

J.-B. Debret, historiador e pintor: A viagem pitoresca e histórica ao Brasil (1816–1839).
By Valéria Lima. Coleção Várias Histórias. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2007.
Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. 327 pp. Paper.

Originally a PhD thesis defended at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), this book aims to investigate Jean-Baptiste Debret's masterpiece *A viagem pitoresca e histórica ao Brasil* and Debret's experiences in Brazil between 1816 and 1831. The author announces as her major objective to understand Debret's intentions by illuminating elements of his biography, his manifest aesthetic filiations, and the conception and accomplishment of his historical and "picturesque" travel narrative, concluding her story with his return to France after 16 years of residence in Rio de Janeiro. Lima tries to demonstrate the "constructed" character of Debret's work. As an heir to Enlightenment and postrevolutionary postulates—in accordance with which human history marches in the direction of an unstoppable progress toward perfection—Debret would supposedly have imputed these same conceptions to the history of Brazil. Thus, the recondite intention of his *Viagem pitoresca* would be to demonstrate the thesis that Brazil is part of this same worldwide movement from barbarity to civilization. According to Lima, the selections and construction in Debret's work show us his conception of Brazilian civilization and history.

Lima's book comprises four chapters plus a long introduction reviewing Debret's work. The first chapter divides the subject's biography into three parts: his education and professional training prior to his experience in Brazil, his stay there, and his path after his return to France. According to the author, this chapter lays a foundation for understanding Debret's artistic options and the intentions that guided the general plan and execution of his work on Brazil.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the organization of the volumes, followed by a reflection on the techniques of watercolor and the importance of lithography to the genre of historical and "picturesque" journeys. In this chapter, one will also find an interesting attempt to discover how Debret's work was received, based on analysis of the verdicts of the members of the Institut de France and the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, of which Debret was a corresponding fellow. The third chapter raises the question of whether Debret's work belongs to the genre of travel literature and compares Debret's *Viagem* with similar contemporary works. Finally, chapter 4 seeks to recover Debret's general plan of interpretation of Brazil by means of the analysis of the images and texts that clarify them, "the brush and the plume," as Lima puts it. Lima concludes that Debret "is a man of his time"; his interpretation of Brazil rests on Enlightenment ideas and in his close attention to local conditions, as they can be seen in other contemporary aesthetic and literary manifestations in France, such as the Celtic Academy and the *Tableau de la France* by Michelet.

One might say that J.-B. Debret, historiador e pintor was published prematurely.

Its original function as an academic thesis is clear in the maintenance in the text of an immense number of pages dedicated to bibliographical review. Here, one by one, dozens of similar works of travel literature are described, focusing on Brazil or elsewhere.

While in Lima's book one can indeed find very interesting insights, particularly regarding Debret's education as an artist and his place in the postrevolutionary context, this aspect far surpasses any attempt at internal analysis of his artwork. The two first chapters are the most solid of the book, as the author was more successful in analyzing Debret's artistic training and the public reception of the *Viagem* than in iconographic analysis of the images produced by Debret. That is, Lima's emphasis falls much more on the "plume" than on the "brush" of the French artist. Lima's book lacks internal coherence or narrative unity, as evident in the absence of a conclusion.

Throughout the book, and especially in the last chapter, where one would finally expect to find an iconographic analysis of Debret's monumental work, images are no more than mere illustrations to corroborate the author's argument. Pictorial, formal, or iconographic analyses of the images themselves are practically absent. Furthermore, many of the images cited are not reproduced in the book. The quality of the reproductions, minute and in black and white, strongly harms the final result. At the end of the reading, one feels that the book effectively fulfills much less than it promises in its introduction.

If the great analysis of Debret's *Viagem* is not Rodrigo Naves's, as Lima states, it still remains to be done.

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DOI 10.1215/00182168-2008-115

Published in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* – HAHR
May 2009- pp. 373-374