A CALL FOR LIBERATION: ALEIJADINHO’S PROPHETS AS CAPOEIRISTAS

by

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout the late eighteenth century, many Brazilians became inspired by the political revolutions of the French and American colonies and sought for a similar type of revolution, hoping to gain independence from the Portuguese. One nationalistic group, the “Inconfidência Mineira,” probably influenced the art of the sculptor Aleijadinho (1738-1814). Aleijadinho’s work has been examined as a political message previously, but never as propaganda through the representation of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. Capoeira probably formed as a means for Afro-Brazilian slaves to fight their way out of captivity. While training to fight, slaves would disguise capoeira to look like a dance, so that slave owners would not suspect rebellion. Through the visual representation of capoeira, Aleijadinho’s statues of twelve Old Testament prophets at the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos express a call for liberation, not only liberation for African slaves, but also for Brazilian colonists under Portuguese rule.
This study examines the circumstances that may have contributed to the influence of capoeira in the *Prophets*. Being a mulatto, Aleijadinho’s ancestral connections to the Afro-Brazilian community likely contributed to the sculptor’s exposure to capoeira. In addition, the rise and fall of the rebel group, “The Inconfidência Mineira” took place in Aleijadinho’s home town at this time. This study examines how Aleijadinho may have been associated with rebel sympathizers and how the execution of the rebel leader, Tiradentes, could have affected Aleijadinho’s art.

The argument for capoeira also includes a discussion of the martial art’s origins and the history of slavery in Minas Gerais, Aleijadinho’s home state. The comparative method is used to support the argument for capoeira in the *Prophets*’ composition and gestures. By interpreting these gestures as belonging to capoeira, this argument refutes previous interpretations that the *Prophets* were influenced by ballet and other forms of dance. This study concludes with an exploration of how the *Prophets* can be interpreted as political propaganda through the signifiers and signs of capoeira. It is through these signs that the *Prophets* can be understood as a call for liberation, taking part in the political propaganda which permeated Minas Gerais during Aleijadinho’s lifetime.
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I am grateful for the assistance which I have received from various members of the art history department, especially Martha Peacock. Her willingness to let me study Brazilian Baroque art has been encouraging and motivating. Finally, I am grateful for my loving husband and traveling companion Jeremy, whose assistance with photographing and documenting my research in Brazil proved more than invaluable.
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INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth-century Brazilian sculptor Antônio Francisco Lisboa (1738-1814), better known by his nickname “Aleijadinho” (“The Little Cripple”), is recognized as one of the key artists of the Brazilian Baroque period. His composition of twelve Old Testament prophets, which decorate the staircase of the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos, has attracted the attention of many art historians and scholars. Perhaps the most compelling feature of Aleijadinho’s Prophets is their dynamic positioning; several writers have discussed these positions and argue that Aleijadinho’s work was influenced by various types of dance, such as ballet. However, I argue instead that Aleijadinho’s Prophets were influenced by capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art form which displays a dance-like aesthetic.

Not only do I find capoeira movements to align more accurately with the gestures and positions of the Prophets than ballet, but I also find that this interpretation fits well within the historical context of the period. Capoeira is fundamentally political in nature; it is generally accepted that the dance developed as a means for slaves to fight their way to freedom and also resist recapture.1 This thesis examines both the probability of Aleijadinho’s contact with capoeira and the socio-political context of the artist’s life which could account for an interest in this sport. In addition, the viewer’s interaction with the sculptures is examined, particularly in how the viewer becomes part of the capoeira context. I find the latter to be expressive of the aims of Baroque spectacle and participation. The comparative method then is used to demonstrate how the gestures and composition of the Prophets manifest themselves as part of the capoeira paradigm.

Finally, the capoeira movements and location of the Prophets are discussed as a type of propaganda; these statues call for political change by acting as signs for political action.

The artist Aleijadinho was probably born in 1738; he was the son of a Portuguese architect and an African slave woman.\(^2\) His mixed-race has attracted the attention of one group of Brazilian art historians; they are interested in studying how Aleijadinho’s mulatto heritage may have affected the European influence on his work.\(^3\) A second group of Brazilian art historians tend to view Aleijadinho within the context of his period, specifically viewing the artist as “a symptom of the growing independence of colonial Brazil from Portugal (both critical of and superseding the culture of the colonial masters).”\(^4\)

At present, there are only a select number of scholars outside Brazil who have studied Aleijadinho, and these scholars often find placement within one of the aforementioned Brazilian groups. Although this thesis fundamentally aligns itself with the historical aims of the second group of Brazilian scholars, it is the intent of this research to bridge the gap between the two camps; the argument for capoeira requires one to research Aleijadinho’s mulatto heritage and African background, thus finding place with the first group of Brazilian art historians.

This thesis also contributes to scholarly information regarding the artist’s life. At present, little is known about the life of the sculptor aside from a few commission

\(^2\) The exact year of Aleijadinho’s birth has been debated, primarily because Aleijadinho’s biographer Bretas recorded that the sculptor’s birth took place in 1730. However, Aleijadinho’s obituary in 1814 records that the sculptor was seventy-six years old at the time of death. This would mean that the artist was born in 1738, which is the date that is generally accepted. For more details regarding this topic, see Waldemar de Almeida Barbosa, *O Aleijadinho de Vila Rica*, (São Paulo: Edição da Universidade de São Paulo, 1984), 9-10.


\(^4\) Ibid.
receipts and a posthumous biography. There is no evidence that Aleijadinho left behind any personal writings, and the only known contemporary discussion of the artist has since been lost. The historical artifacts that remain from Aleijadinho’s life are the works he produced.

Since few specifics of Aleijadinho’s life are known, it appears that the Brazilian penchant for legend has exaggerated many aspects of Aleijadinho’s actual history. One example of exaggeration regards the physical conditions of Aleijadinho. Although it is known that the artist contracted a crippling disease during his career – which makes his accomplishments especially noteworthy – the details of his suffering and disease are limited. As a result, Brazilian legend has tried to compensate for such unknown points of interest, sometimes creating false historical facts.

This false historicity is promulgated not only in publications, but also by institutions and misled individuals. Many museums and churches in Brazil claim to own works created by Aleijadinho, when most of these works are only attributed to the artist due to style. The Prophets composition is one of the few existing works which has documentation to prove Aleijadinho’s authorship. When researching for this thesis in

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5 Rodrigo Bretas wrote a biography of Aleijadinho forty years after the artist had died. Some of Bretas’ information was compiled through interviews with people who had known Aleijadinho personally, such as the artist’s daughter-in-law. The only documentation of Aleijadinho’s life beyond this biography is found in a few foreign travel accounts and some receipts of payment for commissions. Bretas’ biography was published first in the Correio Oficial de Minas in August, 1858. It has since been republished in various locations. For an English and Portuguese translation of Bretas’ biography, as well as a history surrounding the biography itself, see Antônio Francisco Lisboa, Passos da Paixão: O Aleijadinho (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Alumbramento, 1989), 13-30.

6 One contemporary writer, Joaquim Jose da Silva, whose discussion of art in Brazil is now lost, is reported to have called Aleijadinho the “new Praxiteles” of the era. See Junior Augusto de Lima, O Aleijadinho e a Arte Colonial, (Edição do Autor: Rio de Janeiro, 1942), 40. Historians know of Silva’s text because it was a source of information for Rodrigo Bretas’ biography.

Brazil, I was particularly struck by the legends and myths which were propagated by tour guides about the artist – one guide mentioned that Aleijadinho only had six chapels built to house his seven *Passion* compositions because the artist was superstitious and “did not like the number seven.” As historians, we are fortunate to have a general idea of when Aleijadinho lived and died – we will probably never find out his personal taste for certain numbers. In this study, in order to be comprehensive and still accurate while discussing Aleijadinho, I have tried to differentiate between history and legend in the text as well as footnotes.

In the absence of specific documentation related to Aleijadinho’s life, one must first examine the documentation related to his place of birth, Vila Rica. Then, Vila Rica was the capital of the captaincy Minas Gerais, a gold mining area which flourished in early Brazilian history. For the purposes of this thesis, the historical information and context for Vila Rica is a good starting point for an analysis of Aleijadinho’s art. One of the reasons for careful documentation during this period is due to the court trial of Aleijadinho’s fellow townsman, Joaquim José da Silva Xavier. Nicknamed “Tiradentes” (literally meaning “teeth-puller”), Xavier was a dentist-cum-nationalistic rebel who hoped to incite a political revolution in Brazil similar to that which had recently occurred in the American colonies. In order to begin this revolution and break away from Portuguese rule, Tiradentes formed a rebel group which consisted of several inhabitants from Vila Rica; the group was named the “Inconfidência Mineira.” I argue that Aleijadinho was affected by the political fervor and climate created by Tiradentes and his followers, particularly in his *Prophets* composition at the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos. This sanctuary is located in the town Congonhas do Campo, some sixty
miles from Aleijadinho’s home town. Aleijadinho began sculpting for the Congonhas sanctuary in 1796, only four years after Tiradentes was hanged for treason in 1792.

Upon arriving in Congonhas, Aleijadinho first began to sculpt sixty-six wooden statues which were arranged into scenes from the passion of Christ. These seven Passion compositions were later placed into six chapels; today these chapels continue to line the hillside leading up to the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos. As a pilgrimage church, it is expected that the visitor to the sanctuary follows a via sacra by visiting each Passion chapel on their way to the main sanctuary. Aleijadinho worked on these Passion figures from 1796-1799. The next year, in 1800, Aleijadinho began to sculpt the Prophets, which decorate a staircase leading up to the sanctuary’s main entrance. With the help of his assistants, Aleijadinho completed these statues in 1805, about thirteen years after Tiradentes died.8

This thesis not only places the Congonhas Prophets within the political context surrounding Tiradentes and the Inconfidência Mineira, but it also leads to other political ramifications. During this period, political and libertarian fervor were also found among the African slaves of Minas Gerais. As a thriving mining area, the economy depended on the labor of thousands of African slaves. Slavery began in Brazil in the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth century the first communities of runaway slaves, known as quilombos, began to form in northeast Brazil. Later, quilombos formed in other areas of Brazil, including Minas Gerais. The problem of runaway slaves became so great in Vila

8 Myriam Andrade Ribeiro de Oliveira notes that Aleijadinho’s work on the Prophets was interrupted in 1801 and 1803-4. The cause for these interruptions is unknown; perhaps they were due to the poor health of the artist. See Myriam Andrade Ribeiro de Oliveira, Aleijadinho: Passos e Profetas, (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1985), 123, 128.
Rica, Aleijadinho’s home town, it was decided by the town council that any escaped slave would have his or her hand amputated.\(^9\)

It is thought that soon after the establishment of the first *quilombos*, the Afro-Brazilian dance capoeira was devised as a means for slaves to resist recapture. In addition to resisting recapture, it is also thought that capoeira was employed by slaves in the initial process of escape, to free slaves from captivity. Some experts think that the slow, rhythmic movements of capoeira were originally intended to disguise fighting aspects of the dance, so that slave owners would not have suspected rebellion as slaves trained for escape.\(^10\)

I find that Aleijadinho’s *Prophets* reveal themselves to be influenced by capoeira, not only by the compositional structure of the statues, but also in their gestures and positions. This association with capoeira is consistent with the political fervor and turmoil of Aleijadinho’s day, given that capoeira holds political implications through its connection to slavery. In addition, I also discuss Aleijadinho’s mulatto background and other biographical details which suggest that the artist himself was inclined towards freedom, emancipation, and abolition. This connection with Africans, slavery, and rebellion is supported by a previous stylistic analysis of Aleijadinho’s art, which maintains that “Aleijadinho represents the artistic rebellion of the negros…contrasting [his works] against the stylistic models of his time period.”\(^11\)


Chapter one discusses the socio-political context of Aleijadinho’s life in the late eighteenth century, partially drawing from Aleijadinho’s biography by Bretas. The focal point of this socio-political context is the political milieu which surrounded Tiradentes and the Inconfidência Mineira. These nationalistic rebels propagated and encouraged Brazilian freedom from the Portuguese, and also extended their discussion of freedom to include debates regarding emancipation. In addition, this chapter mentions possibilities of how Aleijadinho may have had connections with associates of the Inconfidência Mineira, such as Claudio Manuel da Costa.

In order to support my argument regarding political themes in Aleijadinho’s work, I examine what other art historians and writers have said on the subject. A critique and analysis of their arguments is crucial in understanding how this thesis refutes and contributes to the existing discussion of the Prophets. Furthermore, since limited discussion of the Prophets is available outside of the Portuguese language, it is necessary to discuss these arguments to help non-Portuguese speakers become familiar with the current discourse.

The second chapter discusses how Benton and Oliveira’s political interpretations of Aleijadinho’s Passion sculptures are connected with Tiradentes’ death. Since the Passion sculptures were part of a collective project at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos which included the Prophets, I find that the Prophets were also politically influenced. I also examine an altarpiece in the church Nossa Senhora do Carmo that was sculpted by Aleijadinho shortly after he completed the Prophets. This altarpiece depicts the prophet Jeremiah with distinct African features, which historian Fernandes finds to be a
commentary on abolition. I use this interpretation to strengthen my argument regarding Aleijadinho’s interest in slavery and capoeira in his *Prophets* figures.

