

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF NEOCLASSIC ARCHITECTURE IN 19TH-CENTURY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract

This study analyzes the symbolic dimension of neoclassical architectural works in Rio de Janeiro as constitutive elements of the new Brazilian nation. A unique historical example of a colonial city becoming the capital of its empire, attention to neoclassical elements begins with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family to its colonial rule in the Americas. In a slave-owning, mixed-race, and tropical land, becoming a country required reworking its history and its projection among nations. We discuss the importance of tie-ins with Greco-Roman antiquity for creating a new land called Brazil.

Keywords

Neoclassic; Rio de Janeiro; Empire of Brazil; nationality.

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Resumo

O intuito deste texto é o de analisar a dimensão simbólica da presença do neoclássico em obras arquitetônicas do Rio de Janeiro/Brasil na composição da nova nação brasileira. Exemplo histórico único de cidade colonial a tornar-se capital de seu império, a atenção para o neoclássico inicia-se com a chegada da família real portuguesa ao seu domínio colonial na América. Em terra escravocrata, mestiça e tropical, tornar-se um país exigia reelaborar a sua história e sua projeção no conjunto das nações. Discute-se a importância do vínculo com a Antiguidade greco-romana para a composição de uma nova terra chamada Brasil.

Palavras-chave

Neoclássico; Rio de Janeiro; Império do Brasil; nacionalidade.

Brazilian nationality and neoclassicism

Following Brazil's independence in September 7, 1822, a new country emerged on the American continent. Besides emancipation, countries which separated from their colonizers in the period sought autonomy in various aspects and tried to show the concert of European nations that the new State would draw closer to a project of nationality based on the liberal values of modern Europe (Angelo, 2015).

Such interest began with the arrival of the Braganza dynasty and its court in the then Portuguese colony of America in 1808 after pressure from the Continental Blockade declared by Napoleon Bonaparte (Hermann, 2007). When they settled in Rio de Janeiro, around 15,000 people found a city that in no way resembled Lisbon. Low row houses and long narrow lots constituted most of the local constructions that were built using precarious materials compared to those found in Portugal.

European structures of political and cultural organization were gradually implemented as a demonstration of civility from the local government, process which had already been occurring in Portugal (Rocha-Peixoto, 2000). Lisbon was practically rebuilt after the 1755 earthquake, employing Pombal's bold project that made it an important European capital with neoclassical features, an 18th- and mid-19th-century European cultural movement that considered ancient art aesthetics, especially Greco-Roman, a model of balance, clarity, and proportion.

Used in Europe as a means to emulate the humanistic and intellectual development of Ancient Greece and Rome, of whom they considered themselves heirs, neoclassical architecture acted in several countries to legitimize authority and national pride. Several countries, including Portugal, evoked for themselves part of the power the Roman Empire and others like it held in the past, as well as the glory and knowledge superiority that was attributed to the Greek-Romans via architectural references. Employing the old classical style was a way of institutionalizing discourses based on an official seal of wisdom, power, and civility, as was attributed to Antiquity (Andrade *et al*, 2021; Shultz, 2008). Even the United States of America acquired a neoclassical style for its new capital, Washington D.C., built by French architect Pierre Charles L'Enfant at late 18th century. L'Enfant's project became known as *Worthy of the nation*, and the phrase "certainly a great and glorious city plan" would be used for many decades to come (Gutheim; Lee, 2006: 14).

In Brazil, King João VI was responsible for bringing painters, sculptors, engravers, and architects who ironically, as Schwarcz (2008: 14) states, had

once served Napoleon, who was precisely responsible for transferring the Portuguese court to the tropics. In a mostly illiterate society, this visual language would enable the court to produce a new and official representation for itself. Once the presence of French artists and architects in Brazil had been consolidated since 1816, the neoclassical influence in architecture, so recurrent in great European buildings, was adopted as a policy of civility for the colony. On the other hand, some Lusitanian traditionalists repudiated the idea of a French neoclassicism influencing Brazil, as the architectural style of Lusitanian aesthetics predominated there, even if precariously. With these two conceptions, two styles ended up predominating in Rio de Janeiro after 1808: the Lusitanian and the French-inspired neoclassical (Hoirisch; Ribeiro, 2010).

