

FROM INTERMEDIALITY TO INTERCULTURALITY: *THE
FLIGHT INTO EGYPT* IN GIOTTO'S, FRA ANGELICO'S AND
PORTINARI'S PICTORIAL TRANSPOSITIONS

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Abstract: Starting from the biblical episode of “The Flight into Egypt”, this essay, based on Clüver’s, Rajewski’s and Souriau’s theoretical concepts on interart approaches, discusses the pictorial transposition of this text to Giotto’s and Fra Angelico’s frescos. It then considers the way the styles of these two Renaissance painters are reflected in Portinari’s works on the same theme. As he moves from his initial academicism to modern experimentalism in the preliminary drawings and paintings for the 1952 works, and especially in the later works on the theme, between 1953 and 1960, “The Flight into Egypt” has continued to inspire the artist, establishing a dialogical relationship between the biblical theme and themes from Brazilian culture and history.

Keywords: Intermediality. Interculturality. *The Bible*. Portinari.

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DA INTERMIDIALIDADE À INTERCULTURALIDADE: A FUGA PARA O EGITO NAS TRANSPOSIÇÕES PICTÓRICAS DE GIOTTO, FRA ANGELICO E PORTINARI

Resumo: Partindo do episódio bíblico sobre “A fuga para o Egito”, este artigo – apoiado nos preceitos teóricos de Clüver, Rajewski e Souriau sobre abordagens interartes – faz uma leitura da transposição pictórica desse texto para os afrescos de Giotto e de Fra Angelico. Em seguida, avalia como os estilos desses dois pintores renascentistas iriam se refletir nas obras de Portinari sobre o mesmo tema. Ao passar do academicismo inicial ao experimentalismo moderno nos desenhos e pinturas preparatórios para as obras de 1952, e, principalmente, nos trabalhos posteriores sobre o tema, entre 1953 e 1960, “A fuga para o Egito” continuou a inspirar o artista, estabelecendo assim, simultaneamente, um dialogismo entre o tema bíblico com temas da cultura e história brasileiras.

Palavras-chave: Intermidialidade. Interculturalidade. *A Bíblia*. Portinari.

Introduction

The dialogue between literature and the visual arts, or interarts studies, has already established itself as a fertile field of research which can deepen our critical reflections on intersemiotic translation, with the help of intermedial theoretical studies.

Among the visual arts, especially painting, sculpture and illustrations, these relationships become particularly instigating as we are reminded how, with the advent of Christianity, “the main flow of European art was gradually dedicated to the Church; and the tremendous European heritage of medieval, Renaissance, and even

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baroque art is mainly religious in its function, even if not produced for the Church” (WHELPTON, 1970, p. 51).

Whether in Carolingian art, Romanesque sculpture and architecture, Gothic cathedrals with their immense portals and stained glass windows, in frescos and mosaics, in tapestries and illuminated manuscripts, biblical themes have presented their messages alongside themes from Greek and Roman mythology, which continued to attract artists, since it was supposed that the public would know biblical stories as much as these legends and myths from other cultures and times.

Starting out from this perspective, the aim of this article is to verify how the episode of the “Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt” – reported in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, and a frequent theme in Christian art from late Antiquity on – was depicted by European artists from the XIIIth century onwards, and specifically by Giotto and Fra Angelico, in order to better evaluate the impact that the text and paintings had on Candido Portinari, among other Brazilian artists. By analyzing the intramedial transposition of these Renaissance paintings to Portinari’s canvasses, drawings and frescos, we may thereby gain a better understanding of how he absorbed and reinterpreted the biblical text, simultaneously establishing a dialogical relationship between the biblical theme and themes from Brazilian culture and history.

The biblical text: “The Flight into Egypt”

The episode of “The Flight into Egypt” – in which Joseph, Mary and their newborn child Jesus flee into Egypt after the Adoration of the Magi, when they learned that King Herod planned to kill the newborn boys in the region – is described in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. This synoptic Gospel is an account of Jesus of Nazareth’s life, ministry, death and resurrection. Chapter 2, considered the final episode of the Nativity, is generally divided into four sections: the visit of the Magi guided by the

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Star of Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 1-12), the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-15), the Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2: 16-18) and the return of the Young Jesus to Nazareth after Herod's Death (Matthew 2: 19-23). As the episode of "The Flight into Egypt" is recorded in Matthew,

2:13. After they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said to him, 'Rise up, take the child and his mother and escape with them to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to do away with him.'

2:14. So Joseph rose from sleep, and taking mother and child by night he went away with them to Egypt, and there he stayed till Herod's death.

2:15. This was to fulfill what the Lord had declared through the prophet: 'I called my son out of Egypt.' (THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE, 1961, p. 5)

The theme of "The Flight into Egypt", which became a frequent one in Christian art, was enhanced in the visual arts by the transpositions of the biblical text to the works of the great masters of European painting. As Anne-Marie Christin states, "the objective of the Christian image is of the same order as that of the rhetorical image: it is necessary to seduce and convince" (CHRISTIN, 2006, p. 84, my translation).

