

Vamona Navelcar and the Carnation Revolution: The blossoming of change betwixt continents

The Goan artist's life exemplified the far-reaching political changes of revolution in Portugal and its aftermath.

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Vamona Navelcar in 2017 at his home in Pomburpa, Goa. | Courtesy: Navelcar family.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution. It was on vinte e cinco de Abril, Portuguese for that fateful date of April 25, 1974, that the dictatorial *Estado Novo* or New State regime (1933-1974) came to an end in a largely peaceful overthrow led by members of the army. Named for the red flowers placed in the muzzles of soldiers' guns by jubilating Portuguese people, the Carnation Revolution was the dawn of a new era, both within and beyond Portugal's shores. The decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique, both then Portuguese overseas territories, was close at hand. This notwithstanding, what has often been overlooked, is how Portuguese Africa influenced revolution in the metropole. The legacy of the moment was a transcontinental one and the Goan artist Vamona Navelcar (1929-2021) was but one person whose life exemplified the far-reaching political changes of the revolution and its aftermath.

Born in Goa, the capital of the *Estado da Índia* (Portuguese India), Navelcar's natural artistic talent secured him a scholarship to study art in Portugal in the mid-1950s. None other than António de Oliveira Salazar, the prime minister of Portugal and founder of the *Estado Novo*, bestowed him with this state sponsorship. It was the kind of political entanglement that became a constant in Navelcar's life in every country he called home, even on different continents.

Ironically, Navelcar often described himself as apolitical. Following the end of Portuguese rule in Goa in 1961, as art historian Savia Viegas documents, the artist was asked by a fellow Goan in Portugal to sign a petition decrying the Indian takeover of formerly Portuguese India. While refusing, Navelcar responded that he saw himself only as an artist, thereby disavowing national allegiances altogether.

However, this was not to help him, for his government scholarship was rescinded during the politically volatile time. Only a fellowship from the Gulbenkian Foundation allowed Navelcar to complete his studies. Thereupon, unable to return to Goa as a Portuguese citizen, the artist opted instead to take up a government teaching job in Mozambique in 1963.

Failed promises

The end of Portuguese colonialism in Goa, which had haunted Navelcar in Lisbon, should have served as an omen of things to come on the other side of the Indian Ocean. In 1975, Mozambique declared its independence from Portugal, which meant that Navelcar had to leave yet another country. If heretofore it had been the processes of anti- and decoloniality that had caused the biggest upheavals in his life, on this occasion it was the politics of post-coloniality.

In newly independent Mozambique, Navelcar fell afoul of the administration for a number of plausible reasons. In various interviews, he cited a farewell party thrown in his honour on the eve of his intended departure to Portugal as the source of the travails. Navelcar noted in these exchanges that alcohol was served at his going-away bash and also that it was a mixed-race gathering that included his students. The implication was that either of these could have been construed as anti-nationalist.

The lack of clarity as to why Navelcar and his students were rounded up and sent off to a hard labour camp in distant Imala was not an aberration in how Mozambique's ruling party, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, or Frelimo, dealt with the transition to post-colonialism. Scholars of the period, such as Victor Igreja, believe that inasmuch as Frelimo wanted to create a new Mozambique that was radically different from the country's colonial past, it turned to authoritarianism especially because it was under-resourced.



Mother and Child (1978) by Vamona Navelcar. Courtesy: Anne Ketteringham.

In fact, this was the reason why Frelimo's carceral projects left much to be desired, historian Benedito Machava contends. Camps like the one to which Navelcar and his students were dispatched were as ambiguous in their attempts to reeducate as might have been the state's motives for incarcerating supposedly wayward citizens. Machava writes that "Frelimo authorities wanted the camps to be strict disciplinary institutions. But they were never able to realize their panoptic ambitions...because they simply could not afford to do so."

It is upon this canvas of attempted post-colonial moral policing and surveillance that Navelcar executed a painting that would repeatedly fall out of his oeuvre and was to be unrecoverable by design. While on the one hand, the limited resources of the state kept Frelimo from carrying out its intended reeducation of camp inmates, on the other, the wilderness and the wild animals surrounding the camps deterred escape with many runaways failing in their attempts.

