

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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PORTUGUESE LEND CELEBRATED COACH TO NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

FOR "THE AGE OF THE BAROQUE IN PORTUGAL"

NOVEMBER 7, 1993 - FEBRUARY 6, 1994

WASHINGTON, DC -- The magnificent First Noble Coach of the Embassy of the Marquês de Fontes to the Papal Court (1713-1716), elaborately decorated with allegorical figures in gilded wood, is coming to Washington for the exhibition The Age of the Baroque in Portugal, in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, November 7, 1993 through February 6, 1994. The transportation of the coach is made possible by the Secretary of State for Culture, Portugal, and the Luso-American Development Foundation. It will be lent by the Museu Nacional dos Coches, Lisbon, whose collection of state coaches is one of the most famous in Europe.

An entire gallery in this exhibition of some 120 objects from Portugal will be devoted to the celebrated coach, which is twenty-four feet long, nearly twelve feet high, and weighs approximately two tons. It was commissioned as part of an entourage of four coaches for the official entrance in Rome in 1716 of the

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portuguese coach . . . 2

ambassador extraordinary of Portugal, the marquês de Fontes. The procession was received by Pope Clement XI, who afterward granted special concessions to the King of Portugal. The carriage has a frame of iron, gilded iron and gilded copper, leather, and carved and gilded wood with a body of wood and crimson velvet embroidered with gold thread and decorated with gold fringe.

The Age of the Baroque in Portugal has been generously supported by a consortium of Portuguese and American sponsors, including Pacific Telesis Foundation, Espírito Santo Financial Holding S.A., Banco Comercial Português, Banco Totta & Açores, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Luso-American Development Foundation. The National Gallery is also grateful for additional support provided by the Instituto Camões, the Orient Foundation, Investimentos e Participações Empresariais, S.A., and the International Corporate Circle of the National Gallery of Art. Additional support for the catalogue and musical program for the opening event has been provided by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

"The First Noble Coach, a rare survival of the type of elaborate vehicle that figured in the grand ceremonies of baroque Europe, wonderfully evokes the magnificence that surrounded the court of King João V of Portugal," said Jay A. Levenson, the coordinating curator of the exhibition, who was previously the managing curator for the National Gallery of Art exhibition Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration (1991-1992).

Three survive of the four coaches built in Rome for the official entrance to the

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portuguese coach . . . 3

papal court of Dom Rodrigo Annes de Sà, Almeida e Menezes (1676-1733), marquês de Fontes. (Upon his return to Portugal he was named marquês de Abrantes, the title by which he is more commonly known.) This most formal and magnificent occasion among Roman diplomatic ceremonies could take years of preparation. The marquês de Fontes in fact arrived in Rome on May 21, 1712, but did not make his official entrance until 1716. The creation of the coach required teams of artisans and other workers, including sculptors, carvers, coach builders, and embroiderers in addition to a gilder, a bronze worker, a sword maker, a painter, a saddle maker, and a crystal worker.

The body of the First Noble Coach is suspended from the frame using four large leather straps attached to the front and rear, which is typical of the traditional Roman type established in the mid-1600s. In the nineteenth century, following a technique that originated in France in the early 1800s, the body of a coach was attached to the frame with iron suspensions.

The First Noble Coach's body is adorned with velvet, gold embroidery, and decorative fringe, lacking only the curtains that originally completed the decorations. The interior is lined with damask. The gilded wood carving on the frame concentrated in the front and rear bears figural compositions filled with allegorical meaning. On the front of the frame are four small zephyrs who hold a long garland with laurel leaves and berries--repeating the motif embroidered on the coach body--and a female figure wearing a diadem of rays of light. A radiant sun is carved on

portuguese coach . . . 4

her breast and a serpent biting its tail encircles her waist. These represent "the love of heroic virtue" and the immortality of the name of Portugal; the sun and its rays stand for brightness, clarity, and luminous fame and the serpent symbolizes eternity.

The most complex allegorical scheme appears at the center of the rear, which was the most important part of a triumphal coach. The dominant personification is the city of Lisbon, a majestic figure wearing classical armor, covered with the mantle of royalty and holding a scepter. At her feet are weapons, symbolizing the spoils of war, and a small dragon, representing the royal Portuguese house of Bragança, tearing apart a Turkish crescent. Below are two figures representing conquered and imprisoned enemies. The meaning of this allegory relates to Pope Clement XI's war against the Ottomans, whose fleets were threatening the papal states.

The exhibition catalogue is published by the National Gallery of Art and distributed by Yale University Press. It contains color illustrations of the coach as well as an essay and entry about the coach by Marco Fabio Apolloni, entitled "Wondrous Vehicles: The Coaches of the Embassy of the Marquês de Fontes." Admission to the National Gallery of Art is free of charge. The Gallery, located at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, is open every day of the year except December 25 and January 1. The public hours are: Monday - Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., and Sunday, 11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. For more information, call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, weekdays, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

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