Intermedial transpositions: from the biblical text to Giotto's painting

We start the pictorial transposition – from the Biblical text, as "verbal source text" (CLÜVER, 1989, p. 76) to the fresco, retable or canvas, and therefore, intermedial – with Giotto (1267-1337), considered "the founder of all modern painting and the father of the Italian Renaissance" (CUMMING, 1995, p. 11, my translation).

The representation of *The Flight into Egypt*, which is in the Arena Chapel of the Scrovegni (Figs. 1 and 2) in Padua, was painted between 1305 and 1306. It is one of the most famous scenes of the

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cycle of frescos about the Virgin's and Christ's lives, a cycle that has become a fundamental work in order to understand the evolution of European painting. As Cumming comments, "all the paintings in the Chapel are real frescos, that is, painted directly on the chapel wall while the mortar was still moist, thus becoming an integral part of the building" (CUMMING, 1995, p. 10, my translation), and thereby demonstrating the deep bond established between these frescos and Christian religion:



Fig. 1 – <https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/>



Fig. 2 – <http://www.google.com.br>

The fresco (Fig. 3) portrays Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus fleeing into Egypt in order to escape from Herod's persecution:

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Fig. 3 – <http://www.wikiwand.com/pt/>

Mary, mounted on an ass, holds the Child protectively, wrapped in a cloth bound above her shoulders; Joseph leads the way and, under his cloak, his outstretched arm emphasizes the slow pace of the ass; above, an angel protects the way. The figures are moving across an arid landscape, with rocky mountains and a few scattered trees breaking the monotony of the desert. A young man, guiding the ass beside Joseph, and two other young men and a girl behind the ass, also form part of the main group.

These secondary figures are part of the description which appears in the apocryphal gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew and, therefore, deprived of canonical authority: “Three young men made their way with Joseph, and a young woman with Mary”.¹

As Saint Matthew’s text only mentions the angel in verse 13, warning Joseph in a dream to flee into Egypt, his presence in the fresco emphasizes his continuous protection of the Holy Family, escorting them in their crossing of the desert. The presence of the ass, even if not in the biblical text, remains implied, for on such a long trip it was the only possible means of transport for Mary and the child Jesus. Therefore, we have to attribute to Giotto’s imagination and

¹ Available at: <www.wikiwand.com/pt/> my translation. Accessed on: May 20, 2016.

creativity all the details of the landscape, of the secondary figures and of the ass. As Clüver comments, as he theorizes about intersemiotic transposition, “the meaning ascribed to the source text, whether poem or painting, is the result of an interpretation” (CLÜVER, 1989, p. 61).

It is worthwhile remembering that Giotto – breaking away from the impositions of Byzantine art, which obeyed a rigid hierarchy: God above Christ, Christ larger than the angels and these above the saints and, in the background, gold, ornaments and decoration; no trees, mountains, life – made man the focus of the scenes he painted, and gave him the real world as an environment, while nevertheless shaping it according to his will. Thus, in his paintings, men appear bigger than trees and almost the same height as the mountains, for these are secondary, as the environment was created in keeping with the characters (GIOTTO, 1980, p. 20, my translation). Cumming corroborates this statement, in relation to the mountainous landscape, for Giotto used to employ these forms in order to create a “stage” on which his figures act, thus mirroring “the grouping of the figures” (CUMMING, 1995, p. 11, my translation).

In the case of *The Flight into Egypt*, the triangular rock (which could represent a mountain) which rises behind Mary and the child Jesus – the focuses of attention in the painting – despite having a secondary function in relation to the human figures, has its function as a “stage” emphasized by the symbolism inherent to the mountain: the realm of meditation, as opposed to the plains of reality; communion with the blessed; axis of the world; contact between heaven and earth, refuge, liberty, peace – all of which relate to the theme of the painting.²

The sense of perception of the mountainous space, reinforced by the sandy rock behind Mary, thus highlights the centrality of her figure with the Child as the dominant element in the scene, besides the fact that she is also visually higher than the others, by being

² All symbolic meanings are taken from the two dictionaries mentioned in the References: by Ad de Vries and by Chevalier & Gheerbrandt.

mounted on an ass. Only the angel, protecting the way from heaven, is above her. Completing the foreground of the fresco is the sandy ground whose folds remind one of the garments of the figures and further reinforce, by their form, contours and chromatism, the mountains behind the group. A harmony is thereby created between the vertical and oblique lines of the background and the plain in the foreground, further stressed by effects of light and shade.

As for the trees which grow here and there in the mountainous scene – adding a touch of fertility to the landscape, as they could represent forests – their slender trunks and abundant crowns provide a contrast, in color and shape, with the barrenness and drabness of the rocks/mountains, symbolizing cosmic life through their verticality and connection with the three worlds: that of vegetative life, as perpetual regeneration and immortality; that of refuge, as one of man's first homes; and that of sacrifice and redemption, for, in Christian art, the Cross is often represented as a living tree (VRIES, 1976, p. 473). These symbolic associations of the trees enrich the theme of the fresco, as well as anticipating Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. As he theorizes on the "pictorial text", Clüver confirms that "the size of the image of a tree in a painting may be interpreted simply as indicating its location within a system of perspectival representation, or as expressing its relative importance, or as constituting part of its symbolic relevance" (CLÜVER, 1989: p. 61-2).

