

TOMÁS SANTA ROSA - FROM THE MAN TO THE ARTIST

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An artist brings memories in his life journey. And their art tells us how each of them may have been born; finding the links that evoke them requires listening, if possible, to all the documents that surround the process of artistic creation, such as diaries, sketches, notes, letters, among others that may exist. This listening, in a certain way, brings us to the mind of the artist, their experiences and their deepest desires. By analyzing these elements, we can further discern his creative and artistic output when we contemplate his final work of art.

In this dialog, I invite us to listen to Tomás Santa Rosa Junior in a phase in which we can perceive his genesis. In a manner of speaking, a Tomás Santa Rosa Junior before Tomás Santa Rosa Jr., Tomás Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa, Santa or simply S.R. From this diversity of names that he admitted, we are already beginning to see shadows that allow us to understand the multi-talented artist. In this text we highlight some testimonies, outbursts, feelings and personal confessions from letters he wrote when he was still developing as a person and artist, between 1925 and 1931, in the city of Parahyba (now João Pessoa), where he was born and lived for 23 years. The letters analyzed are part of José Simeão Leal's private archive, available at the Núcleo de Documentação e Informação Histórica Regional [Center for Regional Historical Documentation and Information] at the Federal University of Paraíba.

Tomás Santa Rosa was a man who lived intensely, if we look at the whole range of his artistic production, whether in terms of the volume of works or the multiplicity of areas in which he worked during his 47 years of life. His self-education was combined with a well-ordered intelligence. He was a voracious reader, even read in three languages and appreciated classic literature. He never stopped studying. Throughout his life he devoted himself to painting, drawing, set design, graphic arts, music and theater.

As an artist of his time, he was greatly affected by the changes in the world at the beginning of the 20th century. He was nourished by the European avant-garde and the history of art that was being produced at the time. The survivor of the Santa Rosa family was born in 1909, after consecutive deaths of his three brothers in childhood. His mother affectionately called him *Bonsinho*. As a great and renowned artist, he died in India in 1956. At the time, he was taking part in the 9th General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO.

The painter, set designer, decorator, costume designer, illustrator, graphic designer, engraver, teacher and art critic Tomás Santa Rosa was born into an environment that was apparently unfavorable to his artistic abilities. We can see this when we read his personal letters, especially those addressed to his great friend and mentor, José Simeão Leal (cultural administrator, diplomat, art critic, journalist, doctor and art collector), a friendship born when they studied together at the *Lyceu Paraibano* in 1925. In these personal confessions, we have access to the man before the artist, at a time before his arrival in the capital of Brazil at the time, Rio de Janeiro.

When we look at these letters, we immediately see a special shape, from the way he used the paper, with drawings and inventive letter shapes, to the final signature, which varied according to his name. We have selected some excerpts that reveal the expectations and mindset of an artist to become, who longed and suffered for not being able to live the fullness of his life, his art.

In his tales, Tomás Santa Rosa describes himself as exiled in the city of Parahyba, even though he loved his hometown and had occasional highlights in small artistic productions. He regretted that there was no solid cultural context in his city that would favor his technical and artistic development.

You can't imagine the bitter sadness I feel, seeing myself thwarted in my ideas, delimiting myself, constraining myself in the tight circle of the civil service, now that I've thought long and hard about the uselessness of my efforts. I tried to go to Recife to see if I could get something better, but the backlog of work forced me to wait for another opportunity. If you could only guess my inner tragedy in recent times. [2]

He was also financially responsible for supporting his mother (Maria Alexina) and his younger sisters (Cristina and Heliomar), which was reinforced after his father abandoned them. Our artist needed a job to ensure his survival and his family. Faced with the immediate opportunities that were presented, he began working with numbers, first in an accounting office in the city of Parahyba and later at *Banco do Brasil* in Maceió. Working in the financial and tax area has brought pain to his soul, causing him great difficulties, and he even says that he doesn't live... he just reacts, because his head is full of numbers. His desire was to work with something of line and color, he wanted to live from art and for art, until that happened, Tomás Santa Rosa expressed sadness and melancholy in all his words: *"Simeão, my friend: I am reacting within myself. I read and draw. I am more inclined to work on a magazine, on set designers, on advertisements, on anything that exalts line and color."*[3]

