

THE ROOSTER OVER TIME – a history of the evolution of the Rooster of Barcelos

By João Manuel Mimoso

The Rooster of Barcelos became a Portuguese icon. This status is about half a century old, but the extraordinary piece of design with the rooster's morphology is much older. This article will provide a chronological overview until our days.

As an introduction, I would like to call your attention to *figure 1*, an image of a whistle rooster published in 1900 by the ethnographic journal *Portugália* and included in Rocha Peixoto's study about potteries of Prado (a municipality that, at that time, included pottery-producing locations such as Galegos, Pousa and other villages that today are part of the vast district of Barcelos). The image shows us, undoubtedly, that the form generally associated with the modern rooster of Barcelos already existed in the 19th century. Therefore, it is not a recent invention.



Figure 1



Figure 2

In his text, Rocha Peixoto writes about the popular statuary of the region: *The rooster [...] exceeds in number and variety the other fauna species. It is also the most carefully modelled and decorated.* In the same chapter, he notes: *Religious subjects are not very common among a population that finds in church festivities an excuse for their ephemeral collective joys.* These two observations could be explained by the fact that the rooster statuary may represent the remains of a very ancient cult, possibly of Celtic roots, which the Christian tradition was neither able to replace nor to obliterate, as it has happened in other places.

It is not possible to state whether the rooster of *figure 1*, approximately 12 cm high, was entirely modelled by hand or, as it seems most likely, resulted in part from the use of a mould. Nevertheless, this stylization is completely unexpected in a piece of Popular Art, where the humble craftsman would be expected to reproduce the rooster as realistically as possible. However, its proportions are not of an actual rooster, particularly the form of the neck, thin and erect, and its tail that resembles the blade of a small scythe, which is the most intriguing detail. It is not likely that these deviations would result from inability, they rather seem to be the proof that some ancient

morphology was perpetuated. The origin of the fine stylization of the piece represented in this image, without which the ancestry of the Rooster of Barcelos would only be conjectural, is still a mystery.

Another illustration of the same work by Rocha Peixoto reproduces the globular form of a water whistle that is still produced nowadays in the region of Barcelos, normally called 'nightingale' (figure 2). In 'Artes e Tradições de Barcelos', published in 1979, an author describes it as follows: *In the nightingale, the artefact that reproduces its singing is the body of a gallinaceous bird. Instead of the head there is a rudimentary whistle attached (...); the trunk, large and round, ends with a tail and has a circular base. On each side three lines are painted in diagonal and parallel to each other simulating the wings. The body of the bird, almost half-spherical and hollow, is the water reservoir.*

There seems to be no relation between the whistle rooster of *figure 1* and the water nightingale of figure 2. In fact, 'nightingales' like these could be found all over Europe.



Figure 3

At that time, very similar ones were produced namely in Alsace, which might confirm their ancestry and a possible common origin. The 'nightingales' can be handmade with a mould, or using a potter's wheel. As far as it is possible to know from the little information there is, the Rooster of Barcelos as we know it results from the same technique used to make the water nightingale altered to impart a morphology inspired by the rooster in *figure 1*. A morphologic detail, useful to establish how old a local ceramic rooster is, is the peculiar form of the comb, a characteristic that evolved

during the first decades of the 20th century. The Museum of Pottery in Barcelos has in its rich collection a precious whistle rooster of unknown age that has a very similar comb and the globular body of a water nightingale. This piece illustrates the hybridization of the form previously mentioned (*figure 3*).

The stylistic origin of the elegant rooster illustrated by Rocha Peixoto constitutes a mystery, but on the other hand, its morphology also raises a question that interests us particularly: can this piece be considered a *rooster of Barcelos*?

To trace the evolutionary history of the Rooster of Barcelos, first it is important to define it. Whether we consider a broader definition or a more concrete one, the ceramic rooster populations embodied will be more or less vast and its history more or less remote. However, it is very difficult to define with precision what 'a rooster of Barcelos' is. The same way one



Figure 4

recognizes an acquaintance, the Rooster is also recognizable in the absence of a description. It is in any case a ceramic object with a bilateral symmetry, produced locally from a solid clay paste. It has a pedestal with circular symmetry, and it may include a whistle. It has a globular, hollow body and salient wings; a prominent and indented comb; a vertical tail, with the general shape of the comb but bigger. The base color of the body, neck, wings and tail is the same and its decoration is painted, incised or embossed, and made up from predominant elements such as stylized flowers or hearts, feathery segments, dots, circles or colorful sectors. The approximate proportions are as shown in *figure 4*.