The figures' gestures and facial expressions are also evidence of the way Giotto's characters were painted with life and feelings, accentuating the realism of the scene and the unity of the group making its way through the landscape: Mary, upright, the posture of her head suggesting the determination with which she is facing the journey, with its hardships and risks; Joseph watching Mary, even if walking somewhat ahead; the angel watching over the group; the young man beside Joseph with an inquiring look, while he holds the ass's reins; and the three figures behind Mary who follow the group apparently in conversation about the Holy Family and the journey.

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On the other hand, this realism – visible in the draperies of the garments and in the representation of the water jug which Joseph carries – is further enhanced by the symbolism which impregnates the figures' garments and gestures. The white of Mary's cloak, a color related to purity, sanctity, illumination, life, peace and simplicity, and the red of her tunic underneath it, a color associated with love, purification and resurrection, are richly symbolic together in relation to Mary's role as the mother of Jesus.

Joseph's dark yellow cloak – a color that symbolizes the sun, love and constancy – besides providing a contrast with Mary's red tunic and white cloak, highlights his position as leader of the group, with his right arm outstretched, indicating movement. Gesture, according to Kristeva, "is a practice and, as such, a gesture that transmits a message in a painting is more than language – it is the elaboration of the message (...). The painted or sculptured gesture is not only a gesture, it is integrated into the decodified whole of the figured representation" (KRISTEVA, *apud* CORTEZ, 2005, p. 305, my translation). In their turn, the golden haloes that encircle the heads of Mary, the Child, Joseph and the angel, symbolize, by their color, the divine spirit and, by their splendor, the state of glory, thereby highlighting still further the heads of the four figures.

The ass, symbolic of peace, poverty, humility, patience and courage, is always presented favorably in the Bible: Joseph leads Mary and Jesus on the back of an ass to Egypt; before his martyrdom, Christ makes his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem mounted on an ass (CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANT, 1973, p. 68, v. I). This symbolism confirms and enriches that of the other elements mentioned, while its gray color, through its neutrality, blending into the background with the rocky hills, further enhances Mary's figure in red and white.

In broader terms, the frescos of the Arena Chapel represent

a new conception of space which conquers the three dimensions of the visible world, transforming the two-dimensional surface of the picture into an opening onto the fantastic world of images. They

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mean, further, a new vision of the human figure, seen as an actual body moving in a world which has been appropriated by him. And, finally, they introduce a new way of using the plastic effects of colors, by beginning to express human emotions.³

The importance of the frescos therefore lies not just in Giotto's technical virtuosity but above all in the way his artistic vision expresses "the total belief of the artist and his commitment to carry out what was asked of him – that is, to accomplish a work of art worthy of God Himself" (CUMMING, 1995, p. 9). This underlines the innovation of Giotto's painting as a transition from Gothic art to a humanist conception of the world, which will reach its apogee in the Renaissance.

Since all this representation of nature and of life, enhanced by subtle effects of light and shadow and further increased by suggestive symbolic loads, will reappear in paintings of later times, it becomes important in order to evaluate the extent of the intramedial dialogue which Giotto's painting will establish with future artists. Therefore this fresco, despite being the pictorial transposition of an apocryphal text, has great importance on account of its artistic value, and it will influence Fra Angelico's painting on the same theme, which in its turn will be taken up again after a gap of five centuries in Portinari's paintings. Conversely, Portinari's modernity can be seen to enhance Giotto's and Fra Angelico's modernity.

Intramedial transpositions: from Giotto to Fra Angelico

If Giotto is considered the father of the Italian Renaissance, the Dominican Fra Angelico (1387-1455), one of the greatest exponents of religious painting of all time, is considered, together with Filippino Lippi, the best painter in Florence of his time and an "artist who impregnates the cultural movement of the Renaissance with a

³ A *ARTE NOS SÉCULOS*, vol. II, "Do classicismo ao gótico". 1969, p. 485 (my translation).

Christian yearning. In the luminous vision of his figures, in the transparency of color, there was in him a spirit more religious than classical, more sacred than profane” (FRA ANGELICO, 1967, p. 3, my translation).

The Flight into Egypt (1450) is part of a large retable and of a series of frescos which Fra Angelico painted, over a period of ten years, in the Convent of Saint Mark (Figs. 4 and 5), in Florence:



Figs. 4 e 5 – <http://www.wikiwand.com/pt/>

It is the seventh scene of these paintings, carried out for Armadio degli Argenti, made in tempera on wood (Fig. 6). Above the painting we find the verse line (*Ecce*) *Elongavi fugiens et mansi in solitudine* (“I should escape far away and find a refuge in the wilderness”) (PSALMS, 55:7). Below it is the verse line *Surge, accipe puerum et matrem et fuge in Egiptum* (“Rise up, take the child and his mother and escape with them to Egypt”) (MATTHEW, 2:13), confirming the intermedial relationship between the biblical text and the painting. However, this relationship is not confined to the canonical biblical text – portraying just the Holy Family – as opposed to the apocryphal text used by Giotto (Fig.7). As a descendant of works by earlier painters, Fra Angelico’s painting also constitutes an intramedial transposition of Giotto’s fresco, for it presents similarities which go beyond the portrayal of the central characters, the ass and the landscape, to