This second chapter also includes a discussion of previous interpretations regarding the gestures and positions of the *Prophets*, particularly as they relate to dance. I examine and refute Carmo and Bazin’s arguments that Aleijadinho was influenced by ballet in his Congonhas sculptures. This discussion also includes Soraia Maria Silva’s argument that the expressive nature of Aleijadinho’s sculptures has similarities to modern dance aesthetics. While I do not agree with Silva’s interpretation of different dance movements, I find many of her semiotic analyses of the movements and gestures to be of interest.

In the third chapter, I expand on many of Silva’s analyses, showing how they fit well within the capoeira paradigm. This chapter also includes a discussion of capoeira and its development within the context of slavery in Brazil. Capoeira has since developed into two different schools of practice, namely Capoeira Regional and Capoeira Angola. Most historians agree that Capoeira Angola follows more of the traditional gestures, positions, and interplay followed by early practitioners of capoeira.\(^\text{12}\) For purposes of historical accuracy, I focus on studying Capoeira Angola gestures in relation to Aleijadinho’s *Prophets*. The comparative method is implemented to help support this argument for the *Prophets* as capoeiristas, using pictorial representations of capoeira from Aleijadinho’s time period, but also consulting modern photographs and drawings where necessary.

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The staircase of the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos can also be compared to the capoeira circle, which is called the *roda*. This *roda* composition for the staircase was most likely the idea of Aleijadinho, despite records which indicate that the staircase was designed by an earlier architect, Thomas de Maia Brito. However, the continuity of Aleijadinho’s sculptural composition, particularly viewed within the capoeira paradigm, suggests that Aleijadinho redesigned part of the staircase for his statues. This continuity and coherence in composition has already been observed by historians Robert Smith and José de Sousa Reis, who both suggest that Aleijadinho redesigned Brito’s original staircase.

I also examine the actual process of movement in capoeira by discussing the capoeira footwork, which is called *ginga*. I find that the configuration of the staircase of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos is such that a visitor to the sanctuary would mimic *ginga* by walking up the stairs, lifting the knees up and down in a similar fashion to the footwork. In addition, the double elevation of the staircase also would cause the visitor to rotate within the capoeira circle, first walking up one flight of stairs, and then turning 180 degrees and continuing up the staircase. This element of viewer involvement within the capoeira circle also ties into the Baroque concepts of spectacle and participation. In addition, the propagandistic message of slavery and liberty are emphasized by having the visitor take part in the capoeira circle.

This study also argues that the capoeira message of Aleijadinho is propagandistic in several ways, not only calling for liberation and political change, but also inviting the viewer to actively participate in bringing about freedom. The exact location of the *Prophets* is also discussed as an ideal location for a propagandistic message to African
slaves, as shown through an examination of the location of the sanctuary from different vantage points within Congonhas do Campo. In order to make this argument for propaganda complete, I use semiotics to discuss how capoeira movements can be interpreted as signs of invitation, aggression, resistance, evasion, and action. It is through this discussion of signs and signifiers that I finalize the concept of capoeira as political propaganda. Through this final argument, I assert that these sculptures are a visual representation of the political propaganda which permeated through Minas Gerais during the eighteenth century: a call for liberation.
CHAPTER I
THE POLITICAL MILIEU DURING ALEIJADINHO’S CAREER

There is no doubt that the Brazilian colonists in the captaincy Minas Gerais, or “General Mines,” experienced moments of difficulty, oppression, and rebellion in the eighteenth century. More than one uprising against Portuguese authority occurred at various times during this century, and most of the conflicts stemmed from the taxation of gold which was mined in the area. The most significant political uprising of the period was a conspiracy started by the Inconfidência Mineira group in 1788. The Brazilian colonists, however, were not the only people who were experiencing difficulties during this period – slaves in the area were constantly being imported to help work in the mines. They worked and lived in poor conditions which resulted in disease and sometimes death. ¹ Just as the Brazilian colonists began to rebel against the Portuguese crown through political uprisings, African slaves also began to react against authority through capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. Capoeira is a sport that is inherently political in nature; it is generally thought to have originated as a means for African slaves to free themselves from captivity. Some writers think that the slaves disguised capoeira to look like a slow-moving dance, so that slave owners would not suspect rebellion.²


² Lewis, 34. It should be noted, however, that Matthias Röhrig Assunção refutes this belief, finding that slave masters were very aware of the potential danger which arose from capoeira practice. Therefore, it could be that early capoeira was disguised to look like a dance, only for quick-witted slave
During this period, the government in Minas Gerais worked hard to stop slaves from rebelling and escaping. Town councils created stringent laws regarding the treatment of runaway slaves; the town council of Vila Rica proclaimed that an escaped slave have their hand amputated, while the town council of Mariana declared that “fugitives should have their Achilles tendon sliced through so they would only be able to limp to work.” In addition, the gold collected from the mines was partially used to finance militias and slave hunters; these groups were given the orders to seek out and destroy settlements established by runaway slaves.

It appears that the artist Antonio Francisco Lisboa, better known as “Aleijadinho,” was affected by the political spirit of his contemporaries, colonists and slaves alike. Being the son of a Portuguese architect and a black slave woman, Aleijadinho’s mixed race caused him to drift between racial categories of “white” and “black,” making social definition more difficult. Perhaps it is this nebulous definition of self which led Aleijadinho to be interested in political stances and philosophies, with which one could have a definite position. Aleijadinho propagated his political ideals of independence through sculpture, particularly in his work at the sanctuary of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos at Congonhas do Campo (Fig. 1). Aleijadinho’s work has previously been examined, but owners to soon realize the subversive nature of the sport. See Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 8.

3 Taylor, 191. Settlements governed by runaway slaves, known as “quilombos,” were found in many areas of Brazil, not just Minas Gerais. The connection between quilombos and capoeira will be discussed in chapter three.

4 Ibid., 191-2.

5 Instead of being associated explicitly with whites or blacks, mulattoes in eighteenth century Brazil worked to establish their own hierarchical basis in the world, but this arrangement placed them just “above” blacks and “below” whites, which still constituted a relative definition. For more information, see Tania Tribe, “The Mulatto as Artist and Image in Colonial Brazil,” *Oxford Art Journal* 19, no.1 (1996): 70.
it has never been explored as propaganda through the representation of capoeira.

Through the visual representation of capoeira and use of African artistic styles, Aleijadinho’s statues of twelve Old Testament prophets at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos express a cry for liberation, not only liberation for African slaves, but also Brazilian independence from the Portuguese.

In order to understand better the events which led up to the creation of the Prophets, one must have a general understanding of the political climate in Minas Gerais during Aleijadinho’s lifetime. Minas Gerais is an area which developed quickly after gold was discovered there at the end of the seventeenth century. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw a huge mining rush in the area, but even by the time the town Vila Rica was declared capital of the new Minas Gerais captaincy in 1720, the gold was already beginning to decline.6

The Portuguese crown, anxious to take part in the newly-discovered wealth, collected a fifth of all the gold that was extracted from the area.7 However, near the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the gold in the area had been diminished dramatically, the crown refused to understand why tax collections had subsequently decreased. Believing that the miners were holding onto more gold than they declared, the crown announced it expected arrears for 1500 tons of gold by the year 1789, and “that value was to be completed, if necessary, by the expropriation of goods of the local population.”8 During this period of impending arrears, the Inconfidência Mineira, a

6 Leslie Bethell, Colonial Brazil, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 191. The name of the city Vila Rica has since been changed; today it is called Ouro Preto.

7 Ibid., 202.

8 Museum text panel, permanent collection, Ouro Preto, Brazil, Museu da Inconfidência, 14 August 2007.
group comprised of nationalistic rebels, formed in the town of Vila Rica. Although this group never developed sufficiently to organize military resistance or a formal sedition, the ideals and viewpoints of the Inconfidência members deeply impacted the history of Vila Rica and its inhabitants. This impact not only affected the social and political climate of the period, but, as will be shown, it also entered the world of art. Through the implementation of the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira, Aleijadinho’s *Prophets* are a manifestation of political propaganda which typifies the spirit of independence that was prevalent in the Inconfidência Mineira.

The first official meeting of the Inconfidência Mineira took place in late December of 1788, when the various influential members of Vila Rica came together at the home of Francisco de Paula Friere de Andrade to discuss the formation of a revolution. Under the leadership of Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, a dentist nicknamed “Tiradentes,” the Inconfidência Mineira hoped to gain independence from the Portuguese crown by fomenting a war, a plan which was inspired by the American Revolution that had just taken place. Similarly, like the Founding Fathers of the United States, the Inconfidência Mineira hoped to replace the oligarchy of their colonial motherland with a republican government. It should be clarified, however, that misinterpretations of history have led some to believe that the group was also directly influenced by correspondence between the medical student José Joaquim de Maia and Thomas Jefferson, which took place in France between 1786 and 1787. In these letters, de Maia consulted with Jefferson, who was the United States Minister to France at the time, regarding the

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possibility of a Brazilian revolution. However, the sequence of historical events has led scholars, such as Santos and Marchant, to argue that there was no connection between de Maia’s letters and the formation of the Inconfidência Mineira.\footnote{Alexander Marchant, “Tiradentes in the Conspiracy of Minas,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 21, no. 2 (May, 1941): 240-42.}

Rather, Maia’s letters show that political revolution was considered by multiple Brazilians during this time period. Many of these Brazilians were students who traveled abroad to Europe, where they were able to come into contact with writers and thinkers of the Enlightenment. For example, José Bonifacio de Andrade e Silva, another Brazilian student, wrote many poems during 1785 which were “heavy with a bewildering profusion of heroes, which included Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, Pope, Virgil, and Camões.”\footnote{Maxwell, III, 35.} In a true libertarian spirit, these poems also spoke out against the “horrible monster of despotism.”\footnote{Octavio Taruinio de Sousa, *História dos Fundadores do Império do Brasil*, vol. 1, (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria J. Olympio, 1960), 63.}

Although the Enlightenment fervor spread throughout most of Europe, it should be mentioned that Portugal was one of the countries that was slow to adopt these new ideas. “Located on a fringe of Europe, Portugal did not start to form a bourgeois class where these new ideas could multiply, but stayed feudal, aristocratic, economically behind-the-times, and dependant on England.”\footnote{Luiz Roberto Lopez, “Revolução Francesa e Produção Artística no Brasil,” in *Caminhos para a Liberdade*, eds. Myrna Bier Appel, Zilá Bernd, Rosa Helena F. Figueirido and Robert Ponge, (Rio Grande do Sul: UFRGS, 1989), 118. “Localizada numa franja da Europa, Portugal não chegou a formar uma classe burguesa onde poderiam as novas ideias frutificar, permanecendo feudal, aristocrático e economicamente atrasado e dependente da Inglaterra.”} Perhaps Portugal’s diminutive status in Europe fostered its censorship and monopoly of power in Brazil, in order to compensate
for a lack of prestige elsewhere. Only a limited amount of “subversive books” by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Mably inadvertently escaped customs when entering Brazil, thus impeding the widespread development of Enlightenment thought in the colony. The other way that Brazil received small doses of Enlightenment thought was through Brazilian students who traveled to Europe and shared revolutionary ideas of the period upon their return.

José Alvares Maciel, a Brazilian student who studied abroad in Coimbra, was influenced by Enlightenment ideals and spent time in Europe discussing the possibility of a Brazilian revolution with interested English merchants. Soon after Maciel returned to Rio de Janeiro from Europe, probably in August of 1788, the dentist Tiradentes came to visit his house. Maciel was the brother-in-law of Francisco de Paula Freire de Andrade, the lieutenant-colonel of the regiment where Tiradentes was an ensign. According to later court testimonies of Tiradentes and Maciel, it appears that these men questioned why the Brazilian colonists had not followed the example of the North Americans, who had recently broken away from British rule. When Maciel and Tiradentes later met up

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15 Ibid. In addition to general censorship and monopoly, there are many historical details which also specifically relate to the Portuguese monopoly of all basic goods in Minas Gerais. Since Minas Gerais was a mining district, basic goods (such as meat and other food) had to be imported. Miners were required to pay dues on all types of imports which were brought into the area, in addition to paying a fifth of all of the gold they extracted. For more details, see Bethell, 195-217.

16 Ibid.

17 Maxwell, III, 35.

18 *Autos da Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira*, V, (Belo Horizonte: Imprensa Oficial de Minas Gerais, 1982), 33. Tiradentes said in his court confession on January 18, 1790, “O [dito] José Alvares Maciel disse, que pelas nações estrangeiras por onde tinha andado, ouvira falar com admiração de não terem seguido o exemplo da América inglesa; come este dito entrou o Respondente a lembrar-se da independência, que este paiz podia ter, entrou a desejar-la e ultimamente a cuidar no modo por que poderia isso effectuar-se...” Translation: “Jose Alvares Maciel said, that in the foreign lands where he had visited, he had heard people question with wonder why the colonists had not followed the example of the English American colonies; this being said, the respondent [Tiradentes] was reminded of independence, that this
again in Vila Rica, they began to speak with Freire de Andrade about their political leanings.

Later, during the week of Christmas in 1788, Tiradentes met with Maciel, Andrade, and Carlos Corrêa de Toledo e Melo, the influential and wealthy vicar of the Vila São Jose. These men began to discuss the possibility of a revolution, using the impending enforcement of back-taxes as a motivation. A few days later, the men met again, with another recruit, Ignacio Jose de Alvarenga Peixoto. Alvarenga was a man of substantial means, and it is thought by several historians that his interest in rebellion was primarily due to the exorbitant amount of debt which he owed to various individuals. In addition, Alvarenga had significant influence in the community, being one of the leading poets of Minas. Three other poets and philosophers, Cláudio Manuel da Costa, Canon Luiz Vieira da Silva, and Thomas Antonio Gonzaga, who had all been writing criticisms of the government for some time, were also invited by Alvarenga to join the conspiracy.

country [Brazil] could have, and began to desire it, and ultimately how to foster it so that it could actually take place.  

