

Recovering the Collection of the Fine Arts Museum of the University of Porto: the Modern and Contemporary artworks

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Summary

In this article we will present some artworks from a ‘hidden collection’ of Portuguese artists at the Fine Arts Museum of the University of Porto (FBAUP). A recently started pilot project focussing on the modern and contemporary works displays the wide range of both art historical and material aspects of 10 selected artworks. Topics as production technique, the meaning of the artwork, the artist intent and the artist interview will be addressed, together with the conservation and maintenance needs of some of the works. Through this project a rediscovery of artworks is enhanced.

Introduction

The FBAUP has a long and well recognized tradition in training young students to become artist. Founded in 1836, as Academia Portuense de Belas Artes (APBA), the school provides in a fine arts training programme on painting, sculpture and design. To reach the final degree it was mandatory to the students to make and hand in a completed artwork in their specialisation. By the 1960’s and 70’s these final artworks were evaluated and marked, after which the artworks stayed at the Faculty. In this way the university built up an art collection of Portuguese artists from that period. The collection also includes artworks by professors and teachers. The application to become teacher or professor required the participation in a competition where in limited time an artwork or a proposal was to be produced. Some of these artworks would also stay in the collection.

The collection of the FBAUP started off at 1836 with the beginning of the APBA and now contains up to 5700 artworks (drawings, engravings, paintings, sculptures, photography, installations and video) from the 19th and 20th and 21st century. Most of the works were documented in a manual archive with a black and white photograph and few information such as title (or subject), artist, year, size, material. These files are an invaluable source as they also contain additional comments and handwritten notes on some objects. Nowadays the collection is managed with a digital database which includes inventory and documentation of most artworks.

Modern and Contemporary artworks

Among the works made in the second half of the twentieth century there are non-traditional painted works, collages and reliefs, sculptures and some installations. In starting the disclosure of the collection it was felt necessary to first focus on these maybe more complex and vulnerable art objects.

A pilot was set up as a cooperation between the University of Porto and SRAL Netherlands to investigate a representative group of works [Note 1]. Main goal was to investigate the conservation needs for the art collection and to start up the actual conservation of some modern artworks. This set up increases knowledge and experience in modern art conservation while applying it directly on the artworks from the collection. The following examples show some of the aspects and issues specific to modern art conservation.

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The Surface

The large painted relief “Jogo”, 1973, 186 x 132 cm, by José Alves, leads us right back to the abstract figuration of the seventies (Fig.1). The rounded square shapes from big to small could be faces or figures. It also reminds one of an architectural model or floor-plan. The general condition is good but the work looks rather dull and uninteresting. The former bright colours and the glossy finish of the elements- which almost gives them a ceramic look- are hidden under a fine layer of grey dust. One element has come loose from the panel but is still preserved. In the collection there is another comparable work by Alves, but also a small model for the big relief (model for “Jogo”, 1973, 25 x 18,5 cm). This peculiar small model is of interest because it shows how the artist developed his artistic ideas into the much bigger final artwork.

The conservation treatment is not a complex one and can be approached from the general point of view in painting conservation. However it will have great impact: it will bring back the bright colours and the distinction between high gloss elements on the matt dark blue background. The elements will regain their three dimensionality and highlight from the monochrome background, catching the viewers eye.

The Body

A much different work is 1972's “Exaltação” (98 x 200 x 28 cm, 60kg) by Joaquim Machado, a huge, heavy, flashy red three dimensional object representing ‘draped’ shapes in glass fibre reinforced epoxy (Fig.2). The hooks on the top part indicate a hanging position but no further instructions for presentation were available. At the same time the position of the hooks, and the weight of 60 kg being hung in presenting the work in the past have caused the main problem: huge longitudinal breaks on the top and bottom part, in the area where the two cast halves of the work were put together. Decisive before coming to any treatment proposal is to find out if the piece can only be presented hanging. To enable this an intrusive intervention will be necessary. Here the meaning of the artwork and the idea of the artist needs to be investigated. One advantage of modern art is that in many cases the artists are still alive and available to ask questions. The international research network in modern art conservation has developed detailed guidelines for interviewing artists, from the practical set up to special attention to the pitfalls. [Note 2]

Joaquim Machado kindly agreed on being filmed and interviewed about his artwork in the university collection. [Note 3] The interview was organized in presence of the artwork, with the available files at hand. In a relaxed atmosphere Machado talked about the model that he made for the competition to become professor, about the choice for red and the production technique in epoxy material. The exhibitions were addressed where it actually was hung outdoors between two trees. An exciting detail was that this work is in fact the only free and abstract sculpture that Machado made, which makes it truly a unique piece. In discussing the difficulties about the current condition and the problematic treatment Machado was co-operative in considering a standing presentation on a pedestal as a good alternative to hanging. His indications on the options of presenting the work are recorded and stay available to the collection.

The Function of gears

A third example from the collection illustrates the unconventional questions arising while conserving modern and contemporary art. Maria Rosalina Morais Soares has made a painting/collage on a square board on which geometrical circles and lines in green, brown and white tones are painted (“Relógios”, 1972, 130x130cm, Fig.3). On this several parts and elements from clocks and clockworks as gear-wheels, dial-plates and springs are glued, representing a range of materials. An important part of the artwork is the painted frame and the front glass with a precise design in fine painted orange lines and circles suggesting a rotating machinery, as if reflecting the clockwork elements.

The university collection has a smaller work that maybe functioned as the model or proposal for this artwork. Here the front glass with the painted lines is almost completely lost. Maybe this work that is also produced in detail should be estimated as an artwork on its own and have a conservation treatment.