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include the use of technique, symbolism, colors, space and light, differing only in personal interpretation:



Fig. 6 e 7 – [http:// www.wikiwand.com/pt/](http://www.wikiwand.com/pt/)

As in Giotto, Fra Angelico's tempera portrays Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus fleeing to Egypt. Mary, mounted on an ass, also holds the Child protectively; Joseph, this time, walks on Mary's right side, but behind the ass, thus giving more emphasis to the figures of Mother and Child. The movement of the scene comes from Joseph's gait, with his left leg in front, as if following the slow trotting of the ass. The staff holding his cloak over his left shoulder at an oblique angle also indicates movement. His golden-yellow garments remind us of Giotto's fresco, thus keeping the symbolism and function of this color. The golden halo, the same tone as his garments, is further enhanced by a black cap and, behind the halo, a rounded rock as if framing his figure serves to highlight it further.

Mary, in Fra Angelico, has her red tunic covered by a blue cloak, as opposed to her white cloak in Giotto. The color blue – related to the sky, eternity, immensity and harmony – has become, together with white, Mary's color in Christian mythology, from the Middle Ages onwards (VRIES, 1976, p. 54-5). The greatest difference between the two works lies in the fact that, in Giotto, Mary has her head covered

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by a cloak, while in Fra Angelico her blond hair, as well as that of the child Jesus, is enhanced by their haloes.

An oblique rock rising behind Mary, as if following the ass's trotting, highlights her protective posture, with her head bent slightly forwards to touch the face of the Child in her arms, thereby revealing a tenderness peculiar to Fra Angelico's time. The Child Jesus, in his turn, has his white tunic covered by a red cloak, which serves to draw attention to him.

With its gray color and white muzzle, as well as its posture, the ass reminds us of Giotto's ass. The only difference lies in the fact that it has no harness and is not being led by somebody, which could suggest that it is being guided by the protective angel – invisible in Fra Angelico, but visible in Giotto – who accompanies the Holy Family.

As in Giotto, the figures move across an almost barren landscape, for only a few scattered trees break the monotony of the desert. The mountainous region, with rocky hills, presents rounder and gentler forms than the mountains in Giotto. The trees, with slender trunks and crowns in a stronger green than in Giotto, highlight, by their verticality, the intricate rounded shape of the hills. In the foreground of the painting, a group of trees, a palm tree and some low vegetation with delicate flowers make the landscape less barren than the scene in Giotto. The slight ascent indicates that they are crossing a new hill.

However, in contrast to Giotto, in which the scene is lit from right to left, indicating that the participants are walking towards the light, the light is coming from left to right in Fra Angelico and the travelers are lit from behind. The perspective, much more developed than in Giotto, shows a landscape that fades into the distance, thus emphasizing how far they have already traveled, besides adding lightness to the scene. A house among the hills, barely noticeable due to its being in the same golden hue, suggests that the Holy Family has found shelter to rest at night.

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As Fra Angelico is an extraordinary graphic designer, he also enhances features which do not exist in Giotto, such as the figures' expressions, and the richness of details in the garments, the contours of the ass, the chromatism of the hills bathed by the morning sunlight, and the little white flowers by the roadside. Therefore, besides the numinous aura which derives from the chromatic force of the painting – as opposed to Giotto's lighter colors – tenderness, grace and pleasure in nature are present in Fra Angelico. For this reason, his “profoundly lyrical tone in the treatment of landscape motifs” and the fact of “recognizing in the luminosity of color a reflection of the perfection of nature, thus impregnating it with a mystic sense” (FRA ANGELICO, 1967, p. 4, my translation) meant that his style exerted a considerable influence on later Italian painting and, as will be seen, on the way *The Flight into Egypt*, specifically, has influenced Portinari's paintings on this theme. For this reason, the innumerable pictorial transpositions of “The Flight into Egypt” in the periods which come after the Renaissance fall outside the scope of this work.

Intramedial transpositions: from Giotto and Fra Angelico to Portinari

Several Brazilian painters have already taken biblical texts and, specifically, “The Flight into Egypt”, as a theme for their paintings. Apart from Portinari, we can mention José Ferraz de Almeida Junior (1881), José Américo Roig (Zeméco) (1961) and Djanira da Motta e Silva (1967).

As for Candido Portinari (1903-1962), even if poverty is “the constant motif” of the most famous paintings of this artist “whose sensibility and intelligence allowed him to capture and acutely express the human tragedy of dry roads, of barren fields, of sad favelas” (PORTINARI, 1967, p. 2, my translation), the range of his themes – religious, lyrical, cultural, fauna and flora, Brazilian history and its people – in canvases, drawings and murals, goes far beyond this penchant for social criticism, thus showing his versatility.

