
Cunha, Manuel da

(1737–1809), Brazilian painter,

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.73735>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

was born into slavery in Rio de Janeiro, in the Portuguese colony of Brazil. At the time of Cunha's birth, his mother, an enslaved woman of African descent, was working for the family of the Januário da Cunha Barbosa, a *conêgo* (canon priest). Manuel was given the priest's surname. Cunha showed a talent for painting from an early age and, despite his enslaved status, began to study with João de Sousa (fl. eighteenth century), an established religious painter in colonial Rio. While Cunha was his student, Sousa likely also taught Leandro Joaquim (c. 1738–c. 1798), a mulatto painter also active in Rio. Sousa's mastery of Brazilian baroque painting and many commissions for the city's churches and religious orders helped to influence Cunha's style and likely helped to expand Cunha's professional connections.

In 1757, likely under Sousa's tutelage, Cunha completed his most famous work: a half-length portrait of Gomes Freire de Andrade (1757–1817), First Count of Bobadela, painted for the Convento de Santa Teresa (Convent of Santa Teresa), now hanging in the city council building of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Receiving a commission of that magnitude at the age of 20, while still enslaved, was a major accomplishment for Cunha. Cunha's reputation grew in Rio de Janeiro's artistic community, eventually reaching José Dias da Cruz, a wealthy businessman. Cruz would serve as Cunha's main benefactor through the end of the eighteenth century. In 1794, Cunha completed a commission for a series of paintings in the Capela do Noviciado da Igreja da Ordem Terceira do Carmo (Novitiate Chapel of the Church of the Third Carmelite Order). Around the same time, Cunha completed a series of portraits of benefactors, including Inácio da Silva Medela (1672–1746), one of the city's wealthiest citizens, for Rio de Janeiro's Santa Casa de Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy), a charity founded in Lisbon in 1498 and active throughout the Portuguese Empire, having expanded to Rio in the sixteenth century. Following the completion of these commissions, Cruz, wishing to further Cunha's artistic education, paid for Cunha to study in the art academies of Lisbon. Cunha left Rio de Janeiro for the seat of the Portuguese court around 1795, but it is unclear how long he stayed in the metropole. Upon his return to Brazil, Cruz then made further financial arrangements to purchase Cunha's freedom. Unencumbered by enslaved status, Cunha began to take on a wider range of commissions and established himself as a painting instructor, teaching his own class of twelve students at his home.

In twentieth-century scholarship, Cunha is often named as a member of the Fluminense School of painting, a grouping of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century artists active in Rio first defined by the Brazilian man of letters Manoel de Araújo Porto-alegre, the Baron of Santo Ângelo (1806–1879), in 1841. While scholars continue to debate the validity of this classification, Cunha's many

commissions for prominent churches and religious orders active in late-colonial Rio attest to his artistic influence in the city during his life, and the decline of the Fluminense School following his death only further confirms his importance.

The majority of Cunha's works are difficult to date with certainty. Among his major church commissions is a scene of the *Descent from the Cross* in the Capela Nosso Senhor dos Passos (Chapel of Our Lord of the Steps) in the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo (Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel), the main cathedral of Rio de Janeiro from 1808 to 1976. Two other influential works are his side panels for the Igreja de São Sebastião (Church of Saint Sebastian), including *Saint Andrea Avellino*, as well those for the Capela de Nossa Senhora das Vitórias (Chapel of Our Lady of Victories) of the Igreja de São Francisco de Paula (Church of Saint Francis of Paula), including *Milagres de São Francisco de Paula* (Miracles of Saint Francis of Paula) and *O Santo Patriarca em oração á Virgem Maria* (The Holy Patriarch in Prayer to the Virgin Mary). Cunha also completed a series of paintings for the Mosteiro de São Bento (Monastery of Saint Benedict) and a painting of the Virgin Mary titled *Nossa Senhora da Conceição* (Our Lady of the Conception), which hangs in the Brazilian Museu Nacional de Belas Artes (National Museum of Fine Arts). Cunha is also credited with creating the processional banners of the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Church of Our Lady of Good Success), which are still paraded annually. Cunha died on 27 April 1809 and is buried in the Igreja da Venerável Ordem Terceira de Nossa Senhora da Conceição e Boa Morte (Church of the Venerable Third Order of Our Lady of the Conception and Good Death) in Rio de Janeiro.

[*See also* Joaquim, Leandro .]

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See also

Joaquim, Leandro <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74239>>

