

# BRAZILIAN ART YESTERDAY



*Brazilian Art Today—continued*

the figure. Gastão Manoel Henrique shows certain influences of 'Pop' art, together with reminiscences of the Brazilian baroque. A special place is occupied by Djanira, who began as a primitive, and who, without losing the spontaneous quality of 'naif' art, has become one of the great painters of Brazil.

The graphic artists of Brazil really speak for themselves. It is obvious that most of them have completely mastered the very complex and difficult craft, whether they work in metal, in wood, or whether they draw on a stone. Some of them are still carried away by the purely skilful aspects of etching and engraving, others prefer to forget the possibility of technical fireworks in order to produce work of great depth and originality. It is a belief that these artists share, and which is the driving sector of the explosion.

But Brazilian draughtsmen do not stay far behind. They also represent the most varied trends and techniques, they also have reached a very high level indeed.

The art of tapestry at its best is represented in Brazil by Norberto Nicola and Jacques Douchez, Brazilian the one, French the other, but a long-time resident of Brazil. Both were painters who had already made a name for themselves, both became interested in tapestry, and decided to join their efforts. Their atelier now produces undoubtedly the best tapestries of the country. Most are signed Nicola or Douchez, but sometimes they ask other well-known Brazilian artists for designs.

Primitive painting has become a lucrative proposition in Brazil, and it is not easy to select the artists who may be considered true primitives.

Like the art of the United States, the art of Brazil is the result of a conglomeration of races and nationalities. Japanese, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, Spaniards, Germans, etc., have created an art that is full of vitality, strength and personality. They digested the heritage they received from their Portuguese, Indian and Negro forebears, they added all the ingredients mentioned above, and they are about to produce something at an international level, but nevertheless very much their own. They understood how to make use of the many paradoxes of their development, and I think there is something that is worth seeing—at least they hope and I hope that the British public will be interested in whatever it is.

Left *The Prophet Joel* by ALEIJADINHO at Congonhas do Campo, Minas Gerais  
Right *The Church of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos*  
By ALEIJADINHO  
There are photo montage display panels of the work of Aleijadinho in the foyer of the *Brazilian Art Today* exhibition at the R.C.A.

## ALEIJADINHO

The name António Francisco Lisboa is almost entirely unknown outside the more erudite artistic circles, but almost everyone knows him by his nickname—Aleijadinho—the little cripple. It was the influence of the colonial style in the 18th century that created the Brazilian Baroque Style, and it was this style that was essential for the work of Aleijadinho.

His churches of São Francisco de Assis, Ouro Preto and São João d'El Rei. Attributed to him are plans for the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, which has been called 'the most beautiful sacred monument of Minas Gerais and one of the most important in the country'. Born in 1730 in Vila Rica, now called Ouro Preto, little is known of his early youth. He was the son of a Portuguese carpenter and a slave mother, freed at the time of his birth. Brought up to follow the career of wood-carver and sculptor, he also became an architect. The nickname which has surrounded him with an aura of legend, was earned as a result of deformities caused by a disease which attacked him when he was 47. Almost all of his more famous works, such as the Statues of the Prophets, a marvel of primitive art carved at Congonhas in 1800, were executed after he had become so terribly deformed. The disease, which appears to have been leprosy, gradually wore away his fingers and toes. He was obliged to wear knee-pads in order to climb the ladders to the scaffolding where he worked, and his tools, which an experienced modern sculptor with perfectly trained hands would find difficult to wield, were bound to his arms. His work which combines the primitive with a strikingly beautiful

baroque, reveals deep religious feeling, with here and there a flash of sardonic humour. Pulpit altars, retables and fonts are carved with angels and cherubs, delicately enscrolled, and expressive bas-reliefs depict such scenes as Our Lord preaching to the fishermen or Jonah being cast into the sea. No less than 14 churches in Minas Gerais owe their rich ornamentation to his prolific imagination and to the skill of his nerveless fingers. Much of his work exhibits such originality and such a new approach to the architect's and the sculptor's art that it raises him to a conspicuous position above all other Brazilian artists. He frequently used the soft medium known as soapstone, a compact, massive form of talc, to which he applied the technique of wood-carving with remarkable results. The greyish-green variety of this medium, which is plentiful throughout the region, is close-grained in texture; though readily cut with a knife, it is not lacking in strength and indeed hardens with age, acquiring a delicate patina in the mild climate of Minas Gerais. The 12 prophets in soapstone compare favourably with the 63 statues of the Via Crucis (the Stations of the Cross), in the same church carved by the Master out of cedar-wood. He worked for the most part in unceasing pain, until blindness came down on him a few years before his death. When he was nearing his end he asked to be carried to the altar of one of the churches he had built, where after lonely hours of agony he died on November 18, 1814. A hundred years were to pass before his work would be appreciated at its true value. B.N.

The piece by Barbara Hepworth reproduced on page 10 won the Grand Prize at the VIII São Paulo Biennial, and the painting by Alan Davie reproduced on page 8 won the first prize for painting.

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