

# THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN DGPC MUSEUMS COLLECTIONS: DISCOURSE, IDENTITIES AND SENSE OF BELONGING<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The basis of this chapter is the post-doctorate research «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging» being conducted at the Department of Heritage Studies of the Faculty of Arts, University of Porto, and at the Directorate General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC). This text is essentially about the problem of disabilities and social exclusion, focusing particularly on the relation between the social role of museums and the fight against social inequality. At the same time, it will look further into issues related with the way disability is represented in DGPC Museum Collections and its impact on the discourses in museums, addressing every possible avenue for building more positive and innovative narratives. The issue of disability will be analysed as a social phenomenon, questioning the creation of identities and social categories that support the discrimination of disabled people, and thus limiting their social participation. It starts out from the idea that the public cultural narratives of disability — usually anchored in negative and depreciatory meanings —, create misconceptions about the reality of disabled people. While those meanings limit the way society relates to disability, they nevertheless lead to the actual identity

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distancing of this social group. In this sense, this chapter addresses the importance of museums as essential spaces for communicating ideas that may lead to social transformation and to a change of attitudes towards disability.

**Keywords:** disability, social exclusion, identity, museums, representation.

## INTRODUCTION

The slogan «Nothing about us without us» is often used by disability rights groups to express the conviction that disabled people should be wholly part of the decisions related with their lives and of the issues that affect them as a social group. One of the main aspects to support this idea will necessarily depend on a reflected approach on how disabled people have been represented over time and have played an active role in the matters that concern them. Such approach has the power to change categories and the usual perceptions about the representations of disability in a more positive way.

This is the core aspect of the post-doctorate research project, currently in progress, entitled «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging», funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology through the call for individual post-doctorate grants, having CITCEM and DGPC as host institutions. This research project stems from the idea that the issue of disability within museums is much more than just issues of physical access and communicative and educational interaction. It argues that although the elimination of barriers or provision of educational activities for disabled people can make access easier, it nevertheless does not solve the main problem that inhibits their lives, such as the lack of social participation. It is in line with the view that museums play a preponderant role in the identity construction of disabled people. It also assumes that museums are able to change the mainstream ways of thinking publicly about disability, thus contributing toward social transformation by suggesting new ways of looking at this social group.

Indeed, despite the current anti-discrimination policies issued by the European Community, aimed at creating equal opportunities for disabled people, Portugal continues to present significant data with regard to the limits imposed to their social participation<sup>2</sup>. These limits go beyond the removal of physical barriers and communicative interaction in the access to public, cultural and leisure facilities, relating to cultural issues attached to the social meaning of disability. It is therefore based on the idea that cultural values based on prejudice and sketchy attitudes regarding this group continue to prevent them from being fully included in society, thereby contributing to their discrimination and social exclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> PINTO, 2012; PORTUGAL, 2010.

The theoretical basis of «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging» rests on the social model of disability, in particular on its resolve to tackle disability as a human rights issue, highlighting the ways in which cultural representations strengthen negative attitudes and shape everyday social practices. Moreover, it also rests on the concept of «disabled identity», considering disability as an alternative culture that needs to be recognised, promoted and celebrated. This concept is intended to help enhance a more positive approach to disability and to the acceptance of social diversity. Consequently, it seeks to dissociate itself from the negative values attached to the topic of disability.

In this sense, this research project aims to study the representation of disability in DGPC museum collections, the purpose being to explore new ways of looking collectively at disability. It therefore draws on the legacy of the historical-artistic heritage to generate a deeper understanding of how the identity of disabled people has been socially constructed. With this in mind, it is also expected to help museum staff so that they can better understand the topic in question, and to open new avenues for new museum practices that promote various perspectives and voices in the presence of the same artistic object, creating places of knowledge, acceptance and enhancement of the cultural identity of disabled people.

