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Luiz Ferreira and Manuel Alcino

Two twentieth-century silversmiths in Oporto

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During the twentieth century, the city of Oporto consolidated its position as the major centre for Portuguese silversmiths, which it had held since the 1800s. While the importance of the great Lisbon establishments is apparent, such as Leitão & Irmão, and others like Ourivesaria da Guia, Casa Mergulhão and Ourivesaria do Carmo, a greater wealth of silverwork has been seen in the area of Oporto. However, this city has not always adhered to new movements and compliance with great international decorative styles must be viewed with some reservations.

Despite the scarcity of research regarding Oporto silversmiths' art during the twentieth century, limited almost exclusively to studies of the trade establishments and most often in rather laudatory terms, it is certain that Art Nouveau left little trace on the city's silverware. Although several examples can be found in private collections, one does not find this style applied to silver to any great extent, except for small items such as match-holders and cigarette cases, napkin rings or other similar objects. As far as the impact of Art Deco is concerned, the number of pieces gradually coming to light in private collections and in the antiques market, suggests a greater adherence to this style by silversmiths in Oporto than might at first be expected. With the forms made possible by the use of linearity and the application, at times, of more elaborate decoration, the influence of this style can be seen particularly in table, lighting and *toilette* objects (great silver-framed mirrors). It was especially the objects used for table decoration (as centrepieces) and for serving drinks (tea and coffee pots and sets) that were produced the most by the silversmiths of Oporto, their popularity apparent in an increasing number of objects.

On this basis one can conclude that the conservative taste of the élite who comprised Portuguese clientele was faithful to revival and eclectic styles, and this proved an impediment to the full evolution of decorative arts in Portugal. There was a particular predilection for neo-Gothic (during the first decades), neo-Baroque and Neoclassical revivals, a fact which precluded innovation. The well-known 'D. João V', an eclectic style combining neo-Baroque and neo-Rococo, still exists today in the production of a significant number of silversmiths, for all that a growing desire to innovate, through simplification and the dictatorship of formal simplicity, is also apparent.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Oporto silver was deeply influenced by certain establishments and by individuals who stood out from the rest. Sometimes this was due to the quality of the objects created, as was the case of Pedro Baptista (essentially until the 1970s) with his establishment in the traditional Rua das Flores. Others were influential due to the aesthetic orientation of the pieces they made,



1 Toucan, oxidised and gilded silver, with ivory and garnet eyes, Luiz Ferreira. (Private collection)

such as Luiz Ferreira (between the 1950s and his death in 1994); and others due to their own creations and their association with renowned artists who conceived pieces in a contemporary design, such as Manuel Alcino. It is the work of these last two individuals that this article examines.

Luiz Ferreira (1909–94)

Portuguese silversmiths' art in the second half of the twentieth century was indelibly marked by Luiz Ferreira.¹ [2] He was born in 1909 in the city of Oporto into a family of silversmiths and married the daughter of silversmiths. He was thus brought up in a society of craftsmen, a situation seemingly propitious to an aesthetic continuity with the past. However his aesthetic and artistic training and his travels around Europe, where he became acquainted with a wide range of cultures, wrought changes to Portuguese silversmiths' art and, in some fields, an actual break with the past.

Luiz Ferreira represents the affirmation of a traditional taste, not in the sense of a *tout cours* permanence of aesthetic standards, but rather the assimilation of the taste of the traditional élite, who were his main customers.² This was to go beyond a merely local interest, with his work becoming desired objects both at home and abroad. His artistic standards and the meticulous workmanship in the decoration of the pieces made and sold in his establishments (first at Rua das Flores, then at Rua Trindade Coelho and finally in the Ipanema Park Hotel – all in Oporto), earned him a reputation which was to reach its apogée in the years leading up to his death.

His reputation had grown steadily since the 1950s. His career began with the creation of quality objects in a classical style. These pieces were complemented by an extremely specific and innovative range of pieces,³ using silver with inlaid stones – the characteristic style with which he is associated. It is in his design of silver animals [1] mixing a variety of materials, that the best Luiz Ferreira pieces are found.