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Receiving the Trip to Europe Prize in 1928 was a decisive landmark in the artistic trajectory of the young painter:

In Europe, the artist saw what was being done in vanguard painting. He saw the works of the Italian Renaissance painters such as Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello – whose style, so many centuries afterwards, would be more modern than academicism. And Portinari knew how to see it. He left Brazil almost as an academic, and would come back as a modern. (PORTINARI, 1967, p. 4, my translation)

This contact with the masters of the Italian Renaissance, besides influencing Portinari's style, also influenced him to paint biblical themes: between 1931 and 1960 he produced sixteen works about "The Flight into Egypt", among drawings, paintings, gouaches and models: 1931 – water color drawing; 1937 – fresco painting; 1952 – sketch for panel; model for panel; gouache painting on paper for panel; drawing on paper; oil canvas for the panel of the Bom Jesus da Cana Verde Church (Batatais, São Paulo); 1953 – drawing; drawing; oil on canvas model; 1955 – oil painting; graphite drawing with Portinari's father; painting with Portinari's father; drawing in colored crayon; painting: oil on canvas; 1959 – *Exodus*: drawing; 1960 – painting.

After his first drawing in India ink (nanquim), pen-point (bico-de-pena), watercolor and graphite paper (1931), which was used as an illustration for the *Bazar Magazine* (Fig. 11), Portinari produced a fresco in 1937 (Fig. 12) – inspired by Fra Angelico's *Flight into Egypt* (Fig. 13) – which is in the Casa de Portinari Museum.



Fig. 8 e 9 www.portinari.org.br

Fig. 10 www.wikiwand.com/pt

Keeping in mind that Portinari had seen the works of the Italian Renaissance masters in 1928, his work shows Fra Angelico's influence in terms of theme and technique. The differences appear in relation to historical style – from the Renaissance to European modernism – and, consequently, in relation to space and light, colors and symbolism, besides the artist's personal interpretation. As Irina Rajewski states, as she discusses intermediality in the strict sense, “any typology of intermedial practices must be historically grounded”, for

the criterion of historicity is relevant in various ways: with regard to the historicity of the particular intermedial configuration itself, with regard to the (technical) development of the media in question, with regard to the historically changing conceptions of arts and media (...), and finally with regard to the functionalization of intermedial strategies within a given media product. RAJEWSKY, n.d., p. 50-51)

In relation to the landscape, which stretches in perspective, the more sober colors, in tones which are more bluish and lilac in Portinari's fresco – contrasting with the sunnier tones of Fra Angelico's landscape – suggest a more desolate place, which is emphasized further by the smaller number of trees, the lack of color pointing to the barrenness of nature in the background. In the foreground the vegetation has the bluish tones of the flowers and

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cactuses, as if serving as a frame for the blue color of the garments and the kerchiefs on Joseph's and Mary's heads.

The blue color – as seen in relation to Mary in Fra Angelico's painting – could, in relation to Joseph, symbolize divine contemplation, expiation, humility and hope, all of which are applicable to him (VRIES, 1976, p. 54-5). As for the golden haloes which surround the heads of the Holy Family in Fra Angelico, only Mary's halo keeps the same color in Portinari, as the only luminous point of the scene, suggesting that she is the central focus. The expression in Mary's eyes in Portinari, however, reveals her concern, in contrast to the more serene expression of her eyes in Fra Angelico. In the background, left, we see, as in Fra Angelico, hills and a house, suggesting that the family had already passed by there.

However, if Portinari's fresco (Fig. 14) looks at first sight like an intramedial transposition of Fra Angelico's tempera painting, in terms of theme and technique, he returns more to the style of Giotto's fresco (Fig. 15). He uses softer colors, replacing Fra Angelico's polychromatism with somber and more veiled colors in tones of blue, and simplifies the features and details in Fra Angelico. But it is above all the expression in Mary's and Joseph's eyes – she concerned, looking at the road, and he watching her – that takes us back to Giotto. This re-reading shows that, even if the work is a “copy with a difference” of Fra Angelico, almost a homage to the Renaissance master, this intramedial transposition already presents a modernist Portinari, reminding us of Giotto – “the father of modern art” – as he reinterprets, with his different historical style, Fra Angelico's biblical scene (Fig. 15). These are the details which will serve as a basis to relate Portinari's future versions of *The Flight into Egypt* to other works by the artist:

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Fig. 11 www.portinari.org.br



Fig. 12 www.wikiwand.com/pt

This biblical theme will be taken up again in 1952, on the occasion of the painting of the frescos for the Bom Jesus da Cana Verde Church (Figs. 13 and 14), in the city of Batatais:



Fig. 13 <http://arquidioceserp.org.br>



Fig. 14 www.tripadvisor.com.br

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The twenty-three paintings and frescos on view in this church constitute the largest collection of his sacred works. They include *The Miracles of Our Lady*, *The Way of the Cross* (fourteen paintings), *Jesus and the Apostles*, *The Holy Family*, *The Flight into Egypt*, *The Baptism*, and *Saint Sebastian's Martyrdom*. Just as Giotto had been invited to paint the cycle of frescos about the Lives of the Virgin and Christ in the Arena Chapel of the Scrovegni in Padua, and Fra Angelico to paint the retable and a series of frescos in Saint Mark's Convent in Florence, this time it is Portinari who was invited.

Portinari's five works on *The Flight into Egypt* (1952) contain important differences in relation to the 1937 work, for, even if the basic rhetorical function continues the same – to portray this biblical scene – he “freed” himself, so to speak, from Giotto and Fra Angelico, for the intramedial dialogue continues, in spite of the change of style. As he himself commented in an interview, “People point out changes in me; of course I have to change; always studying and researching, I can't help showing greater technical development in 1953 than in 1920” (PORTINARI, 1953, my translation).⁴

Concentrating our analysis on the oil painting, the result of the four studies below (Figs. 15-18),

⁴ Available at: < http://almanaque.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada_16mar1953.htm> Accessed on: May 20, 2016.

