

Art and Progress. Portuguese Colonial Representations in the Great World Exhibitions

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The great exhibitions - world, universal, international or colonial - promoted in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century in the light of western development were one of the most important factors in spreading the idea that progress, an outcome of the Industrial Revolution, was essential. In effect, right from the start these events were privileged spaces for presenting and promoting the socio-economic development of an imperial Europe, which had mapped out the world. The colonial idea was not forgotten, and its representation increasingly dominated the great exhibitions where it had been present ever since the first exhibition of 1851. As a result, the configuration of this faraway reality was brought to the metropolises of the Old Continent, and the hegemony of western civilisation was highlighted as was its role as a civilising agent in a combination capable of bringing progress to the overseas possessions.

In this context, the great exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries were used as vehicles to legitimate and disseminate the colonial policies of the European empires, and to spread propaganda about them. However, they were also, and primarily, used as vehicles for an artistic culture that reflected the worldview of a society that saw itself on a global scale and was the fruit of progress, a progress it felt an urgent need to disseminate.

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