As is revealed in Anne Ketteringham's biography, *Vamona Navelcar: An Artist of Three Continents* (2013), before they had been loaded into the vehicle that would take them away, a parent of one of the students had exacted a promise from Navelcar that he would "take care of...[the] children". Capitalising on the desire for political reeducation in the meagre circumstances of the carceral system, Navelcar hatched a plan to keep his students safe from the surrounding wilderness where they would have been deployed to perform agricultural labour.

Navelcar requested permission from the commander in charge of the students to have them participate in a pedagogical exercise. He asked if he could lead the youth in painting a mural to the glory of the new nation. To his surprise, the commander said yes. After that, Navelcar busied himself and his wards in the project, but would find reasons every day to stall the work. He would ask the students to redraw or repaint sections or work at a very slow pace. In so doing, Navelcar kept his imprisoned crew from having to do hard labour in the surrounding jungle but also kept his promise to their parents that he would take care of the students. They were finally released three months later.

The exile returns

Despite his statements to the contrary, what can be gathered from such events in Navelcar's life is that his artistic oeuvre and history were decidedly political. In Portuguese Mozambique, his adopted home, the artist covertly lent his artistic talents to anti-colonial efforts. When requested for art to accompany protest posters against colonial rule, Navelcar acquiesced and took pains to avoid detection by the Portuguese authorities, Ketteringham relays. In addition to leaving the work unsigned, the biographer quotes Navelcar as saying, "I used to paint and draw with my left hand so that people would not recognise my brush strokes or style of painting!"

Upon his release in 1976, Navelcar once more readied to leave Mozambique. If his entry into colonial Africa, due to his blacklisting in Lisbon, was semi-exilic, then that condition was rendered complete – even doubled – by his incarceration in post-colonial Mozambique. Although his departure had been imminent given his citizenship status and Mozambique's freedom from Portuguese rule, his imprisonment darkened what had been one of the happiest times in his life.

As Ketteringham records, in preparation for his departure, the artist "collected all his belongings including nine hundred and fifty drawings and sketches, sixty oil paintings, prizes that he had won as well as diplomas and placed them in a suitcase". His destination was once again the country he had been forced to leave a decade and a half earlier: Portugal.



Vamona Navelcar in 2017 at his studio in Pomburpa, Goa, drawing the figure of one of his favorite muses, Fernando Pessoa. Courtesy: Anne Ketteringham.

Navelcar's circuitous journey by air from Maputo to Lisbon included Beira, Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi – a veritable cartography of empires past. The convoluted itinerary had been the result of political instability in the aftermath of Mozambique's independence. In other words, the link between colony and metropole had snapped.

The succeeding post-colonial state that took over from the fading colonial regime in Mozambique had intended to make a clean break from the past. But Navelcar's incarceration at the end of colonialism in Mozambique, and then the reverse but convoluted journey to Portugal, symbolically highlight the failures of the colonial and post-colonial regimes.