In the context of the French artistic mission that brought to Brazil recognized masters in various areas of the Arts and to which the initial roster of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts is indebted, one individual stands out who would change architecture in Brazil: Auguste Henri Victor Grandjean de Montigny. According to Schwarcz (2008: 311):

This architect inaugurated the neoclassical phase of Brazilian architecture and was the court's first urban planner, concerned with the hygiene of buildings and the construction of squares, parks and public roads. After the temples, triumphal arches and other settings to enhance the coronation celebrations of the king and then of Emperor Pedro I, Grandjean designed a series of buildings for the government and the local elite.

Renowned in Europe and winner of architectural prizes, Montigny was entrusted with teaching architecture in the building he designed, which would become the head office of Escola Real de Ciências Artes e Ofícios [Royal School of Science, Arts, and Crafts]. When construction was completed in 1826, after the independence, the building became home to the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

King João's appeal to turn Rio de Janeiro into the first and only capital in America to host the center of power of a kingdom (named in 1815 the United Kingdom of Brazil, Portugal. and the Algarves) was so strong that emblematic buildings were erected in the form of temporary monuments, usually used for parties, parades, and solemnities, such as his coronation as monarch on May 13, 1818.

At the palace square, Montigny built three neoclassical monuments evoking Antiquity. The first was a Greek temple dedicated to Minerva and the king, a 17 meter and 60 centimeter high building with a 63 meter and 80 centimeter façade. A temple of Doric architecture with 12 grooved

columns in the center of which stands a colossal statue of Minerva and, underneath it, the bust of King João VI on a pedestal.

On one side of the square, an immense triumphal arch was built, 13 meters and 20 centimeters high and 15 meters and 40 centimeters wide. Once again, columns, statues, and allegories of all kinds were built. An Egyptian-style obelisk was installed in the center of the square (Schwarcz, 2008: 219-220; Hoirisch; Ribeiro, 2010: 262). “Civilization appeared in a theater, on these stages – Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks – as if tradition had finally reached the tropics” (Schwarcz, 2008: 221). Figure 1 is a canvas by the French painter Thomas-Marie Hippolyte Taunay in homage to the acclamation of Dom João VI, King of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves, reproduced in Schwarcz (2008: 220).

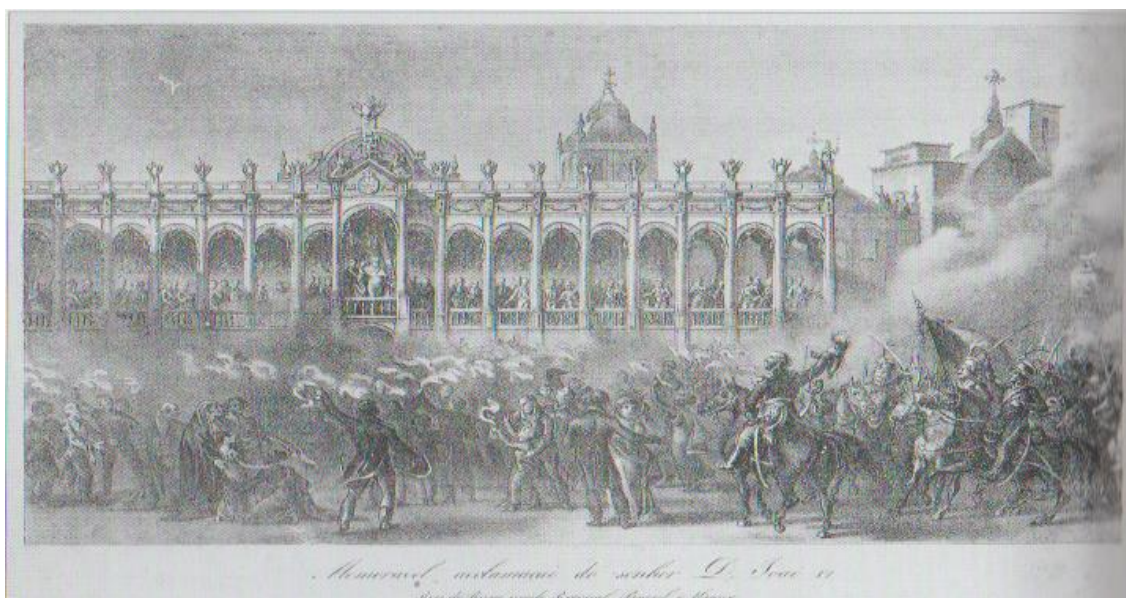


Figure 01: Memorable acclamation of Dom João VI, King of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves, n.d.

