

Ricardo Espírito Santo: philanthropy and banking (1919-1954)

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Introduction

It was the end of the 19th century when on 12th November 1900 Ricardo Ribeiro do Espírito Santo e Silva was born, the third son a the Portuguese banker José Maria do Espírito Santo e Silva.

This future businessman - who would become famous as one of the most renowned Portuguese bankers, and nicknamed the "Renaissance Prince", besides being an art lover and a Maecenas - donated to Portugal the Decorative Arts School and Museum under the name Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation. Could this be considered "business beyond the firm?" Yes and no. Let's see why.

His short life was inversely proportional to the plenitude of how he lived the first five decades of the 20th century.

Ricardo was born at a time when the world was witnessing great transformations and inventions and the cultural and material progress made life more pleasant and safe. His father, for three decades in the exchange and banking business, had, by the end of the century, gained some respect within the Portuguese economic and financial activities.

Just like *private bankers*, mainly British, he tried to give to his sons a strict education, providing them with the necessary means to inherit not only the name but also the professional skills suitable to move forward successfully with their father's business whose succession he was carefully preparing.

When Ricardo was 18, he was attending the meetings at the Espírito Santo Silva & C^a. Banking House, managed by his older brother. By the end of 1932 he succeeded him in office, already as President of the Board of Directors of Espírito Santo Bank. In 1935 he finished, in Lisbon, a degree in Economic and Financial Sciences.

The world of Ricardo de Espírito Santo was not over in the business activities. Besides the management of the banking business, another world, probably much wider for him, was awaiting for the action of his refined sensibility.

RICARDO, THE COLLECTOR

When we look at the photos of this banker one feels the intensity of this man who according to a Portuguese journalist of that time seemed "a Gainsborough model wearing tailor made models of Piccadilly," he never stopped searching for beauty, both in the arts and in the monotonous banking operations to which he was equally devoted.

In 1918 he married a 16 year old Jewish girl, the daughter of a dealer from Gibraltar. Just before the wedding he began a collection of antiques meant to furnish his new family house. In an interview published in the issue of February 1955 (the same month he passed away) of the French magazine Connaissance des Arts he confessed: "My first intention was to buy objects and furniture to put in my future house. I was seventeen years old. I have to say I became independent quite early. I lost my father when I was fifteen. When I was seventeen, I was engaged and I married at eighteen."

He bought an 18th century Portuguese silver cutlery with a turtle case and an Arraiolos carpet from the end of the 17th century in an antique shop. With these two items he began his collection.

Since his youth he was interested in decorative arts. In this area, and throughout the years, he acquires a deep knowledge together with a remarkable artistic

sense, becoming one of the main Portuguese experts, while still an amateur. He was a banker!

One of his first worries as a collector was to commit with resolution in the reconstruction of the Portuguese heritage shorn by sixty years of Spanish domination (1600-1640) and by the French Invasions (1807-1811). A great lover of ancient art, he was interested in paintings, statuary, furniture, parchments, porcelain, glass and goldsmith.

This intention was far from being common in Portugal during the 1920s even among privileged social classes, as it was already the case of the Espírito Santo family.

“No one, or almost no one, paid attention to ancient objects,” Ricardo Espírito Santo said in the above mentioned interview. “There were in every family without suspecting their value. I remember going to my grandmother’s house and be amazed looking at her porcelains that, for her, had no importance. In the kitchen, servants had their meals in Companhia das Índias plates, which were there because they were no longer a complete set. At the time when I really started to buy, Portugal was visited by all the big antiquarians from Paris, London and New York. So that one can have an idea, they took two or three hundred sets of Companhia das Índias tableware.”

THE GROWTH OF THE COLLECTION

A passionate art collector, Ricardo did not neglect his banking business. In the second half of the 1930s, the merge of the Bank with his family name with another bank was planned, negotiated and carried out by him, an operation that confirmed the organizational maturity the Bank had reached, being a clear proof of the trust that the Espírito Santo bankers (Ricardo and his two brothers) and shareholders had in the future of the institution.

The administrative restructuring and power decentralization with the aim of providing the banking services of institution he was presiding, in order to be more efficient and have more quality, together with a suitable management of the human resources available, were just some of the priority actions carried out during the years that this banker-collector presided the directions of the family Bank.

Not even the troubled times of the World War II – during which he stood out as the main Portuguese financier, attracting passions of contrary signs – Allies or Nazis – slowed down this search for beauty that, soon, became insatiable.