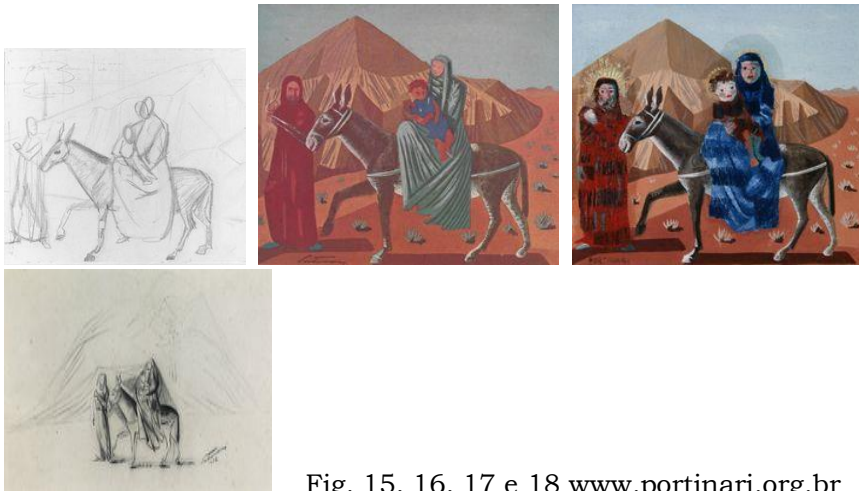


Fig. 15, 16, 17 e 18 www.portinari.org.br

we can see the following differences in the 1952 canvas (Fig. 19) in relation to the 1937 canvas (Fig. 20):



Fig. 19 (1952) e 20 (1937) www.portinari.org.br

– in the 1952 version, the figures of Joseph and Mary with the Child on the ass are moving from right to left, receiving daylight on their faces, suggesting a more hopeful journey than in the 1937 work, in which the movement is from left to right and the light is coming from behind them, suggesting more a flight;

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- the sky, totally blue, in a lighter shade than Joseph’s and Mary’s garments, adds serenity to the canvas, besides concentrating our attention on the figures of the Holy Family;
- the blue of Joseph’s and Mary’s garments in the 1937 work is kept in the 1952 version, but the hue is darker. Portinari has added a red cloak to Joseph and one to Mary, that covers her head and shoulders as far as the waist, while the child Jesus is wearing a dark gold tunic, which apart from providing a visual contrast with Mary emphasizes the religious symbolism of the color. For the Hebrews gold suggests divine and mystic power, while for Christians it is related to the divine spirit and the glory of faith triumphant (VRIES, 1976, p. 220). The fact that Jesus is portrayed as larger than a newborn baby, as in the 1937 painting, points to his importance as God’s son;
- the serene expressions on the faces – Joseph looking at Mary and her child, and Mary gazing into the distance – also contrast in their mildness with those in the 1937 painting, especially in relation to Mary, perhaps reminding one of her expressions in Fra Angelico;
- the language of hands, if compared to that of the 1937 painting, is also highly expressive, emphasizing a feature that will reappear in many of Portinari’s works, as it has already in previous ones. Jesus’ right hand, leaning on his left arm, seems to bless Mary and to form a pair with Mary’s right hand, so that they resemble the wings of an angel. His left hand lies in an analogous position to Mary’s right hand, suggesting the intimacy between mother and Son. Joseph’s hands are also emphasized, his left hand resting on the ass’s head, again in a protective attitude, while his right hand holds the animal’s reins, indicating the way, which is suggested by the diagonal position of his arm, as in Giotto;
- the haloes, limited to a fine golden line, are more transparent than in the 1937 painting, and especially so in comparison with Giotto and Fra Angelico, giving the painting more lightness. Besides not

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interfering with the lines of the mountains in the background, they also bring out the human quality of the group, which we will also find in other versions of the theme in Portinari;

– the figure of the ass seems to be a replica of the ass in Giotto, only the other way round. Even the harness is in the same position, as also are the movements of the legs: the right leg raised, the left leg straight.

What calls our attention most as we look more closely at the background is the way the folds of Mary's and Joseph's garments are reproduced in the sides of the pyramidal mountains that stretch to the horizon, with their nuances of white and grey. As in Giotto and Fra Angelico, they serve to frame the figures of Joseph and Mary with the Child, besides suggesting a visual identity between the figures and the landscape. The shape of these mountains is already present in other works by Portinari, such as the mountains in the background of the 1949 etching *O braço de Tiradentes (Tiradentes' Arm)* (Fig. 21).