After independence, the new country should be defined by a new nation based on a combination of norms such as language, ethnicity, territory, cultural traits, and common history (Hobsbawm, 1990: 15). Few of these criteria applied to Brazil. The territory hosted a heterogeneous mass of the most distinct ethnic origins. Apart the large population of African origin – by birth or descent, therefore enslaved or free Black individuals –, and Indigenous people, mestizos, poor Whites born in Brazil, Portugal, and elsewhere (Silva, 2009; Alvin, 1998; Schwarcz, 1998). They formed the population base of the new country.

The situation was so dramatic that the Frenchman Saint-Hilaire (1974: 74), who recorded ethnic and cultural differences on his canvases during his travels from 1816 to 1822, declared his vision of the South American

monarchy: “There was a country called Brazil, but there were absolutely no Brazilians”. We must be careful when considering this statement, colored by his European interpretation particularly influenced by the values of the French court. Moreover, forging a nationality and assuming oneself as part of a certain people is a complex and historical situation. That explains the reason for still considering the author’s observation. Brazil faced a unique situation at the time. Most of its population, responsible for its singular cultural characteristics developed from an ethnic and cultural hybridism, in no way resembled that which was considered developed: the European standard.

Another issue referred to the small groups of people united by economic, political, and ideological aspects that formed the regional elites, whose interests varied and diverged from one province to another in this country of continental dimensions (Carvalho, 2007). But there we also find the desire to form a national state centered on “cultural unity,” intolerant of its diversity (Funari, 1997: 90), and heterogeneity demanded that the empire ensure some shade of unity. Such nation state, idealized as strong and cohesive, centered on the figure of a monarch legitimized not only by his noble ancestry but also by the church and the Southeastern coffee elites, would solidify the territorial and political unity, unlike the fragmentation seen in Spanish America. A state with a civilizing project that was intended to be unique for the country and supported by imperial art, including neoclassical architecture.

Against this imperial desire, the succession of movements that took place throughout Brazil highlights the questioning of the established order and its desire for country and citizenship (Guimarães, 1988).³ Thus, artistic production generally served to create symbols and images that could shape national identity and represent the greatness of the Empire until its fall in 1889, but the polyphony of interests remained in conflict with the prevailing one, even in canvases exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts of

³ Some examples of such movements include the Confederation of the Equator – secessionist rebellion, Northeast (1823-1824); Night of the Bottle Fight – popular riot and conflict between Brazilians and Portuguese, Rio de Janeiro (April 1831); War of Cabanos – popular rebellion, Pernambuco and Alagoas (1832-1835); Revolta de Carrancas – slave uprising, Minas Gerais (1833); Cabanagem – popular revolution, Pará (1835-1840); Malê revolt – Muslim slave rebellion, Bahia (1835); Ragamuffin War – separatist and republican uprising, Rio Grande do Sul (1835-1845); Sabinada – popular rebellion, Bahia (November 7, 1837-1838); Balaiada – popular rebellion, Maranhão (1838-1841); Praieira revolt – liberal and republican revolt, Pernambuco (1848-1850); Quebra-Quilos revolt – popular revolt, Nordeste (1874-1875); Guerra das Mulheres – popular uprising, Nordeste (1875-1876), and the Revoltas do Vintém – popular uprisings, Rio de Janeiro (1880) and Curitiba (1883).

Rio de Janeiro. The project put into action failed to correspond to the aspirations of the “Brazilian people” and their shared history and traditions, but the artistic and architectural styles produced were certainly significant for a portion of society that idealized, valued, and consumed them (Cardoso, 2007).

The triangular pediment surmounting the facades, the Greek-inspired colonnades with capitals, the rotundas crowning the ceilings, and the symmetrical and balanced lines became part of the official buildings of the new country, especially in Rio de Janeiro, its capital. The neoclassical style, now present in palaces, hospitals, schools, and residences, began to share space with the colonial tradition, intertwined with the desire for modernization and the need to build an imaginary of the new nation (Ribeiro, 2005: 144). According to Souza (2012: 40), Neoclassicism was considered “the Enlightenment art par excellence. Following the scientific and philosophical revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, it revalued the study of nature and the ancients’ rationality as a source of inspiration, contrary to previous styles”.

