

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

DANÇA POPULAR MINIATURE

Textile, glass and wood

H. 31,5 x L. 57,5 x W. 57,5 cm

19th Century 1950

MAH.R.2007.0001

Danças and *bailinhos* (both variations of a pantomime) are the main manifestations of the Carnival in Terceira island.

Their origins are lost in time, but researchers tend to link them to dance and theatrical performances that characterised the carnival period (dances, jokes, revels, comedies, farces, etc.) in medieval times. Many of these traditions being surely known by the local inhabitants in Azores, possibly also interacting with customs of foreign populations, namely from the African continent.

Whether the scripts have a dramatic theme (*danças*) or comic plots (*bailinhos*), both variants are theatrical performances that include dancing and singing, and whose performance corresponds to templates and codes described by Frederico Lopes, in the middle of the 20th century, as follows:

"A "*Dança*" is always composed of three distinct parts: - The "entrance" or "salutation" in which the public is directly greeted; the "topic", in which the theme of the "*Dança*" is presented and immediately followed by the plot; and the "farewell," in which the spectators are thanked by the dancers for their presence."

The dancers wear matching outfits and place themselves in two rows on separate ends of the stage, allowing the centre stage to be used by the remaining performers. The dancers may include musicians and actors, especially if it is a *bailinho*. In *danças*, it is more frequent for the actors and musicians to be separated in different groups, partly because the two rows of dancers are not used, but also because the performers are dressed in everyday clothes.

A central role is played by the *puxador* or master of the dance, distinguished by his costume and by a performance that usually demands a rarer set of skills: voice for singing, body for dancing, dexterity for using the sword or the tambourine and a great stage presence. The master will command the dance with these skills and talents.

Danças and *bailinhos* are performed during the four days of Carnival, from Fat Saturday to Shrove Tuesday. However, they require the attention of the various participants for a longer period time, which usually starts after Christmas and New Year's or even earlier, when Carnival is early, and during which the rehearsals and preparations take place. Great importance is placed in friendships and solidarity established during the process of organising a *dança* and a *bailinho*, as they have been a core element in the creation of groups that remain active for years and even decades, including generations of one or more families. Such groups become known by their places of origin, the names of their main organisers, or the gender of the participants, for example "Bailinho do Porto Martins", "Dança de António Ivo" or "Bailinho das Mulheres do Porto Judeu".

In recent decades, these cultural manifestations have adapted to the ways and circumstances of contemporary life which, although very significant, have not altered their most profound structures and characteristics. The greatest change has been the preference of recreational institutions and ballrooms as a performance space, instead of the civil parish showroom.

Besides the introduction of different instruments and musical genres and the growing female participation, dress has been one of the most modified aspects, even changing some of the old dress codes of the dances: black trousers and white shirt decorated with sequins and golden pennants.

The arch dance exemplified in the miniature, made by pupils of the Elementary School of Ladeira Grande (Ribeirinha - Terceira Island), is found in some data from the beginning of the 20th century, even if little is known about this tradition in Terceira Island. In this piece, which belongs to the Ethnography Conservation Unit of Angra do Heroísmo Museum, there are still common elements to the old Carnival performances, both in the figurines (the master of the dance and the comedian) and in the dancers' costumes (the crossed bands over the chest and waist and the kind of head cover, still remembered by a few).