



# On the artistic production of the alienated: history of theories and practices of Brazilian alienism, 1852- 1902

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## Abstract

The article deals with the presence of artistic manifestations of inmates of the Hospício de Pedro II, the first psychiatric institution in Latin America (1852-1902). The methodological framework chosen focused on the historicisation of the framing processes of mental illness, in order to demonstrate its consequences for the notion of the subject and the art he produces and in the process of circulation of this knowledge in Brazil. Derrida's concept of archive fever was used to analyse the reasons why such manifestations and the therapies used based on them were ignored by local narratives about the artistic manifestations of individuals in asylums.

Keywords: history; psychiatry; alienated; art; Brazil.

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Since Foucault (2002a), much of the historiography has followed the thesis that the language of madness as unreason had been banned as of the Classical Age. Insanity was objectified by the alienist scientific field, thus being segregated to the margins of society as *alienation*, confining its existence (Katz, 2001, p.45). The creative production of insane people, banned from the records of truth and memory (Birman 2010), became an invisible reminder to the knowledges that founded the asylum:

It was the birth of the classical experience of insanity that reduced it to silence. It was then that music and the arts in general were excluded from therapeutic practices, which coincided with the creation of asylums organised around moral treatment, being mainly based on a structured and well directed work (Lima, Pelbart, 2007, p.712).<sup>1</sup>

According to this tradition, only through modernist thought – Freudian psychoanalysis, Nietzschean philosophy, and Marxism (Andrade, 1992), as well as avant-garde literature and art (Hölderlin, Nerval, Artaud, Van Gogh) –, the illuminist reason and the field of consciousness were put in question, paving the way for the expression of the irrational linked to the unconscious (Foucault, 2002a), especially in the twentieth century. Only then could the experience of insanity have been reintroduced in records of the language, truth, and subjectivity (Foucault, 2002; Birman, 2010).

The “archaeology of silence” (Foucault, 2022, p.14-40) seems to have influenced the historiographical tradition in Brazil, which did not expect to find any trace of insanity before the resumption of irrationality by the tragic tradition. Thus, the narratives about art in Brazilian asylums focus on the interwar period onward, amidst the beginning of the dissemination of psychoanalysis and the modernist movement. Osório Thaumaturgo Cesar (1895-1979) and Nise da Silveira (1905-1999) are usually described as the first to consider the art produced in the asylum as therapeutic and aesthetic material, which situates the beginning of these narratives as sometime in the 1920s and sometime in the 1940s, respectively (Dias, 2003; Melo, 2007; Cabañas, 2018). Other authors have drawn attention to the role of Ulysses Pernambucano (1892-1943) and Juliano Moreira (1873-1933) shortly before them (Andriolo, 2006; Araújo, Jacó-Vilela, 2018). Likewise, this historiography usually stresses that, at least until the 1920s, novels, poems, modern visual arts, theatrical performances, and music were seen by local psychiatrists as a means of perversion of the sensibility, lack of control of the senses, cultivation of illusions, and inducers of nervousness and mental diseases.

Against the backdrop of this historiography, this article takes up the debate between Derrida and Foucault (Birman, 2010; Nascimento, 2017) to address the constant tension between reason and unreason, demonstrating that the presence of art in asylums has interrogated psychiatry since its birth, even if the visibility, meaning, and importance of the works on this topic have undergone significant variations over time. We propose to investigate how the psychiatric theories of the nineteenth century influenced the notion of the mentally ill individual and the impact of this perception on the interpretations of this aesthetic production and its uses. To this end, we analysed the main international theories that shaped psychiatric knowledge in the nineteenth century, and which, arising from the globalisation processes of European psychiatric science, served as a basis for the

institutionalisation of local alienism. Finally, we present its consequences in the psychiatric practices at the Pedro II Asylum in the capital of Brazil.

We focused our narrative on the Pedro II Asylum, which after the proclamation of the Republic (1889) was renamed the National Asylum Psychiatric Hospital for the Mentally Ill (Hospício Nacional de Alienados, HNA),<sup>2</sup> because this was the first specialised institution in the country and became a reference for the other units of the Assistance to the Mentally Ill (1890) public system of assistance whose rules adhered to the psychiatric hospital, and for the chair of Psychiatry and Mental Health at the Medical School of Rio de Janeiro (1882) (Faculdade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro, FMRJ) (Engel 2001; Mathias, 2017; Muñoz, Facchinetti, Dias, 2011; Moraes 2020).

The period of analysis follows the foundation of the HNA (1852) and continues until the turn of the twentieth century, when the institution underwent a major physical, political, and theoretical reform, already addressed by vast historiography (Portocarrero, 2002; Venancio, Carvalhal, 2005; Facchinetti, Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz, 2018; Facchinetti, 2022). It was in 1903, when Juliano Moreira took over as director of the HNA, that the agenda for the reception of German psychiatry was set. While theories originating from the German-speaking world began to be disseminated in the asylum and the FMRJ, psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology, as well as the aesthetic and philosophical debates arising from modern art, also began to be disseminated in psychiatry, changing the way some physicians interpreted the manifestations of the mentally ill, especially from the 1920s onward (Facchinetti, Castro, 2015).

