INTRODUCTION
TRANSOCEANIC CROSSROADS – PORTUGUESE HUMANISM AND THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

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Transoceanic Crossroads: Images of the Lusitanian Empire: Italy, Portugal and the New World

Historians and art historians have recently reminded us that globalisation is not a phenomenon that originated in the late 20th century.¹ For example, the expansion of the Lusitanian Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries – combined with inventions in the fields of transportation, communication and printing – was a cornerstone of a new age of globalisation. During the reign of King Manuel I, when Portugal experienced a period of unprecedented wealth, Lisbon became one of the most important sites of international exchange. In only two years – between 1498, when Vasco da Gama, after circumnavigating Africa, arrived in Calcutta, and 1500, when Pedro Álvares Cabral landed on the Brazilian coast – Portugal succeeded in establishing a global commercial maritime network; in the first decade of the 16th century, it strengthened its commercial bases on the western coast of Africa and in Brazil, Persia, Goa, Malacca, Timor. In this context, colonial conquests were understood as the fulfilment of biblical prophecies. The reign of King Manuel I was interpreted by humanists and artists in a providential sense: the King, whose very name goes back to the messianic tradition, was seen as the Messiah of a re-born Empire.

These concepts were often related to the classical past, which offered a language that could be applied in diverse ways to different historical contexts. Carolingians, Ottonians, French 18th century revolutionaries and Latin American 20th-century dictators, among many others, have used rhetorical and visual elements of the classical past in order to legitimise contemporary forms of government. The usage of the

¹ For the correction of the English, we want to express our gratitude to Walter Melion.
classical tradition reflects a dynamic process in which literary and artistic models are freely re-defined and applied in new contexts. A special quality of this process is its “universality”, i.e. the fact that it is extremely fit for international intellectual exchange. In his treatise *Da Pintura Antigua* (On Ancient Painting), written in the 1540’s, Portuguese humanist and painter Francisco de Holanda tries to demonstrate the universality of what he calls ‘ancient painting’ by pointing out that its principles were present throughout the world: from Morocco to India, from Brazil to Peru, and even in China one notices the precepts of ‘ancient painting’.

In the early modern period, Humanism stimulated an intellectual internationalisation analogous, *mutatis mutandis*, to the process described in 1924 by Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset in his *Revista del Occidente*: ‘Without a common programme, without any act or intention of propaganda, without any apparatus or instrument, it happened that the best members of European and American international organisations joined, without really knowing how, in a close contact’. Ortega felt that in different countries, dozens of thinkers not only began to take notice of other countries and cultures, but also started to feel more akin to thinkers living in different regions than to their own countrymen.

In the course of the 16th century, Portuguese intellectuals inserted themselves into the international humanistic *Republic of Letters* and its networks. An important stimulus was provided by the transfer of the University back to Coimbra, in 1537, and the efforts to transform it into an international academic centre. The gathering there of scholars from different parts of Europe culminated in the creation of the Real Colégio das Artes e Humanidades in 1542. Humanists such as Elie Vinet, George Buchanan, Nicolas de Grouchy, Fabio Arca, Sebastian Stockhamer, or Nicolaus Clenardus were brought together in what then became an intellectual centre of the highest order. Conversely, Portuguese scholars such as João de Barros or Damião de Góis built up their careers abroad. King João III generously granted thirty

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4 King João III invited the humanist André de Gouveia, then rector of the university of Paris, to become director of the *Colégio*. 