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A Poetic Panorama of Rio

Thiago Leitão

Abstract

This is a digital panorama-mosaic of drawings and paintings made by the 19th century travelers to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Bay of Guanabara is a focal point in their representations, as are the vessels, which help unravel the narrative of the digital panorama, recalling not only different visions, views, and painting techniques, but also re-activating a certain social memory of Rio.

The 19th century City of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, was the subject of four distinct 360 degree painted panoramas, each made by a different artist and each exhibited in a different location. The first known panorama of Rio was painted by French artist Félix-Émile Taunay (1795-1881) in 1824 and was exhibited in Paris, near the *Passages des Panoramas* at the third rotunda of Pierre Prevost; the second, painted by English naturalist artist John William Burchell (1781-1863) in 1825, was exhibited in London, at Leicester Square; the third, painted by two artists, Brazilian Victor Meirelles (1832-1903) and Belgian Henri Langerock (1830-1915), was exhibited in Brussels in 1888, Paris in 1889, and Rio between 1891-1894; and the fourth, painted by French artist Louis-Jules Dumoulin (1860-1924), was exhibited in Brussels in 1910. All four panoramas were highly successful and shared a particular theme: capturing the spectacle and splendor of the city of Rio in the 19th century. Unfortunately, none of these panoramas have survived to the present day.

Yet, many other artists created their own memorable pictorial representations of Rio in the 19th century, the Bay of Guanabara being a frequently featured sight. By combining parts of these representations and records (from sources such as Belluzo, Lago, and Leitão, among others), with the help of technology, one can attempt to “recover,” something of the spectacular landscape of 19th century Rio. The result is a unique virtual panorama, composed by the panoramic views of the landscape and bay of Rio de Janeiro created by the less famous artists of the time. In reality, this panorama has never existed in its totality: it is a collage of the woodcuts and paintings made by European travelers (French painters Adolphe d’Hastrel (1805-1874), Jules Marie Vincent (1812-1898), Joseph Alfred Martinet (1821-1875); Chinese painter Sunqua (1830-1870), English painter Henry Chamberlain (1796-1844), among others) when they arrived at different moments in the city in the 19th century. Their individual contributions are all the more interesting, especially when put together into a “whole.”

The selection of these images was not random. The idea was not to emphasize the individual techniques of each representation but rather, what they chose to represent about the city. In some images, nature was more important, like in the landscape and the bay with Sugar Loaf Mountain; in others—the architecture of the city and the description of its inhabitants. All these multiple gazes of European travelers made this unique virtual panorama possible. The pictorial narrative unravels with the navigation through the Bay of Guanabara: starting with the caravel, then onto the little wooden ship, and finally, onto the sailing boats and rafts. From left to right, the landscape unfolds as the navigation does, creating a unique way of spectating the landscape while also belonging to it.

But selecting the particular images and putting them together in this virtual panorama was not enough; it was necessary to interpret them as well. Each image was analyzed minutely, and small rectangles were created to highlight particularly important aspects in it. As an all-embracing view, the final panoramic composition generates new possibilities of viewing and interpreting: the poetics of the ships, the silence of the bay, the loneliness of the man who

observes the landscape, the idea of belonging...The panoramic collage informs us of the diverse ways of spectating the city of Rio in the 19th century but also creates conversations among the different views, visions, and ideologies.



Fig. 1. *A Poetic Panorama of Rio de Janeiro by the European Travelers in the 19th century*. Digital rendition by Thiago Leitão, 2015.

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About the author

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