Perhaps the most innovative feature of the 1952 painting, in contrast with the 1937 one, Fra Angelico and to some extent Giotto, is the way the ground is depicted with almost cubist lines: geometrical areas in the foreground, in shades of brown and pink, suggesting that the Holy Family are making their way uphill, gradually giving way in the background to a more homogeneous pink that stretches into the distance. Three small stones soften the straight lines of the soil and at the same time recall other works by Portinari, such as *A Família de Retirantes (Family of Migrants)* (1944) (Fig. 22), whose scenario is also a stony desert with a mountain in the background. The works are linked, even though the contexts are totally different: the 1952 work represents the Holy Family's hope as "migrants" fleeing from Herod, while the 1944 expressionist work, with its strong colors, the tired features and squalid bodies, portrays the anguish and despair of a family of northeastern migrants fleeing from the drought. In their turn, the geometrical lines of the pink and beige ground will reappear, with more detail, in the canvas *Futebol (Soccer)* (1958) (Fig. 23). All

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these intramedial relations reinforce the recurrence and at the same time the transmutation which certain elements undergo in the artist's work.



Fig. 21, 22 e 23 www.portinari.org.br

We can thus see how the five works of 1952 establish an intramedial dialogue among themselves and with previous works, as well as pointing towards later works, for the theme of “The Flight into Egypt” continued to inspire Portinari.

The five paintings and drawings of 1955, in their turn, present new stylistic elements that establish a relationship of the Holy Family not only with the painter's own family – as Portinari portrays his father as St. Joseph in two of these works – but also through the similarity of the figures with the paintings of the “migrants”, suggesting that the inter- and intramedial transpositions of *The Flight into Egypt* served Portinari as a lever to transpose it to a current Brazilian intracultural reality – the flight of the “migrants” from the Northeastern drought, in search of better living conditions in other regions of the country – and, simultaneously, to a familiar context and a current intercultural reality: the emigration of Portinari's family from Italy to Brazil; for

His parents were poor, and so was the land from which they came, in the region of Veneto, Italy. The land they find, Brodósqui, is rich with coffee plantations. (...) But the family – father, mother, 12 children (Cândido was the second) – will not share this fortune. All will have to work, and hard. And behave according to the severe moral and

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religious standards brought from the Italian province, in those early years of the twentieth century. (PORTINARI, 1967, p. 2, my translation)

In the oil on wood painting (Fig. 24), the ass is being led by Joseph, while Mary is seated sideways on it, with the child Jesus on her lap, as if looking at us:



Fig. 24 www.portinari.org.br/

The simplicity of the somber blue background and ochre-toned foreground concentrates our attention on the Holy Family: Mary's dark blue, black and ochre garment and the ass's tones in dark brown could indicate a nocturnal, more charged atmosphere, along with the expressions on Mary's and Joseph's faces. Joseph's garments also blend into the colors of the ground. The whole expressivity of the group seems to be in Mary's resigned face, while the Child's expression is one of astonishment. The expressivity of the hands is also noteworthy, reminding us of the hands so often portrayed by Portinari. The more geometrical lines of Joseph's and Mary's figures and garments and, to some extent, of the ass's body, reinforce the stylistic changes which Portinari has introduced in his canvases.

If we focus on the two works (Figs. 25 and 26) which portray Portinari's father as St. Joseph, we see in both an important feature in the pictorial evolution of the theme: in contrast with the earlier works,

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in which we seem to observe the scene of the Holy Family's passage towards Egypt from the side, the figures are now seen frontally, as if they are moving towards us– with only Joseph turned to the right, indicating the way. This change of perspective suggests the close connection that this flight establishes with the reality of *A Família de Retirantes* seen above and with the artist's own reality, the time in which Portinari's parents came as migrants to Brazil.

In the crayon and graphite drawing (Fig. 25), the representation of the facial features of the Holy Family brings out the serene expression on Mary's face, with her eyes closed, and Joseph's determined, confident expression, looking ahead, while the child Jesus' gaze expresses assurance, in his mother's arms. Joseph's image, with tunic and sandals, pulling the reins of the ass on which Mary and the child Jesus are mounted, reminds us again of *A Família de Retirantes*, thus recontextualizing *The Flight into Egypt* in the flight of Portinari's family and in the migrants' flight from the scourge of drought. The haloes which surround the Holy Family's heads add due significance to the theme, further emphasized by the white background.



Fig. 25 e 26 – [http:// www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

The oil painting, (Fig. 26), in its turn, portrays, against a light blue background, a thin sickle-shaped moon, reminding us of the

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passing of time: Joseph, walking to the right, with his head turned to the left, as if looking protectively at Mary and the Child seated on the ass which he is leading. His head reproduces the features of the artist's father: the long face, wrinkled and aged, short hair, straight nose and closed lips. The bold strokes highlight his geometrical tunic, in ochre, bluish and greenish tones, reproducing the sky as well as the soil, while his sandals emphasize the size of his feet, reminding us of the long journey they are making. Mary's and the Child's garments, in blue and white tones, match the tones of Joseph's tunic, and well as of the ass's brown and white tonality, highlighting the chromatic harmony of the group. Mary's face, with closed eyes, delicate features and white skin, as well as the Child's rosy face, blond curly hair and round eyes, suggest the confidence they feel, guided by Joseph. Their haloes are replaced by square areas of a stronger blue, thus emphasizing the outline of their heads against the light blue sky. By the fact that these square areas are in consonance with the square areas on the ground and on Joseph's, Mary's and the child Jesus' garments, giving a visual harmony to the scene, these marked strokes confirm how "the same paint, attributed to an insignificant detail, to a reflex, to a background hue, or to a prominent object in the subject of the painting, takes on diverse values" (SOURIAU, 1969, p. 225, my translation).