The theoretical and methodological framework chosen to address the topic delves into psychiatric rationality (Camargo Jr., 2005) to historicise the conceptions of insanity, demonstrating its recurrent constructions and deconstructions. It also seeks to address its transcultural dissemination (Raj, 2007; Damousi, Plotkin, 2009; Ruperthuz Honorato, 2015), observing the impact of the appropriation of international psychiatric theories by Brazilian psychiatric hospitals in their practices and by public opinion, especially regarding the artistic production of insane people.

According to Gonçalves (2011), until at least the 1880s, the hospital remained distant from academia. The lack of clinical observations of the diseases treated at the HNA and the absence of originality in the medical dissertations on the subject reflect the lack of practical classes and clinical research at the FMRJ. Even after the introduction of the chair of psychiatry, students only “worked in the [psychiatric] clinic four times a month” (cited in Mathias, 2017, p.33). Thus, it was only after the proclamation of the Republic, when the Assistance to the Mentally Ill of the Distrito Federal (1890) created the Observation Pavilion (Brasil, 29 jun. 1892), that the daily life of the asylum and the clinical practices were linked to the theoretical teaching of the FMRJ. Still, the clinical observation books of the pavilion began to be filled only from 1896 onward (Mathias, 2017). Thus, although the topic of insanity had been addressed by some medical dissertations and medical manuals since the 1830s, the practices and experiences of asylums were not studied in the FMRJ throughout the nineteenth century, which certainly also contributed to the invisibility of the topic for historiography, which usually relied on this type of documentation for research.

The gap between psychiatric practices and academic discourses in the nineteenth century is not a Brazilian particularity. It took a shift in historiographical perspective, attuned to “the patient turn”, as proposed by Porter (1985), for concerns about the daily life of psychiatric hospitals and experiences in the asylum throughout the nineteenth century to gain research interest, giving rise to new research sources. The contributions by Engel (2001), Huertas (2001), Dörries and Beddies (2003), Villasante and Dening (2003), Prestwich (2003), Rios Molina (2008), Sacristán (2009), Wadi (2011), Colerbone (2014), and Ribeiro (2016) are good examples of this new orientation. Nevertheless, the historiography of psychiatric hospitals remained largely focused on the processes of medicalisation, diagnostic uses, and hospital administration. Innovative works that use letters and other manuscripts as a source and that feature the voice of the patients (cf. Wadi, 2009; Gámez et al., 2018) and that, such as the present article, draws attention to their subjective productions, have been gradually opening up a new dimension of theoretical and methodological problems for the history of nineteenth century psychiatry. It is worth mentioning that artistic activity, as well as its function and conceptual articulation with the medical arsenal for the treatment of mental illness in Brazil remained forgotten by the historiography of the nineteenth century.

In this article, we used scientific journals and Brazilian daily newspapers sourced from the Hemeroteca Digital<sup>3</sup> of the National Library of Rio de Janeiro as primary sources to show that art was present in the HNA since 1852. In the nineteenth century, many travel reports and even annual reports of the HNA were published in widely disseminated journals, as well as chronicles about the asylum, visitor reports, and interviews with its physicians. The research was successful: it allowed us to find small traces, “the murmur shouted in search of meaning” (Nascimento, 2017, p.148), which here gains the value of testimony, giving voice to the silenced by historiography. At the end of the article, we propose that the discourses and powers that paved the way for the renewed appropriations of art archives in asylums in the 1920s to 1950s favoured the forgetfulness of the traditions that preceded them (Derrida, 2001) and that we are here trying to reintroduce.

### **The birth of French alienism and the emergence of the art of mentally ill people**

According to Berrios and Porter (2012, p.39), a new medicine emerged in Europe in the 18th century. Explanatory models of insanity based on physiology and the body/spirit relationship were the basis for what, in the nineteenth century, became known as mental alienation. Insane people came to be considered mentally ill, and, according to Pinel’s understanding, “far from being guilty and liable to punishment,” they became “patients whose painful condition deserves every attention” (cited in Pereira, 2004, p.114).

Mental illness was first systematised by Philippe Pinel (2007) in his 1801 *Treatise*. By transforming mental illness into positive truth, alienism gave the insane an individualised profile, considering that they are subjects alien to themselves, that are full of illusions (Roudinesco, 2000, p.39), but with a remnant of reason that could be recovered. To do this, one would have to renounce their illusions and passions and transfer their intellect and will to the sovereignty of alienist reason (Foucault, 2002a, p.529).

Jean-Étienne Esquirol, direct disciple of Pinel, proposed a further nosographic systematisation of this “commonly chronic, feverless brain affection, characterised by disturbances of sensibility, intelligence, and will” arising most of the times from the passions and their impact on the intellect (Bercherie, 1989, p.46). Esquirol also promoted a certain invisibility of alienation among the general population, given its abundance of forms and partiality (Pessotti, 1996, p.138).

Alienism expanded in Europe, reaching consensus among physicians. In France, it reached such a point of institutionalisation that in 1838 a “law for mentally ill people” was passed, covering to alienists the exclusive right to treat mentally ill people. From the point of view of care, the asylum was confirmed as a medical space for treatment managed by specialists. Thus, it was there that the control of passions and moral affections (Pinel, 2007, p.82), as well as the stimulus for healing (p.217-219), would take place by physical and moral means.