## DISABILITY AND MUSEUMS: HOW CAN THE TWO COEXIST?

In an article dated 1991, Hunt sought to draw attention to how disabled people were publicly represented in the media, more precisely on television, in the press and in advertising, through the use of negative stereotypes:

*Disabled people have identified ten commonly recurring disabling stereotypes in the mass media. These include: the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic, as an object of curiosity or violence, as sinister or evil, as the super cripple, as atmosphere, as laughable, as her/his own worst enemy, as a burden, as non-sexual, and as being unable to participate in daily life. These stereotypes are particularly evident on television, in the press, and in advertising<sup>3</sup>.*

The very notion that the symbolic representation of disability rests on a number of negative stereotypes has not raised much controversy among researchers in disability studies. This idea stems from the evidence that the social imaginary on the identity of disabled people is indicative that there are relations of inferiority *versus* superiority vis-à-vis a standard of normality. Several authors have noted that the representational referents of disabled people are arranged publicly as a group of people segregated

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<sup>3</sup> HUNT, 1991: 45-48.

from society, in a kind of «a whole homogenised by its inadequacy, incapacity and low self-worth»<sup>4</sup>. This idea can also be found in the representation of disability in history, art history, archaeology and ethnography. The collections in several museums actually contain objects that address this topic, enabling a deeper understanding of how disability has been interpreted over different periods of time and social contexts.

In museums studies, some research work has focused on the problem of the representation of disability in museums. For example, Delin's study *Buried in the Footnotes: the representation of disabled people in museum and gallery collections*<sup>5</sup> has investigated evidence within UK museum collections that relates to the lives of disabled people, both historical and contemporary. The author concludes that the topic of the representation of disabled people in UK museum collections has been overlooked in museum discourses and practices, thus confirming its social impracticability and identity dissociation<sup>6</sup>.

Following this project, the Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service developed the project *Hidden Histories: Discovering Disability in Norwich's Museum Collections* with the purpose of revealing the «hidden histories» that would reflect the experience of living with a disability, depicted in their varied collections in Natural History, Social History, Military History, Archaeology and Contemporary Art. Overall, the project hoped to help change the lives of disabled people and the personal and social perceptions of disability<sup>7</sup>.

The research project *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*, developed at the Research Center for Museums and Galleries, of the University of Leicester, was coordinated by Dood and Sandell and worked with nine partner UK museums to bring together a number of social actors formed by disability activists, artists and professional of the cultural sector. The project grew from the analysis of a selection of historical sources that included disability-related narratives and testimonials of disabled people. Its purpose was to create different interpretative exhibitions to generate a deeper and more reflective understanding of the issue. Overall, this project found that the museums, through explanatory and educational practices, are conducive to the exploration of social issues insufficiently discussed publicly, as they convey ideas that are capable of contributing to social transformation and change of attitudes<sup>8</sup>.

Another example is the research developed by the academic Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Her work focuses on feminist and disability studies and she has contributed to the analysis of how the disabled body is represented in literature and visual arts. She focuses on how public cultural narratives on disability limit the way disabled people are

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<sup>4</sup> FERREIRA, 2007: 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> DELIN, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> DELIN, 2002: 84.

<sup>7</sup> TOOKE, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> DODD *et al.*, 2008: 10.

seen by the Other, and relates them with the emergence of new «public images» and their potential for shaping more positive and innovative narratives<sup>9</sup>.

Also, the doctoral thesis by Diana Walters *Attracting Zealots: Responses to disability in museum collections and practice in the early 21st century* found that disability is a key area for future research on museum collections. The author considered that many of the existing museum collections can open the way for the creation of promising dynamics and challenges related with more sensitive issues on the history of disability, attitudes and contemporary practices<sup>10</sup>.

## THE CONCEPT OF DISABILITY CULTURE

Another aspect that has often been pointed out by several researchers dedicated to the study of disability is the concept of «disability culture». This emerging concept appears in literature as a positive factor in the human diversity of disability, contrary to the «tragic perspective» and «negative perspective» that the topic raises<sup>11</sup>. The consolidation of the concept of «disability culture» is indeed based on the idea that the attitudes, values and prejudices that sustain social oppression perpetuated throughout the lives of disabled people can be challenged through the notion of a common culture among disabled people.

The concept of «disability culture» therefore appears as a way of generating awareness to the issues of representation, identity and social activism, proposing ways of criticising the reason why some ideas on disability were developed and continue to persist. This concept recognises that the cultural imaginary socially established around disability is one of the main obstacles to valuing the social status of the disabled person. It considers that this cultural imaginary must be deconstructed to make room for the social change necessary to improve the way how their lives in society.