It is this complex ethnic-social fabric that defines the challenge of transforming Brazil into a legitimate and civilized country. In the particular paths taken by Brazilian modernity, unlike those taken by Europe in which the city shaped the development of the nation, modernity was thought from the general – the nation – to the particular – the city – especially Rio de Janeiro, as a constituent and revealing space of national elements. To this end, the imperial government programmed a series of actions to establish elements that would legitimize the Brazilian nation (Hoirisch; Salgado; Ribeiro, 2009: 09). One such measure was for the State to become the cohesive element of the heterogeneous country, which saw incisive attempts during the First Reign (1822 to 1831) and the Regency (1831 to 1840).⁴ Neoclassical architecture was one of the paths defined for elaborating a Brazilian identity and thus strengthening the country itself and its monarchy, as emphasized above, which constitutes the focus of this analysis.

Neoclassical architecture eventually became official in the Brazilian state. Appreciation for ancient art, heroic spirit, and Greco-Roman decorative patterns became common elements in public buildings. Chief among them was the headquarters of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, dated 1826.

⁴ Period in which Brazil was ruled by regents as Pedro de Alcântara, son of Pedro I, successor to the throne, was too young to take over as Pedro II. For more details, see Basile, 2018.

Its construction project was by no means random. The building, planned and built in the neoclassical style, would materialize an institution that would house the study of forms and the visual arts. It began when Rio de Janeiro was still the provisional capital of the Portuguese empire, its construction was only completed when the city was already the capital of the Brazilian empire. As shown in Figure 2, its neoclassic project design was marked by clear and simple classical lines in opposition to the Baroque and Rococo styles. Only a few constructive elements included Roman touches such as arches or columns, whose symmetry and straight lines replaced irregular curves. Cornices and platbands were exploited on the façade and at its entrance colonnades and pediments of exposed stone formed a set that met Vitruvian standards, with its severe and straight lines (Imbroisi; Martins, 2021).

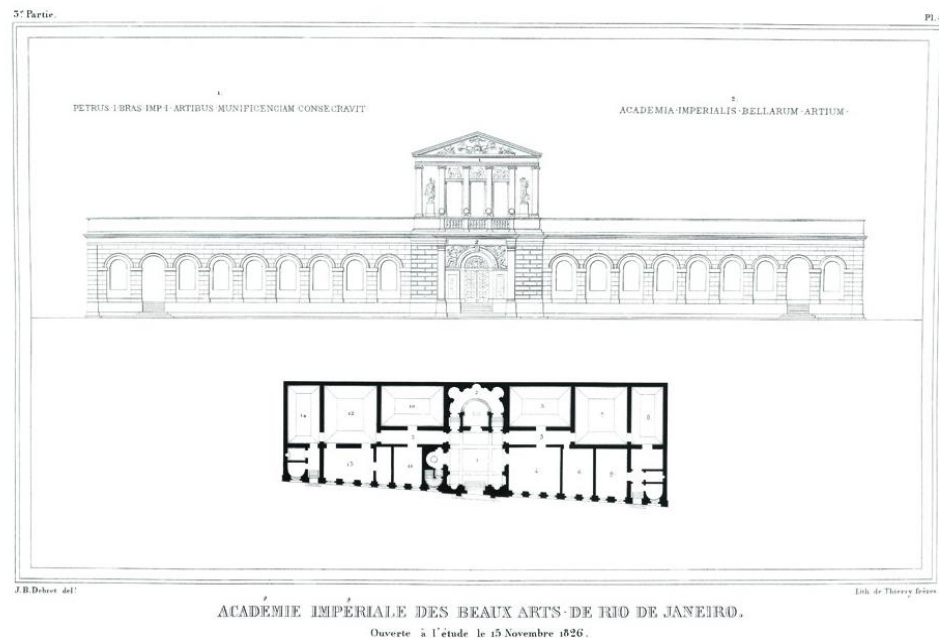


Figure 02: Project of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, in: <https://www.emaze.com/@AWOFLLT/missoartsticafrancesa-compat.pptx>.

The building façade has been preserved and currently serves as the portico of the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, whose origin dates back to the time of the transfer of the court to Brazil. It makes up one of the best preserved green areas of the city and exemplifies the diversity of Brazilian and foreign flora.

