability to articulate techniques, supports and artistic expressions, in partnership creations as the last mentioned.

### 3. Conclusion

Aesthetics aspires to overcome the antagonisms and paradoxes of the historical reality of the rise and fall of the colonial bourgeoisie, in which man finds himself fragmented and divided socially and politically.

As for some others Brazilian contemporary artists – mainly female – when quoting former iconography, namely from the artistic missions, they intervened on printed engravings, drawings and paintings fragments, overlapped and/or disguised by direct interventions, photography or similar materials. These compositions are organised upon analogic structures influenced by historic creations, driving to “oversized” ironist paraphrases and imagistic phantasies. We can easily imagine Nino Cais' self-portraits performing any *tableaux-vivants* as a dancer or actor standing in a carefully chosen scenery – his backyard in this case. He dislocates the aesthetic intellectual trend from a cultivated environment to a day-to-day middle-class urban location.

The above referred Series display Cais' deliberate criticism about the aesthetic educated sense; inquiry about common culture *versus* cultivated norm of Taste, linked with the *Camp* Aesthetic, following Susan Sontag *Notes on Camp* (1964) and *Kitsch*, along with Gillo Dorfles (1968)<sup>14</sup>. Cais achieves a unique balance with a contemporary picturesque mood and under the conceptual auspices of appropriation, expands plural strategies, placing himself in a socio-ironic that instigates the spectators. The aesthetic reaction aroused is always polysemic, mediated by each one circumstance – as a potential aesthetic user. Cais underlines performances that live, in permanent alterity and motivation by others – as interlocutor and participant. Interest in activating astonishment, laughter, thus inducing questions and overturning convictions is manifest.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.sp-arte.com/en/editorial/central-galeria-de-arte-recebe-nova-individual-de-nino-cais/>

<sup>14</sup> This research, developing this perspective, is ongoing.

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