According to Pereira (2004, p.116), the moral treatment aimed at promoting tranquillity of spirit and discipline. To this end, accommodations and routines should be guided by clear rules and humanised corrections, mediated by scientific reason and the subject’s accountability for his or her actions, and the use of methods of intervention in the intellect and emotions. Purgatives, bloodletting, vesicant drugs, baths, showers, among other practices, were added to this treatment (Oliveira, 2016, p.176-193).

Mechanical labour brought together the two ends of this system, which came to be considered useful beyond its economic value (Foucault, 2002a, p.10): it was praised as the newest technology for the re-education of alienated consciousness and will. Manual labour and farming were proposed as capable of inducing good habits and regularity, contributing to attention and concentration. From a physiological point of view, they would improve circulation, prevent brain congestion, and regulate sleep (p.529).

Other occupations in the asylum aimed at making “the senseless one focus on an object rather than on their chimerical ramblings” (Pinel, 2007, p.24) included cultural, artistic, and recreational activities. The director of the Pedro II Hospital observed, when visiting the Salpêtrière Hospital that:

In Dr. Falret’s section, some mentally ill people recite poetry, and others apply themselves to music ... In the sections of Mr. Trélat and Mr. Mitivié there are also singing exercises. ... We must ... say that ... the patients of the sessions were similar pastimes were instituted seem to us more satisfied, more cheerful, and had a more flattering appearance (Barbosa, 27 maio 1866, p.2).

In fact, there are reports about the artistic production of mentally ill people as far back as Pinel, as in the case of the production of the sculptor, “son of the celebrated Lemoine” and two other painters (Pinel 2007, p.24, 203). As for music, Esquirol stated that it could affect the body physically, by producing small shocks to the nerves and increasing circulation, and should be used as a remedy (Esquirol, 1838, p.80). According to Bercherie (1989, p.72), the alienist Etienne-Jean Georget is said to have developed a particular interest in the artistic manifestation of patients. According to Park (2007, p.326), through his influence, Esquirol collected drawings of insane people. Another Esquirol pupil, François Leuret, introduced

classes in grammar, geography, music, dance, and drawing at Bicêtre beginning in 1839 (Park, 2007, p.197).

The Pinel's reform profoundly impacted the medical field. Moral treatment and attention to the arts were implemented in various parts of Europe. The Berlin asylum, for example, offered painting and drawing classes for its inmates as early as 1820, while the Palermo hospital was adorned with paintings and statues of its residents (Galt, 1853). In Scotland, the Hanwell Lunatic Asylum encouraged patients to paint and draw "not only as part of a broader curative method," but also to make life in the asylum more tolerable (Park, 2007, p.107). Between 1830 and 1850, several English asylums, such as the Crichton Royal Institution and the Southern Counties Asylum, used drawing and painting as an occupation and treatment, and collected the paintings and drawings of the inmates (Browne, 1880). Art was then thought to be able to gratify the inmates and cultivate their sensibilities, being understood as recreational and therapeutic at the same time (Stock, 2016).

As in Europe, alienists in the Americas also began to report, from the very beginning of the establishment of hospitals for the mentally ill, the presence of spontaneous production by the patients and its therapeutic use, among other activities. In 1812, for example, the American Benjamin Rush claimed that, seized by alienation, some individuals develop abilities that did not exist before, such as talents for eloquence, poetry, music, and painting, and rare skill in several of the mechanical arts. For him,

the disease should be compared to an earthquake, which, convulsing the upper strata of our globe, throws on its surface precious and magnificent fossils, whose existence was unknown to the owners of the soil in which they were buried (Rush, 1812, p.152)

For the alienists in the United States, art was able to help awaken the most refined sensibilities in insane people, increasing their tranquillity and moving them towards health. The asylums sought to develop them with support from the fine arts (Hogan, 2001, p.33). Pliny Earle even published a paper on the artistic production of "insane people" in 1845 that points in this direction (Andriolo, 2006, p.45). The following section addresses the dissemination of alienism in the Americas, especially regarding its appropriations in Brazil.

### **Alienism in the Empire of Dom Pedro**

In Brazil, references to insanity as mental alienation can be found at least as early as 1814 (Silva, 2012). French alienism, which arrived in the country through scientific publications, travels, and contributions by foreigners, acquired greater social capital in the 1830s, becoming the basis for the criticism against insane people free in the streets or in the Holy House of Mercy's Hospital (Santa Casa de Misericórdia) (Gonçalves, 2011). In 1841, the construction of an asylum for the mentally ill was decreed on the occasion of Pedro II's coronation. To this end, in 1845, Antonio José Pereira das Neves, the medical doctor in the provisional infirmary of the mentally ill, was sent to Europe to study the operation of asylums abroad to apply this knowledge in the country (Ribeiro, 2016).

In keeping with his experience, the HNA not only copied the structural division of Charenton's architecture. Two years after its inauguration, the director had already put

in place workshops for shoemakers, tailors, woodworkers, florists, and towel shredders to “soothe” and “treat” the inmates (Barbosa, 7 nov. 1854, p.1). In addition to these activities, reading, writing, drawing, and performance of plays were introduced by the director of the institution’s clinical service as treatment from the first year of the HNA’s operation (Barbosa, 1853, p.14).