19  *Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira*, V, 35.  
20  Maxwell, V, 8.  
21  Marchant, 241-2, 248. It should also be noted that Waldemar de Almeida Barbosa argues that Costa and Gonzaga were not members of the Inconfidência, but were only sympathizers. Both of these men were respected poets in the area, and Barbosa only finds that they were friends of active Inconfidência Mineira members. According to Barbosa, Costa was only condemned as being a member because he made a suggestion regarding the design of the new republic’s flag. In addition, the condemnation of Gonzaga was “provoked” because he mentioned to some friends that “the moment [of revolution] was lost” at one time when the back-taxes were suspended. See Barbosa, 15. Another scholar, Almir de Oliveira, also argues that Gonzaga was not a member of the group. See also Almir de Oliveira, *Gonzaga e a Inconfidência Mineira* (São Paulo, Editoria da Universidade de São Paulo, 1985), 144-51. These men are included in this discussion because they were invited into the group, and the revolt was a popular topic of conversation with them. Costa even had several conspirators meet in his own home, with Gonzaga numbered among the individuals (see Lúcio José dos Santos, *A Inconfidência Mineira: A Papel de Tiradentes na Inconfidência Mineira* (Belo Horizonte: Imprensa Oficial, 1972), 723). Tiradentes declares that these men essentially entered into the conspiracy, even without making a formal acknowledgement of their membership in the group (See *Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira*, V, 40).
Later, Padre Rolim, a friend of Tiradentes, joined the group during a meeting in January of 1789.

During this January meeting, the group decided on their strategic plan to incite an uprising, determining that the revolt would take place in Vila Rica when the collection of back-taxes began to be enforced by the governor Visconde de Barbacena. The details of the revolt and fighting were planned in detail, and the group decided to go ahead with their plans without waiting to see if they could get support from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In addition, the details of the new republican government were also discussed during this gathering, which included a debate about the design for the republic’s new flag. The topic of slavery was also considered, with Alvarenga suggesting to set free a “very large number of slaves…as a move in accordance with the spirit of the revolt and one calculated to win the support of the slaves for the republic.” Tiradentes also emphasizes in his court testimony that Alvarenga was also possibly considering that “the number of blacks is greater than those of whites, and if they attained liberty they might turn against the whites and kill them in the midst of the revolt.”

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22 Ibid., 249.
24 Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira, V, 37. See also Santos, 723. Tiradentes proposed that the new flag symbolize the Trinity, consisting of three triangles. After the meeting, Cláudio Manuel da Costa later suggested that the new flag be modeled after the American flag, containing the symbol of a genie breaking fetters, with the inscription, Libertas aqua spiritu. This idea was not accepted, so Costa suggested the inscription Libertas aut nihil instead. However, the group finally decided on a quote from Virgil, which was proposed by Alvarenga: Libertas quae sera tamen.
25 Marchant, 250.
26 Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira V, 330. “...era os numero dos negros ser maior que o dos brancos, e que para conseguiram a liberdade tomariam o partido contrario, matando os brancos.”
necessary labor for the mines and factories, causing the new republic to falter. Alvarenga then proposed that only mulattoes should be freed, but the group also rejected this suggestion without much deliberation.\textsuperscript{27}

It appears that all of the discussion revolving around the emancipation of slavery was seen from a political or economic standpoint, instead of as a humanitarian act. Some of the members of the group, including Tiradentes, were slave owners themselves.\textsuperscript{28} Tiradentes even explained in detail how he would sell runaway slaves during his court trial.\textsuperscript{29} However, the subject of slavery finally was resolved to the extent that “the promises of the leaders of the Inconfidência…included freedom to native-born slaves and mulattos.”\textsuperscript{30} As a consequence, the Inconfidência Mineira has been considered to be “the first emancipationist call” in Brazil.\textsuperscript{31}

It is likely that these libertarian and nationalistic ideals, particularly those associated with slavery, influenced the mulatto artist Aleijadinho. Like most of the Inconfidência Mineira members, Aleijadinho was a native of Vila Rica. It is entirely probable that Aleijadinho could have heard about the Inconfidência Mineira conspiracy because Tiradentes went around Vila Rica speaking to groups of people in order to find

\textsuperscript{27} Diffie, 462.


\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira}, V, 20. Tiradentes spoke of his treatment of slaves during his first interview on May 22, 1789, while pretending that he did not know the reason he was imprisoned.


\textsuperscript{31} Roberto Reis, “Por Uma Critica Mestiça,” \textit{Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature} 37, no. 4 (1983): 186. “...[a] Inconfidencia Mineira [é] geralmente entendida como nosso primerio grito emancipacionista [no Brasil].”
supporters for the revolt.\textsuperscript{32} It is also probable that Aleijadinho could have heard about the group through Cláudio Manuel da Costa, with whom he had an acquaintance since at least 1771.\textsuperscript{33} However, historian Junior Augusto de Lima also suggests that Costa, who served as the lawyer of the Third Order of São Francisco de Assis in Vila Rica, was also probably the \textit{architect} for the church São Francisco de Assis. If Lima’s hypothesis is correct, then the connections between Aleijadinho and Costa would probably be even stronger and more personal, since Aleijadinho worked on the decoration for this church from 1766-1776.\textsuperscript{34} Due to this long-standing acquaintance, it is possible that Costa could have shared his thoughts regarding the Inconfidência Mineira with Aleijadinho.

Although the artist did not leave any personal writings or letters behind after his death, it appears that Aleijadinho was affected by the liberating viewpoint of the Inconfidência Mineira in some way, and his link to Costa would be a logical connection to the conspiracy.

Even if Aleijadinho did not hear about the conspiracy during the beginning of 1788, there is little doubt that he would have been unaware of the deaths of Cláudio Manuel da Costa and Tiradentes. After the second meeting in January, the Inconfidência Mineira never met again as a large group, but met in smaller parties. The members continued to search for more supporters and sympathizers for their cause. After speaking to numerous groups in Vila Rica, Tiradentes received notification in March of 1788 that

\textsuperscript{32} Marchant, 251.

\textsuperscript{33} Barbosa, 19. “Era sabida a ligacao do Aleijadinho com Cláudio Manuel da Costa, advogado da Ordem Terceira de S. Franciso e Assis, de Vila Rica, desde 1771; nao ‘e segredo que a morte misteriosa do poeta, na prisao, chocou profundamente de Vila Rica, que nao aceitou o boato oficial do suicidio.”

\textsuperscript{34} Junior Augusto de Lima, 89, 91, 101. Lima compares designs found on a map of Vila Rica that Costa designed of Vila Rica with the ornamentation and designs of São Francisco de Assis. According to Lima, the designs are identical, even down to miniscule decorations which were characteristic of Costa’s map.
his proposal for a waterworks project had been approved in Rio de Janeiro. Tiradentes decided to leave for Rio immediately, but quickly went to the area Cachoeira do Campo first in order to borrow money for the trip. While in Cachoeira, Tiradentes discussed the conspiracy with Silveiro dos Reis, who was a former government contractor. Before even meeting Tiradentes, Silveiro had heard about the Inconfidência Mineira and had already considered turning the conspirators into the governor, so that he could be pardoned from his heavy debts. Soon after Tiradentes and Silveiro met, the latter went to the governor and revealed what he knew of the conspiracy.  

Unaware of Silveiro’s treachery, Tiradentes continued on his journey to Rio de Janeiro. He still spoke with numerous people about the plans for the conspiracy, speaking “as if the revolt were assured.” In fact, Tiradentes even began to tell people that the Inconfidência Mineira had already received the support of France and England, although this was not really the case. After arriving in Rio de Janeiro on March 25, Tiradentes still continued to rally support, sometimes carrying with him two books on the constitutional laws of the United States. However, the viceroy Vasconcellos e Souza was soon informed of Tiradentes through Silveiro, who was sent by Barbacena to Rio in order to expose the conspiracy.

Tiradentes was arrested on May 16, 1789. Other conspirators, such as Corrêa, Alvarenga, Gonzaga, and Costa were also arrested in Minas Gerais on the same day or

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35 *Autos de Devassa da Inconfidência Mineira*, I, 22. Marchant explains that Silveiro first spoke with Barbacena in person regarding the conspiracy, and then put his statement into writing on April 11. The statement made formal on April 19. See Marchant, 252.

36 Marchant, 252.

37 Ibid.

38 Marchant, 253.
soon thereafter. On July 2, Cláudio Manuel da Costa was interrogated for his involvement with the conspirators, and two days later his dead body was discovered in his cell. The official report for Costa’s death explains that the poet hanged himself, but historian Maxwell convincingly suggests that Costa was probably murdered. Many people in Vila Rica had a difficult time believing that Costa had committed suicide. This death deeply affected members of the community, and likely affected the artist Aleijadinho.

Soon after the death of Costa, a long and arduous trial began in August for Tiradentes. The stress and tension of this trial was intensified by news of the revolutionary turmoil in France; word of the French turmoil reached the government in Lisbon about the same time as the news of the Minas conspiracy. The “Oath of the Tennis Court” took place in France in June 23, where leaders pledged not to go home until they had formed a new constitution for France. About a month later, the Storming of the Bastille took place on July 14. Europeans followed the revolutionary measures of the French intently, which allowed the Minas conspiracy, arrests, and trials to happen.

39 Diffie, 463.

40 Maxwell, VI, 30-5. Two doctors and the magistrates of the official inquiry examined Costa’s body, writing a report on July 4th that Costa committed suicide. On July 5, Ignacio Pamplona left Vila Rica precipitously, and on July 6th the vice regal commission arrived in town. Costa’s death was not discussed in a letter written by the governor on July 11, although his testimony was discussed. The reported suicide was sent in a separate letter by the governor, and much later one of the doctors involved in the examination attested that Costa was actually murdered, and that he did not commit suicide.

41 The effect of Costa’s death on the community can be seen in many instances. For example, a mass was held for Costa, which was an event denied to those who committed suicide. Not only does this ceremony suggest community distrust of the suicidal reports, but it also can indicate the level of regard that community members had for Costa. Furthermore, the effects of Costa’s death on the community can be observed in letters written after the death of the poet. One of Costa’s contemporaries labeled the poet as “that great intelligence that we had in Villa Rica who in all matters knew how to find solutions.” See Ibid., 31.

42 Ibid., 14.
without attracting international attention.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, Portugal did not receive much criticism or attention from Europeans regarding the conspiracy which took place in its colony. Nonetheless, the news of France still caused loyal colonists in Brazil to hold “a very hostile attitude toward conspirators who challenged a king’s sacred authority.”\textsuperscript{44}

Tiradentes gave a full confession of his leadership within the conspiracy on January 18, 1790, but he was still interrogated seven more times after this confession.\textsuperscript{45} In the end, Tiradentes was condemned to death in April 1792. Tiradentes was the only member of the Inconfidência Mineira who was condemned to death, likely because he assumed full responsibility for the rebellion.\textsuperscript{46} Many other involved members were sent into exile.\textsuperscript{47}

The death proclamation of Tiradentes is rather graphic and specific in outlining the treatment of the rebel leader’s corpse. For example, the proclamation states that Tiradentes was to be:

“taken with hangman’s rope and public proclamation through the streets and gallows to die a natural death forever; and after his death his head is to be severed from his body and taken to Vila Rica where it will be nailed up in the most prominent place on a high pole until time rots it; and body is to be cut into four parts and nailed along the road in Varginhos and Cebolás where the criminal did most infamous acts, and in other places of large population, where they are to remain until they rot, demonstrating the infamy of the criminal extending to his children and grandchildren also…and the house in which he lived in Vila Rica will be razed to the ground and the earth salted so that never again can anything

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Diffie, 464.

\textsuperscript{45} Marchant, 254.

\textsuperscript{46} On October 15, 1790, the queen Maria I stated that only the leaders of the conspiracy should be put to death. The first death sentence was not signed until about a year and a half later, on April 18, 1792. In this death sentence, ten men were condemned to death. Nine of these men were later sent to exile instead, perhaps, as Maxwell suggests, “to make plain the queen’s clemency.” See Marchant, 256.

\textsuperscript{47} It should also be noted that some individuals were pardoned. For a list of the punishments and places of exile for the Inconfidência Mineira members, refer to Santos, 782-3.
be built there…And on the same spot there is to be erected a pillar by which the infamy of this abominable criminal will be remembered.48

According to the stipulations of the decree, after Tiradentes was killed, the government paraded his head through the streets of Vila Rica. It is likely that the gruesome display of Tiradentes’ body and head could have been seen by Aleijadinho, but it is not known for sure, since Aleijadinho’s exact location is not recorded.49 Historian Fernandes suggests that Aleijadinho actually went outside of Vila Rica because he was heavily involved with the Inconfidência Mineira, hiding in isolated areas between 1789 and 1794.50 Wherever Aleijadinho was located at this time, he was probably was aware of the death of Tiradentes and the subsequent spectacle in Vila Rica to some degree. This terrible event affected the lives and behavior of the inhabitants of Vila Rica, and it assuredly would have been a popular topic of conversation and debate among people in the area.