One of the problems that has been pointed out in the analysis of the «disability culture» concept is the lack of acknowledgment of a specific identity and culture of disabled people. This has been pinpointed as one of the main causes for this group to be socially excluded, as its collective identity is disregarded, thus giving rise to other forms of oppression other than the structural and access barriers to physical, social, and cultural spaces, also limiting their social participation<sup>12</sup>.

Silverman argues that identity is something not always guaranteed to people surrounded by others who are different to them, and can generate unstable feelings related to the sense of belonging and filiation. This is often due to social factors that lead to

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<sup>9</sup> DODD *et al.*, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> WALTERS, 2007: 353.

<sup>11</sup> BARNES & MERCER, 2010: 187.

<sup>12</sup> BARNES & MERCER, 2010; LAWSON, 2001; PARSON, 2012.

the lack of opportunities, to ongoing negative stereotypes and to barriers that make it difficult for each individual to develop positive self-esteem<sup>13</sup>.

The study carried out by Hall also suggests that thought should be given to the analysis of the identity issue of disabled people around the problem of how «difference» is represented. When the author poses the question: «Does visual language reflect a truth about the world which is already there or does it produce meanings about the world through representing it?»<sup>14</sup>, he considers that the process of representation is formed by «shared values» that are produced around a specific social group in a specific place and at a specific time, through concepts, images, objects or feelings, thus forming the cultural imaginary of humanity on the same matters.

According to Hall, the representation system contains two key aspects: «language» and «discourse». They both define, to the «Other», the concepts, ideas or feelings that lead to the production of meaning. It is this meaning that bonds with power, regulating conducts, constructing and defining identities, and the ways in which some subjects are represented, reflected on or practiced. In this sense, the representation of a specific social group results from the meaning produced, while having at the same time an important role in the construction and transmission of that meaning through practices that are part of the «circuit of culture»<sup>15</sup>.

Indeed, the identity of disabled people has been constructed from a representational system about the meaning of the «Other», based on hierarchical relations of superiority *versus* inferiority, in which society imposes itself on the individual. This being the case, Ferreira concluded that, in the case of disability, collective identity is not constructed autonomously by the disabled people themselves. On the contrary, these people «realise» their difference as is defined by the «Other», based on negative aspects, leading to their marginalisation and exclusion. In other words, the author believes that the identity of disabled people is, in fact, a «non-identity»<sup>16</sup>.

## EXPLORING THE DGPC MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

The DGPC is a central service under the direct administration of the Portuguese State responsible for ensuring the management of the country's cultural heritage and for developing and implementing the national museum policy. The DGPC is responsible for the management of fifteen national museums situated in Coimbra, Lisbon, Porto and Viseu<sup>17</sup>. The museums' collections are varied and extensive, ranging from the pre-history

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<sup>13</sup> SILVERMAN, 2010: 58.

<sup>14</sup> HALL, 1997: 223.

<sup>15</sup> HALL, 1997: 223.

<sup>16</sup> FERREIRA, 2007: 6.

<sup>17</sup> The fifteen national museums are: Casa Museu Dr. Anastácio Gonçalves, Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Museu do Chiado – Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea, Museu Nacional de Arte Popular, Museu Nacional do Azulejo, Museu Nacional Machado Castro, Museu Nacional dos Coches, Museu Nacional de



period to the present day and covering very different areas: archaeology, ethnography, furniture, design, painting, sculpture, photography, musical instruments, clothing, and written documents.

The methodology first used to develop the research project «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging» was based on a research in the online *Matriznet* collective catalogue, also under the supervision of the DGPC, among other entities<sup>18</sup>. This platform is considered to be the largest repository of information on the collections in Portuguese museums, and is, therefore, an important work instrument for professionals who deal with heritage and museums and also for students. The *Matriznet* allows for cross searches in the museums' collections, for instance, pertaining to a certain author, type or historical period, and offers three levels of research — simple, oriented and advanced.