According to this definition, the rooster of *figure 1* is not yet a rooster of Barcelos. The poor development of the comb is enough to classify it as a predecessor, member of a lineage that can be called generically as the *proto-roosters of Barcelos*.

Only a decade and a half after the publication by Rocha Peixoto was it possible to find a new representation of the rooster in the region of Barcelos thanks to Sónia and Robert Delaunay, who took refuge in Portugal during the Great War and lived in Vila do Conde between 1915 and the beginning of 1917. During this period they spent some time with Eduardo Viana, having influenced his style, and with Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, who painted the Minho region. At that time, Sónia Delaunay painted 'Jouets Portugais' (Portuguese Toys - *figure 5*) preserved in the French museums and Eduardo Viana painted 'Dolls of Barcelos' (*figure 6*), now at the National Museum of Soares dos Reis in Porto. In both paintings, small whistle roosters can be found, and comparing with other figures in these oil paintings, they might be about 15 cm high..



Figure 5



Figure 6

The rooster of Eduardo Viana's painting clearly shows a comb peculiarly extending backwards. It is the same archaism illustrated in the rooster of *figure 3*. The representation by Sónia Delaunay is more impressionist, but the tail is sufficiently detailed to confirm that it is a piece of Barcelos. *Figure 7* illustrates a whistle rooster 17,5 cm high, with similar characteristics to the ones represented by Sónia Delaunay, whereas among the collection of MuCEM (Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) in Marseille there is a small whistle rooster 14,7 cm high whose tail decoration corresponds to Delaunay's painting and the comb's shape to Eduardo

Viana's representation. The date of this piece ('circa 1920') is actually unknown but is previous to 1937, the year it integrated the museum collections. The Museum of Pottery in Barcelos also keeps in its collection some whistles of this type, even though with more developed combs, meaning that they are probably more recent, from the 1930s or 1940s.

There is a particularly interesting morphologic difference between the rooster of 1900 and the one in *figure 7*: in the latter, the independent wings disappeared and were replaced by small incisions over the body that is now clearly globular, losing the early elegance of the original. It is possible that the rooster in Eduardo Viana's painting also had the same globular body, which seems to represent a stylistic retrocession comparing to the first. In fact, this apparent regression results from an evolution: the body of the rooster of 1900 was probably solid or thick-walled, because the wings would be difficult to attach to a hollow body with thin walls. On the other hand, the body of the second rooster, manufactured with the 'nightingales' technique, is a small



Figure 7

gourd made with a potter's wheel, whose top was flattened to connect the neck and the tail, and two small lumps representing the tips of the wings precisely to make their application easier over a thin-walled body. There are technical reasons that justify the importance of this difference: the drying of solid masses of clay is difficult and, on the other hand, during the firing process the clay suffers a sudden volumetric modification at the quartz-inversion temperature (573 °C) which frequently causes the breakage of relatively voluminous and solid pieces. When making a rooster with the wheel, the potter had necessarily to create a globular body, applying a technique that made much bigger pieces possible and developing an essential part of the distinctive morphology of what the rooster of Barcelos would one day become. It is, however, necessary to distinguish two different steps: the first was when a solid whistle became a hollow rooster with similar dimensions made in a potter's wheel; the second was the evolution in terms of size and detail that would originate the ceramic piece known today as the 'rooster of Barcelos', with independent and well developed wings and a prominent indented comb that characterizes it. The first step probably occurred more than 100 years ago when the form of a rooster was given to some water nightingales; the second might have occurred around 1930.



Figure 8

In the images of the Exhibition of Portuguese Popular Art held in Lisbon in 1936, there are no pieces resembling a rooster of Barcelos. However, the designer Carlos Bártolo, who collaborates with the Museum of Popular Art, sent me a copy of a photograph

preserved at Torre do Tombo National Archive, in Lisbon, related with the Portuguese participation at the International Exhibition of Paris of 1937 (*figure 8*). This image clearly shows two ceramic pieces immediately recognizable as real roosters of Barcelos. They were about 45 cm high and their decoration was very simple, including just traces, dots and colored areas on a light background. Apparently, these roosters did not have independent wings yet – the wings were represented by a clay thread that marked the contour.