There are no historical documents to prove that Aleijadinho saw Tiradentes’ corpse, but a number of historians have suggested the possibility that Aleijadinho was affected by this event. For example, Jorge suggests that this horrific event spurred Aleijadinho to compare his own life to Tiradentes’, going as far as to assert that both men “dreamt of liberty.”51 Although this romanticized argument cannot be supported with

48 Diffie, p. 468. The Museu da Inconfidência in Ouro Preto has a display of the original death proclamation of Tiradentes.

49 Although there is no documentation of the artistic transaction, it is also possible that Aleijadinho was working on a second commission at the church São Francisco de Assisi in Mariana. The soapstone decoration over the front of this church is attributed to Aleijadinho. If Aleijadinho was in Mariana during the year 1792, then it is very likely that Aleijadinho would have also been in Vila Rica during the time of Tiradentes’ death, since Mariana and Vila Rica are separated by only a few miles.

historical evidence, as with many of Jorge’s statements, an empirical analysis of
Aleijadinho’s art perhaps can better support this suggestion, as will be shown later.

The death of Tiradentes took place only a few years before Aleijadinho began
work on his statues of the twelve prophets in Congonhas do Campo. The impact which
Tiradentes had upon Aleijadinho is arguably seen in the political sentiments and
statements that Aleijadinho infused into his artwork, which disassociate him from the
Portuguese regime. Jorge argues that Aleijadinho “rebelled against the ruling spirit,
looking to make works personal and above all, Brazilian.”52 This rebellion against
Portuguese rule is seen not only in Aleijadinho’s artistic style, but also in his artistic
compositions, particularly his Prophets at Congonhas do Campo.

Aleijadinho was a very prominent man in the Vila Rican community, despite his
poor health and reputed bad temperament.53 However, Aleijadinho was also different
from other prominent members of his community, due to his background and
circumstances. Since Aleijadinho was born a mulatto, he was threatened with the
possibility of captivity at a young age. Manuel Francisco Lisboa, Aleijadinho’s father,
intervened early in Aleijadinho’s life to permanently free his son from a life of
servitude.54 There is little doubt that threat of captivity in Aleijadinho’s own life made
the artist more sensitive to the abolitionist cries of the slaves.

51 Fernando Jorge, Notas sobre o Aleijadinho (São Paulo: Sociedade Impressora Brasileira, 1949),
91. “sonhou com a libertação.”

52 Ibid., 46. “rebelou-se contra o espírito reinol, procurando fazer obra pessoal e sobretudo
brasileira.”

53 Lisboa, 24.

54 Celso Kelly, Tres Gênios Rebeldes (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Serviço
de Documentação, 1953), 21.
Ethnicity was always an issue for Aleijadinho in his life, because “most of the craftsmen of African descent who built the chapels and churches of Ouro Preto [Vila Rica] were forced to apply every six months for ‘temporary licenses’ in order to practice their craft,” a process which did not apply to white craftsmen. In addition, Aleijadinho was also excluded on ethnic grounds from the two most prestigious and wealthy brotherhoods in the city, São Francisco de Assis and Nossa Senhora do Carmo. Instead, Aleijadinho served for one year as the president of the Brotherhood of São Jose, a confraternity that was reserved for mulattoes and that especially attracted carpenters. These brotherhoods were an integral and important part of life in Minas Gerais; they dealt with the practice of Christian living, charitable assistance to the poor, and the physical concern for members of the confraternity. Boschi discusses how brotherhoods in colonial Minas Gerais were also political in nature, for their purpose included a search for social freedom in an environment which was dominated and controlled by the Portuguese. Therefore, Aleijadinho’s membership in a confraternity could perhaps indicate that Aleijadinho was interested in the politics of the day.

In addition to being a mulatto, Aleijadinho was also different from other townspeople due to a venereal disease which apparently resulted in the loss of several fingers and toes. Consequently, Antônio Francisco Lisboa – whose nickname “O Aleijadinho” means “The Little Cripple” – is reported to have propelled himself with his

55 Benton, 173.

56 Ibid, 174. See also Russell-Wood, 580. It should be mentioned that Benton mistranslates the word *pardos* as “blacks” in his article, when the word signifies “mulatto” (or a person of mixed race). As a consequence, Benton incorrectly states that Aleijadinho belonged to a brotherhood specifically for black members. If Aleijadinho would have belonged to a black brotherhood, it would have been listed as reserved for “dos prêtos” and not “dos pardos.”

knees. Assuredly, Aleijadinho felt his own personal desire for freedom from his physical impairments; the embarrassment of his physical condition reportedly forced Aleijadinho to become an extreme recluse, working only behind a tarpaulin or at extreme hours of the early day or late night.

Due to his inhibiting disease and resulting physical impairments, Aleijadinho relied on the help of assistants and his three slaves, Maurício, Agostinho, and Januário. Agostinho was from Angola, which is also pinpointed as a possible location of capoeira’s origin. Therefore, while it is known that Aleijadinho employed the help of his three slaves during the carving of the twelve prophets for artistic reasons, it also could have been for political reasons as manifest by capoeira movements. Perhaps it seems unlikely that Aleijadinho would propagate the idea of abolition and independence to the Brazilian community when he personally owned slaves. However, it is written that Aleijadinho did try to free his slaves at one point. This attempted declaration of freedom is extremely different from the prevailing attitude in Minas at this time, for mulattoes were generally

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58 Hans Mann, *The Twelve Prophets of Aleijadinho*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 17. The disease and art of Aleijadinho appears to have become a bit of a legend, even during the lifetime of the artist. One contemporary writer, Joaquim Jose da Silva, reportedly called Aleijadinho the “new Praxiteles” of his day. See Junior Augusto de Lima, 40. Forty years after Aleijadinho died, a government official, Rodrigo Bretas wrote a biography of the artist, which probably over exaggerates the physical condition of the artist. Historian Freudenfeld points out that, “Legend exaggerates the sufferings [of Aleijadinho]: it tells that he lost his fingers and in order to work tools were attached to his imperfect hands. This is a fantasy of the people to augment compassion. Even in 1802 he signed receipts with his own hand, something which cannot be done without fingers.” “A lenda exagera-lhe os sofrimentos: conta que perdeu tambem os dedos das maos e para o trabalho atavam-lhe os ferros nas maos imperfeitas. Fantasia do povo para aumentar a compaixao. Ainda em 1802 assinara recibos de proprio punho, o que nao pederia fazer sem os dedos.” See Freudenfeld, 26. Nonetheless, it appears that Aleijadinho did have some kind of physical impairments, or he would not be known as “The Little Cripple.”

59 Ibid.

known to “express contempt” for blacks. The freeing of Aleijadinho’s slaves was recorded years later by Rodrigo Bretas, the biographer of Aleijadinho:

“...[Aleijadinho] having written letters declaring liberty for [his] slaves, and also for a slave named Ana, locked these letters in a box, and the interested party [i.e. the slaves] stole the box, for, perhaps, the letters had been slipped into the money book...It’s certain, however, that these ‘freemen’ didn’t enter the joy of liberty during the life of their benefactor.”

Although Bretas, who was a white government official, includes his own biased conclusion regarding why the slaves stole the letters from Aleijadinho, one can get a sense of Aleijadinho’s sentiment towards slavery. After this incident, perhaps Aleijadinho did not insist further on sending Maurício, Agostinho, and Januário away because he considered them to be an extension of his own family. It could also be that his slaves refused to be freed, since the exact motivation for stealing the letter box is unknown. The slaves might not have wanted to leave their master, a cripple, who would not be able to work without assistance. Bretas comments in Aleijadinho’s biography that it was remarkable to see “so much loyalty” in his slave Maurício, who accompanied Aleijadinho everywhere. In addition, Maurício was always paid “half of all wages [that] Aleijadinho received for his work,” indicating that he was treated more like a free man than a slave.

61 Russell-Wood, 574.

62 Silvio de Vasconcellos, Vida e Obra de Antônio Francisco Lisboa, O Aleijadinho (São Paulo: Companhia Editoria Nacional, 1979), 33. “tenho passado cartas de liberdade aos escravos acima declarados, e bem assim a uma escrava de nome Ana, as quais tinha fechadas em uma caixa, os interessados lh’as roubaram para, talvez, as lançarem no livro de notas...É certo, entretanto, que estes libertos não entrarem no gozo da liberdade durante a vida do seu benfeitor.”

63 Benton includes several critiques of Bretas’ biased writing style, saying that Bretas perhaps assumed that “Aleijadinho’s ‘black blood’ or his artistic temperament made him vulnerable to [youthful excesses].” See Benton, 174.

64 Kelly, O Profeta Aleijadinho, 99.
Obviously, Aleijadinho’s slaves were essential in helping him complete his artistic projects, and the slaves knew that they were important. The help of the slaves was probably invaluable in Aleijadinho’s infusion of African and capoeira influences in his *Prophets*. Certainly Aleijadinho was also emotionally affected at this time, likely thinking about the institution of slavery, as his own dear Maurício died in Congonhas do Campo. This death took place while Aleijadinho was sculpting the *Prophets* and finishing up his work for the *Passion* sculptures at the same sanctuary.66

In addition, it is likely that Aleijadinho thought about the institution of slavery at this time because of a slave who escaped from the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos. This slave belonged to the sanctuary as part of the property of the brotherhood located there. In 1799, as Aleijadinho finished his *Passion* figures and prepared to sculpt the *Prophets*, this runaway slave proved very difficult to recapture. The difficulty of finding the slave was so significant, in fact, that the records of the brotherhood make mention of the expensive search.67 This event, coupled with the death of Maurício, could have caused Aleijadinho to think more about freedom and the effects of slavery while he worked on the sanctuary grounds.

Therefore, there are many political and social factors that could have contributed to the political nature of Aleijadinho’s *Prophets*. The Inconfidência Mineira’s

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65 Lisboa, 24.

66 Ibid., 28.

67 Júlio Engracia, *Relação Chronologica do Sanctuário e Irmandade do Snr. Bom Jesus de Congonhas do Campo no Estado de Minas Gerais, 1908* (São Paulo: Escola Profissionais Salesianas, 1908), 78. “Neste anno que escrevemos [1799], um fugido, causao grande dispendio em procural-o: a verba especificada – Capitao do malto e Cadeia’ de S. Joao d’- El rei era superior ao preço do dito escravo.” “In this year that we write [1799], a runaway, caused a lot of expense in order to find him: his specified title ‘Captain of the Jungle and the Jail’ in [the city] São Joao del Rei cost more for this slave to get than his original sale price.”
conspiracy, in conjunction with the death of Tiradentes, could have helped to ignite Aleijadinho’s interest in freedom and emancipation. In addition, Aleijadinho’s personal slaves and their contribution to his sculptures can also be pinpointed as a reason for the capoeira movements. Finally, the death of Aleijadinho’s faithful slave Maurício during his time at Congonhas do Campo could have also sparked feelings of emancipation in the mulatto artist. The following chapter will discuss how some of these political influences in the Prophets have been suggested by select scholars, but also how each scholar fails to see the influence of capoeira in the artistic composition.
CHAPTER II

ALEIJADINHO'S PROPHETS AND THEIR PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos is a pilgrimage sanctuary that is located at the top of a hill in Congonhas do Campo, a town which is about sixty miles from Aleijadinho’s home town, Vila Rica. The name of the church, Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos, is inspired by a miraculous image of the crucified Christ which is located at a sanctuary in Matozinhos, Portugal.¹ The Brazilian sanctuary originally began as a small oratory built by the Portuguese colonist Feliciano Mendes when his health was miraculously restored after an illness.² Mendes went about the countryside gathering funds for construction, and the sanctuary officially began to be built in 1758 with sixty cruzados.³ News of Mendes’ miraculous healing spread throughout the region, and the church began to attract pilgrims. Even today pilgrims continue to come to the church, particularly during the month of September, to worship and pray.

Construction of the sanctuary began at the part of the building that holds the main altar. This area of the church was completed in 1761. Under the direction of architect Francisco de Lima Cerqueira, the church rose quickly and was nearly completed by the time Mendes died in 1765.⁴ The staircase leading up to the church, which is decorated

¹ Germain Bazin, O Aleijadinho e a Escultura Barrôca no Brazil, (Rio de Janeiro: Distribuidora Record, 1971), 219. See also Kubler, 431.

² Mann, 57.

³ Kubler, 433.

with Aleijadinho’s *Prophets*, is recorded to have begun in 1777. The architect who was hired to begin work on the staircase area was Tomas de Maia Brito. Aleijadinho arrived in Congonhas do Campo to work on the wooden statues for the Passion scenes in 1796, four years after the death of Tiradentes. He worked under the patronage of Vicente Freire de Andrade, the head of the brotherhood located at the sanctuary. Later, from 1800 to 1805, Aleijadinho sculpted the *Prophets* with the help of his assistants. Made out of Brazilian soap stone, these statues complement the staircase so well that many scholars, including Reis and Smith, believe that Brito’s original staircase must have been remodeled or reconstructed to accommodate Aleijadinho’s sculptural composition.\(^5\)

Having been trained in architecture by his Portuguese father, Manuel Francisco Lisboa, and his uncle, António Francisco Pombal, it is likely that Aleijadinho redesigned the Congonhas staircase himself.\(^6\) These suppositions further support the argument for capoeira, for Aleijadinho’s capoeira composition incorporates the specific positioning and use of the staircase, as will be discussed later.

Six chapels line the hillside which leads to the entrance of the church. Each of these six chapels contain a scene from the Passion, and they are visited by the approaching viewer in chronological order, forming a *via sacra* for pilgrims to follow. By following the chronological order of Passion events, the visitor finds himself climbing the hill in a zig-zag pattern. George Kubler points out that Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos is a


\(^6\) Benton, 149.
sanctuary which has all of the characteristics of a pilgrimage church and a *sacro monte*,
“in receiving pilgrimages and in having a hillside Way of the Cross.”

