



INTERNSHIP MEMORIES: THE EXPERIENCE CASE AT SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to report the memories of the supervised internship that resulted in an art exhibition featuring ex-votos, offerings made by devotees in locations considered religious sanctuaries as a token of gratitude/payment for received blessings/miracles. I had the opportunity to follow the theoretical concepts on how to organize an exhibition and also participate in its practical assembly. The exhibition focused on the theme of popular religiosity, a widespread practice throughout the country, representing the faith and devotion of the people.

Keywords: Ex-votos. São Francisco Cultural Center. Exhibition.

INTRODUCTION

In the proposed theme for the undergraduate internship in Religious Studies, namely Supervised Internship II, the focus is on 'Religion, Culture, and Symbolic System.' A project was developed for an art exhibition, covering everything from its theoretical conception to its practical setup.

The exhibition focused on popular religiosity, featuring ex-votos, a widespread practice throughout the Northeast that represents the faith and devotion of the people. The connection between these pieces and the Penha procession was also explored—a traditional pilgrimage where ex-votos are present throughout the entire route and are left at the sanctuary by the faithful. This pilgrimage, already recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of the state of Paraíba, is also considered one of the largest expressions of popular religiosity in the entire country.

In this experience, we deepened our reflection on the responsibilities of the scholar of religion in a cultural center and realized how opportune this

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internship is, allowing us to perceive in practice the relational structure of the theoretical insights outlined in our curriculum.

As for the methodology, we approached the internship field from a dialogical perspective, incorporating in-depth bibliographic and documentary research, along with the experiential data that culminates in this article. We realized that the experiences stemming from this internship can open up numerous dialogues regarding the roles and necessary contributions of Scholars of Religion in both public and private organizations.

DETAILS OF THE INSTITUTION

The São Francisco Cultural Center is located in the historic center of the city of João Pessoa, in the state of Paraíba. Its address is situated at Ladeira São Francisco, S/N - Centro, João Pessoa - PB, 58010-650. The Cultural Center operates within an architectural complex formed by the Church and Convent of Santo Antônio, the Chapel of the Third Order of São Francisco, the Chapel of São Benedito, the House of Prayer of the Third Order (known as the Golden Chapel), the Cloister of the Third Order, as well as a fountain and a large courtyard with a crucifix, constituting one of the most remarkable testimonies of the Baroque era in Brazil.

Its origins date back to the arrival at the site in 1588 of Friar Melchior de Santa Catarina, tasked with establishing a Franciscan mission. The convent was founded in 1589, designed by Friar Francisco dos Santos, four years after the Portuguese occupation of the region, and was completed in 1591 by Guardian Friar Antônio do Campo Maior. However, its present configuration is the result of various reforms carried out in the 17th and 18th centuries. Initially, it was a small wattle-and-daub building with 12 cells and a cloister, later expanded in the following years, now in limestone masonry. In 1634, it was occupied by Dutch invaders and turned into a fortification. After being recovered by the Franciscans, it was renovated, with the works completed in 1661. Over the next two centuries, it underwent further interventions until the church's facade was completed in 1779, a date engraved on the frontispiece. The interiors were richly decorated, featuring



tilework, gilded woodwork, and paintings. The convent became the largest Franciscan center north of Pernambuco, playing a decisive role in the exploration and occupation of the region through the missionary and cultural work of the friars (SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER, 2023).

The institution currently functions as a cultural center, although it still hosts religious activities open to a limited audience. Its primary focus lies in the fields of culture and tourism, hosting annual exhibitions featuring local and out-of-town artists with varied themes. It also welcomes daily visits from students of public schools, colleges, and a large number of tourists from across the country. The cultural center is a must-visit for those wanting to explore the history and architecture of Brazil's colonial period. The guided tour is an excellent way to explore the various areas of the complex and learn more about its rich history. The Religious Studies program recognizes the importance of this space as a means of acquiring knowledge and, at the same time, contributing to the institution through research, continually expanding its role in this space, which is one of the most significant in our city.

MEMORIES OF ACTIVITIES

The work carried out at the São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF) involved organizing an exhibition of artworks focused on popular culture with the theme: 'Ex-Votos: Faith, Promise, and Gratitude.' Ex-votos constitute an expression of popular religiosity, representing promises made by devotees who, upon receiving a granted grace, create a sculpture with a strong narrative appeal. These sculptures are left in sacred places such as churches, crosses, chapels, and even graves. According to Fagundes (2015), some ex-votos may evoke more than one interpretation regarding the secondary theme, as they do not clearly present their relationship with the requested miracle. The representation of a heart, for example, could signify a cardiac issue or a romantic relationship. Representations of heads pose the most difficulty in this stage of iconographic analysis (FAGUNDES, 2015, p. 44).