Noted since childhood for his artistic gifts, he received local awards at a very young age, the most important of which would have been the governor's interest in funding his art studies in Europe, prevented by the fact that he was already maintaining and supporting his family, which consisted of his mother and sisters. Tomás Santa Rosa understood his existence and his way of relating to life by expressing himself through art, *"José Simeão, my very dear friend: only art is eternal because it is built with the things of the spirit, undefined [...] only canvas, marble, paper, are pretexts for the work of art, art [...]"* [4]

The modernity and modernism experienced in his time was a reflection of his life, so much so that only one art form could not contain him, which was confirmed by many of his contemporaries such as Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Graciliano Ramos, José Lins do Rêgo, among other friends from when he lived in Rio de Janeiro. Anywhere was a place for an artistic study, the streetcar and the lunch break, his perceptions of the reality around him were provocations to be recorded in an artistic way.

Simeão, my friend: A break from lunch, the paper from the Bank and the typewriter machine idem, to send you this news. [...]. I will not tell you anything about art, you know how we suffer from the absence of such a thing here. I have

been making some drawings that Zéauto has. It is likely that in the next season you will have part of it. For the moment, it is all about research across a wide range of schools. I became half cubist, half impressionist, half nothing. I look for lyricism, like Chirico.[5]

When we study his paintings, we see his memories even more vividly, we see a generous artist, letting us know what was going on in his soul. We can contrast his subjectivity with other forms of art, more technical, as well as his work as a book cover artist and illustrator, which responded to the literary production of an author, as well as to a publisher; or in his creations of sets for the theater, where there was a text to contextualize in a dimension way.

Through his letters, we read about a Tomás Santa Rosa who was attached to the word, the text and the message throughout his creative process, as he himself emphasized. As such, the artist was able to summarize the content of a book in the cover illustration, as his friend José Lins do Rêgo once pointed out. This was at a time when the modern way of conceiving the Brazilian book was being consolidated, both in its technical production and in its content.

When he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, the country's cultural center, in 1932, Santa Rosa described himself in his correspondence to Leal as finally happy. Now, he says, he has his books, his beloved, his brain, his imagination, his penchant for art and his indifference to life - all waiting for the best opportunities to present themselves and even stand out from the crowd. Interested in new things, he always looks for something unprecedented and talks about how he understands the thrill of getting to know and being touched by the new through simple curiosity: *"Never has intelligence been so comfortable at its home in its pajamas as it is now, in this time when everyone thinks up their own ideas."*[6]

There are several Tomás Santa Rosa's when we study his life and work, and the more we try to get closer, the greater and deeper his work becomes. However, one element stands out when he is described by his friends. Knowing him like this, we see that he had an apparently quiet personality, and was even perceived as shy, which could be a contradiction when we analyze his firm and expressive artistic features. Details of a life divided into a before and after the city of Parahyba, in which adversities experienced at the beginning of his career became wings at the end. Geographical and economic limitations didn't keep him any less creative and sensitive in creating art that engaged with various issues of his time and many that are still current, working tenaciously with everything that favored the thought of art and culture in Brazil. As an artist of the second generation of modernists, Tomás Santa Rosa's art has once again contributed with important themes to the history of Brazilian art, transcending time and sensing the eternity, as he dreamed.

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[2] Catálogo de correspondências/ NDIHR – Remetente: Tomás Santa Rosa Junior. Notação/ Número A1. G1. P20. C2. 0581.

[3] Catálogo de correspondências/ NDIHR – Remetente: Tomás Santa Rosa Junior. Notação/ Número A1. G1. P21. C1. 0609.

[4] Catálogo de correspondências/ NDIHR – Remetente: Tomás Santa Rosa Junior. Notação/ Número A1. G1. P21. C1. 0610.

[5] Catálogo de correspondências/ NDIHR – Remetente: Tomás Santa Rosa Junior. Notação/ Número A1. G1. P20. C3. 0597.

[6] Catálogo de correspondências/ NDIHR – Remetente: Tomás Santa Rosa Junior. Notação/ Número A1. G1. P20. C2. 0593.