He would carefully browse the catalogues of the main antiquarians in the world from whom he would order by phone. In the evenings, at home, he welcomed *marchands* when he returned from the Bank, where he spent the day. He privileged Decorative Arts, which he considered “the highest expression of civilization and elegance, as they are a consequence of the collective development of taste.” Finally, in 1953 (one year before passing away) he donated to the Portuguese Government, the Foundation bearing his name. Located in an old, abandoned 18th century Palace, which was purchased and refurnished, the Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation houses a wide repository of art pieces purchased throughout the years by the collector, as well as the Decorative Arts School - Museum. Its main goal was to train professional craftsmen able to restore furniture, gold pieces, porcelain, faience and painting in a country (Portugal) where according to the donor “*had the best workers in the world.*” Before his premature death, he organized in Paris an exhibition of Portuguese and French silverware with pieces of his private collection; the exhibition was repeated in Lisbon and it was only inaugurated in November 1954 and it closed already after his death in February 1955.

In the Lisbon exhibition, according to the contemporaries, what was left from that show was, besides the intimate warmth of the personality, the human unity and the higher sense of aesthetic style, the memory of Ricardo Espírito Santo. Without his lifetime action none of what is now in the Azurara Palace would have

been possible, where still today is located the Decorative Arts Museum, property of the Portuguese Government. His presence is quite noticeable in everything: in the subtle taste of the exhibition arrangements, which is still deeply inspired by his suggestions and experience and by the nature of pieces, which were his favourite for the construction of a unique image of Renaissance transported to our time.

Among what could be seen by the public in Lisbon at the Museum he built, were «polvilhadoras», tea jars, cutlery cases, punch bowls and jars.

Portuguese and French decorative arts always deserved the special interest of the banker. From France stand out in his collection the works of painters such as Jean Pillement (who lived several years in Portugal), Quillard and Antoine Watteau, all from the 18th century.

But his biggest passion was the Portuguese art, which he tried to bring back to the country. Christine Garnier, a French journalist, drew his portrait, where it is mentioned that passionate search: "Today, as then, whenever he finds abroad something beautiful with the Portuguese brand, he rushes to buy it to bring it with love back to his country." The search sometimes took him close-by, other times far away. By the way, we remember the episode of the multipurpose table that Ricardo bought to an old lady in downtown Lisbon, in cash, because even after having recognized the buyer, she did not trust cheques. With the same commitment he went to Poland and bought the furniture and decoration pieces of a whole castle.

The entrepreneur spirit of Ricardo de Espírito Santo Silva – dazzled by the beauty and superior category of Portuguese silverware – always thought of gathering a collection as wide as possible of those art creations and give them to know to an erudite public, both in Portugal and abroad. His collector's experience (and of the exhibitions he made possible) did not deny that artist intuition.

RICARDO ESPÍRITO SANTO SILVA FOUNDATION

Established by Ricardo Espírito Santo and donated, as before mentioned, to the Portuguese Government in 1953, this institution is the live testimony of the legacy left to coming generations of the philanthropy of a unique banker. Handicraft academy, someone called it. The Ricardo Espírito Santo Foundation represents for the luxury arts, what the old São Francisco Academy represented for the Fine Arts.

According to Egas Moniz, the Portuguese Nobel Prize Winner for Medicine, Ricardo was “our sharpest and noblest ancient art pieces lover, ranging from paintings to statuary; old parchments and miniatures to furniture from other times; rare pieces evoking historical dates or recalling old families, even the most varied glasses and porcelains from past centuries.

With its institution it was fulfilled the wish of Ricardo Espírito Santo, the Maecenas-banker that Portugal was fortunate enough to have.

But his philanthropic action was not over in his biggest work.

Social responsibility of Ricardo Espírito Santo *avant la lettre*

The fragile social conditions of the country throughout the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, worsen by the dramatic consequences resulting from two conflicts in Europe, awoke in the civil society moments that led to the protection of the poor and disadvantaged, with special focus on unprotected childhood and the orphans.

This true situation was also of interest for the banker’s generosity – a quality he inherited from his father – and in 1938 he supported the activities of the male orphanage school that, at the time, was almost abandoned, close to ruins.

Soon, and delegating the responsibilities of the mission in a restrict group of workers he trusted, normally bank workers, he promoted the first refurbishment works of the degraded buildings and boosted within his personal and institutional contact network the help, offers and donation, which allowed not only the maintenance of the Orphanage School, as well as the continuous extension of the premises allowing hundreds of unfortunate children to have a different future from the one that was expected for them.

Ricardo Espírito Santo kept alive not only his interest in this social solidarity institution as also recommended to the employees of the Bank he presided the same collective solidarity principles.

Also in other social and sport life sectors, the Portuguese banker stood out. Besides a good tennis and fencing player, in 1933, he was the Portuguese golf champion. During several years, he presided the *Sporting Clube de Cascais*, whose expansion he supported. In 1940 he was elected president of the Golf Portuguese Federation.