Understanding the importance of keeping alive the traditions of popular religiosity, the conducted study is highly relevant so that new generations have



knowledge of how the practice of ex-votos was, expressing the faith and devotion of the faithful. Originating from pagan cultures and later adapted by Christian culture, it has persisted to this day, becoming one of the most significant expressions of faith and devotion, especially in the Northeast region of the country.

Extensive research was conducted during the theoretical phase of the project to better understand what an ex-voto is, its different typologies, and the role it plays in popular religiosity, specifically in Paraíba. The focus was on practices carried out during pilgrimages throughout the state, particularly in the Penha procession held in João Pessoa, which is already recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Paraíba.

The Penha procession, also known as the Penha pilgrimage, is one of the largest expressions of popular religiosity in all of Brazil. In its 260th edition, it stands as one of the most significant religious events in the state, with the participation of over 500,000 people. The procession brings together devotees from various regions of the country in a 14-kilometer walk, starting from the Church of Nossa Senhora de Lourdes in the city center to the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha in the South Zone of the city.

The connection between this procession and the exhibition lies in the fact that the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha itself is already an ex-voto. According to accounts, the sacred site was built in gratitude for a grace received by the Portuguese navigator Sílvio Siqueira. Facing a storm at sea, he made a promise to Nossa Senhora da Penha: if he safely reached land, he would build a chapel at the highest point of the city, which indeed happened in the year 1763. Recognizing the importance of the procession and its relation to ex-votos, the event was also featured in the exhibition through photos illustrating the entire route.

At this moment, it was possible to understand how an exhibition is curated, how its logistics function, and how a narrative related to the chosen theme is constructed. Access to bibliographic references was also crucial for



gaining more knowledge on the subject. Interaction with professionals in the field and guided visits to other ongoing exhibitions served as a foundation for the practical activities in the pre-exhibition, exhibition, and post-exhibition phases. One of the standout professionals is the curator, responsible for selecting the pieces to be exhibited, understanding each work in its context, establishing connections between the pieces, ensuring they engage with the audience, organizing the logistics of the exhibition space, and determining the arrangement of the pieces in their designated places.

The work followed a detailed schedule, with weekly meetings held on Tuesday afternoons, allowing for some adjustments to the calendar. Our first meeting took place at CCSF, where we were welcomed by the institution's representatives, André and Maria Helena. Following an introduction, we engaged in a discussion where the main points regarding our work were addressed. Soon after, we had a valuable opportunity to visit the exhibition of the visual artist from Paraíba, Wilson Figueiredoi, who has several of his works scattered throughout the city. It was an afternoon of significant learning, as we had the chance to see firsthand how an exhibition is structured. Mr. Wilson provided us with a wealth of information about exhibitions, shared some of his history, discussed his art, the process of creating his pieces, and the sources of his inspiration. It was an incredible learning experience.

At the second meeting, our discussions focused on the exhibition plan. The first topic addressed was the issue of the exhibition title. Throughout the week, all group members were tasked with developing two title proposals, which they brought to be presented during the meeting. After all the proposals were presented, it was agreed upon that the exhibition title would be: 'Ex-votos: Faith, Promise, and Gratitude.'

We also set some dates for completing the stages of the project, and the opening date of the exhibition was already established for November 24. We concluded by observing pieces that would be exhibited, a task that requires sensitivity because each piece carries a narrative about the grace attained by the one who brought it, often with nothing written. We selected some texts to



study theoretically how an exhibition is conducted. We filled out the form regarding the entire exhibition process, including the project title, execution period, target audience, etc. We categorized some pieces by colors to conduct experiments on the display stands, evaluating which would look better and attract more attention. We discussed the justification and objective of the project, which was in its initial phase, that is, in pre-production.

In the following days, the curatorial text that would be part of the exhibition was presented, and some texts were provided for a more theoretical foundation on ex-votos, pilgrimage, and procession. The color of the display stands was determined, and some pieces to be exhibited were selected. The space was also finalized, and we conducted a small exhibition rehearsal with the assistance of the institution's museologist, who added valuable insights.

In the final meetings, the invitations that would be sent to participants at the opening of the exhibition were defined, as well as all the dynamics that would happen during it were shown. During the week, texts were sent to compose the written part that would also be part of the exhibition. Some pieces were chosen to be exhibited and we visited the workshop where image restorations take place and where the donated objects and the cultural center itself are kept. A lesson plan was also created, which was part of the training for the guides who would accompany visitors through the exhibition.

CONCLUSION

The internship experience was of great significance, despite some difficulties that I consider normal as it was something new. Tasked with participating in curatorial work, the entire process has been a valuable learning experience. Through this work, I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge of how an exhibition is curated, its logistics, and the construction of a narrative for the theme being addressed.

Access to bibliographic references was also very important to obtain a deeper understanding of the focused subject. Interaction with professionals in the field, guided visits to other exhibitions, and practical activities in the pre-



exhibition, exhibition, and post-exhibition phases were all of great importance for the overall learning experience.

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