Music and dance classes (Barbosa, 22 jul. 1856, p.120) were also offered and were seen as important therapeutically, the latter being considered “one of the most appetising pleasures that mentally ill people in these conditions can enjoy.” According to the physician Nuno Ferreira de Andrade (1881, p.265), the primary objective of these activities was to provide them with “distraction,” “tranquil evenings,” and “rest for the intellectual functions,” as long as they were used in moderation. Aiming at the promotion of such activities in the asylum, the administrator José Clemente Pereira requested the provision of the patients with “a fiddle, a flute, a clarinet, and an E-flat clarinet as a means of distraction and perhaps cure” (Barbosa, 7 nov. 1854, p.1-2). Two years later, this topic was still present in the reports:

Music has already been rehearsed in this asylum, where we had four or five artists. ... Music seems to me to be a useful means in the treatment of insanity, and it has been used for many years in Italy as a means of curing mental disorders. In a country where the fine arts are usually cultivated, this resource should necessarily be used by the physicians in charge of mentally ill people (Barbosa, 22 jul. 1856, p.120).

French alienism had a long life in the HNA, and other theoretical frameworks gained greater space only after the foundation of the chair of psychiatry and mental disorders of the FMRJ, in 1882 (Ribeiro, 2016). With alienism being addressed by the various subjects that comprised the chair, there was a significant increase in the number of dissertations on the topic and contests. Furthermore, physicians from other specialties and laboratory technicians strengthened the bonds with the institution (Mathias, 2017; Moraes, 2020). The increased links between the asylum, and the FMRJ gave greater political power to the director and now professor Teixeira Brandão, as well as to the psychiatric field in general, which would lead to more concrete efforts for the laicisation of the asylum (Moraes, 2020). These advances have also taken patient production to a new level:

I dare to propose a suggestion, which to a certain extent will help to break the tedious uniformity of asylum life and will be a valuable aid in maintaining discipline among the inmates. Similarly to what is done in European asylums, to designate one day in the year for the exhibition of all their artefacts, and those who are able to enjoy such a privilege will remain freely in the halls of the asylum, which will be adorned in a way to transmit a festive feeling. ... Regardless of the salutary influence that such an event would have on insane people, by encouraging them to hope to attend the solemnity, or by correcting their fear of being condemned to death and correcting their fear of being deprived of it, it would be an opportunity to show the pessimists that in Brazil, people also work and that the Pedro II Asylum is not inferior to foreign asylums (Brandão, 1888, p.251).

In the same article, Brandão proposes to invite “great people of our society” to the exhibition, showing that in addition to the production of music (Barbosa, 27 maio 1866),

embroidery and tapestry (Rey, 2012), and artefacts, the production of mentally ill people could also gain status of exhibition. The proposal was well accepted and, in the republic, the annual exhibition with the material produced by mentally ill people was instituted by law (Brasil, 29 Jun. 1892). Aside from showing that “in Brazil, people also work,” alienation at the exposition also was reported by newspapers and magazines, instigating the curiosity of the general population, who began to visit the asylum on days when the exposition was being held (Assis, 2010a, first print in 1895; *Exposição...*, 24 set. 1895; *Hospício...*, 27 set. 1895; Bilac, 2006, first print in 1905).

Initially, the alienism saw the insane as a stranger to himself. As they were not a being with reason, discernment, or will, their production could be called art since they were the result of the remnants of their health and conscience. However, such questions gained new answers in the late nineteenth century, and this change in perspective raised even greater interest in society on the aesthetic productions of mentally ill people. We will discuss the reasons in the next section.

### **The art between neuropsychiatry and degeneration theory**

While in Brazil alienism was gaining strength with the opening of new specialised hospitals in several parts of its territory (Oda, Dalgarrondo, 2005), in Europe it was experiencing a deep crisis, which started in the 1840s. Contrary to expectations, there was a significant increase in the number of patients considered incurable in hospitals (Shorter, 1997, p.33-68). Moreover, the theoretical frameworks of alienism were distinct from these of the broader field of medicine. Given this situation, these experts came to be urged to justify the legitimacy of their knowledge and practice (Trichet, 2013).

In the midst of the crisis, a growing psychiatric field opposed the alienist doctrine and proposed the “neurologisation” of knowledge and the confrontation of physicalist processes as the cause of insanity. As a result, part of psychiatry, through the influence of German schools (Muñoz, 2018; Accorsi, 2020), gained an organogenetic and localisationist tone, directing their attention to anatomoclinical and physiological results coming from the laboratory. From this perspective, alienation came to be considered a disease of the brain, with symptomatic manifestations understood as attempts to re-establish its normal functioning (Pereira, 2007).

Despite competing with the new products coming from the laboratory, moral therapy continued to be instituted in the asylum of these physicians. Activities offered, such as music and fine arts, have gained renewed interest. According to Andriolo (2006), the new perspective started to propose a redefinition of the works as semiological expressions that would signalise brain dysfunctions and started to serve as an auxiliary tool in the diagnostic process.

Disputing with experimentation, which despite the efforts failed in proposing an aetiology of mental disorders (Muñoz, 2018), and under the impact of the theories of evolution, insanity and hospital chronification gained a new framework after the notions of degeneration and heredity were linked to it, indicating the limits of the physicalist project.