These pieces showed an important detail: it was mentioned that they belonged to Jorge Barradas (and not to the Portuguese State as it would be expected in pieces used as samples of popular art in an international exhibition of this magnitude). Jorge Barradas was a renowned Portuguese painter and illustrator that precisely at that time started to devote to ceramics (his first ceramic figures were exhibited in 1936), and it is likely that he visited some centers of popular production and bought those roosters in Barcelos. These were very unusual pieces, possibly never seen in Lisbon before, and this is demonstrated by the fact that the artist had to loan them for the Portuguese pavilion in an exhibition, for which the State had also ordered him a painting. Could it be that these showpieces were specifically ordered for the exhibition? Probably they were and these are in my opinion the oldest original roosters of Barcelos on record.

There is a precious rooster at the Museum of Popular Art in Lisbon that might be representative of that same period. It is 37 cm high, discoidal feet without whistle, tail with plain contour, prominent comb with triangular outlining. The colour is a murky blue and the base and the pedestal are red. The decoration consists of some red traces on the neck with golden contours. The prominent golden eyes are the only morphologic trace evidencing they are from a later period than the pieces presented in 1937 at the International Exhibition of Paris, whose eyes were just orifices.

The Exhibition of the Portuguese World held in 1940 in Lisbon included the Pavilion of Popular Life, a covered area of great dimensions that later became the Museum of Popular Art. The whole area was to be filled with pieces of ethnographic interest, besides the allusive decorations. At the center of the rooms stood great curvilinear tables for the larger items and pedestals for the particularly attractive ones. One of these tables was decorated with three big roosters of Barcelos (around 50 cm high) and two of them were placed on the pedestals.

The biggest rooster, like a figurehead, was surely a special showpiece, made-to-order (probably in 1939). It had a particularly elaborate decoration with flowers embossed and on the chest a cartouche with the inscription: 'FÁBRICA CER(AMICA) / EDUARDO FERN(ANDES SOUSA)' - *figure 9*. Eduardo F. Sousa (known as 'Persina'), unfortunately already deceased, was married to Rosa Côta and, therefore, he was Domingos Côto's



Figure 9



Figure 10

son-in-law, to whom the modelling of roosters of big dimension was attributed in the beginning of the 1930's and to whom I will refer later in this article. Another rooster, probably red, had a solar decoration on the chest and tail, and an embossed flower on each wing - *figure 10*. Inside a showcase on the wall of the same room at the Exhibition, four smaller roosters could be found. While the roosters featured in the Exhibition of 1937 depicted a tentative decoration, those at the Exhibition of 1940 already revealed an attractive decorative scheme to cover the surfaces of a piece with such dimensions. The embossed flowers particularly represented the adaptation of a very old solution used in the decoration of small vases produced locally.

From the photographs of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World reproduced in *figures 9 and 10*, we can conclude that, along with the major part of the morphologic characteristics that identify a rooster of Barcelos, there are also many archaisms, including the excessive height of the body turned with the wheel, the tail with no indentations, and no representation of the legs. The wings seem to be already developed, but the eyes are still only orifices. With the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, which is fairly documented with photographs, the obscure period of insufficient information to establish chronologies or authorships came to an end.

I have read texts that identify 'the father of the Rooster' as being one specific potter or another. In my opinion the Rooster of Barcelos is a product of Popular Art and as such it does not have an individual originator but rather is rooted on a collective community. In any way, in order to argue this matter it would always be necessary to establish distinctive criteria generally accepted and that would identify a rooster of Barcelos as such. If the morphology of *figure 1* is accepted to correspond to a rooster of Barcelos, then its origin is previous to the 20th century; if it is imposed that a rooster of Barcelos has a hollow body, then its origin is unknown but surely previous to 1915, as evidenced by the paintings of that time. If one relates the Rooster to a more refined typology, then the origin depends on the criteria to be adopted, but it can go as late as the mid 1950's, when the roosters with a decoration based on typical motifs from Minho started appearing, mainly red hearts on a black background.



Figure 11

Despite what was said about the collective origin of the Rooster of Barcelos, the authorship of certain pieces, whether or not signed, can be attributed to the families of modest potters that would sell them in fairs or upon orders for purposes unknown to them. In 1958, Domingos Côtô stated to a journalist of the Lisbon Daily [Diário de Lisboa] that he himself had originated the authorship of in the early 1930s an innovative morphology from which all modern Roosters of Barcelos derived. We do not know how his roosters looked like but, on the other hand, a well-established authorship of the archaic rooster of Barcelos is the family of Eduardo F. Sousa and Rosa Côtô. She was Domingos Côtô's daughter, therefore making his role in the

evolution of the Rooster of Barcelos plausible. Among the collection of the Pottery Museum of Barcelos there is a red rooster signed 'EFS' (Eduardo Fernandes Sousa), with very similar characteristics to the ones at the Exhibition of the Portuguese World but already with developed eyes, which dates it from the early 1940's (*figure 11*). Moreover, among the collection of the Museum of Popular Art, in Lisbon, an important set of roosters clearly made after that date can still be found, signed by 'E F S' and with the signet 'G.gos' (Galegos) 'BARCELOS', that must have been made to order for the original collection of the Museum of Popular Art, which opened in 1948.