From his interest in Fado (the Portuguese national song) and in sports, to his sharp vision of financial and political realities – namely international ones – which made him a respected power interlocutor, including so many other aspects of his personality, all of them had transformed the great banker into one of the most important and famous people of Portugal.

He was also the first Maecenas of Playgrounds in Lisbon. In a dinner at the French Embassy, Ricardo Espírito Santo said to a poetess (who was the mentor of the project) that he believed in that work of support to poor children. And, for the construction of the first playground, in Lisbon, he gave her a cheque of 30 *contos* (c. € 30.000). To justify that support he said "... I find poetry in it and I like poets."

In fact, the banker helped not only poets, but also Portuguese painters, actors and singers, several expressions of the Portuguese culture such as António

Botto, Beatriz Costa, Amália Rodrigues, Eduardo Malta. He sponsored several books, all devoted to art, of which are worth mentioning: *Dicionário dos Pintores e Escultores Portugueses ou que trabalharam em Portugal* (Dictionary of Portuguese Painters and Sculptors or that have worked in Portugal) and *Obras-Primas da pintura flamenga dos séculos XV e XVI em Portugal* (Flemish Painting Masterpieces from the 15th and 16th centuries in Portugal). He also wrote several articles on Chinese porcelain in the *Arte de Ontem e de Hoje* magazine, of which he was the editor and he also wrote the preface of dozens of books related with decorative arts.

Having finished the short explanation about the multifaceted activity of the banker within the decorative arts and social responsibility fields we shall focus on the theme of the conference *business beyond the firm*, having as a background the interrelationships between his business activity and philanthropy.

Philanthropy as a business?

The most representative organization established by the businessman Ricardo Espírito Santo, established in 1953 and whose activities still endure, is the result not only of a decisive personal calling (and it was not inherited from his ancestors for collecting), almost innate to his personality, but also of the availability financial and other resources that the banker had resulting from the profits earned with the work of his professional life and of the influence of his powerful social networks, without forgetting the comfort provided by the inheritance received after the death of his father in 1915 (around 1.8 million euros/1.5 million GBP)).

The RESS Foundation that he established is, since its origin, a non-profit state association that during the last 50 years has been standing out as an almost exclusive center for education and teaching of decorative arts in Portugal.

Without a direct connection to the Espírito Santo Bank, once all the investment came from the personal fortune of the donator, however its existence

and promotion on the media and artistic networks of the country are due, one should say, almost exclusively to the name Espírito Santo, a renowned brand within the Portuguese and international financial sectors. As a matter of fact, even today, the majority of the population and even official entities believe that the Foundation belongs to the Espírito Santo Family, and not to the Portuguese Government.

The *branding* behind the name Ricardo Espírito Santo was a booster of the trust within the scope of North American and European *marchands*. The institution Espírito Santo Bank, Portuguese banking leader, one can in a certain way say that it assured the safety of all purchase orders coming from Lisbon done by the President of the Board of Directors of the company.

The *skills* acquired by the banker during the performance of his professional activity as a top leader of the banking organization he managed helped maybe to assure his purchase orders. And if they were not as profitable as the banking operations assurance of success, it was certain that in the purchase order of art pieces – carried out by intermediates he had in several European capital cities and in New York – the safety principle and even some conservatism limited his choices and bids on art auctions.

It was certainly not by chance that his intermediates – especially in the United States – were mainly renowned North American bankers, with whom he kept friendship relationships resulting from the banking international activities of the bank.

Therefore, one can conclude that the same principles applied in the bank management were the basis for the action lines when he bid on the purchase of art pieces.

As a result of those principles, it is understood that in a speculative market such as art auctions, Ricardo Espírito Santo was used to see his offers outbid, as the remarks on the auction catalogues prove it, and losing a reasonable part of his bids, as the amount he offered was often lower than the amount the works were then bought.

Without allowing his passion for collecting to affect the full development of his work or without allowing the banking organization to suffer with this parallel activity – though there are not any statistics that can prove this assertion – the annual results of this bank, in the different and difficult Portuguese and European economic environment between 1936 and 1955, prove the success of the management of Ricardo Espírito Santo and his team.

The example of the Portuguese banker did not have followers in the period he lived. Worried about the management, and many times, about the difficulties or even the lack of success in business, the Portuguese businessmen, contemporary to Ricardo Espírito Santo, were not as active within the scope of social or cultural responsibility that could be compared to the action in those areas projected, developed and financed by the banker.

The philanthropic example of this businessman was therefore for many decades the only one of this type and even today it is hard to find philanthropic actions of businessmen with the dimension of the ones left by Ricardo.