In the second half of the nineteenth century, the notion of degeneration was disseminated through most fields of knowledge, from philosophy, to politics, from the natural sciences to the humanities (Hoff, 2015, p.34). In psychiatry, the most disseminated degenerationist theory was that of the French Benédicte August Morel (1857), whose central idea was that insanity was the end of a process of decline in physical and mental functioning, which would increasingly worsen in the subsequent generations. Proposing heredity as the primary cause of *mental alienation*, he proposed a new classification of mental illnesses based on the different types of degeneration, according to their aetiology.

For Morel, the predominance of incurable individuals in asylums was due to the very nature of their pathology, which imposed a progressive worsening of the conditions throughout their life. Thus, insanity came to be measured by its mismatch with progress: while evolution included, from generation to generation, increasingly higher levels of mental ability and civility, insanity would take the opposite direction of this process. The progressive involution of human abilities was visible, according to the physician, in the increasing inability of the degenerates to direct their actions towards a useful, moral, and civilised goal, affecting the entire subsequent family branch (Morel, 1860, p.90). Here lies the increasing importance given to prophylaxis and early intervention grew, to protect society from these individuals (Foucault, 2002b).

Morel was a central influence on the alienism of the late nineteenth century, influencing great names such as Henri Legrand du Saulle and Henry Maudsley. Another fundamental representative of this school of thought was the French psychiatrist Valentin Magnan, whose works were published thirty years after Morel's works. Contrary to Morel, Magnan stated that there was no single perfect human type at the origin of the world, but that there were different human races in continuous progress. In a language more attuned to the medical sciences of the turn of the century. Magnan defined degeneration as a pathological state of defect in the nervous system, either in brain areas with brain functions disconnected from each other or disarticulated from the central nervous system, which overloaded those functioning, demanding immediate satisfaction (Serpa Jr., 2010). It would be this "imbalance" or "disharmony" between the different parts of the brain that would give rise to irresistible impulses, perversion of the instincts, and weakness of will (Magnan, Serieux, 1895).

With Magnan, insanity started to include the deviations of instinct, whether arising from a hereditary predisposition produced by excesses (Dowbiggin, 1991, p.168) or by the unbalance resulting from racial mixtures of different evolutionary levels (Serpa Jr., 2010, p.469). Having no control over their own behaviour, the degenerate would be one of the greatest social scourges. The concept of degeneration has begun to be used to explain deviant social behaviour in adjacent areas, such as criminal anthropology and law.

Cesare Lombroso significantly influenced psychiatry in the field of criminal anthropology. His work reinforced the determinist consensus by proposing that the moral anomalies found in criminals were indicative that a trait of the ancestors long since extinguished could reappear in a descendant (Rodrigues, 2009, p.778-779; first print in 1902). Lombroso's concept of "born criminal" described an individual who concentrated various regressions of humanity in their abnormal moral and morphological characters.

These would lead him to crime, epilepsy, or even moral insanity. This perspective remained an enduring legacy for mental and legal medicine, even though it was debated and criticised since the time of its proposition (Wolfgang, 1961, p.361).

The change in the framework of insanity did not mean that moral therapy and the asylum disappeared but that new ways of using them emerged. Labour therapy, amusement, and distraction activities – games, music, parties, and reading – remained part of the management of individuals in asylums and continued to be used therapeutically (Russell, 1983).

The artistic productions of mentally ill people have gained new contours. The degeneration inflection of insanity eliminates “the rigid barriers between delirium and minor anomalies or degenerations, defined as physical or moral deviations from the original type” (Caponi, 2012, p.17). The theories of degeneration and atavism gave rise to the method of comparing the productions of deviants from the “norm,” be it the mentally ill, the great geniuses of the arts, or the so-called “savages” or “primitives” – non-Western groups, considered inferior to Western European culture in evolutionary terms (Cesar, 1951). Gilman (1985, p.593) even states that it was with degeneration that “the medical category of the ‘pathological’ was linked to the artistic category of the ‘degenerate.’”

Lombroso started to collect works produced in the asylum and analyse them using a classification that included notions such as “bizarreness, pretentiousness, obscenity, eroticism, incoherence in allegories, stereotyping, and scribbling,” as well as a lack of “sense of usefulness.” The production of mentally ill people would allow to access their thinking, anomalous emotions, and insistence on certain topics and aversion to others, becoming an important piece of the diagnostic puzzle. Such categories also allowed comparing the artefacts of mentally ill people and genius artists with those of primitive peoples, since Lombroso underlined “the similarity of the art of some mentally ill people with primitive art” and considered “the artistic works of these mentally ill people as a return to the childhood of humanity” (cited in Andriolo, 2006, p.46). According to this model, insane people, like primitive peoples and genius artists, often used the atavistic resource of painting symbols rather than depicting reality (Lombroso, Du Camp, 1880).

In many asylums, the systematic collection of the artefacts produced by the inmates has been listed as material evidence of their alienation (Hogan, 2001, p.57). In France, Auguste Ambroise Tardieu and Paul-Max Simon, for example, began to encourage patients to draw and paint, using their works to establish diagnoses (Porter, 1990).

In this scenario, besides being important instruments of diagnostic analysis, the “insane” literature, drawings, and paintings produced by insane people also began to be considered as degenerate art (Gilman, 1985, p.580). The objects produced by “degenerates” and the “atavistic” started to be collected in various international institutions.. At the turn of the twentieth century, several psychiatrists were already collecting the asylum production for the study of psychopathology, as Júlio Dantas in Portugal (Franco, 2017) or Max Nordau (1893) in Germany, drawing attention to its bizarreness, excesses of colour, pretentiousness, eroticism, incoherence, and lack of usefulness.

