

Henry and his Hat

There's nothing like a good story. I tend to collect them, and though they don't always show up in my work, the themes that I most often explore - landscape, urban and monumental space, or our futile attempts to control nature through geometry and architecture - wouldn't be half as interesting without the density of history behind them. But sometimes I will deliberately chase a word, a phrase or a story, and incorporate them directly into an artwork.

The piece being presented at this festival came about as a follow-up to the extensive research I did around the public sculpture of Lisbon, the latest materialisation of which is the online series *The Adventurous Lives of Lisbon Statues*. That series goes into the history of a few of the statues that are, or have previously been, on the streets of Lisbon, repositioning them and reflecting on the meaning of their placement. At the time of release of the first episodes, a polemic started in Portugal around the words of a politician who seemed to advocate for the removal of an important monument to the Portuguese "Discoveries" (the maritime and colonial exploits undertaken during the 15th and 16th centuries). By coincidence, the first episode of my series centred on the very same monument, and the history and design of its surrounding area, the Praça do Império in Belém. Unsurprisingly, this was the episode that got the most attention of the whole series, although it wasn't the most audacious in terms of changes to the monumental landscape.

That stayed in the back of my mind until the invitation came to participate in this festival. When I read the themes, I thought back to that polemic and how much it evinces the range of feelings about Portugal's role as coloniser of several parts of the world, but also about the monument to the Discoveries itself, as a prime example of how the mid-twentieth century Estado Novo dictatorship tried to inspire nationalistic sentiment. And the monument is sentimental: epic, grandiose, and centred on the singular character of Henry the Navigator.

The fact that Henry was purportedly more involved in the logistics and the research that made long-distance travel by sea possible, than in the dodgy history of colonisation itself, means he can still, more or less safely, be considered a hero to this day. That in turn means that not only the statues made during the dictatorship survive, but new ones are put up from time to time.

I embarked on further research: how many statues to Henry the Navigator exist in outdoor public spaces in Portugal today, and when were they made? A methodical collection returned 17, of which 4 are busts and the remaining full-body representations. (There may be more; these are the ones I found mention of in the available records.) Most of them were created during the dictatorship. I resolved to catalogue them as one would botanical specimens.

In the process of collecting this data, I started noticing details about the representations themselves. Henry is most often portrayed with a wide-brimmed hat, but that fashion started in the 20th century. Previous representations dress him up as a warrior, but once the hat appears his clothes become more priest-like. Looking further into when and why this change of image occurred, I found the culprit was an illustration in a book that was discovered in the 19th century, where Henry is indeed wearing the hat and some kind of flowing garment. Doubts have since been raised as to whether that image is in fact a portrait of Henry the Navigator or of someone else (possibly one of his elder brothers), but we won't go into that here. The fact remains that due to the amount of 20th century portrayals inspired by that image, Henry is now almost universally recognised by his headgear.

The hat itself has an interesting story: it's called a chaperon, and evolved from the deliberate misuse of a mediaeval type of hood in a hat-like manner. Chaperons were popular throughout the middle ages, and particularly fashionable in the Duchy of Burgundy during the rule of Philip the Good, whose third wife was Henry's sister Isabel. Their brother Peter negotiated the wedding, and may have brought back the trend to the Portuguese court.

The other interesting detail regarding the chaperon-bearing statues of Henry is that the chaperon itself is often incorrectly portrayed as a wide-brimmed hat with a piece of cloth attached to it. The fact that the one item that provides instant recognition of an image of Henry is portrayed with no historical accuracy, on top of the possibility that the real Henry never actually wore such a hat (if the portrait in the book is indeed of someone else) points to the arbitrariness of these representations. Formally, they could be anything whatsoever, as long as we all agree they represent Henry.

This was the legacy of our dictatorship: it taught us to recognise particular signs loaded with nationalistic meaning, but the signs are random, two dimensional, devoid of historical significance. They tell us more about the present (the then-present of the Estado Novo regime, and the now-present of our inheritance of their visual language) than about the past. But that's what monuments do: in lieu of helping us remember the actual past, they provide us with ready-made signs loaded with static, a-historical meaning. In this sense, the story of Henry's hat is the story of any propagandistic image.