Seven scenes from the Passion are found within the six chapels: The Last Supper, The Garden, The Taking of Christ, Ecce Homo (The Flagellation/The Crown of Thorns), The Carrying of the Cross, The Nailing to the Cross. Aleijadinho and his assistants were responsible for sculpting these sixty-six *Passion* figures out of cedarwood. In December 1798, before all of the figures were completed, painters Francisco Xavier Carneiro and Manoel da Costa Athaide were contracted to paint the wooden statues.

The twelve prophets that decorate the staircase of the sanctuary are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk. Each prophet holds a scroll which contains a passage which references their respective Biblical writings. These are the twelve prophets whose books first appear in the Vulgate, with the exception of Baruch, who has been substituted for Micah. The reason for placing Baruch, a disciple and secretary of Jeremiah, instead of Micah is unknown but the selection could have been chosen to emphasize a political message within the statues, as will be discussed later.

These statues outline the wall of the staircase that leads up to the sanctuary entrance. A prophet is placed at every corner of the staircase wall, and the overall effect

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7 Kubler, 431. Germain Bazin, historian and Louvre curator, also linked the layout of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos to the *monte sacro* tradition through a Portuguese sanctuary in Braga. See Bazin, 205-6, 218, 220.

8 The original plans for the Passion chapels included a seventh chapel, but it appears that the project ran short of funds. For this reason, the fourth chapel contains two Passion scenes: The Flagellation and the Crown of Thorns. These scenes were mistakenly been titled “Ecce Homo” on the outside of the chapel, for they obviously do not contain a traditional *ecce homo* representation. See Myriam Oliveira, 28. See also Lisboa, 128.

9 Oliveira, 26.

10 Lisboa, 125.
is an oval-like, enclosed formation. The statues are placed in chronological order, with the exceptions of Joel and Jonah, who appear to have been accidentally switched with each other. Hans Mann notes that this error “is confirmed by the position of the body and the direction of the gaze, which, in each case is out of harmony with the arrangement of the other figures in the composition. Artistic and chronological symmetry would be restored merely by interchanging these statues.”

The first two statues which are approached by the visitor, or pilgrim, are Isaiah and Jeremiah (Fig. 2, 3). When facing the staircase, Isaiah is placed on the left side of the staircase entrance and Jeremiah is placed on the right. Isaiah is wearing a hooded cloak, and his beard curls appear to be tousled by wind or movement. In his hand he holds a scroll, which proclaims Isaiah’s words, “A live coal, taken by seraphim from the altar of the Lord, hath seared my lips.” The words of this scroll, like all of the other scrolls of the prophets, are written in Latin and reference a chapter in the Bible.

Jeremiah’s scroll also contains a dramatic quote from his Biblical book, “My heart maketh a noise within me; I weep, for Judah hath been laid waste and Jerusalem overturned…” Jeremiah gazes directly towards the approaching visitor, his pen in hand. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah are slightly smaller in scale than the other statues, and a possible reason for this difference will be discussed later in connection with capoeira. However, it should also be recognized that these two statues are not static in their composition, but exhibit a lot of “bodily tension” and “conflict” in their stances.

11 Mann, 129.
The next two prophets that are approached by the visitor are Baruch and Ezekiel (Fig. 4, 5). These statues are located in a second elevation in the middle of the staircase; when entering the staircase Baruch is to the left of the visitor and Ezekiel is to the right. Baruch is positioned in an exaggerated contrapposto stance, with his right hip leaning far into his scroll. With his left hand, Baruch clutches the thick drapery folds which are wrapped around him, stabilizing his clothing’s place amidst his bodily movement. Ezekiel is also full of movement, and his right hand dramatically swings to the left as the rest of his body swings to his right. Ezekiel’s scroll tells of his apocalyptic vision with “the whirlwind of fire enfolding itself, and the four living creatures that came out of the midst thereof, the dreadful wheels within wheels and the throne of sapphire.”

The prophets Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah are located to Baruch’s right side, on the third elevation of the staircase (Fig. 6-8). Jonah is placed slightly behind Baruch, Amos is almost parallel with Baruch, and Obadiah is placed in front of Baruch. Amos’ back is dramatically hunched, and his hips are thrust forward in order to balance the weight of his body. Obadiah holds his right arm curved above his head, with his pointer finger arched towards the heavens. His left foot is placed in front of his other foot, and his whole body sways slightly to the left. Jonah is also exhibited in a swaying stance, but his body is leaning back on his left foot, with his right foot pointing forward. At the base of Jonah’s left foot is a whale that animatedly spouts water. Jonah’s head is twisted towards his right side, cocked upwards towards the sky. Jonah’s left arm is thrust forward, perpendicular to his body and his left hand is held upwards with the palm facing the viewer.

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14 Mann, 66.
Located on Ezekiel’s left side are three statues that decorate the other end of the third elevation: Habakkuk, Nahum, Joel (Fig. 9-11). Joel is placed slightly behind Ezekiel, Naum is almost parallel with Ezekiel, and Habakkuk is placed in front of Ezekiel. Like Obadiah, Habakkuk also dramatically gestures towards the sky, his left hand held high over his head. Habakkuk looks down, however, at the approaching pilgrim. His belly is slightly thrust in front of him, again suggesting movement. His scroll reads, “Babylon I accuse! Woe to the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation!”

Nahum stands with a fairly erect posture, his left hand clutching his drapery folds. His left foot points forward, projecting off of his pedestal, which also gives his body a sense of movement. Joel is also portrayed with a curved back. His head and belly are both projected forward, and Joel’s head is dramatically turned to his left. Joel’s scroll reads, “I show unto Judah the drying up of the vine and the languishing of the fig tree, the rotting of the seed under the clods, and the earth laid waste by the palmer worm and the locust, the cankerworm and the caterpillar.”

The last two statues that are approached before reaching the entrance of the sanctuary are Daniel and Hosea (Fig. 12, 13). These statues are also on the third elevation of the staircase, placed at the exit between Jonah and Joel. When exiting the staircase, Daniel is to the right of the visitor and Hosea is to the left. The posture of Daniel is also curvilinear, and a lion winds itself around Daniel’s right foot. Daniel wears a laurel wreath around his hat, and he stares intently downwards, looking towards the viewer who passes below. Daniel’s left foot is deeply bent at the knee, suggesting

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.
movement. This stance is balanced by Daniel’s right hand, which is set forward, as if in a swinging motion. Hosea also appears to be in a swinging motion, and his posture is exaggeratedly bent in movement. The bending and swaying in motion is further emphasized by the unaligned buttons on Hosea’s coat. Hosea’s feet are placed at an angle to each other, in a dance-like stance. In addition, Hosea’s right hand is pulled to the front of his body, holding a quill.

**Previous Political Interpretations of the Prophets**

It is important to recognize how select political interpretations of the Prophets have created a foundation for the argument that the sculptures are manifestations of capoeira. Although these interpretations help to build the historical context, these political interpretations rarely include a discussion of the dynamic nature of the Prophets in conjunction with politics. In contrast, other writers focus on the dynamic nature of the statues without including much historical context.

Aside from the few political interpretations which exist, the Prophets have generally been analyzed in a European, Caucasian context, focusing on the different European influences on Aleijadinho’s work. For example, the Louvre Museum curator Germain Bazin extensively studied the work at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos, and presented Florentine engravings which portrayed images with similar clothing to some of the statues. However, Tim Benton argues that Aleijadinho’s sculptures are too “archaic” and primitive to prove that Aleijadinho was aware of the modern European Baroque styles.  

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17 Bazin has explained that the wreath surrounding Daniel’s head is undoubtedly composed of laurel leaves, and suggests that the inspiration for Aleijadinho’s leaves have come from Florentine engravings. See Bazin, 291.

18 Benton, 166.
Benton suggests that Aleijadinho’s work merely conformed to a generalized European tradition.

Although Aleijadinho perhaps did “conform” to the European tradition, Benton also implies that the artist did not conform to the European monarchy and power, as manifest in the Passion figures at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos. Benton writes, “The fact that the Roman soldiers in these scenes were caricatured, with bulbous split chins and monstrous noses, has been interpreted as a dig at the Portuguese ruling classes” (Fig. 14).19 Local traditions also place Aleijadinho’s Passion figures within a political context, maintaining that the ring of blood around Christ’s neck is a reference to Tiradentes and his death at the gallows (Fig. 15).20 In addition, Christ’s wrists are also tied to the flagellation column, which local tradition pinpoints as Aleijadinho’s critique of the treatment of slaves.21

Aleijadinho’s work is also seen as being anti-conformist because it follows several different artistic styles, not adhering to a specific European trend. For this reason, Aleijadinho has been accredited with giving an original, colonial Brazilian interpretation to the Baroque style.22 As mentioned previously, Aleijadinho’s style has been interpreted

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19 Ibid, 168.

20 A História de Congonhas, DVD, directed by Warley Robert Pereira, (Independent production, Minas Gerais, n.d.).

21 Ibid.

22 Sérgio D. T. Macedo, Tiradentes e o Aleijadinho, (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1962), 46. It has also been suggested that Aleijadinho’s connection with Brazilian art was fostered by individuals who were trying to give Brazil a greater sense of national identity. See discussion in Benton, 175.
as an embodiment of an “artistic rebellion of the negros” because of its stark contrast to the stylistic models of the time.\textsuperscript{23}

These ideas of political rebellion and artistic originality can be further tied into Aleijadinho’s choice of medium, particularly in regards to the \textit{Prophets}. Aleijadinho expressly chose to carve the prophets in soap stone, a medium which comes from Brazil. By choosing this medium, Aleijadinho’s art is imbued with a nationalistic, indigenous flair which “reflected colours and adopted textures that the European craftsman could not have foreseen. Brazilian wood, Brazilian gold and Brazilian soapstone dictated their own terms.”\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, Aleijadinho’s choice of medium artistically and literally made him distinct from the European world and, more specifically, Portuguese rule. The Brazilians were capable of being completely independent from Europe, even in their use of artistic mediums.

Some critics have furthered this idea of artistic rebellion to speculate that Aleijadinho infused African traits into his \textit{Prophets}. The African influences in Aleijadinho’s art have been suggested by a few scholars, particularly Marianno Carneiro da Cunha and Tania Tribe. Tribe suggests that the “obvious departures from standard European anatomical canons” could be a mark of African origins.\textsuperscript{25} Cunha furthers this discussion by pointing out that the large heads and large body parts of Aleijadinho’s figures tie into an African style of exaggerated features. These “deformations” appear in sculptures from the Northeast part of Brazil, as well as in “certain sculptures in Minas

\textsuperscript{23} José Lezama Lima, 104.

\textsuperscript{24} Alberto Manguel, \textit{Reading Pictures: A History of Love and Hate}, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 214.

\textsuperscript{25} Tribe, 77.
and the central-south [part of Brazil] in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.”

Although Cunha doesn’t discuss any specific examples from Minas Gerais in his article, he shows convincing African and Afro-Portuguese examples that have exaggerated heads and body features.

Cunha also attacks the idea that the disproportion of the statues is a consequence of having several assistants help Aleijadinho work. Instead, Cunha finds that the disproportion is intentional, for all of the works were created under the “endorsement” of Aleijadinho. In regards to the Prophets, it is generally agreed that his assistants did a lot of the work, with Aleijadinho “merely putting the finishing touches on the rest of the body, the folds of the raiment and the ornamentation.” However, Aleijadinho in certain cases completely sculpted the head and the features, which could support Cunha’s additional argument that Aleijadinho was expressly interested in not only creating larger heads, but also adopting traces of other African sculptural traits, such as the full-lips and distinct eyes.

Building off of Tribe’s and Cunha’s ideas, the disproportional depiction of the Prophets can also be interpreted as a technique by which Aleijadinho could emphasize the dynamic quality of capoeira. These disproportions enliven the sculptures, making them appear to undulate back and forth to an inaudible African rhythm. Movement is also experienced by the physical movement of the viewer’s eye, for slight disproportions cause different emphases in the overall sculpture, causing the viewer’s eye to wander


27 Ibid.

28 Mann, 58.

29 Cunha, 1021.
around the form. Finally, the African characteristics implemented in each of the prophets make them become viable participants in capoeira, for Aleijadinho’s stylistic exaggerations suggest that these prophetic men are Africans themselves.

African references in Aleijadinho’s art have been further associated with politics, particularly by Orlandino Seitos Fernandes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Fernandes argues that Aleijadinho was so closely associated with the members of the Inconfidência Mineira that he took refuge in isolated areas of Brazil from 1789 to 1794. This argument is furthered by Fernandes’ discussion of how Aleijadinho’s works are pleas for independence and liberty. In regards to the Prophets at Congonhas do Campo, Fernandes believes that they are sympathetic towards the rebellion, for their scrolls can be interpreted as standards of freedom for Brazilian slaves and mulattoes. He points out that the different messages embodied by the Prophets, such as “soon the One shall come who will save us” (Baruch), refer to freedom and the coming of a “mulatto Brazil.” In addition, Fernandes also quotes “Israel shall be saved” (Daniel) as a reference to freedom and Brazil.

Furthermore, Fernandes finds that the altarpiece of São João at the church Nossa Senhora do Carmo has a depiction of the prophet Jeremiah (Fig. 16, 17) “with traits that are not Judaic, but African, depicted as a black person attached to a tree trunk who cries of his captivity through bars. Who therefore is this slave, Israel or Brazil?”