Collectionism also gave way to another phenomenon: the exposure of the art of the mentally ill. In addition to Lombroso in Turin, physicians such as August Marie in France (Morehead, 2011) and institutions in England, such as the Bethlem Royal Hospital,

began to exhibit the artwork produced in the asylum on a permanent basis. In 1898, the patients' production and care for them (*Irrenpflegeausstellung*) were presented in the Universal Exhibition (Heighton, 2008, p.223-227), with the same occurring in 1908 at the exhibition of insane artists of the Mauer-Öhling asylum in Vienna (p.229-230). Finally, the journal *L'Encéphale* opened a permanent section under the title "insane people painted by themselves" which ran from 1882 to 1888 and which emphasised their remarkable "power of expression," sometimes "brilliant" (Régis, 1882, p.190).

The exhibition of the production in different hospitals also reflects the general public's growing curiosity about insanity. According to MacGregor (1989, p.165), European hospitals began to receive hundreds of visitors. In light of this interest, it is worth paying attention to the new nature of the insane as a degenerate, producer of these productions. If at the beginning of the nineteenth century the question centred on whether there was a rational subject in insanity, by the end of the nineteenth century another answer was given: insanity was the final stage of a degenerative process. The production of these individuals could not be normal art, as the insane was essentially a deviant being, determined by their pathological, heritage, or atavistic instincts. Their productions were the result of a distorted mind and reflected that. Thus, the insane, "such as Jews and Negroes" did not have a "true aesthetic sensibility" (Gilman, 1985, p.594). Still, according to Gilman, with the support of the degeneration theory, art gained the function of defining who constituted the outsiders.

The same was true for the writing of these individuals: the examination of the poetic qualities of mentally ill people gained a definite place on the agenda of alienists, as was the case of Octave Delepiere and Antigono Raggi, who drew attention to the writing of insane people, especially maniacs and monomaniacs, discussing their style, formal education, common mistakes, and even prognostication through writing (Anastasi, Foley, 1941). Constructed in terms of comparison with the great geniuses of literature, pathography attracted attention from a wider audience, also increasing the professional prestige of psychiatrists (Sirotkina, 2002). Several publications on the art and literature of mentally ill people appeared in the period as a result of this new direction (Fursac, 1905; Mohr, 1906).

Just as speech disorders are sometimes extremely evident in these patients, the combinations of lines in their drawings may be extremely complicated, or the colours they use to illuminate their pictures may be absolutely false to nature (cited in MacGregor, 1989, p.111).

In Brazil, the writing of the mentally ill also did not escape the attention of the alienists: according to Doctor Santos (1875, p.22-23), for example, the examination of "any documents proceeding from the pen of the mentally ill" was seen as an excellent aid in the production of diagnoses, either by considering aspects of its content or evaluating its graphic aspects (such as the direction of the letters, their size and layout) and formal aspects (spelling, punctuation, organisation, the presence of scribbles and drawings).

Another change that occurred in this period, being extremely relevant to care, was the change in the socio-professional identity of the mental physician. It was also in the midst of the degenerative scenario – in which the long periods of hospitalisation were normalised through diagnosis and accountability of individuals – that the criticism against

the closed asylum model gained more strength, dividing physicians between those who started to call themselves psychiatrists and those who kept their identity as alienists. The new generation, which called themselves reformers, and included psychiatrists such as Marie, Toulouse, and Sérioux, relied on the open door model and hetero-family care to give inmates greater freedom and dignity (Morehead, 2011). In these open spaces, considered as capable of giving a sense of freedom, writings, and works of art came to be seen no longer only as diagnostic markers or moral therapeutics. These psychiatrists began to encourage their patients to create and collect their own works, because these also became evidence of the new psychiatric regime (Trichet, 2013).

### **Degeneration and new meanings of art in the care of the Brazilian mentally ill**

In Brazil, there was great dissemination of the degeneration theory was intense in the late nineteenth century, especially after the abolition of slavery in 1888, being used, among other ends, to naturalise class hierarchies in racial terms, with the support of Magnan. Many were those who had a pessimist view, believing that the country could not modernise given the hereditary problems that marked its primitive and miscegenated population (Rodrigues, 2004; first print in 1903).

As a mirror of the society, the HNA was marked by a strong class hierarchy. At the turn from Empire to the Republic (1889),<sup>4</sup> the regulations of the Assistance to the Mentally Ill were approved, providing treatment by means of not only work, but also of artistic activities and recreation for all inmates (Brasil, 21 jun. 1890). However, differences in treatment among the rich, the well-off and the poor remained striking, maintaining, in the daily life of the asylum, the strong division of “races” (Roxo, 1904) and classes found in the wider society (Cunha, 1986). This is not to say that such naturalisation was exclusive to Brazil:

Pinel, who rendered so many services to the unfortunate mentally ill, who replaced brutal violence and barbaric means of repression with intelligent and humane treatment, wanted his patients to have a field to cultivate. Esquirol obtained the most beautiful results from the employment of labour. He stated that the replacement of this precious resource, which lacks in the treatment of wealthy people, by music, painting, reading, meetings, walks on foot, horseback, or car, among other activities, results in disadvantages. (Barbosa, 22 jul. 1856, p.120).

