

**REVIEW OF THE BOOK
CYRILLO VOLKMAR MACHADO:
UM PERCURSO ARTÍSTICO SINGULAR
(1748-1823),
BY SOFIA BRAGA**

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Recently published by Caleidoscópio, Sofia Braga's long-awaited monograph on Cyrillo Volkmar Machado (1748-1823) fills a significant gap in Portuguese art history. Cyrillo was an industrious painter, architect, set designer, decorator, academic, and writer whose contributions profoundly impacted the national art scene from the late 18th to early 19th century.

This comprehensive study by an art historian Sofia Braga meticulously examines Cyrillo's life and work, and the cultural context in which he operated. She traces his artistic journey from training in Lisbon, Seville and Rome to his prominent mural cycles in the salons of the grand bourgeoisie and "great works" of the kingdom in the finest Lisbon's aristocratic palaces, including Pombeiro, Porto Covo, Barão de Quintela, and Duque de Lafões, while also exploring his contributions to royal commissions, such as the palaces of Mafra and Ajuda. Additionally, Braga highlights his expertise in the art of illumination for royal festivities during the reign of King John VI and Queen Carlota Joaquina, for whom he served as court painter, his set designs for theatres like São Carlos and Salitre, and his unique *rovine* projects, including the folly grotto at Quinta dos Senhores de Belas.

Often dismissed by 19th and 20th-century critics, Cyrillo achieved a remarkable *aggiornata* quality in these commissions, especially his mural paintings, and also in some easel works. In addition, he promoted art education and the development of the arts, founding the *Academia de Desenho* academy in 1780, a precursor to future fine arts schools. He reorganised the *Irmandade de São Lucas* brotherhood, established in 1602 by leading figures of the Mannerist generation including Fernão Gomes, and initiated in 1819 the conferences of artists for the royal palace of Ajuda known as *Conferências de Artistas para o Real Palácio da Ajuda*, a forum for the discussion of topical architectural, painting, and other artistic issues.

Since Cyrillo's work has historically been "undermined by prejudice" (p. 268), Sofia Braga seeks to redress this injustice by engaging in an open, thorough dialogue with the artist's oeuvre, aiming to counter the limited analyses that have long restricted appreciation for Cyrillian painting. While works like *The Story of Esther* (1779) in the Casa de Cultura cultural centre in Elvas, coach decorations for the Royal House, and the conventional Apostolate at the Church of Loreto in Lisbon may appear overly derivative of Italian-French engraving styles, Cyrillo's creative expression reaches a new intensity in his grand mural cycles. In the halls of the Palace of the Baron of Quintela and Count of Farrobo (1786-1787), for example, *Council of the Gods* in the so-called Camonian Room stands out, as does his *Triumph of the Arts* series at the Pombeiro Palace (1788-1790), where his scenographic sensibilities are matched by a remarkable talent for portraiture. The tradition of the *grotesche* of classical antiquity also reemerges with strength, notably in the Arcadia Room of this Lisbon palace. Braga meticulously examines these stylistic and thematic aspects, giving precise attention to both the formal elements and the historical sources that Cyrillo drew upon.

The commission Cyrillo received in 1791 from Dom João Carlos de Bragança, 2nd Duke of Lafões, to paint the rooms of his Lisbon palace, stands as one of his most distinguished works. This project features a complex iconographic programme (which the author refers to as "enigmatic themes" on p. 90 and following), grounded in erudition through which the various "stories" elevate the *Parnassus of Arts and Letters* and affirm the enduring liberality intrinsic to the art of painting. Thorough examination of these works required both a deep understanding of Cyrillo's evolution as an artist and a sustained, discerning focus – tasks that Sofia Braga skillfully achieves. Her definition of Cyrillo as "a pioneer of Lisbon's First Neoclassicism (or Proto-Classicism)" (p. 266) is thus fully validated.

The theme of nature emerges prominently in the former Casa da Tocha of Mafra Palace, now known as the Sala de Diana. Rather than reflecting an early pre-romantic tendency, it embodies strong neoclassical references, drawing inspiration from Domenichino and the Carracci, and literary influences steeped in Virgil and Ovid. This same Italian *Seicento* influence, informed by the Roman style, appears in the ceiling painting of the South Oratory of Mafra Palace (1796) and in the Sala dos Destinos. These works are now reemerging after a long period of neglect and obscurity.