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30 Fernandes, 16-7. See also Kubler, 437.

31 Fernandes, 17. “bientôt viendra Celui qui nous sauvera” “Brésil mulâtre”

32 Ibid. “Israël va être sauvé”

33 Ibid. “traits qui ne sont pas judaïques mais africains, dans la personne d’un Noir attaché à un tronc d’arbre et qui se plaint de sa captivité à travers les barreaux. Qui donc est cet esclave Israël ou Brésil?”
political interpretation is further supported when one looks at the Latin words
surrounding this depiction of Jeremiah: “Incarcerem Jeremias. Caesum sum mi serunt.”
(“Jeremiah in prison. They sent him to his murder.”) These words help to further
heighten the intense, accusatory, political tone of the altarpiece. Not only can this
depiction of text and image be interpreted as a commentary on the treatment and death of
African slaves, but it also encompasses a cry for African liberation and national freedom.
The Jeremiah altarpiece was sculpted in 1807-09, only a few years after the Prophets
were completed in 1805, suggesting that the same political fervor which Aleijadinho
infused in his altarpiece could have easily existed while he was sculpting the twelve
prophets.

Furthering the political discussion, the correlation between the Prophets and the
Inconfidência Mineira members was studied by Isolde Helena Brans Venturelli. Like
Fernandes, Venturelli also concluded that Aleijadinho’s Prophets were directly
influenced by the Inconfidência Mineira, and she also asserts that Aleijadinho supported
the same separatist, abolitionist, and federalist ideas as the members of this rebel group.34
In relation to Aleijadinho’s Prophets, Venturelli further proposed that each prophet
represents one of the principal members of the Inconfidência Mineira, which are
respectively:

Jonah – Joaquim José da Silva Xavier (“Tiradentes”)
Jeremiah – Francisco de Paula Freire Andrade
Obadiah – José Álvares Maciel
Habbakuk – Domingos Vidal Barbosa
Nahum – Francisco Antônio de Oliveira Lopes
Ezekiel – Luis Vaz de Toledo Piza
Baruch – Salvador Carvalho do Amaral Gurgel
Daniel – Tomás Antônio Gonzaga
Hosea – Inácio José de Alvarenga

34 Isolde Helena Brans Venturelli, Profetas ou Conjurados (Sousas: Autora, 1982), 200.
Joel – Cláudio Manuel da Costa
Isaiah – the “disguised” (an emissary who warned inconfidentes of impending arrests)
Amos – Antônio Francisco Lisboa (“Aleijadinho”)

Venturelli supports her conclusions by expounding on the life of each one of the Inconfidência members, and shows how the prophets have messages on their scrolls or physical characteristics which coincide with each group member. However, Venturelli’s interpretations lack concrete attributions and are relatively subjective. For example, one of her reasons for attributing José Álvares Maciel as Obadiah is simply because Obadiah looks “young,” essentially because he is beardless. However, the same statement could be made for Amos, who is also beardless. In other instances, such as the case with Nahum, Venturelli hardly examines the physical characteristics of the sculpture at all. She briefly mentions how Nahum looks “depressed” in comparision with Habbakuk, which is the basis for attributing Nahum as Francisco Antônio de Oliveira Lopes. Lopes was an Inconfidência member who denounced the group under pressure, whose confession led to the imprisonment and interrogation of his cousin, Domingos Vidal Barbosa. With only “depression” as her true justification, Venturelli finds that Nahum represents Lopes, and Habbakuk conversely represents Barbosa.

In addition, there were more than twelve people who were involved with the Inconfidencia Mineira, and Venturelli’s attributions are a rather arbitrary selection. Admittedly, Venturelli does seem to focus on many key members of the group but does not include important members such as Padre Rolim, who was present at the crucial

36 Ibid, 408.
meeting in January 1789 when the group outlined details of the revolt. She also does not attribute Aleijadinho’s statues to Vitoriano Goncalves Veloso, Friancisco Antonio de Oliveira Lopes, Joao da Costa Rodrigues, Domingos de Abreu Viera, Jose Aires Gomes, or Vicente Veira da Mota, all individuals whose tombs are housed in the Inconfidência Mineira Museum due to their involvement with the group.

Venturelli attempts to solidify her argument by suggesting that there is interplay between the different statues which suggests the personalities, collaboration, and at times, disagreement of the Inconfidência Mineira members. Once again, Venturelli’s interpretations are problematic and demonstrate a lack of art historical knowledge. For example, Venturelli observes:

“The left hand of Jonah, in Congonhas is raised up with the palm outwards, like a gesture of rejection, in the direction of the prophet Daniel that in turn, has turned his back. There seems to have been, in this coordinated positioning, the allusion of an ostentatious anger, pseudo-existent, between the two conspirators (in truth there was an agreement, a convenient understanding, to prove the innocence of Tomás Antônio Gonzaga). The plastic gesticulation of Jonah, monolithic like Daniel, a ‘choreography’ between the two prophets, seems to reinforce the idea that such commentary was the public demand.”

This discussion of interplay between the statues presupposes that Aleijadinho intended the figures to have this interactive discourse. However, this interplay between Jonah and Daniel was probably not intended by the artist, since the Prophets would follow chronological and artistic harmony if Joel was positioned in Jonah’s location. Either Venturelli was not aware of this probable switch or simply chose to ignore it for her fallacious argument, which ultimately emphasizes the subjectivity and anti-historical approach to her writing.

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38 Ibid, 61.
In addition, another writer, Marilei Vasconcellos also believes that the Prophets are influenced by the Inconfidência Mineira, particularly by making connections between the statues and the Masonic involvement of some of the inconfidentes. According to Vasconcellos, Aleijadinho’s prophets have specific configurations, clothing designs, and iconography which correspond to various Masonic symbols. Vasconcellos believes that these references are not only indicative of Aleijadinho’s Masonic beliefs, but also proof of his involvement with the Inconfidência Mineira. However, like Venturelli, Vasconcellos’ ideas are ahistorical and pigeon-holed to fit her argument. For example, Vasconcellos’ theories regarding how the Prophets are unified through different zig-zag patterns are continually debunked when it is remembered that Jonah and Joel likely are switched in their respective locations. Like Venturelli, Vasconcellos also comes up with her own interpretation of which Inconfidência Mineira members are represented by specific prophets, they are as follows:

- Obadiah – Francisco de Paula Freire
- Baruch – Tomás Gonzaga
- Ezekiel – Inácio Alvarenga Peixoto
- Isaiah – Tiradentes
- Jeremiah – Cláudio Manuel da Costa
- Amos – Antonio Francisco Lisboa
- Daniel – José Alvares Maciel
- Jonah – Rego Fortes
- Joel – Salvador Gurgel
- Nahum – Domingos Abreu Vieira
- Habakkuk – Antonio Oliveira Lopes
- Hosea – Domingos Vidal Barbosa

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41 Ibid, 76.
Vasconcellos’ attribution of each prophet to an Inconfidência Mineira member is also subjective, if not more so than Venturelli. At times, she does not even give justification for her attribution. In other cases, such as the prophet Isaiah, Vasconcellos makes a loose connection between the word “seraphim” on the prophet’s scroll and the solar god Serapis. Vasconcellos then argues that Serapis is actually Osiris in popular cult, a god that was killed by his companions and had his body cut into pieces, which she finds is similar to the death of Tiradentes.\textsuperscript{42} This connection between Tiradentenses and Isaiah appears quite strained, not only through the loose connection to Osiris, but also because Tiradentenses died by hanging not cutting, and was only cut into pieces later.

In regards to movements, Vasconcellos only examines a few of the gestures by the Prophets. In regards to the raised arms of Obadiah and Nahum, Vasconcellos merely notes that their positioning not only makes their bodies symmetrical, but causes the composition of the sculptural group to be symmetrical as well.\textsuperscript{43} She finds that Ezekiel’s positioning is related to the Masonic movement of crossing one’s hand across the throat, indicating that the mason would rather have his throat cut than divulge the secrets which were confided to him.\textsuperscript{44} However, Ezekiel’s raised fist crosses over his body and is positioned far past his opposite shoulder, not even close to the area near his throat. Finally, Vasconcellos argues that Jonah’s hand positioning, with the palm raised upwards, is similar to a Master Mason hand gesture, with “the pointer and middle finger united and the other fingers spread open.”\textsuperscript{45} This statement is rather hard to assert, as the

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 97.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 88.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 99. “os dedos indicadores e médio estavam unidos e os demais abertos”
majority of Jonah’s fingers are missing. However, a detailed examination of Jonah’s hand reveals that this isn’t the case – the remainder of Jonah’s ring finger is not “spread apart,” but is flush with the middle finger (Fig. 18).

As one can see, many of the political interpretations regarding the Prophets have a good foundation, but other interpretations are greatly lacking in historical and concrete scholarship. Although Venturelli and Vasconcellos have both used historical context to tie Aleijadinho’s art to the Inconfidência Mineira, their arbitrary attributions of specific statues to inconfidentes are problematic. The possibility of linking specific statues to members of the rebel group is intriguing but requires further research; none of the arguments by Venturelli and Vasconcellos are justifiable or convincing. Although this study will not try to remedy their attributions, it is important to note their historical connections and fallacies. Furthermore, Vasconcellos created a good foundation by analyzing some of the prophet’s movements, but her interpretation of the movements is problematic and will be revisited in this study with capoeira.

**Previous Interpretations of the Prophets’ Dynamic Movements**

Vasconcellos was the first writer to begin analyzing the movements of the Prophets in 1989. Another scholar, Soraia Maria Silva, furthered the analysis of these movements in her master’s thesis, *Prophets in Movement*. Although Silva was careful not to critique Vasconcellos, she indicated that she would like to build upon the present state of discourse by examining the choreography and dancing exhibited by the Prophets. As a ballerina, Silva found artistic inspiration for her dance through the dynamic movements of the prophets, suggesting in her book that the Prophets are involved in a
metaphor of expressive movement.⁴⁶ According to Silva, the dramatic gestures of the prophets create a "danceintersemioticism" which utilizes the "interaction of dance with other artistic languages" while employing the use of semiotics.⁴⁷

These expressions are seen by Silva as a precursor to the theories of dance expression examined by German Rudolf Laban in the 20th century. Silva believes that the Prophets are a transposition of two complimentary theories, which are “the method of the origin of Baroque, which was created for the purpose of scenic movement” and also “an analysis of expressive movement created by Laban.”⁴⁸ In 2001, Silva's observations and ideas culminated in a dramatic dance spectacular, where all of the choreography was inspired by Aleijadinho's statues.

By analyzing the combined signifier and signified of the Prophets statues, Silva determines that the postures and gestures of the statues “equate the global meaning ‘to be prophetic.’”⁴⁹ This globalization of the idea “to be prophetic” seems generalized and confusing, which is perhaps why Silva shies away from elaborating on how gestures can signify the state of being prophetic. It can be deduced from her argument that prophetic actions include the critique of political, economic, social and religious injustices.

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⁴⁶ Silva, 27. “a metáfora cênica do movimento expressivo”


⁴⁸ Ibid, 41. “o método de origem barroca para a criação de uma movimento cênica,” “a análise do movimento expressivo criada por Laban”

⁴⁹ Ibid, 35. “When the Prophets are conceived as a form captured in a static pose, this points to a correlation between the semantics of the signified and the semantics of the signifier, whose union equate the global meaning ‘to be prophetic.’” “Quando se concebem os Profetas como uma forma capturada em uma postura estática, está-se apontando para uma correlação entre a semântica do significado e a semântica do significante, cuja união equivale ao sentido global do ‘ser profético.’”
Furthermore, Biblical prophets after the Babylonian Captivity are also associated with announcing consolation and hope in a Savior.\(^{50}\)

Silva’s ambiguity regarding what it means “to be prophetic,” also extends into her subjective interpretation of the *Prophets*’ movements. It is particularly confusing when Silva uses nouns to describe a movement, such as when she asserts that both Isaiah and Hosea are exhibiting the movement of “profundity” through their actions.\(^{51}\) This interpretation is confusing and requires further explanation – which indicates that these signifiers are not functioning in their capacity to clearly reference “profundity” or any other type of “prophetic dance” to the audience.

It is disappointing that Silva is careful not to critique previous theories and ideas that have already been presented on Aleijadinho’s work, such as Venturelli’s study. Silva tries to leave an open door for interpretation by stating that her focus is merely proposing a new aspect of looking at the *Prophets* through danceintersemiticism, but consequently does not establish herself in relation to other scholarship. Finally, Silva’s book is most significantly erroneous because of her forced connection to Laban’s theories of expression. Laban’s methods do not have direct movements and gestures which parallel the prophets. Consequently, Silva’s conclusions are based more on the general positioning and body actions of Laban’s theories instead of concrete comparisons.

However, there is also some merit to Silva’s interpretation of the *Prophets*’ movements, and some of her analyses can be used to connect movements of the *Prophets*

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\(^{50}\) Ibid, 63.

