

Design through Doing

Palla and Rodrigues, pioneers of Portuguese design.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Portugal, that singularly amazing country, situated along the westernmost flank of continental Europe, struggled, like most its European partners, to rebuild its war-damaged economy. For years, after the end of the war, its GDP remained a fraction of its neighbors and it wasn't until the end of the 1950s, that decisions were made by the government of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, to make a concerted effort to build and grow its economy, and lift the country back into the modern era. Although its economy still remained below that of its more affluent neighbors, the general public did see a marked improvement in their living standards (and the country's productivity) from the 1960s onward. Along with this newfound economic growth, the arts also began to flourish. There were many influences on the fledging Portuguese design movement, such as the mid century Modernist movement, which had evolved from creative powerhouses like the Bauhaus, from between the wars, and the Russian Constructivist ideal (especially its daring approach to typography) eventually made their impact felt in all corners of Europe, including Portugal. The evolving Modernist aesthetic, one that pervaded much of Europe at that time, impacted the design of textiles, furniture, ceramics, and architecture. It also found expression in the world of graphic design, and notably, in the beautiful book cover designs, by exemplary designers, Victor Palla and Sebastião Rodrigues. Their vibrant, illustrative, and playful designs for magazines and books for example, delivered a newfound optimism, and began an era of unique publication design that holds their own, to this today. Never heard of Palla or Rodrigues? Well, don't feel too bad. These wonderful designers have really been overlooked, over the decades. For example, even today, a quick search through the excellent *Graphic Design A New History* by Stephen J. Eskilson,² reveals that it doesn't even mention, in its vast 400 plus pages, either designer, nor the Portuguese design movement.

What is truly remarkable about their work, and important to keep in mind when examining their covers, is that this design movement established itself in a society that was only just beginning to recognize the importance of graphic design, as an art form, and as a profession. In fact, the first university to establish a course specifically tailored to design, didn't happen until 1969, when IADE-U, the Institute of Art, Design and Enterprise – University,¹ in Lisbon, created a course “Interior Design and General Equipment.” So, essentially, designers like Palla, and Rodrigues, were for the most part self-taught (although, Palla did initially study architecture, in Porto, in the late 1940s) and forged a national identity of their making, largely on their own. Maybe as a result of this relative isolation within the European design community, and being somewhat at the periphery of the design scene, they were consequently free to explore their craft on their own terms. By exploring internally, within Portugal's indigenous design, and some study abroad (Palla spent time in London studying book publishing in the 1940s) these designers were free to invent a unique style, even though it clearly holds its own within the design being produced in Europe, at that time.

While there are lots of online resources to currently view their work,³ outside of Portugal, there is scant contemporary printed material relating to their design, although designers like Jorge Silva,⁴ are doing remarkable job, striving to correct this omission in the design history archives. There is also an excellent thesis (available online) by Robin Fior⁵ that delves into the life of Rodrigues (and Palla) and if you are interested in getting into the nitty-gritty of their lives and work, this is a great place to start.

Rodrigues's work for the *Almanque* publication is indicative of his later work and a great place to begin appreciating his style. Throughout, his bold use of typography is married with a minimalist, illustrative and mischievous style, and a playful color palette. Book covers like his design for *Agostinho*, by Alberto Moravia, in 1959, show a remarkable typographic restraint, and sensitivity to photography. Palla's work, such as his cover, “*Um homem na América*,” by André Bay, and published by Editora Arcádia, is daring in its typographic choices, and the arrangement of the various elements on the cover. Palla's design for “*O Homem e o Sardão*,” by Garibaldi De Andrade, also published by Arcadia, in 1960, uses a limited three-color palette, whimsical typography

alongside an integrated wood cut illustration. Clearly there is a relationship and synergy between the two designers, visually and intellectually, and both are intent on creating work that is both memorable, and distinct in its own right. One can only hope, that in the not too distant future, designers like Palla and Rodrigues, will become more accessible in printed form (and digitally) to a much wider, global audience, along with reproductions of their work and content that is referenced and situated in the greater European context of its time.

¹ <http://www.iade.pt/en/about/our-history.aspx>

² Eskilson, Stephen J. “Graphic Design A New History.” *Yale University Press*. 2007.

³ <http://50watts.com/filter/portugal> [Excellent design portal]

⁴ <http://www.silvadesigners.net/colecao-d/pdf/02vp.pdf>

⁵ <http://explore.bl.uk/>

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