For our research, we chose to use the simple level of research, entering some key words related to disability in the search engine to find objects in the DGPC museum collections that may be related to the topic. As a first step, we entered commonly used words such as disabled, disability, visually impaired, physically disabled, motor disability, hearing impaired, blind, blindness, sight, deaf, deafness, hearing, paralysis. Out of these keywords, «blind», «blindness» and «sight» returned results, allowing us to locate some objects associated to blind people or to episodes from the Bible that tell the story of healings by saints and divine punishments. Other keywords, in particular those that include the word «disabled» or «disability» failed to return any object connected to the topic. Nevertheless, we were able to see that both the words «disabled» or «disability» are used in the texts that describe the inventory, to refer to defective objects (*deficiente* in Portuguese can refer to «defective» or «disabled») as a result of their execution or state of conservation.

No object was found using the words deaf, deafness or hearing to refer to a disability, being used only for metaphorical purposes. This finding is indicative of a possible under-representation of the topic of deafness in the objects in the DGPC museum collections, of both deaf people as authors/producers of objects or as portrayed subjects. Perhaps it is because deafness has little impact on the viewer, compared to the visual or motor impairment, it is not explored as much over the centuries and in the societies represented in the DGPC museum collections. We nevertheless believe that there may be objects made by deaf people, even though there is no information about it in the inventory's information materials.

As we soon realised that we had to enter other words in the simple search in the inventory to reach a larger number of objects, in a second step we chose to enter

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Etnologia, Museu Nacional Grão Vasco, Museu Nacional da Música, Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis, Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança, Museu Nacional do Traje.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/MatrizNet/Home.aspx>>.

depreciative words, or words no longer used, in particular dwarf, crippled, needy, paupers, beggars, wooden leg, mentally retarded, madmen, crazy, paraplegic, amputee. The search using these words returned objects connected to the topic of disability, showing that the names of the objects or the information materials related thereto are framed within unpleasant and insulting terms.

From all the objects from the DGPC museum collections regarded as having some sort of relation with the topic of disability, we are able to see how they are distributed across the several museums, as shown in Table 1. Some objects are from different periods and locations, ranging from pre-historic times to the present day, covering diverse areas such as painting, sculpture, photography, musical instruments, ideotechnic artifacts, utensils, documentary collections, etc. The Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (MNA), the Museu Nacional de Etnologia (MNE), the Museu Nacional do Azulejo (MNAZ) and the Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança (MNTD) stand out for the number of objects recognised by the search engine. As for the Museu Nacional dos Coches (MNC) and the Museu Nacional de Arte Popular (MNAP), we were unable to find any objects related to the topic. Since the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, another monument also managed by the DGPC, has some objects of interest that relate to the topic, we chose to include it in the study.

**Table 1.** Distribution of objects across the DGPC museums<sup>19</sup>

MUSEUM	n.º of objects
Casa-Museu Dr. Anastácio Gonçalves	1
Museu do Chiado – Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea	8
Museu Nacional Grão Vasco	10
Museu Nacional de Arqueologia	30
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga	18
Museu Nacional do Azulejo	22
Museu Nacional de Etnologia	24
Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro	3
Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis	5
Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança	22
Museu Nacional da Música	5
Palácio Nacional da Ajuda	10

<sup>19</sup> The number of objects in each museum is not final, so a more thorough study is needed for the removal or introduction of them.



## THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN DGPC MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

On a timeline, the interpretative reading of all the DGPC objects begins with the MNA collection, which includes a vast number of objects from the Iron Age to the Greek-Roman times. These objects represent the so-called «dwarfs» linked to the worship of the god Bes, that is, short stature male figures. God Bes was considered one of the most popular deities of ancient Egypt, especially in the Lower Period and Greek-Roman times<sup>20</sup>. An example is shown in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** *Statue of Bes*, Unknown Author, VII-IV B.C. Lower Period. Museu Nacional de Arqueologia  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

This museum's collection also includes another object, the «Statue of Vulcan», from the 1st century A.C. that represents another «very popular deity in the Roman period — the god Hephaestus/Vulcan» (Fig. 2).

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<sup>20</sup> ARAÚJO, 2001: 150.



**Fig. 2.** *Statue of Vulcan*, Unknown Author, 1st century A. C. Roman Period Museu Nacional de Arqueologia  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

In Greek mythology, Hephaestus, the corresponding figure of Vulcan in Roman mythology, is considered a «handicapped» god because he was «shrivelled of foot» (he limped). This was seen as the cause of deep shame, as opposed to the ideal of physical and mental beauty of that period. As a result thereof, he was cast out from Olympus by his own parents, Hera and Zeus<sup>21</sup>.