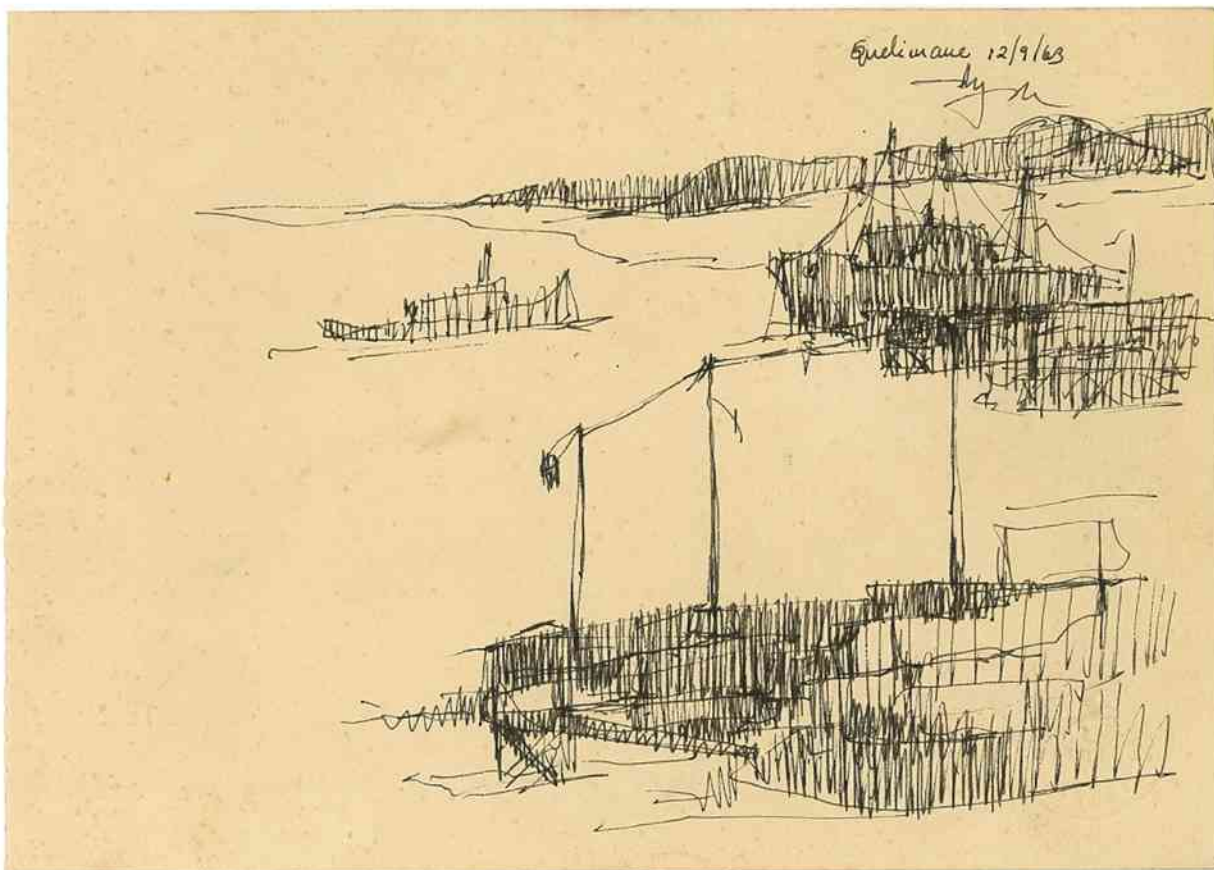
Disembarking in the cold, Navelcar was to find that even Portugal, like its former African dominion, was in distress. It was two years after the Carnation Revolution of 1974: at the same time as its African empire was collapsing, the metropole itself was in a state of disrepair. Against this backdrop of state failure, Navelcar was to discover that the suitcase that contained nearly a thousand pieces of his art from Mozambique had gone missing. It was never to be recovered.

The loss of the entirety of the artistic corpus during the ostensibly mundane affair of travelling bears witness to the seemingly grandiose post-colonial themes of displacement, loss and exile in their inescapably quotidian nature. The arrival of Navelcar in Lisbon sans suitcase is a powerful example of dispossession linking the historically connected Mozambique and Portugal, both in the colonial past and in the post-colonial present.

Africa frees Europe

The anthropologist António Tomás recharacterises the Carnation Revolution and its association with freedom in Africa by noticing that “the official history of this period...[purports] that the end of *Estado Novo* opened the way for the decolonization of Lusophone Africa. Or, first, Carnation Revolution took place and then the democratic regime in Portugal started negotiating the transfer of power to the ‘legitimate’ representatives of the former colonies... In fact, what has been overlooked...[is that the] Carnation Revolution does not only follow the [1973] Guinea[-Bissau] Revolution chronologically, but it was for the most part produced by it.”

Tomás emphasises that “the charismatic leader of the nationalist movement in Guinea-Bissau, Amílcar Cabral[,] was aware that independence of the countries he was fighting for, Guinea and Cape Verde, would only take place after the demise of *Estado Novo*”. He also believed that the struggle to end colonialism in those lands and fascism in Portugal “was the same”.



Quelimane (1963) by Vamona Navelcar. Courtesy: Navelcar family.

With the revolutionary political changes in Portuguese Africa reaching the metropole, the legacy of Portugal’s Third Empire (following the earlier Asian and Brazilian empires), which came to an end at the same time as the authoritarian *Estado Novo*, would instil itself in post-colonial Portugal in the shape of the many who came “back” from the former colonies. Dubbed *retornados*, these returnees “were a constant reminder of the experience of trauma, loss and messiness of decolonization that had taken place...across two continents,” says Pamila Gupta, a researcher of Portuguese colonialism.