A likeness to reality was the main objective of this artist, taking full advantage of the appearance of each material to create the desired appearance, providing extremely surprising results. Ostrich eggs formed the body of squirrels; agates were used as butterfly wings; ivory was used on the back of certain animals; coral represented the wattle of turkeys or the crests of cockatoos. Altogether, thousands of pieces were made, based on a great variety of animal species.⁴

Remarkable collections of animals have been created, to be found today in Portugal and abroad. Of significantly varying sizes, his swans [4] became famous, especially the crowned ones which presided over table decorations with magnificent floral arrangements, his ostriches with rock crystals, the turquoise-inlaid panthers, the sets of herons of different sizes, the circus horses, or the remarkable elephants. These objects were copied extensively even during Luiz Ferreira's lifetime and are so more than ever today, though rarely with the same expertise and, more importantly, without that expressiveness which bestows upon these pieces a quite exquisite singularity.

Luiz Ferreira supervised the creation of animals – as was also the case with the other pieces – by his craftsmen, showing no qualms about rejecting an object until he was fully satisfied with its aesthetic and anatomical qualities. The keen eye he applied to this quality control, as it would be called today, permitted him to obtain unequalled results and earned him an entirely deserved reputation.

2 Luiz Ferreira (1909–94), Rua das Flores, Oporto.
(Photograph taken by the Count of Aurora)



3 Turteen, silver, partly gilt with coral, Luiz Ferreira.
(Zaida Barbot Collection, Oporto)



1 Gonçalves de Vasconcelos e Souza, *A arte de Luiz Ferreira*, Porto 1996.

2 This taste is highlighted by Nuno Vassallo e Silva, 'A arte da Ourivesaria no Norte de Portugal: 4000 anos de História', in *Tesouros de Portugal*, Macau 1999, p287.

3 Nuno Vassallo e Silva, 'Ourivesaria Contemporânea', in N. V. e Silva; Maria José Távora (ed), *Exposição de pratas portuguesas*, exhib cat, Amalienborg Palace, Denmark 2002, p65.

4 As note, 1 p81.

5 As note, 1 p10.

There is another group of objects where we can see this artist's appreciation for figures from different cultures, favouring sets of African figures,[5] Chinese and other characters of pre-Columbian inspiration, in the making of which he applied a variety of silver-working techniques, such as decorative oxidation or gilding. Luiz Ferreira also worked with small gems inlaid in silver.

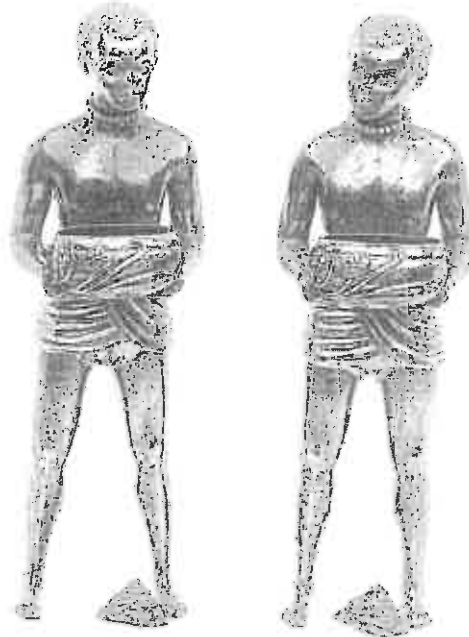
As I have written elsewhere,⁵ it is through Luiz Ferreira that, in the work of Portuguese silversmiths, decoration definitively triumphs over function. The majority of his work is used to decorate entrance halls, sitting rooms and dining rooms. For these objects, he favoured the Neoclassical style,⁶ achieving results of great visual impact, as is evident in vases with festoons and decorated with gold leaf flowers, or in pumpkin-shaped bowls, with lapis-lazuli or coral finishes and silver-gilt foliage.[3]

His surroundings also constituted a powerful source of inspiration. He appreciated antiques, collecting Portuguese jewellery from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably insignias of the Order of Christ and Santiago, and building up over his lifetime a remarkable collection of secular silverware from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He simultaneously assembled a good collection of enamelled snuff boxes. These pieces could be found in his shop in Rua Trindade Coelho (Oporto) which was frequented by a Portuguese society enchanted by the 'Aladdin's cave' which Ferreira conceived as the setting for his establishment.[6]