In the case of the god Bes, one can immediately recognise the representation of a body that deviates from the «normal» standard described in the *Matriznet* inventory records, in particular through the use of common expressions used in various instances, such as a «somewhat grotesque figure», «in a typical dwarf pose», with «short, bowed legs»<sup>22</sup>.

As regards the «Statue of Vulcan», nothing in the description of this object indicates that it is of a physically «deformed» god, although this is plain for all to see. This idea brings us to the question of invisibility of an identity linked to disability, which is lost due to the lack of information in this regard. Besides being known as the god of

<sup>21</sup> PEDRAZA, [s.d.]: 18.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.

metalworking and crafts, the most relevant characteristic of Hephaestus/Vulcan is the fact that he has a limp, that is, a «physical mark of insufficiency, deformity, or functional diversity, as one would say today»<sup>23</sup>. This object, which represents a popular god known for being «lame», lacks this information in its description in the *Matriznet* inventory<sup>24</sup>.

In fact, the importance of the representations of Bes and the «Statue of Vulcan» in the DGPC museum collections has to do with the fact that these objects mark the initial course in history of how the atypical human body is depicted in the cultural imagination of the western world, despite there being a number of different records on disability over time. As Barnes argued, the origins of the oppressive and discriminatory culture towards disability stems from ancient Greek, the influence of which was crucial to the construction of the base thought of Western culture<sup>25</sup>.

For example, since ancient times the Roman aristocracy or the members of European monarchies used short people as their pets and for their entertainment<sup>26</sup>. This is quite evident in the painting by Portuguese artist José Conrado Roza, of 1788, «La mascarade nuptiale», and serves as a kind of cubicle of curiosities of the new world by presenting a number of «court dwarfs».

The myth of Hephaestus/Vulcan is also considered as being «a paradigmatic representative and refined expression of exclusion found in ancient Greece, and an inaugural patron of the forms of oppression, exclusion and cultural discrimination» shown by a god, who, because he has an atypical body, was cast out by his own parents from Olympus, besides being unable to maintain his marriage with the goddess of love, Aphrodite on account of his disability<sup>27</sup>.

Disability in the context of Western society over different times is marked especially by stereotyped and ideological representations, framed within an oppressive and discriminatory logic. As such, we find it important to list some of the objects of the DGPC museum collections that show the practical implications of being a disabled person, articulating them with the development of the concepts of vulnerability, frailness and dependence. In other words, that which Patrício named «the rupture and construction of a practical, political, social and cultural imaginary of the human being as self-sufficient», in which «what is missing is a fundamental element in the construction of the human being and its place in the world»<sup>28</sup>.

This is particularly evident in how disabled people relate with the world of work, showing their inadequacy to act as a productive force in a social context of classes. These

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<sup>23</sup> PEDRAZA, [s.d.]: 19.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt>>.

<sup>25</sup> BARNES, 1998: 59.

<sup>26</sup> GARLAND-THOMSON, 1996: 2.

<sup>27</sup> PEDRAZA, [s.d.]: 10.

<sup>28</sup> PEDRAZA, [s.d.]: 14.

expressions can be found in some objects of the DGPC museum collections through the representation of disabled people begging, and in the texts of the *Matriznet* inventory prepared by museum staff that describe and explain the nature of each object. These are various objects from various periods in time that tell the stories of real disabled people, or show ways of representing them using characters types. The latter are part of the cultural imaginary on disability throughout the history of art.

In the documentary collection of the MNTD, for example, the photograph entitled «José Carlos dos Santos (actor)», from the 19th century, depicts the actor wearing sunglasses because of his blindness (Fig. 3). The information given is that although the actor went blind in 1877 and then retired, he continued to perform. While this description suggests that he was unable to work because he was retired, on the other hand it shows that, in reality, he continued to work even though he was blind. In this case, his blindness caused him to stop working, as was the customary way of dealing with disability in the context of a «practical-political-social-cultural»<sup>29</sup> imaginary, leading him to drop out of the labour market. Nonetheless, in bucking this trend, the actor continued to work, namely in the play «The Blind man's Sister»<sup>30</sup>.