In 1896, this equality of rights continued to be only apparent: the meeting and recreation rooms, gym, library, games, and musical instruments were, according to the newspapers of the time, perks only for pensioners, that is, paying HNA patients of the first, second, third, and fourth classes. At the turn of the twentieth century, reading rooms, music rooms, and wooded courtyards where non-pensioner inmates could walk were reported to be still lacking (cited in Engel, 2001, p.311).

While music was playing in the pensioners’ ward, non-paying patients participated in labour therapy. They carried out typography, bookbinding, shoemaking, and quilting activities, as well as learned professions such as painter, bricklayer, blacksmith, carpenter, and plumber. There were also activities of sewing, embroidery, tapestry, and artificial flowers’ made “of cloth and beads” (Azevedo, 1877, p.390) for women who often produced

“true works of art” (Rey, 2012, p.383). According to the writer and journalist Olavo Bilac (2006, p.313), when he visited the asylum, the inmate children also enjoyed having contact with music:

The arrival of the device [a large phonograph] is greeted with an explosion of joy. When the first notes of the music sound, all the children, as if obeying an irresistible impulse, dance and jump, in a jovial saraband. Then, all the little ones come together, form a circle around the phonograph, and stay like that for hours, immobile, enchanted, transported, alienated from everything, rocked by the melody ... It is an ecstasy, which only ends when the voice of the apparatus fades away and dies, in a last dragged note. And not only in this love of the phonograph is manifested the influence that music exerts on the nerves of those innocent creatures. Almost all inmates in the asylums often sing and dance: and some of them prefer those little mouth organs to all toys, which cost a nickel, and for them worth the same as a real treasure. Music, primitive art, is the enchantment of those equally primitive souls.

Following the steps of the asylum reforms promoted by the new generation of international psychiatrists, other institutions were built at the beginning of the republic for allowing more freedom to those who “naturally” were fated to stay forever in the asylum.

From now on, internment will no longer be the imprisonment of the insane individual in a closed house, where they do not find ... the joys of work to loosen his muscles and prevent his brain from the dementia of indolence (Estatísticas..., 1900, p.132).

In addition to labour therapy, facilities capable of distracting and entertaining the residents were planned, to allow them a greater sense of freedom and belonging. As evidence of the reform's effects on the lives of the inmates, their productions began to be photographed and described in the director's annual reports to the Ministry of Justice and Internal Affairs (Claper, 2020, p.184-186).

Alongside instructional and recreational activities – “walks, music, recitation, theatrical performances” (Agassiz, Agassiz, 1938, p.276) –, the spontaneous aesthetic productions of mentally ill people gained new attention, being put on display, as already mentioned. Journalists (Fantasio, 1895; Livro..., 1895; O Hospício..., 1895) and renowned writers, such as Machado de Assis (1989, p.308; first print in 1892), reported the strong impressions caused by the works, made with “such perfection that it is almost a good thing that they have lost their minds”. Machado de Assis called attention to the reasoning and aesthetic sense of these individuals, recommending the end of the asylum:

The best would be a law abolishing mental alienation, repealing all provisions to the contrary, and ordering the reintegration of the supposedly insane individual to society, with compensation. I know that, in general, we would rather break the law than pass a new one; but, for the safety of the guests at the Praia Vermelha, I recommend this second process. And not only of those, but also for your and my safety; we can go there one day, with no other recourse than conspiracy, which may be discovered; it is better that no one goes (Assis, 2010b, p.312; first print in 1896).

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the discussion about primitive art gained space. Initially, it was linked to the artistic manifestations of “autochthones and Africans,”

as “the racial inferiority of black and native people to white people was indisputable” (Oda, 2001, p.3) and of mixed-race people at different evolutionary levels, diagnosed as degenerates at the time, the interest in primitivism also encouraged the collection of art by individuals in asylums, who were thought to be regressing to primitive stages of humanity. The expansion of the boundaries of abnormality allowed the reformulation of the scientific-care field of psychiatry for more recognition and biopolitical organisation of society. However, at the other end of this discourse, it simultaneously increased the fascination with insanity (Schmiedebach, 2016).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the notion of degeneration was disseminated in politics, law, and the daily life of the city, with expansion of the things that were considered “out of order,” confusing, or unreasonable, to the point that some psychiatrists began to say that “the degeneration they see everywhere is already a diagnostic stereotype, when it is not a simple echolalia of designation” (Moreira, Peixoto, 1905). Intertwined with the critique of Machado de Assis in *O alienista* (The alienist), from 1882 (Assis, 1989), Moreira and Peixoto pointed out that the physicians who only saw degeneration/madness everywhere were the ones who seemed mentally ill.

However, the scathing critique points to ongoing epistemological and political disputes between the group of alienists linked to Teixeira Brandão and a new group of psychiatrists, which with the changes of government in the early twentieth century, had arrived at the asylum and the FMRJ (Portocarrero, 2002; Venancio, Carvalhal, 2005; Muñoz, 2018). The clash took place in the midst of a violent crisis of local alienism, which had been threatening the reliability of knowledge and challenging the psychiatrists of the HNA, with accusations of corruption, cruelty, and inefficiency (Engel, 2001; Dias, 2010; Moraes, 2020).