\(^{51}\) Silva then examines the position of the Isaiah statue, which involves the actions of “pressure, pointing, and [a] diagonal from the front/left/below.” Finally, Silva finds that the internal attitude expressed by Isaiah is exhibited by corporal tension focused on the face. All together, these different actions and attitudes are interpreted to be signifiers for the sensation of movement, “profundity.” Ibid. “pressionar, apontar. Diagonal frente/esquerda/baixo.”
to concrete examples of capoeira. Silva’s analysis is generally useful in the “sensation of movement” that is contained within the frozen stances of the statues. Although some interpretations are still problematic, many of these analyses exhibit self-evident characteristics that can be understood as signifiers. These different movements are self-evident in the statues, based on their different bodily positions. In the next chapter, these movements suggested by Silva, as well as other movements will be examined within the capoeira paradigm. These valid contributions by Silva relate to some of her descriptions regarding the Prophets’ sensation of movement, which are as follows:

- Baruch – Suspension and relaxation
- Ezekiel – Contraction and expansion
- Hosea – Collapsing, sinking, relaxed
- Jonah – Emergence and focus
- Joel – Prolonged rotation
- Obadiah – Expansion
- Habakkuk – Expansion and opposition of the body in two diagonals
- Naum – Oscillation

In addition to these analyses, Silva also asserts that each prophet embodies an individualized, thematic message which is contained in each respective prophet’s Biblical writings. To further satisfy her argument, Silva also examines the messages that are contained on each of the Prophets’ scrolls. The overall themes and messages found by Silva can be interpreted further to encompass an overall political message in the sculptural composition. According to Silva, the overall themes exhibited by the Prophets, as examined through their Biblical messages are:

- Isaiah – Faith and Political Justice
- Jeremiah – New alliance in the midst of conflict
- Baruch – Repentance and conversion

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Ezekiel – A new heart
Daniel – The triumph of the kingdom of God
Hosea – God is faithful love
Jonah – The love of God does not know boundaries
Joel – The Day of Judgment
Obadiah – Against the lack of solidarity
Habakkuk – The just will live because of their faithfulness
Amos – Against social injustice
Naum – The ruin of the oppressors

Although Silva does not truly delve into how the political messages can match the political context of Aleijadinho’s day, this significant parallel should not be ignored. Indeed, the political messages of Silva’s prophetic themes fit well into other political interpretations already discussed, such as that by Fernandes. Many of Silva’s prophetic themes can be seen as a propagandistic call for collaboration or union against tyranny and oppression. When the Prophets are examined as capoeiristas, these themes can be expanded into a call for slaves to rise up against their oppression and injustice. In addition, Silva suggests that two of the prophets, Jonah and Daniel, demonstrate the necessity of death for one to be spiritually reborn. Just as Jonah emerged from the whale and Daniel emerged from the lion’s den, one must face death in order to be reborn to a new life. One can extend Silva’s analogy further to tie into the political context of the day – these prophets demonstrate that colonists and slaves must put their lives in peril and fight, possibly facing death, in order to find a new life of freedom.

Building off of Silva’s suggestion, Daniel’s symbolic associations can be further interpreted as a message of hope to African slaves. For example, the prophet Daniel

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54 Ibid, 99.
“testif[ies] that there is hope even for them that be cast into the den of lions.” Like Daniel, who was unjustly thrown into a lion’s den, the African slaves had been unjustly thrown into the hands of other lions, Brazilian plantation owners. Aleijadinho sends a message of hope to these slaves, showing them that God will help them overcome their trials and find justice. This concept of hope is further emphasized through the laurel wreath around his head, a symbol of victory.

A message of hope and deliverance can also be connected to other prophetic writings, such as those of Baruch. As mentioned earlier, the prophet Baruch was added to Aleijadinho’s sculptural composition instead of Micah. The choice of Baruch over Micah is particularly puzzling since the texts of Baruch were incorporated into Jeremiah’s book in the Vulgate. However, when Aleijadinho’s work is interpreted in a political and abolitionist context, Baruch’s placement could have more significance, for his book contains a message of hope to the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Baruch 4:5-6, 21 reads, “Take courage, my people, O constant reminder of Israel. You were sold to the nations, though not to be destroyed…Take courage, my children, cry to God; he will deliver you from tyranny, from the hands of your enemies.” This message can be interpreted as a message of hope to African slaves, as well as Brazilian colonists. However, it is unknown whether the Brazilian populace would have been able to recognize this political message, particularly because the writings of Baruch were probably not common knowledge. In addition, Baruch’s scroll reads, “I predict the coming of Christ in the flesh and the last moments of the world, and admonish the pious.”

55 Mann, 66.

This statement does not emphasize the political fervor of the prophet’s writings, which leaves the overall interpretation difficult.

Just as Silva is able to help set the foundation for political and abolitionist interpretations, she also helps to set the foundation for the capoeira argument. Finding that the Prophets exhibit a scenic, theatrical quality, Silva recognizes that the viewer plays an important role in experiencing the work. She argues, “Excellent Baroque [art] promotes the participation of the spectator, causing him to ‘pass through the work’ looking at it from various aspects which often provokes various sensations of surprise and enchantment.” Silva then continues to discuss how these sculptures anticipate and expect the spectator to move through constantly changing perspectives of the Prophets. As will be shown later, this observation is critical in conjunction with the capoeira argument; the staircase of the Prophets is configured so that the spectator can enter the capoeira circle. In addition, when considering the changing perspective of the viewer, one can also see different statues taking turns acting as capoeira “contestants.”

Silva and Vasconcellos are not the only writers who have studied the movements of Aleijadinho’s sculptures. Although Vasconcellos was the first to truly analyze the movements of the Prophets, the element of dance in conjunction with Aleijadinho’s work was previously studied by Joaquim Ribeiro do Carmo, a professor of dance who argues that Passion figures are positioned in movements similar to classical ballet. For example, in the Passion scene of The Garden, Carmo argues that Christ is positioned with the right knee bent (“en plié”) and also turned outwards from the body (“en dehors”).

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57 Ibid, 95.
In addition, Carmo finds that many Passion sculptures are positioned in theatrical gestures, suggesting that Aleijadinho probably intended a more scenic, spacious location for his sculptures than the small chapels found today.

Carmo’s study focuses primarily on the figures of Christ’s Passion at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos; he resists interpreting the Prophets in regards to ballet movements. This avoidance of interpreting the Prophets is understandable, for they exhibit a different dance aesthetic than classical ballet. Many of Carmo’s ballet comparisons revolve around the various positions of the arms, which often curve and frame the body in some fashion. Aleijadinho’s statues are not positioned in similar movements; instead of graceful curves, most of the arm positions contain harsher angles, such as that by Ezekiel. In addition, the two statues that raise arms far from the body, Obadiah and Habbakuk, both position their arms outwards with no graceful curve back towards the body. Furthermore, the curvilinear stances of the prophets do not follow the same axial positioning and “perfection of form” required for ballet. Rather, the bodies of the Prophets appear to undulate back and forth in a very non-classical fashion.

Instead of examining dance movements other than ballet, Carmo opts to briefly mention that the Prophets exhibit a scenic, theatrical quality which is similar to the theatrical space he finds in the Passion scenes. Carmo concludes that the observer will convert his or her viewpoint into “various angles” to observe what is theatrically

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59 Ibid., 50.
60 Ibid., 24-26.
61 Ibid., 199. Robert Smith also discusses the theatrical presentation of the Prophets, describing the presentation as “a kind of solemn ballet,” and thinks that these statues have a similarity with some of Bernini’s sculptural ensembles for Roman architecture. See also Smith, 21 (italics added for emphasis).
“presented” by the *Prophets*. This idea of various visual angles and the experience of the viewer is a Baroque artistic technique that is especially significant to the argument for capoeira. In the next chapter, different visual angles will be examined as a means to create capoeira interplay between different statues, emphasizing the political message associated with capoeira. In addition, the capoeira interplay will also emphasize the experience of capoeira to the visitor, who is visually engaged in discovering, creating and participating in capoeira by approaching the *Prophets* from different visual angles and physical positions.

Curator Germain Bazin also discusses the dynamic quality of the *Prophets*, and mentions that they are positioned in a ballet scene; however, like Carmo, Bazin refrains from finding specific ballet movements and comparisons. Instead, Bazin discusses how the emphasis on “rhythm” ties into the ballet and Baroque aesthetic, with origins in the beginning of the seventeenth century. This ballet of rhythm, as described by Bazin, can be found in the staircases leading up to a few Baroque churches, particularly in Sicily. Bazin points out that the gestures of the statues which decorate the balustrade of the Basilica di San Sebastiano in Acireale (Fig. 20) are the closest gestures to those of Aleijadinho’s *Prophets*, but he refrains from elaborating on the subject. Upon examination, these sculptures of Old Testament figures do exhibit a dynamic quality

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62 Carmo, 168.

63 The only scholar who attempts to attribute specific ballet positions to the *Prophets* is the Chilean art historian Leopoldo Castedo, who is obviously influenced by either Carmo or Bazin. However, Castedo merely mentions in a sentence that some of the feet positions correspond to the “third position” in ballet. Unfortunately, Castedo’s figural example of Joel’s “third position” is unconvincing, for the heel of the right foot is not placed anywhere near the arch of the left foot. This discrepancy makes one question Castedo’s familiarity with ballet, thus making this source unreliable. See Leopoldo Castedo, *The Baroque Prevalence in Brazilian Art*, (New York: Charles Frank Publications, 1964), 53.

64 Bazin, 281.

65 Ibid., 282.
which echoes the *Prophets* in some ways. For example, the figure *Joseph of Egypt* brings his arm up and around his body in a manner which is similar to the way in which Aleijadinho’s prophet Ezekiel lifts his arm (Fig. 21). However, the manner in which *Joseph of Egypt* curves his arm around his body appears to have a more graceful, gentler aesthetic than the angular gesture of Ezekiel. The arm of Joseph appears to function more as a means to frame the body, whereas Ezekiel’s arm is held closer to the body (Fig. 22). Although the dynamic quality of these sculptures and other Baroque sculptures may have helped to inspire Aleijadinho’s work, there do not appear to be any specific correlations between the gestures of these statues and those of Aleijadinho.  

Overall, Bazin avoids pinpointing specific Western examples as points of inspiration for Aleijadinho’s gestures and positions. However, Bazin does discuss how Aleijadinho’s *Prophets* correlate with traditional European depictions of biblical prophets. For example, it is traditional in Western art to depict prophets often as bearded men, holding scrolls or parchment. Aleijadinho’s art is specifically different from other

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66 Bazin does not attempt to prove that Aleijadinho was specifically influenced by the statues at San Sebastiano or any other Baroque sculptures. Although Bazin does convincingly argue that the clothing and faces of Aleijadinho's *Prophets* were influenced by Florentine engravings, any correlation between the San Sebastiano artists Gian Battista Marino and/or Paolo Vasta would require further research and exploration.

67 Although he does not give specific Western examples as points of inspiration for Aleijadinho, Bazin mentions that the gesture of the prophet Obadiah can be interpreted as one belonging to the *maître de ballet*, as if Obadiah is coordinating the dances of the other prophets. In addition, Bazin acknowledges that Obadiah, “with his arm extended, reaches towards the sky with the finger of a righteous one, [which can be interpreted] for the world either as forgiveness or a curse” (“de braço estendido, ergue para o céu o dedo de justiçheiro, do qual depende, para o mundo, o perdão ou a maldição.”). See Bazin, 283. It should be recognized that the gesture of Obadiah has more correlation with Western art than any of the other prophetic gestures exhibited by the prophets. The raised arm of Obadiah has similarities to the orator’s stance found in ancient works such as *Augustus of Primaporta*. In addition, the raised finger towards the sky was sometimes used in Western art when depicting angels, indicating that the angel was speaking on behalf of God. However, it is also unknown whether Aleijadinho had seen any prints or drawings of such Western examples. Furthermore, it is unknown whether other Brazilian colonists would have identified this gesture with Western references. As will be discussed in chapter three, Obadiah’s gesture also holds signification within the capoeira context.
contemporary depictions of prophets in Brazilian art, such as an eighteenth century oil painting of Obadiah from Rio de Janeiro (Fig. 23). Bazin effectively demonstrates how this prophet is portrayed without personal characteristics, finding that this “impersonal iconography” does not exist in the Congonhas Prophets, where Aleijadinho has depicted prophets with not only biblical scrolls, but often with other identifiable symbols. In addition, it appears that there are not any contemporary Brazilian examples of prophets or apostles which are positioned in gestures similar to the Congonhas statues, which supports the originality of Aleijadinho’s work in relation to capoeira.

Although Bazin, Carmo, and Silva do not explore the idea of capoeira in their studies, they do argue that Aleijadinho was influenced by dance. Since it appears that Aleijadinho used classical ballet movements for his Passion figures, it is logical that Aleijadinho did not limit himself to observing only this dance form; rather, Aleijadinho looked to other dance forms more familiar to his culture, such as capoeira. The use of capoeira and other non-Caucasian elements in Aleijadinho’s art are especially exhibited by the twelve prophets, and this exhibition manifests that Aleijadinho also did not limit himself to Western elements in his art.

**Potential Reception and Recognition of Aleijadinho’s Propaganda**

Building off of these political studies and the historical context of the day, it appears that Aleijadinho used capoeira in his twelve prophets to help stir feelings of abolition, calling for the liberation of slaves. This liberating message probably was focused towards the overwhelmingly large African population in Minas Gerais, who

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68 Ibid., 273-80.