These are all paintings of exceptional quality. Cyrillo's ceiling works in the final decorative cycle of the Ajuda National Palace (post-1814) showcase his command of Italian quadratura techniques and, notably, surpass the achievements of other ceiling painters active in the early 19th century, such as Arcangelo Fuschini and José da Cunha Taborda. His canvas paintings for the religious sphere, like *Santa Maria de Alcáçova* in Santarém (1817-1818) and *The Last Supper* in the church of São Sebastião da Pedreira in Lisbon (1814), also reflect this high standard and hold their own alongside the revered sacred works of Pedro Alexandrino de Carvalho's later oeuvre.

A valuable collection of easel paintings, ceiling murals, academic drawings, *bozzettos*, and preparatory studies completes the analysis in this beautiful book, offering a comprehensive profile of an artist who was both "learned and excellent", yet unjustly underestimated. This assessment resonates with the late art historian Paulo Varela Gomes's insightful words: "... he was the first Portuguese art historian and the man who wrote most about artistic issues from Francisco de Holanda to the end of the 19th century". In fact, Cyrillo's renowned work *Collecção de memorias relativas ás vidas dos pintores, e escultores, architetos, e gravadores portuguezes, e dos estrangeiros, que estiverão em Portugal* (Lisbon, 1823), to which he dedicated many years of research – during the same period in which he sought to reorganise the now-defunct Brotherhood of São Lucas in Lisbon – establishes him as a Portuguese counterpart to Giorgio Vasari. Cyrillo is often considered as the initiator of the literary genre we now recognise as artistic biography.

Over the course of three hundred pages, the author offers a detailed study based on primary sources, supplemented by previously unpublished material. She corrects chronologies and establishes authorship, discipleship, and collaborations – such as the role of Bernardo António de Oliveira Góis, Cyrillo's assistant in Mafra. Demonstrating exceptional sensitivity in analysing Cyrillo's pictorial output, the author rigorously traces the artist's aesthetic development, from the late Baroque taste of King Joseph's reign to the influences of his masters (such as Pellegrino Parodi and his uncle João Pedro Volkmar). This study culminates in what Sofia Braga identifies as the Proto-Neoclassicism of Rome, influenced by artists like Batoni and Mengs, while also considering the formalist theories of Joachim Winckelmann, particularly the *all'antico* style of classical Greece.

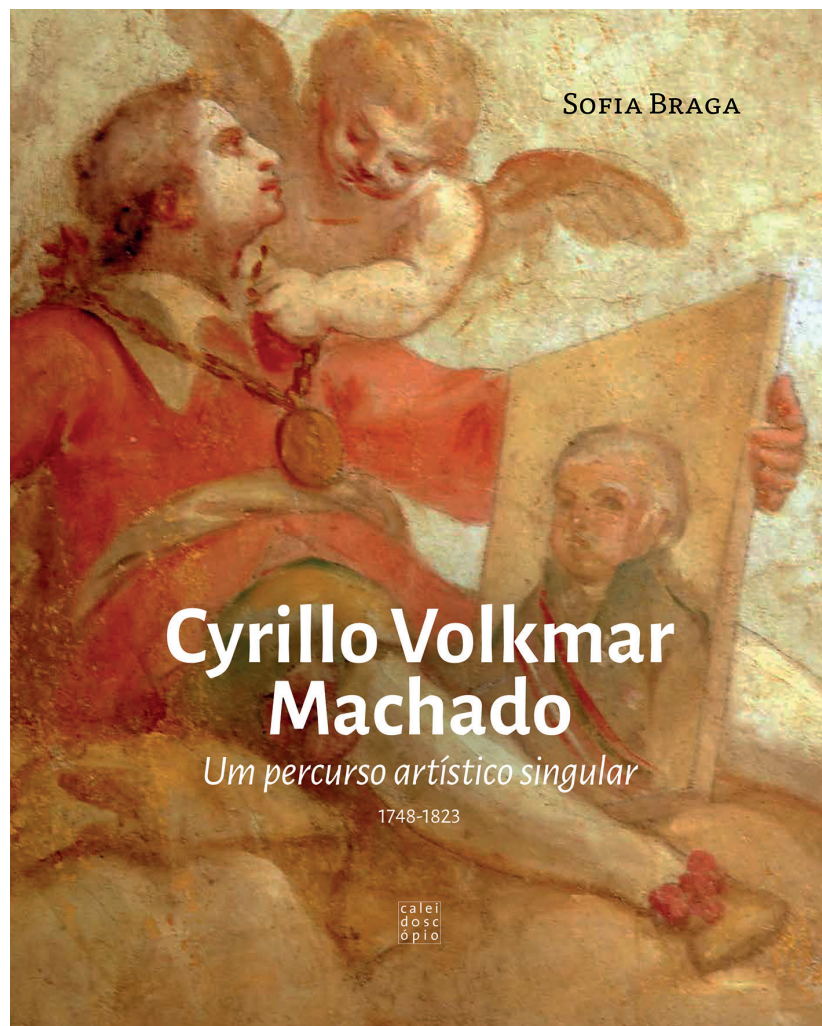
As a painter and writer, Cyrillo was both a theoretician steeped in Italian culture and, in many respects, an innovator in artistic ideas and practices. His progressive approach is evidenced by his dedication to reforming arts education, including his unsuccessful attempt to launch a nude model class in Lisbon. He also championed the status of women artists, influenced in this regard by his sister, Joaquina Isabel Volkmar, an amateur painter.