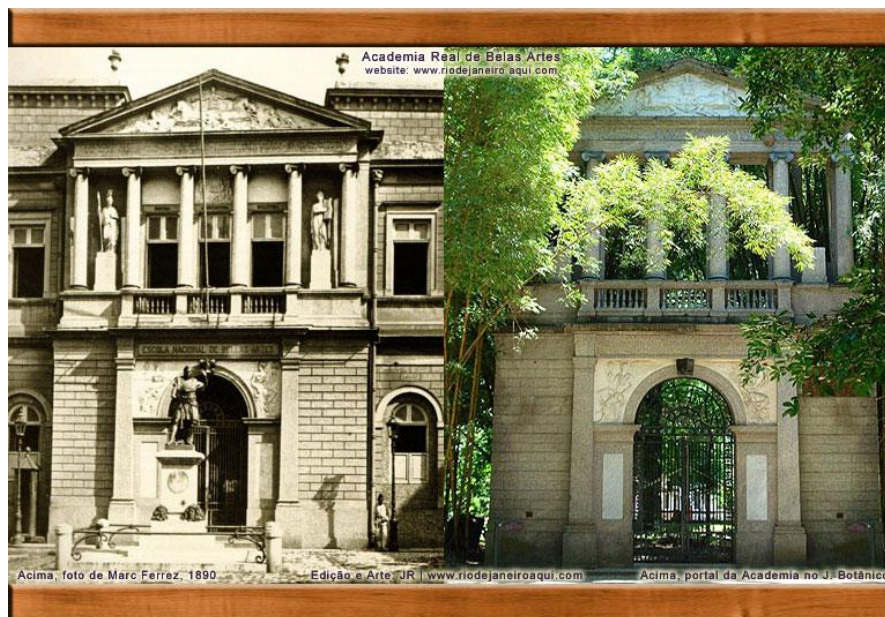


Figure 03: Imperial Academy of Fine Arts of Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Marc Ferrez, from 1891 and present, in: <https://arquiteturado brasil.wordpress.com/arquitetura-neoclassica-no-brasil/>.

However, it was during the Second Reign, after the ascension of Dom Pedro II to the throne in 1840, that the formation of a concept of Brazilian nationality became more pronounced. The reign of Pedro de Alcântara saw an intense effort to constitute a national state and established his concept of citizenship in Brazil (Carvalho, 2007; Franz, 2007). This definitive option for French neoclassicism, especially from this period onward, laid bare the desire to internationalize and civilize the prevailing culture, going against the Lusitanian reality, which had a local and regionalist character (Rocha-Peixoto, 2000).

To accomplish this task, Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre, one of the notable architects of this period and a student at the imperial academy (later responsible for unifying the architectural style of the Quinta da Boa Vista Palace, in which it ceased to have a façade with disparate elements and gained a uniform neoclassical façade (as noted in the image below).



Figure 04: Imperial Palace of Quinta da Boa Vista, in: <http://www.riototal.com.br/riolindo/tur018.htm>.

Following in the footsteps of his French master, Porto-Alegre designed ephemeral works for the coronation of Emperor Pedro II and the former headquarters of the Bank of Brazil and customs in Rio de Janeiro, which were demolished about a century ago. Also noteworthy are José Maria Jacintho Rebello and Joaquim Cândido Guillobel, engineers and Montigny's students at the imperial academy. Both participated in the construction of two great examples of architecture that evoke the classical lines during the Second Reign: the renovation and expansion of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia from 1840 to 1852 – still in operation and with elements of the period on its façade – and Hospício Pedro II, built from 1842 to 1852 to house the first psychiatric health institution in Brazil. It currently serves as the headquarters of Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and preserves most of the neoclassical elements of its original façade (Hoirisch; Ribeiro, 2010). The highlighted works belong to a process of urban transformation that the city was going through as part of the crown's project of modernity and civility. Moreover, two large buildings that would house public health agencies signaled that Brazil aligned with the official architectural trend of powerful states such as France.

Also note that the projects have, in addition to their neoclassical aesthetic characteristics, functional elements such as the internal courtyards in both constructions that were so common in Antiquity. The image below shows the neoclassical façade and the inner courtyards of the old asylum built under the patronage of Pedro II, known as Hospício Pedro II, built from 1842 to 1852. José Clemente Pereira, former holder of the Empire portfolio

and provider of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia, authored the project for the construction of this asylum (Dicionário Histórico-Biográfico das Ciências da Saúde no Brasil).