The simplicity of the painting, eliminating any details in the landscape which might confer identity to it, gives dimension to the space to be crossed, at the same time liberating the figures from unnecessary contextualization. However, the fact that Portinari is portraying his father in Joseph adds a topicality to the scene, making *The Flight into Egypt* again an intercultural episode, as it brings to mind not only his parents' emigration from Italy to Brazil, but also, in broader terms, the mass exodus of people for religious, political or simply survival reasons. The serenity of their expressions, however, suggests the tranquility with which they are facing their journey.

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If the drawing and the painting portraying Portinari's father as Saint Joseph already establish this inter/intramedial and intercultural link with the emigrants who come to Brazil, the other two 1955 works – especially the colored crayon drawing which served as a study for the painting *The Flight into Egypt* – establish a further intercultural link with Brazilian reality: the migrants fleeing from drought.

The drawing (Fig. 27) in bluish, ochre, yellow and violet tones, presents sinuous contour lines in the sky, suggesting clouds, and on the ground, suggesting distant hills, as well as in the figures and garments of the Holy Family, thus conferring a visual harmony between the figures and the landscape. However, the contour lines in relation to Joseph, and to some extent to Mary, further reinforced by black strokes, emphasize their worn clothes, their bare feet and the disconsolate expression on their faces. The work thus not only represents *The Flight into Egypt* but, through its thematic and visual similarity to *A Família de Retirantes*, could suggest the flight of a family of migrants from one part of Brazil to another, thereby increasing the aesthetic, religious and social impact of the message:



Fig. 27 e 28 – [http:// www.portinari.org.br](http://www.portinari.org.br)

The oil painting (Fig. 28), in bluish, ochre, orange and grayish tones, with spatula strokes in the figures and in the sky suggesting a

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pointillist influence, presents a simplification of strokes and a softening of colors compared with the previous paintings: Joseph, in a yellow tunic, Mary and the child Jesus in bluish tones, and the ass in grayish tones. Following the outlines of the figures, square areas of a stronger blue further reinforce the outline of the heads against the light blue sky, replacing the haloes, as in the painting with Portinari's father (Fig. 26).

Mary's darker skin – enhanced by the white veil – as well as Joseph's and the Child's skin, suggest a long period of exposure to the desert sun. The ass, with Mary and the Child, moves in our direction, while Joseph, holding the reins, walks to the right indicating the way, but with his head turned towards the front of the painting, as if conscious of watching over his family. The relevance of this work, therefore, in relation to the previous ones, lies in Portinari's constant stylistic renovation in relation to the theme, proof of the topicality that "The Flight into Egypt" continues to represent for him.

This topicality will reach its apogee in the pictorial transposition of the text to the 1959 drawing *Exodus* (Fig. 29), which portrays the Holy Family wearing white tunics with veils over their heads, mounted on a camel. Symbolic of resistance, because it can go without drinking for long periods of time, besides being the main means of transport in the Orient (FERGUSON, 1972, p. 13), the camel has its function further emphasized by a flock of white sheep which follow it: symbolic of innocence, helplessness and sacrifice (VRIES, 1976, p. 418), they recall the figure of the child Jesus. In the background, the profiles of a horse and another camel, on which three more figures are sketched, suggest that there are other "retirantes" on their way. The drawing thus confirms the wide range Portinari is giving this Exodus – a word that refers not only to the flight of the Hebrews from Egypt but also to the migration of a whole people to another place. In terms of symbolic relevance, the drawing thus becomes emblematic of all fugitives from religious, political or other forms of persecution, which have always existed and will continue to

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exist, and in which we participate daily, as witnesses, by way of the news transmitted by the media:



Fig. 29 www.portinari.org.br

Conclusion

The theme of “The Flight into Egypt”, which has inspired painters such as Giotto and Fra Angelico to pictorially transpose the biblical episode to their works, has been given even greater importance in Brazilian art and culture by Portinari’s recontextualizations. As we have seen, his works about this episode establish a dialogue not only among themselves, showing his thematic and plastic evolution, but reveal features which maintain a dialogue with his other works, thus establishing a dimension that goes not only from the inter- to the intramedial but historically from the inter- to the intracultural. As he makes *The Flight into Egypt* symbolic of all human beings in flight from misery, hunger, political and religious persecution, as well as from the hostility of nature itself, Portinari takes us back, in a wider context, to the very history of Humanity. As Ernesto Grassi states, in discussing “Personality and Impersonality in a work of art”,

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All works of art have a double temporal relation: on the one hand, they have externally a chronological reference, in that they appear at a certain time and result, in the first place, from a recreation of experiences which belong to a certain time; on the other hand, they overcome time insofar as they raise these same experiences to the universal and eternally valid plane. They do not originate, however (...) in the personal experiences of their creators but in intuitions, and intuitions aim at the metamorphosis of the world. (GRASSI, n.d., p. 106, my translation)

It is this intuition that Portinari has added to the pictorial recreations of his predecessors which makes the theme not only as topical and urgent as in Herod's time, but makes its ultimate purpose "the metamorphosis of the world".

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