The morphologic characteristics and decoration are evidence that many other roosters from the 1940s came from the same family. All of them attest a varied and evolutionary production, with a surprising aesthetic pureness, at a time free from erudite influences. The designation 'Fábrica (de) Cerâmica' [Ceramic Factory] inscribed on the Rooster of 1940, surely a copy of some inscription on a factory item, overstates the small familiar production of Eduardo F. Sousa. It is likely that he, the father, only turned the body and the pedestal with the wheel, while the remaining modellings and the painting would be done by his wife, Rosa Côta, and children. Nevertheless, the result is remarkably homogeneous and reveals an admirable understanding of the morphologic and decorative harmony of a three-dimensional piece of a certain complexity. Considering a chronological perspective, we can recognize how these details evolved until they reached the proportions of the sample illustrated in *figure 4*.

After the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, the roosters produced in the region of Barcelos could have receded back to anonymity, but this did not happen. Evidence of this are the photographs from the 1940s that show roosters of Barcelos in exhibitions of popular art held in subsequent years and the smaller pieces exhibited in the delegations of touristic propaganda, where they were sold as regional craftsmanship and submitted to the judgement of the market. The sales must have been encouraging, leading other potters from the region to produce versions of the Rooster and sell them in fairs. This is how the new figure of the rooster affirmed itself, causing a gradual extinction of the archaic roosters and evolving in terms of morphological patterns and decorative variants subject to the buyers' preferences. However, this process was not immediate and the existing iconography combined with the rarity of very archaic copies seems to demonstrate that the Rooster alone only started to become widespread during the second half of the decade of 1940. The same iconography bears out how important the National Propaganda Secretariat (SPN, later SNI) of António Ferro must have been, both on spreading the figure of the Rooster, and on the standardization of the model that was originally distributed through recurring orders, intermediated by a local, to Eduardo F. Sousa.

By the end of that decade the classic morphology of the rooster of Barcelos and its finishing schemes were already established and would remain dominant for around ten years. A safe reference is a set of three roosters of diverse sizes, all with black



Figure 12



Figure 13

background. The one of medium size has inscribed on it "Fair of Sacavém, 18-V-1951". *Figures 12 and 13* illustrate two of the three roosters, the medium and large size, which have the rare particularity of being a bank that had to be broken to get back the coins. All three are attributed to Eduardo F. Sousa's family.

These roosters integrate the classic characteristics:

- tail - well developed with indented triangular isosceles (like the comb) and inferior finishing typically elliptical or semi-circular;
- pedestal - bell-shaped, normally painted orange or dark green;
- feet - almost always represented. Discrete in small roosters, well developed in bigger ones; moulded separately and over the pedestal, typically golden or yellow;
- beak - median, strong, rectilinear and round; painted golden, yellow or orange, like the eyes and the auricle lobes;
- perforations – used frequently as 'holes for toothpicks' of considerable diameter that follow the base of the wings; in bigger sizes more perforations can be added on the beak and on the wings to reduce the risk of breaking during the cooking process;
- background colour – generally red or beige, sometimes orange, grey or blue, since around 1950 frequently black;
- decoration - floral, embossed in bigger sizes, or feathery, or even geometric and painted from white or coloured dots (absence of motifs with heart form).

The modern Rooster started to evolve since 1950, with the appearance of the black colour base that creates an effect of great dramatic impact. Although the black has been used for the contour and for painting details, it seems that it was not used before as a rooster background colour. It is possible that black was only introduced because it was easier to produce a considerable amount of paint necessary for the finishing of large areas, as it would come from very common raw materials (fish glue and chimney soot).

Some years later, there was a crucial modification of the decoration with the introduction of motifs from Minho region, where the central focus was one or several heart shapes, red like the comb, that on a black background created immediately a great aesthetic effect for the onlookers. At the same time the decorative areas (the comb, the tail and the surface of the wings) became larger, offering a broader surface to the creativity of the painters. The indented comb and tail became simpler, in order to reduce the time of production, and no longer interfered with the continuity of the gracious curves that defined them.