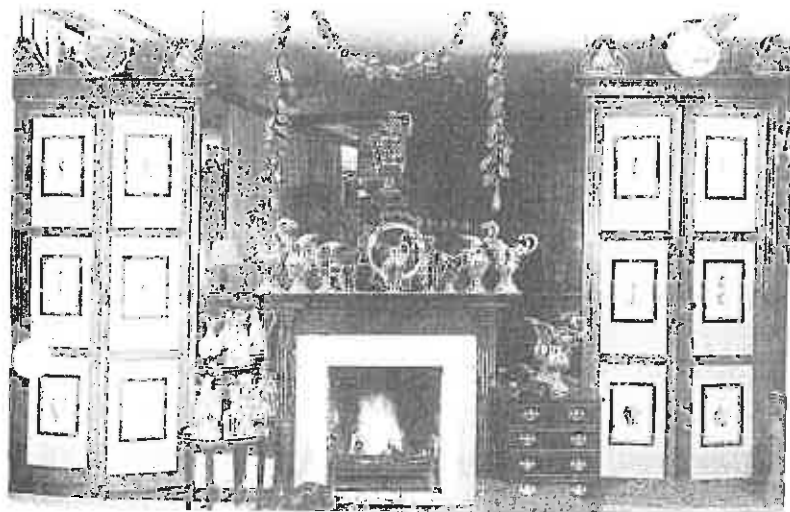
Since he departed this world in 1994, the work of Ferreira has been perpetuated by some of his sons, who today continue certain models as well as creating others. They maintain a quality of output which affords them the status of silversmiths of choice in the city of Oporto and in Portugal.