Navelcar was among the *retornados*. Although his suitcase was never recovered, with it disappearing the many works he had developed during the Mozambican phase of his life, it was not the first time that his art had become unrecoverable. Recall the mural Navelcar kept instructing his students to redo, its incompleteness protecting them from the wilderness in Imala. With his return to Lisbon, Navelcar had brought back a personal history that included Goa and Mozambique. And while he no longer had the canvases from his African stint, that he continued to create art with Mozambican influences indicates the perpetuity of the legacy in which he participated and by which he was shaped.

As he began life anew in Portugal in 1976, his imprisonment in Mozambique continued to haunt Navelcar. Making it worse was a lack of opportunities in Lisbon of the post-Carnation Revolution period. Reporting in 1975 on the state of culture in Portugal almost a year after the uprising, British critic Steve Bradshaw recognises the dramatic change from the time when “many Portuguese painters...were very successful under the old regime. Subsidies from the Gulbenkian Institute supported mainstream Portuguese culture for many years, plus patronage from rich families, enabled artists... to live well and travel abroad.”

Founded in 1956 by Armenian émigré Calouste Gulbenkian, the foundation named for him had also sponsored Navelcar, saving him most notably by providing him with a grant at the time he was blacklisted in the early 1960s. In contrast, the mid-1970s saw a major change in the economic fortunes of Portugal, its democratisation paired with economic nationalisation. This sea change in the political economy meant that public and private patronage for the arts suffered.

It is against these economic and cultural events post-*Estado Novo* that one must situate Navelcar’s decision to return to Goa. An analysis of the creatively staid landscape in Portugal in the mid-1970s, when Navelcar returned to Lisbon, would show that while artists may have been expressing political sentiments, these were reflective of conditions in Portugal itself. Over the course of his life, Navelcar’s development as an artist had taken on a political valence, seeing him transition from a young student who shirked signing a document denouncing the Indian takeover of Goa while he was in Portugal to his pro-African and anti-authoritarian stance in colonial and post-colonial Mozambique, respectively.

On his return to Portugal after his African stint, his art and political views were expressive of his most recent experiences in the Lusophone Indian Ocean world but not the post-colonial metropole. Besides, the economic situation was such that the once-moned patrons of the arts had either fled the country or were no longer positioned to lend the kind of support to cultural development they did previously. Parallely, the state was intent on cultivating a new regime, and where it supported cultural production, it was largely in the service of work that distanced it from the *Estado Novo*.



An African Figure (2010) by Vamona Navelcar. Courtesy: Navelcar family.

After the jubilation of the revolution, Portugal's gaze had turned inward even as the *retornados* had brought back with them the inescapable colonial past. Yet, the time for colonial nostalgia had gone by, and if there was a political interest in the past, its limited cultural expression in Portugal did not include the memory of the Indian Ocean empires.

Post-colonial amnesia

If the political, economic and cultural changes made it impossible for Navelcar to stay on in Portugal, then diplomacy made it possible for him to return to India as a Portuguese citizen, something he was unable to do in the 1960s. On September 24, 1974, as the *Washington Post* reported, "Portugal recognized India's full sovereignty over Goa." The creation of diplomatic ties between the new democracy of Portugal and India, the largest democracy in the world, was incumbent upon multiple political amnesias. On one side was Portugal's transition into democracy away from the memory of the fascistic *Estado Novo* period (which coincided with the end of the empire) and, on the other, India's forgetfulness of the war it fought with Portugal to take over Goa while it had itself come to democracy by nonviolently ousting the British. This was the amnesiac present into which Navelcar stepped when he returned to Goa, the land of his birth, in 1982, a land that did not know the artist it had produced.

The Goa to which Navelcar returned in the 1980s, after having spent his most productive years in other locations, not only was unfamiliar with this artist's oeuvre but, in having become a part of India, could not situate this artist of three continents within a nationalist art history. Especially being a post-colonial nationalism borne out of British colonialism, it had no room for an artist whose trajectory included the Lusophonic world – its metropole and colonies in the Indian Ocean.

Excluded from national recognition because of his past, Navelcar's art bears testament to conditions of displacement, loss and the search for refuge. Navelcar's multiple displacements saw him in this position in every continent he wanted to call home. It is thus no mystery why he continues to be unrecognised in Indian art history. His canvas, nevertheless, stretches across continents, connecting histories and revolutionary change through the legacy of his art.

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