**Fig. 3.** José Carlos dos Santos (actor), Unknown Author, 19th century. Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

<sup>29</sup> FERREIRA, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.

Begging was also regarded as one of the main ways of life of disabled people and can be seen in various representations in various objects of the DGPC museum collections. The object «Crippled beggars», of the plastic art collection of the MNE, from the 20th century, by Rosa Ramalho, represents that condition both on a plastic level and in its title, as well as in the legend «give some money to the crippled» (Fig. 4). The use of the adjective «crippled», often used to represent disabled people, also helps to trigger feelings of pity and inferiority. Moreover, the inventory record describes this object as representing «two anthropomorphic figures», i.e., something with a more or less human shape, also dehumanises disabled people<sup>31</sup>.



Fig. 4. *Crippled beggars*, Rosa Ramalho, 20th century. Museu Nacional de Etnologia  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

Another example is the «Azulejo», by an unknown artist, from the 18th, whose description in the inventory record states that it is «perhaps of a beggar», since it depicts a «male figure, [...] bent over a crutch, with no left arm, and with a wooden leg» (Fig. 5). The clothing and the surroundings of the figure in no way suggest that this is a begging situation. In fact, the figure's demeanour is rather dignified. This, then, contradicts the comment in the inventory record, which assumes that because the person being represented has a disability, he is a beggar<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.





Fig. 5. Tile, 18th century. Museu Nacional do Azulejo  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

The painting by José de Almeida e Silva, «Van Rouge», dated 1932 (Fig. 6) and the photograph by J. Marques «Canto e Castro in 'Divine Words'», dated 1964 (Fig. 7) demonstrate how the representations of disability have often been constructed around visual and descriptive narratives that clearly serve to typify and ridicule disabled people. These cases refer specifically to the representation of people with intellectual disabilities. In the case of the painting «'Van Rouge' of Santiago», this person actually existed and is described in the *Matriznet* inventory record as a real «character type» that inspired the author to represent the «madman» or the «drunkard».

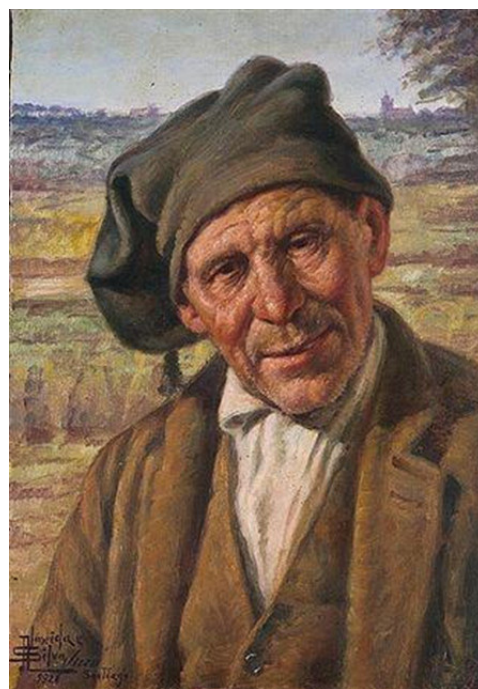


Fig. 6. «Van Rouge» of Santiago, 1932. Museu Nacional Grão Vasco  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>



The photograph «Canto e Castro in ‘Divine Words’» portrays one of the scenes of the play «Divine Words», in which a person with an intellectual disability appears on stage. This is a disturbing picture in that the character is lying down in a wooden cot-like structure, on two wheels, with his legs bent at the knees, in a not so human pose. The *Matriznet* inventory record corroborates this approach by describing that the scene depicts the «[...] actor Canto e Castro imitating the mentally retarded Laureano [...]»<sup>33</sup>. As we can see, these are two concrete examples of how disability is used to trigger feelings of mockery, through stereotyped characterisations that ultimately bar the development of more positive characterisations of people with intellectual disabilities.