4 Swann, silver with glass bead eyes, Luiz Ferreira, 1967/68. (Club Portuense, Oporto)



5 Pair of African figures, silver, oxidized and gilded; the figures have jade and coral necklaces. (Private collection)



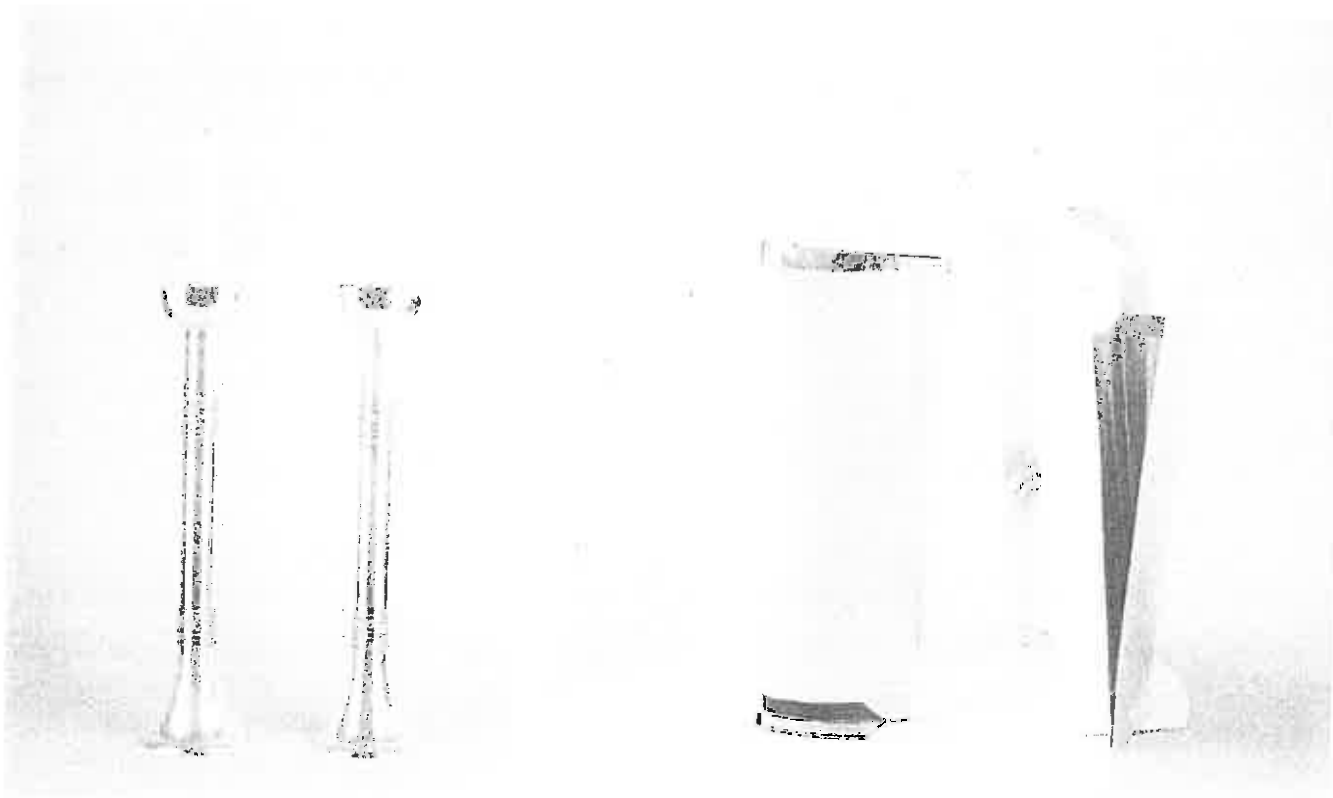
Manuel Alcino

Manuel Alcino Figueiredo Moutinho or simply Manuel Alcino,[11] as he is known in the silversmiths' world, was born in 1933 into a family of silversmiths founded by his great-grandfather during the second half of the nineteenth century. With the art of working precious metals in his genes, he became the first in his family to break from the styles which, in a vicious circle, characterised silversmiths' art in twentieth-century Portugal. He opened the doors to new design.⁷

6 (left) Luiz Ferreira's establishment, at Rua Trindade Coelho, in Oporto, at the time of his death

6 A discrete neo-Rococo is apparent in a bowl acquired by the Viscount of Vilarinho de S. Romão (Oporto); Gonçalo de Vasconcelos e Sousa, *Artes da mesa em Portugal: sécs. XVIII a XXI*, Porto 2002, p79.

7 Gonçalo de Vasconcelos e Sousa, 'Manuel Alcino: ourives da Contemporaneidade', *O Tripeiro*, 7th s, 22 (9) 1999, pp264-6. Gonçalo de Vasconcelos e Sousa, *Manuel Alcino: Tradition and Modernity in Portuguese Silversmith's Art*, Porto 2003 (with English translation).



7 Candelabra, designed by the sculptress Irene Vilar, made by Manuel Alcino, 2003. (Igreja do Santíssimo Sacramento, Oporto)

8 (right) Pair of vases, Manuel Alcino, 2003



9 Centrepiece, designed by Ana Fernandes, made by Manuel Alcino, 1993

8 Nuno Vassallo e Silva; Maria José Távorá (ed), *Exposição de pratas portuguesas*, exhib cat, Amalienborg Palace, Denmark: 2002.

Manuel Alcino studied at the Escola Artística Soares dos Reis during the 1940s, learning the art and the craft of silverwork. Later, he perfected the art of enamelling [12] with apprenticeships in Europe, especially at Escola Massana, in Barcelona, and gained experience working with Swiss experts. This international training was to contribute greatly towards the opening of new horizons in the artistic, aesthetic and technical itinerary of this silversmith.

Alcino's circle of friends and acquaintances, from the 1960s, was fundamental to the renewal of Portuguese silverware. Sculptors such as Salvador Barata Foyo, Zulmiro de Carvalho, Charters de Almeida, Irene Vilar or José Rodrigues; painters such as Júlio Resende or Armando Alves; and architects such as Pádua Ramos or Siza Vieira, are part of the group of artists who designed pieces made in his workshop. This contributed towards imbuing his pieces with a remarkable mastery, involving them with a contemporary design in harmony with international movements.