The issue of patina needs to be studied in depth for artists as Morais Soares re-use old objects and worn elements in their artworks. With the aging of the (originally fresh) painting there is loss of distinction between the old and the new, between the artist hand and the deteriorated re-used materials. Another problem is the question of reconstructive replacement of lost items as an adapted way of ‘retouching a filled lacuna’. It is often urgent to do so because the items over the years are difficult to retrieve or not found anymore, despite visits to flea markets or search quests on internet. Again the artist interview will have to bring answers to many of these questions. Results from art historical research will strongly depend on how successful and recognized an artist has been.

Re-installing installations

Installation art needs specific care and attention in modern art collections. One example in the Porto University collection is Carlos Andrade with his 1972’s installation “Para onde vai a luz quando se apaga?”. From a first contact with the artist, the installation is described as a wood with trees of metal tubes with sheets of the primary colours and small lights in them operated by the control panel. General characteristic for installations is that they are kept in store in a de-installed, dismantled state. This often makes them unrecognisable as an artwork and difficult to understand if the work is complete, what items belong to the work itself or just are provisional to build up the installation. In the case of “Para onde vai a luz quando se apaga?” a box with a complete set of electrical wires, a switch board, sockets and plugs were kept. Photography or a floor plan to build up the installation, as requirements for the space, light or dark and the running of the installation were not filed. Who is allowed to operate the panel, what is the sequence distance of lights switching on or off, and can it still function in that way. The first step is to contact the artist and set up an interview in which the idea and the realisation into the material work is explained by him. The follow up is to check if from the material the installation can be re-installed and if it can run or function as the artist has explained. Here a cooperation between the conservator, the artist and a technician is necessary if the artist is open to reinstalling the artwork. The work by Andrade can be seen as a technical installation in which main elements are the light, the colours and the follow up of the separate lights when the switchboard is operated. In considering various options for re-constructing the work it is important to be aware of changes over time in voltage, light bulb or light tube production, and limits to the charging of the switchboard. The plan for preventive conservation will have to consist of registration of all technical aspects with assessment of the importance of each item. When the wiring is visible and plays an optical part in the installation replacement may be difficult. With the wiring hidden behind a wall the functioning of the piece might become more important than the visual aspects of the actual applied material.

In conclusion it is clear that the problems in modern art conservation differ in many ways from the general conservation standards for traditional paintings. However the problems encountered in the university collection are in accordance with existing issues in modern art conservation: cleaning versus patina, re-use of parts or elements, meaning of material, deterioration of plastics, translation of conservation methods into appropriate treatments, the presentation of the artwork and the role of the artist. Main advantage to traditional artworks is that in modern art often the artists are still alive and available for questions or an interview about their work.

The presented artworks emphasise the possible discovery of many more treasures that are now permanently stored in the depot. A future transfer of the collection into a more appropriate museum environment could start off the full disclosure of the collection, enable the presentation

of the collection to the public, encourage scholars to study the artworks and underline the importance of recent Portuguese art history. It will enhance young student artists to evaluate their position toward their ancestors in recent history, and learn and continue the Portuguese art tradition.

Note 1: SRAL, *Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg*, Maastricht, Netherlands, and University of Porto, Portugal, have agreed on a consultancy. The pilot was up according to the research results as presented in the publication: Hummelen Silé, *Modern art, who cares? An interdisciplinary project*, Amsterdam, 1999.

The ten artworks in the project are:

- Américo Moura de Souza, kinetic object, 1971, 130 x 180 x 33 cm*
- António Quadros Ferreira, untitled painting, 1966-1972 (?), 100 x 100 cm*
- António Quadros Ferreira, neon light installation, 1972, variable dimensions*
- João Aquino, untitled object, 1970, 60 x 60 x 38 cm*
- Joaquim Machado, "Exaltação", 1972, 98 x 200 x 28 cm, 60kg*
- José Alves, "Jogo", 1973, 186 x 132 cm*
- José Bizarro, untitled painting, 1971, 70 x 50 cm*
- José Mouga, untitled painting, 1965, 170 x 200 cm*
- Maria Rosalina Morais Soares, "Relógios", 1972, 130x130cm*
- Rosa Maria Chagas Ramos, untitled painting, 200 x 138 cm*

Note 2: ICN concept of guidelines for the artist interview : www.incca.org

Note 3: The interview with Joaquim Machado took place the 3rd July 2007; is filmed and registered on a cd; duration: 49 minutes; location: Fine Arts Museum, University of Porto; interviewers: Lydia Beerkens and Filipe Duarte; camera: Claudia Garradas.

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Fig. 1- José Alves, "Jogo", 1973, 186 x 132 cm.



Fig. 2- Carlos Andrade, "Para onde vai a luz quando se apaga", 1972, variable dimensions (dismantled work on the image)



Fig. 3- Maria Rosalina Morais Soares, "Relógios", 1972, 130x130cm.

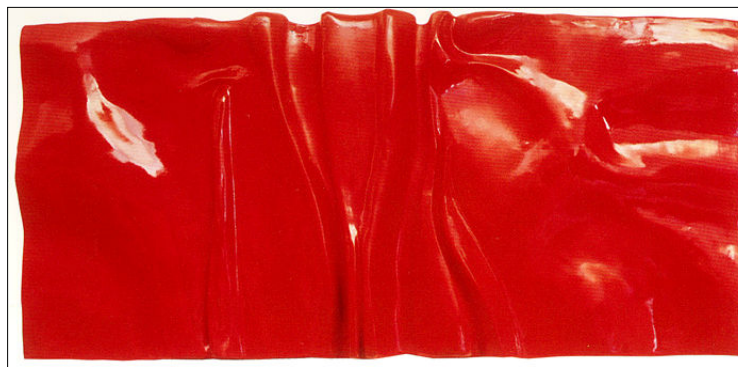


Fig. 4- Joaquim Machado, *Untitled*, 1972, 98x200x28 cm, 60kg