Fig. 7. Canto e Castro in «Divine Words», 1964. Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

Another way of representing disability in the DGPC museum collections is found in biblical themes, as a mystery to be solved or a means of divine deliverance. Disability is easily directed to highlighting the importance of a medical diagnosis and of the cure. For example, the «Ex-voto» objects, in particular the painting by an unknown painter, from between the 18th and 19th centuries, which states in its legend that «Marianna d'idade de 7 mezes. Sega de bexigas» (Mariana, aged 7 months. Blinded by chickenpox) (Fig. 8), and the painting of «Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian», by Garcia Fernandes, 1525-1531, representing the amputation of a gangrened leg and its replacement (Fig. 9). The description of the altarpiece representing Queen Isabel, «Rainha Santa Isabel», dated 1540-1550, by an unknown artist, states that it was used as an «offering from an uncle to his crippled

<sup>33</sup> Cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.

niece after she was cured» (Fig. 10). There are other representations of disability in the DGPC museum collections that refer to the healing power of saints, for example, Saint Lucia, who is holding a platter with two eyes that have the power to restore sight (Fig. 11), and the representations of the revelation of St. Raphael Archangel to Tobias, giving him the power to cure his father's blindness (inventory n.º 2362 and 2363)<sup>34</sup>.



**Fig. 8.** *Ex-Voto*, Unknown Author, 18th-19th century. Museu Nacional de Arqueologia  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>



**Fig. 9.** *Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian*, Garcia Fernandes, 1525-1531  
Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

<sup>34</sup> To know more about this objects cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.



Fig. 10. *Queen Isabel*, Unknown Author, 1540-1550. Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>



Fig. 11. *Saint Lucia*, Unknown Author, 15th century. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

On the other hand, there are also some the objects of the DGPC museum collections that are related to the topic of disability but do not represent disabled people, yet were used by them. For example, the accordion, a musical instrument once known for being «less noble», since it was often associated to the representations of disabled people who begged. One other musical instrument, the «Cravo Antunes» (harpsichord) (inventory n.º MM372), from the collection of the Museu Nacional da Música is, today, one of the few examples of the Portuguese school of harpsichord making, and is from a shelter for blind women situated in a convent in Lisbon<sup>35</sup>. There is also a surgical instrument in the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia collection, called «probe or cataract needle», from the Roman period, used by ophthalmologists in cataract operations (Fig. 12).



**Fig. 12.** *Probe or cataract needle*,  
Unknown Author, Roman Period  
Museu Nacional de Arqueologia  
Source: <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>

These objects are clear examples of how the nature of disability was represented in the Portuguese museum collections throughout art history by stereotypes and negatives ideas. Nevertheless, this can be an opportunity for DGPC museums provide new insights into their collections, exploring the stories of life, habits and cultural meanings associated with disability. The DGPC museum collections contain essential objects that can lead to new identity constructions of disability and to the change of their social and cultural imaginary. These disability-related objects also breathe new life into the social

<sup>35</sup> To know more about this objects cf. <<http://www.matriznet.dgpc.pt/>>.



role of these museums, enabling the creation of meaningful educational projects on the social inclusion of disabled people, taking into account the discourses and practices that represent disability in the historical-artistic heritage.

## CONCLUSION

The research project «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging» can help generate novel interpretations within the current paradigm of disability. As in so many international collections, so too do the DGPC museum collections contain objects that concern stories of disability. How these objects have been exhibited, the messages they convey and the meaning they disclose to the public have not yet been fully analysed and explored, nor have the disabled people had any control over the public interpretations made about them.

As with any objects in a museum collection, these disability-related objects are shown to the public through their description, information and interpretation, which will inevitably influence and promote paradigms about disability. By the same token, the invisibility given to the existing representations of disability and the lack of alternative meanings strengthen models of naturalisation of the messages that the objects embody, with consequences in the way the public opinion thinks about this subject.

With this in mind, the research project «The Representation of Disability in DGPC Museum Collections: Discourse, Identities and Sense of Belonging» aims to be a means to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes, addressing new ways of looking at the national historical-artistic heritage, and contributing to a better understanding of the way and the reason why disabled people are excluded from society. In this sense, it aims to achieve maximum impact in the collective transformation of the Portuguese culture. It seeks to create opportunities to generate new public images about disability, disrupting the dominant representations that contribute to social transformation. This is expected to facilitate the awareness of museum staff in the issues of representation and its cultural impact, and to make them feel more motivated and confident to develop projects with groups of disabled people and the public in general. In particular, producing a broad range of perspectives on objects of their collections that represent disability, establishing connections between their historical past and their present lives.

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