While Sofia Braga argues that it would be reductive to view Cyrillo solely as a painter within the late-Baroque canon (p. 266), it is equally accurate to note that he remained untouched by the new Romanticism. Instead, his mature work bears the strong influence of Neoclassicism, inspired by his exposure to Italian art. Upon returning to Portugal, he brought a cosmopolitan perspective that marked a discursive shift away from domestic styles and positioned him on the fringes of international Rococo, visible in the remarkable ceiling paintings he created in Lisbon's grand palaces.

According to Braga, Cyrillo's artistic peak can be traced to around 1786, marked by the exceptional quality of his paintings for the palace of the Baron of Quintela and Count of Farrobo. Her analysis goes beyond stylistic examination, delving into iconography, iconology, history painting, and even Camonian themes, with which Cyrillo imbued references to Portugal's presence in the East. His painted scenes reveal a confident approach to portraiture, pose, and composition, alongside a warm and harmonious colour palette that sought to revive order in painting, which had been overshadowed by the artificial excesses of King Joseph I's reign.

Cyrillo's career, however, unfolded during turbulent times, with political upheavals stemming from the anti-Pombaline *Viradeira*, the royal family's absence in Brazil, the French invasions, and the onset of the Liberal Revolution. These challenging circumstances likely contributed to his posthumous decline in reputation, with later art historians largely overlooking his contributions – except for his work as a writer, particularly the *Collecção de Memórias*, which continued to be appreciated and widely referenced.

The distinctive pictorial qualities of this artist, who, grounded in a rigorous academic training, skillfully adapted his style to incorporate neoclassical innovations, are at last acknowledged and rehabilitated in this work of intellectual depth and thorough critical analysis. The author, a researcher at the ARTIS-IHA-FLUL research centre, holds a master's degree in Art History from the University of Lisbon's School of Arts and Humanities (2011). Her thesis, entitled *Contributos para o Estudo da Pintura Mural na Arquitectura Palatina Lisboaeta entre o Tardo-barroco e o Neoclassicismo (1775-c.1820)*, supervised by Luís Afonso and Ana Paula Rebelo Correia, laid the foundation for her later book, *Pintura Mural Neoclássica em Lisboa: Cyrillo Volkmar Machado no Palácio do Duque de Lafões e Pombeiro-Belas*, which reflects her long-standing academic focus, further evidenced in numerous publications, conferences, and projects. This book also serves as the corollary to her PhD dissertation, which was developed under the guidance of Teresa Leonor Vale at the same institution and stands as a foundational reference on the work of Cyrillo Volkmar Machado.



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