Figure 05: Former Hospício Pedro II (now Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro), in: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/62514249>.

Rebello individually coordinated the renovation that transformed the palace of merchant José Machado de Melo into the neoclassical Isabel Palace, which was the official residence of Princess Dona Isabel and her family up to 1889, when the State confiscated it by the act of the Proclamation of the Republic. Guillobel, on the other hand, constructed the Imperial Palace of Petrópolis, one of the most important imperial constructions in Brazil, the summer residence of Emperor D. Pedro II, and one of the main exponents of classical-inspired construction in the country. Nowadays, the Isabel Palace configures the seat of the government of the State of Rio de Janeiro and has eclectic features on its façade. The Palace of Petrópolis, on the other hand, houses the Imperial Museum and still boasts much of its original features.



Figure 06: Guanabara Palace – Seat of the government of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Former Isabel Palace, in: <https://diariodorio.com/historia-do-palacio-guanabara/>.



Figure 07: Imperial Museum is housed in the former Summer Palace of the Brazilian Emperor D. Pedro II, Petrópolis/RJ, in: <https://www.petropolis.rj.gov.br/fct/index.php/petropolis/historia>.

The importance of these archaeological excavations for the formulation of the neoclassical concept is also highlighted, in particular the discoveries of the cities of Herculaneum, in 1738, and Pompeii, in 1748. As a political articulation between the kingdoms, Teresa Cristina Bourbon-Two Sicilies (1822-1889), princess of the then Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, based in Naples, became the wife of D. Pedro II and Empress of Brazil. An archaeology enthusiast, she participated in several excavations on her family's land in her youth, including in locations near Pompeii and Herculaneum. Financed by Teresa Cristina, the excavations were carried out between 1853 and 1889. Part of the material was brought in when she got married. She arrived in Brazil in 1843 to meet her husband, and this

initial set was part of her dowry. Another part of the collection came 12 years later at the behest of Teresa's brother, Ferdinand II, king of the Two Sicilies. He complied with a request from his sister, who wanted to strengthen the National Museum, founded in 1818 as the Royal Museum by king João VI, grandfather of Pedro II, in downtown Rio (Pennafort, 2016).

Destroyed by a fire in 2018⁵, the museum housed about 759 pieces in its Teresa Cristina Collection, part of which constitutes its permanent exhibition. She managed to gather a considerable collection of finds, especially artifacts from the Roman Empire. Also part of the collection are pieces found in excavations of ancient Greek colonies in southern Italy and near the city of Rome, such as vases, figurines, amulets, pots, personal objects such as jewelry boxes, bracelets and rings, phallic amulets, among others. The oldest date back to the 7th century B.C.

In 2005 the "National Museum" held the exhibition *Frescoes of Pompeii*. The beauty revealed, presenting numerous pieces of Pompeian and Etruscan antiquities, restored by initiative of the Latin Union. From now on, the public can enjoy a significant part of the remarkable archaeological heritage arrived in Brazil thanks to Teresa Cristina. This collection, with more than 700 items, is the largest of its kind in Latin America (Avella, 2010: 02).

The Empress interest in archaeology cannot be considered part of the project for forging the Brazilian state, as her taste predates her contact with Brazil. However, it is inevitable to relate her sponsorship to the process of strengthening knowledge production in Brazil. By bringing such artifacts here, the empress elevated the nation to the select group of research and prospection of Antiquity objects, which included countries such as France, England and Italy, bringing Brazil even closer to the desired ideal.

As such, the greatness inscribed in the allegories of the past served to perpetuate the nation and give the certainty of a possible Europe in the

⁵ Since 1892, the National Museum of Brazil has been housed in the former official residence of the Brazilian imperial family, the Quinta da Boa Vista Palace. On September 2, 2018, the institution's headquarters was destroyed by a fire, which was later proven to have been accidental due to poor conservation conditions. By 2023, part of the collection had been recovered, including with international cooperation. Check out more details at <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2023-06/aos-205-anos-museu-nacional-busca-preservar-missao-educativa> and <https://harpia.mn.ufrj.br/afresco-restaurado/>.

Americas (Schwarcz, 2008: 226). A way of building an identity, even if fragile and illusory for most Brazilians.

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