The oldest reference I read about this new style dates from November 1957 and it is in an article published on Barcelo's Newspaper: *Some time ago, Gonçalves Torres started to dress up our rooster and from his hands resulted 'the modern rooster of Barcelos'.* [...] *It ceased to be the naïve to become the gracious. Nevertheless, it is still characteristically regional. None of the previous types is less sold, as they keep being manufactured and offered at fairs. [...] It is true that the modern ones sell better. [...] We understand this shocks most of the admirers of our roosters [...] But, what is wrong with it if all the other roosters still are sold? The previous ones tend to become extinct? Go and acquire a good stock!*

It is not known what this 'redesign' means, but the term 'gracious' normally refers to elegance, therefore it suggests not just the introduction of typical motifs from Minho region in the decoration, but also a modification of the form. The painter of Barcelos, Manuel Gonçalves Torres, must have recognized that the two more important surfaces in the decorative impact of the rooster of Barcelos were the comb and the tail and that these should be extended as to be used as decoration. His Rooster redesign (probably an exercise from which great consequences were not expected) must have happened around the second half of 1955 or in 1956, because in a poster of his for *Festa das Cruzes* [Crosses Festivity], held in May 1955, there is a rooster already stylized with indented comb and tail, which define the modern Rooster, yet still without typical motifs from the Minho region. From the previous text, we get to know that there was a reaction against the modernization of the style, but as it is the market that governs the producers and not traditionalism, the new model ended triumphant.

With the adoption of the 'new style', another period of experimentation began, resulting in excessive combs with various outlinings and a simplification of the pedestal. During the first half of the 1960s the modern style of the rooster of Barcelos stabilized in a lasting morphology illustrated in the example of *figure 14*, bought in Barcelos around 1966 and whose elegance reveals foreign influences perhaps because the Rooster, by then, was already appreciated among decorators from other countries and it was necessary to consider their preferences. If we compare the rooster in *figure 14* with the ones in *figures 12* and *13*, the main distinctive characteristics are:



Figure 14

- slender form, with a thinner and taller neck in relation to the body;
- larger comb, inclined onward and extended downward in the posterior part; indented incisions, contrary to the old one, which had isosceles triangles, and therefore required more time to mold;
- bigger tail, extended downward, cut as the comb;
- longer and thinner beak, sharpened and hooked, contrary to the earlier one that was linear or slightly hooked, thick and round.

By that time, white roosters were also manufactured (called 'bride roosters') with the aim of creating the habit of offering one of these pieces to the brides in the day of



Figure 15

their wedding. However, the habit did not stick but the black roosters of Barcelos with red hearts as the central element of decoration did! They were an iconic image of Portugal for touristic purposes and were spread through numerous graphical works, ending up as a symbol of Portugal. For this reason, the Rooster was the symbol of the National Football Team that disputed the 1966 World Championship in England (figure 15). All this promotion turned the Rooster into an internationally recognized icon that spread the name of Barcelos in the whole world. However, it

should be noted that the figure of the Rooster was only used because the people responsible for the tourism marketing, the advertisers and the graphic artists, acknowledged its unique aesthetic qualities for that specific purpose.

Due to its slenderness, the Roosters from that time were necessarily fragile and later developed in an inverse direction (the neck became shorter, the comb smaller and its numerous incisions fewer and smaller). Recently, we witness the predictable emergence of new morphologies and decorative solutions, as the target is a market that looks more for design than for typicality. And the morphology of the rooster of Barcelos responded to this new challenge by providing an aesthetic platform explored through decorations that are today completely unrelated with the modest regional ceramic piece. If the modern stores of design prefer the elegant unicoloured roosters or the ones decorated with a multiplicity of more or less pretentious patterns, the black *roosters* with yellow keys and red hearts still cheer, every week, the secular Fair of Barcelos. And its antecessors, that are here briefly recalled, constitute a surprising cultural heritage, with such a fabulous material origin as concrete is their success as a symbol. So concrete in fact that it actually inspires works of art as the one presented now by Joana Vasconcelos.

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Figures 3 and 11 - Pedro Cunha (Barcelos Museum of Pottery Collection, Portugal).

Figure 5 - Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France)

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Figure 6 - Soares dos Reis National Museum (Porto, Portugal).

Figure 8 - Torre do Tombo National Archive (Lisbon, Portugal) - image sent by designer Carlos Bárto.

Figures 7, 12, 13, 14 - Private collection.