The exhibition he prepared in 1993 together with his son, Manuel Alcino Moutinho, was especially significant. It was called 'A silversmith, Manuel Alcino, and seven artists work in silver'. The innovative design of five sculptors, a painter and an architect, all of them of renown, revealed to Portugal the firm and persevering will to renew an art which had achieved such great quality at certain moments during its long history. Initially unveiled in Oporto, the exhibition afterwards moved to Lisbon and ten years later was shown at Amalienborg Palace, in Denmark,⁸ always meeting with great success. The group of pieces on show allied linearity,[9] which characterises the contemporary design of the last few decades, to the undeniable technical quality of the workmanship, constituting a perfect marriage.

Manuel Alcino has himself designed some remarkable secular and ecclesiastical pieces and the latter have halted the decline of Portuguese

Comment

Pursuit of truth via the Internet

It's all so easy these days, isn't it. All you have to do is settle down after dinner, go to the web and a couple of hours later you've found a mass of information. So I'm told. Not like the old days, when many a member of this Society spent untold hours, days, months and yes, decades, searching through archives, fruitlessly delving in boxes of unreadable documents, making informed guesses as to which record office might be worth a visit, and lost count of the number of indexes that had been searched. Hard to believe that Jackson, Grimwade and Culme were compiled this way. It's all so easy now – just a few clicks of the mouse ...

But is it?

There should have been an extra article in this issue of the journal. 'You've no idea what I've found on the web' John Culme told me. Pulses quickened, the search was on again, surely it would be easy to write it up, make something of it. He knows his way through the period like the back of his hand – there'll be no problems with this one, I thought. Months passed, deadlines came and went. 'It's all very well' he emailed, 'I've got the twigs but there's no mud – I need mud to pull it all together – I can't work out what it all means ...'.

And that's the nub of the problem. Raw material is only the beginning. All too often we publish facts without narrative. Information needs analysis. Trial reports can't be taken at face value (and be warned: there are sometimes mistakes in the transcription). Cityscapes change. Believe what's written in a newspaper? Were advertisements honest? What's behind it all? What on earth were they up to?

Take one example: Paul Storr had some washing stolen from his mother's line. The subsidiary information that the report of the subsequent trial reveals makes it necessary to go back to documents last looked at maybe 30 years ago, to read them again in the light of this new information. A straightforward transcript of the trial could be published in the Journal but that would tell you, the reader, no more than the trivial fact of a petty theft that is amusing to know of. There are many thousands of snippets like this all over the web and many researchers are compiling databases and

printing out thick piles of extracts. It is the sum of the parts that will in end make the searching worthwhile. Authors are making use of the information in different ways – some just publish facts, while others treat each snippet as a piece in a jigsaw without having any idea what the bigger picture will turn out to be.

Has the web really made it easier – for silver buffs researching a past that seems so close to us, for MI6 trying to work out what is to come, for a police force sifting through data after a crime? The web gets you just so far but, unlike schoolchildren who download their essay material and use it as read, we know that words need interpretation and that in order to interpret a text you have to understand it. When you don't understand it you have to look for more evidence until you do – and Lord Peter Wimsey, Miss Marple or Inspector Morse would endorse that!

I'm a novice at all this – several years of editing this journal have made me marvel at the tenacity of those who write for it and fascinated by the way different people approach their subject. It is only now that I am beginning to search for myself. Where to start? 'It's so easy now', everyone tells me, 'it's all there on the web'. But I know that it's not – and I also know that a computer cannot replace the feel of paper or the vibes of a building. Even on the Internet research takes time, effort and a knack of knowing where to look. The clues are there by the thousand, the voices of the past and the legacy of a craftsman's skill are before our eyes, and the challenge (and fun) is deciphering it all.

John Culme has three rules for research;

'When found make note of' (see p2);

When transcribing text always write down as is written – avoid the trap of abbreviating to save time;

Always check the source if you are following references given in the writing of others.

I foresee many more emails and look forward to many conversations on how to interpret what is in cyberspace!

VB

www.thesilversociety.org

The Society's website is available to obtain information about membership and subscription to 'Silver Studies'. Application forms may be downloaded. It contains the contents of back issues of the journal and a cumulative index. There is a special area for members of the Society. The site is being kept deliberately low-key at present and we will keep members and subscribers informed of future developments.