The new group was established as of 1903 in the HNA led by the Bahia physicians Juliano Moreira and Afrânio Peixoto, who managed to attract names already established in psychiatry, such as Fernandes Figueira, Miguel Couto, Antonio Austregésilo, and Heitor Carrilho, among others, to the asylum (Engel, 2001; Facchinetti, 2022). With the support of their students and residents, they implemented the newest experimental perspectives of the time at the HNA for modernising psychiatry to the level of general medicine (Facchinetti, Muñoz, 2013). This theoretical perspective also had a great impact on care, revolutionising the understanding of insanity, the mentally ill, and their treatment.

The period of analysis of this article ends precisely at the entrance of this new group. After all, it was with this initial group, led by Juliano Moreira, that psychoanalysis began to be disseminated in the HNA, proposing new directions to the art produced in asylums, still in the 1910s (Facchinetti, Castro, 2015). It was also through the influence of these physicians that a new generation of psychiatrists introduced social psychiatry, the sociocultural studies of psychoanalysis, and art criticism into asylums, starting in 1920. In the new epistemological framework, insane works came to be understood as enunciators of the truth of the unconscious. Going beyond the limits of the asylums, they also became an artistic reference for the local modernist avant-garde, beginning to be exhibited as modern art. Nevertheless, this generation has already been addressed by historiography, as stated at the beginning of this article.

### **Final considerations: archive fever**

This article sought evidence of production in Brazilian asylums in the nineteenth century in the “insane” art archive. For Derrida (2001), the concepts of history, truth, and power are always intricate and organise what is memory, but also what is forgetting. This means that every historiographical tradition and its way of ordering narratives depend on the archives that are produced by power and by those who have the authority to maintain it, the “archons,” guardians, and interpreters of the truth enunciated by the archive (p.12-13).

Thus, the interpreter, as the archivist that they fundamentally are, must not only welcome the repetition that insists on the archive, but also relaunch it toward the future. This reading, which is constitutive of the archive itself, is what directs it toward the becoming-to-be that also pervades the archive as such. It would be the archivist/interpreter, finally, who would constitute, by such reading operations, the consignment of the archive in question (Birman, 2008, p.116)

The writing of history is a discontinuous, lacunar, and symptomatic process, permeated by forgetfulness and erasures established by power. The choices of the archons concern not only the past, but also the records of the present, the conditions of possibility of who commands the narrative, the assemblage that introduces its origins and brings a specific perspective of the future (Derrida, 2001, p.11).

However, every archive is bound to encounter the “evil” that crosses it, which at the same time allows the forgetting and the inscription of new archives (Derrida, 2001). From this perspective, this is the condition of possibility for the destruction of traditions and the construction of new arrangements, memories, and truths, even if the “new” also produces new repressions, the very condition of its renewal.

Considering this “archive fever” throughout the article, we sought to demonstrate that the silencing of art by reason in modernity did not mean that stopped being produced in the asylums, but rather that the modern era brought the challenge of rationally dealing with something that goes beyond reason. The entire debate between Foucault and Derrida is precisely about whether it is even possible to enunciate madness or whether we can only do so from “alienation” (Nascimento, 2017).

Our aim here was not to overcome the silencing of madness. We have only sought to demonstrate that, even if psychoanalysis and modern art intertwined in the interwar period to revolutionise the view of art and the artistic production in Brazilian asylums, this does not mean that it did not occur before, throughout the nineteenth century. Nor did it mean that mad artists and their production were not observed by the alienists during that period.

Instead, it allowed to address how different international psychiatric theories treated madness as a mental illness – sometimes as an error that could be overcome by consciousness, sometimes as brain damage or degeneration – and the impact of such perspectives in medical analyses on the creative expressions of those under their care. Although medical dissertations or Brazilian treatises in the nineteenth century did not address local practices, we could address the different interpretations of these manifestations by the alienists of the HNA during the nineteenth century in documents dealing with clinical practice and

care, showing how the medical staff dealt with them for different purposes: recreation, catharsis, and therapeutic activities, from 1852 onward, following the model of the practices of the French alienist hospitals; diagnostic evaluation, collection for psychopathological observation, and recreation, from the 1880s onward, especially in the 1890s, under the influence of the theory of degeneration and the physicalist theses of alienation; and even for scientific dissemination, for calling the attention of public opinion for the scientific work conducted in the hospital and its reforms.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [Translator's note] In this and other citations of texts from non-English languages, a free translation has been provided.

<sup>2</sup> Both will be referred to as HNA throughout this article for ease of reading.

<sup>3</sup> The research was conducted using the Hemeroteca Digital (<http://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital/>), a portal of the Brazilian National Library Foundation that allows for a wide consultation, through the internet, of newspapers, magazines, yearbooks, bulletins, and other serial publications. Future studies could search for data on the artistic manifestations of mentally ill patients in the hospital's clinical documents since 1852, which are now in the custody of the Instituto Municipal Nise da Silveira, in Rio de Janeiro. However, it was not possible to access them because this study was conducted when the archives were closed as a result of the lockdown imposed due to COVID-19.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the transition from monarchy to republic, see, for example, Carvalho (1987).

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