69 Ibid., 280. For example, the prophet Jonah is depicted with a whale, while Daniel is depicted with a lion at his feet.
would have been able to recognize capoeira movements and signs. In the year 1805, the year that the Prophets were completed, there were 118,761 slaves that were recorded as living in the state of Minas Gerais, comprising 46.4% of the population. It is likely that African slaves in the area would have been able to notice and recognize this propagandistic message. Although all African slaves were baptized into the Catholic church, they were not permitted to worship inside churches such as Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos. Instead, the slaves constructed their own Catholic churches, worshipping separately from the white colonists. J. Lowell Lewis writes that in other cases, slaves stood outside of “white” churches, participating in mass services as best as possible. Therefore, Aleijadinho wisely places his propagandistic message on the outside of the church, where it could be seen by slaves throughout the city and area, and particularly by those who worshiped outside the sanctuary or waited in the entry plaza while their master or mistress worshiped inside.

In addition, the Prophets also assuredly would have been seen by African slaves who worshiped at the local Congonhas church for slaves, Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Fig. 24). This church was built in 1677, and is the oldest church in the area. It is built on a hillside which faces Congonhas do Campo, with a clear view of Aleijadinho’s statues that still exists today (Fig. 25). In fact, most of the city of Congonhas do Campo is comprised of several hills, and the statues can be seen from vantage points throughout the city. In 1869, Sir Richard Francis Burton noted in his travel journal that

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72 Lewis, 29.
Aleijadinho’s *Prophets* had “a good effect at a distance,” a description which is confirmed by a nineteenth-century representation of the complex (Fig. 26).  

Another great vantage point from which one can see the *Prophets* is another church in Congonhas, Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Fig. 27). Although slaves would not have been able to enter this church, it is likely that they would have waited for their masters to finish worship services within, allowing them to stand outside with a clear view of the *Prophets* (Fig. 28). Slaves during this time were recorded as having accompanied their owners’ family members to church, such as one account by Francisca Rodrigues de Guerra. The slave woman of Guerra’s family was required to “wash the clothes of [her] daughters and to accompany them to Mass in the customary manner,” which suggests that accompanying to church was a traditional part of the culture.

However, this cry for freedom and liberty was not limited to the African population of Brazil. Rather, Aleijadinho’s propaganda for the freedom of slaves also reflected a cry for Brazilian independence, for the Brazilians were slaves under the Portuguese crown as well. As discussed in the last chapter, the oppressive taxes on gold in Minas Gerais assuredly made miners feel as if they were slaves to the Portuguese crown; the formation of the Inconfidência Mineira is proof of this sentiment. Furthermore, Aleijadinho’s political message of national freedom is especially emphasized in the political messages included on the *Prophets*’ scrolls. As mentioned earlier, the indigenous soap stone medium of the statues also exudes a spirit of

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74 Will of Frederica Rodrigues de Guerra, 29 June 1757, Livro de Obitos, No. 2, fol. 301v, Archive of the Parish of Antonio Dias. See also Donald Ramos, “Community, Control and Acculturation,” *The Americas* 42, no. 4, (April, 1986): 431. Italics added for emphasis.
nationalism and identity. Together, the political words, capoeira actions, and physical medium of the Prophets exhibit a message of freedom for colonists and slaves alike.
CHAPTER III

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CAPOEIRA AND THE PROPHETS AS CAPOEIRISTAS

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian dance form whose origin is associated with the African slaves in Brazil. Although a form of capoeira could have existed in Africa before Brazil, it is obvious that the practice would not have flourished if it had not been for Brazilian slaves. The exact beginnings of capoeira are unknown, due to poor documentation of its history during the first 200 years of slavery in Brazil. However, some historians suggest that capoeira developed with the Portuguese recapture of Quilombos dos Palmares, a group of independent villages in northeastern Brazil that were governed by runaway slaves, many of which originally came from Angola. The millions of inhabitants in Quilombos dos Palmares resisted capture for more than a decade, but the area was finally conquered by the Portuguese in 1697. It has been suggested by Burlamaqui that capoeira movements were used by these former slaves to counteract the organized military advances during this period of attack. Burlamaqui writes that the runaway slaves used “strange leg, arms, trunk, and head movements with...agility and violence, [giving them] incredible superiority. [From this point] spread then the fame of the Capoeira game.”

1 Tigges, 26.

2 Annibal Burlamaqui, A Ginastica Nacional. Capoeiragem Metodizada e Regrada, (Rio de Janeiro: Self-published, 1928), 163. There are a few other interpretations of capoeira which should be mentioned. Some scholars also link capoeira to a Zebra dance from Angola, which is called N’Golo. Other scholars disagree, finding that capoeira never existed in Angola. Finally, a few scholars think that the capoeira dance originated in France, and the dance may have traveled to Brazil through the Senegal people. For a more detailed discussion of other capoeira origins, see Tigges, 29-31.
The etymology of the word “capoeira” perhaps can also indicate more regarding the origins of the dance. In addition to the martial art, “capoeira” refers to a forest, and can further refer to a fugitive slave living in a forest. The word can also refer to an outlaw or troublemaker who assaults travelers. With this etymological background in mind, Engracia’s account of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos may indicate that the area surrounding the sanctuary could have housed fugitive slaves and practitioners of capoeira. Engracia relates that in 1797 there was a need for Vicente Freire de Andrade, head of the brotherhood at the sanctuary, to purchase a small house near the sanctuary where animals could graze in enclosed, secure pastures. Engracia goes on to explain that the confinement of these animals to an area was “not just circumstantial, for the other terrains, covers of capoeiras, did not give direct and immediate access to pastures.” Although Engracia does not explain whether “capoeira” refers simply to a forested area or a hiding place for practitioners of capoeira, the stress on finding a safe pasture for animals could indicate that dangerous outlaws resided in the nearby terrain. If this is the case, then capoeiristas were already located in Congonhas do Campo while Aleijadinho was sculpting the Passion figures, at least a few years before he began to sculpt the Prophets in 1800.

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3 Tigges, 15-6. See also Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, “Capoeira,” <www.m-w.com>, 16 January 2008. The interpretation of capoeira as “forest” refers to the Amerindian language Tupi-Guaraní, where caé (“forest”) and puêra (“extinct”) come together. The reference to extinction could either refer to deforestation, or it could indicate that a capoeira is an area of the forest containing secondary vegetation, a place where the original forest cover has been destroyed by fire. Finally, the origin of the word “capoeira” has also been linked to the English words “rooster” or “capon,” suggesting that capoeira movements are similar to those of a cockfight. For more information, see Merrell, 5.

4 Ibid.

5 Engracia, 75.

6 Ibid. “não é so por esta circunstancia, mas tambem porque os outros terrenos, cobertos de capoeiras, não se prestavão de prompto ao fim directo e immediate de pastagens.” Italics added for emphasis.
The first written record of capoeira dates to 1770, which is during the beginning stages of Aleijadinho’s career.\textsuperscript{7} At this time, capoeira had spread across Brazil to several different states, and the subject of the sport was in constant debate, for the martial art was officially banned by the Brazilian Penal Code.\textsuperscript{8} It is probable that capoeira was banned because it appeared confusing and thereby threatening to Portuguese colonists. When capoeira was practiced, slave owners could not tell if the movements were part of a prohibited African ritual or merely a dance.\textsuperscript{9}

It is most likely however, that capoeira was banned because of its anti-slavery sentiment. This explanation of capoeira’s function is well-explained by Augusto Ferreira:

“Capoeira was born out of a burning desire for freedom. Only through the efforts of these men would the slaves free themselves, and return once more to the life of freedom they had known in their own land...The process of isolation and fortification caused the fugitive blacks to develop a system for freeing the slaves still captive on the plantations and in the towns... Capoeira developed its structure as a fight...basically because it was needed not just to defend against physical aggression, but as a defense in life or death situations in which the attackers did not simply use whips, but rather deadly weapons, even firearms and cannon...”\textsuperscript{10}

Today, music always accompanies the capoeira dance; it is used as a medium to help recreate the anti-slavery sentiment which originally accompanied the sport. The lyrics of these songs often express a desire for freedom or a hostile attitude towards slave owners. One such capoeira song which “evokes a scenario of slave resistance” is:

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\textsuperscript{7} Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, A Capoeira Escrava e Outras Tradições Rebeldes no Rio de Janeiro (1808-1850), (Campinas, Brazil: Editoria da Unicamp, 2001), 41.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Lewis, 34.
\textsuperscript{10} Almeida, 16-7.
\end{flushright}
vá dizer ao meu Sinhó          go tell my master
que a manteiga derramou      that the butter spilled
a manteiga não é minha       the butter isn’t mine
a manteiga é do ioiô         the butter is the ioiô’s [master’s].

Music is so often used with the contemporary capoeira dance that it would be easy
to assume that capoeira has always been executed with musical accompaniment.
However, although capoeira songs perhaps evoke the sentiment of early African slaves,
the actual music and lyrics are not historical artifacts. Greg Downey points out, “Songs
that bring [contemporary] players into contact with the art’s fallen heroes were not
actually sung by the people from whose perspective they were composed. And
capoeiristas of yore did not go into battle to the sound of the berimbau, the instrument
that now causes a capoerista’s pulse to race with anticipation.”12 Although the berimbau,
a stringed instrument now universally associated with capoeira, did exist during the
nineteenth century, it is generally agreed that the instrument was not associated with early
capoeira.13 In fact, during Aleijadinho’s time, it appears that capoeira was not necessarily
practiced with music. Two nineteenth-century European tourists, Johann Moritz
Rugendas (João Maurício Rugendas) and Augustus Earle, both did not include references
to musical instruments in their respective works, São Salvador and Negroes Fighting,
Brazil (Fig. 29, 30). In another engraving by Rugendas entitled Game of Capoeira, the
capoeiristas are shown only fighting to the beat of a drum and clapped hands instead of

11 Ibid., 28-9.
12 Downey, 116.
13 Almeida, 75-6.
several musical instruments (Fig. 31). Therefore, it is understandable that Aleijadinho’s Prophets are not depicted with musical references and instruments during this period.

Since the time of Aleijadinho, capoeira practice has also evolved into two different schools known as Capoeira Regional and Capoeira Angola. Capoeira Regional developed in the twentieth century under the direction of Mestre Bimba; it is viewed by many as a modernization and “whitening” of the traditional Afro-Brazilian dance.\(^\text{14}\) In addition, Capoeira Regional incorporates foreign techniques and martial arts movements, causing one writer to say that this style is “completely prostituted.”\(^\text{15}\) Capoeira Angola, on the other hand, strives to maintain traditional capoeira movements which existed in early times. Although both forms of capoeira focus on slave heritage and contain some similar movements, Capoeira Angola maintains more of the playful, cunning interaction between contestants whereas Capoeira Regional focuses more on speed and strength.\(^\text{16}\) Capoeira Angola movements are generally characterized by “slow movements, quirky danced steps, unusual postures, and inverted acrobatics [that] do not obviously appear strong, dexterous, or even martial to many observers.”\(^\text{17}\) Obviously, any ties between Aleijadinho’s Prophets and capoeira will be more historically and traditionally sound if examined through Capoeira Angola, which will be done in this analysis.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 169-70.

\(^{15}\) Waldeloir Rego, *Capoeira Angola Ensaio Sócio-Etnográfico*, (Salvador, Brazil: Editoria Itapoa, 1968), 362. “totalmente prostituída” See also Merrell, 15.

\(^{16}\) Downey, 180-1. See also Merrell, 19.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 186.

\(^{18}\) It should be also recognized that Capoeira Angola cannot be considered a pristine historical artifact, although it strives for following traditional capoeira movements. It is easy for capoeira movements to slowly morph and change over time, particularly depending on how capoeira students absorb and duplicate what is being taught. Even today there are debates between individuals regarding the lineage and
The capoeira dance usually involves two individuals who appear to dance in a slow motion of attacks and counter-attacks. Capoeiristas often contort their bodies and project their arms and legs into open space, interplaying with the movements of their opponent. Early capoeira was probably less acrobatic than the capoeira that is practiced today, although acrobatic elements did exist and were practiced. Although existing documentation does not give historians a specific description of how all early capoeira movements were practiced, it appears that the head-butting practiced by fighting African slaves caught the attention of European travelers. The German tourist Rugendas wrote in his travel journal:

“The negroes have an even more violent warrior’s pastime called ‘capoeira.’ Two champions throw themselves one against the other, trying to hit the chest of the opponent they wish to knock down with their head. They avoid the attack with equally skilled jumps to the side and sudden stops. But in throwing themselves one against the other, more or less like goats, it may happen that they hit each other head against head forcefully, which often makes the game degenerate into fights and then a knife comes into play, bringing bloodshed.”

Although head-butting caught the attention of European tourists, there are other elements of capoeira that are also unmistakable. For example, the basic footwork of capoeira is a back and forth movement called *ginga* which requires one to lift his or her legs up and down. The *ginga* is considered to be the basic position of all capoeiristas;

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19 Nestor Capoeira, *Capoeira: Roots of the Dance-Fight Game* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2002), 118. Part of the acrobatic nature of capoeira today is due to the modernization of the sport through the Capoeira Regional branch.

20 João Maurício Rugendas, *Viagem Pitoresca Através do Brasil*, 6th ed. (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, n.d.), 155. “Os negros têm ainda um outro folguedo guerreiro, muito mais violento, a ‘capoeira’: dois campeões se precipitam um contra o outro, procurando dar com a cabeça no peito do adversário que desejam derrubar. Evita-se o ataque com saltos de lado e paradas igualmente hábeis; mas, lançancarem-se um contra o outro mais ou menos como bodes, acontece-lhes chocarem-se fortemente cabeça contra cabeça, o que faz com que a brincadeira não raro degenerar em briga e que as facas entram em jôgo ensangüentando-a.
some claim that the distinct *ginga* footwork separates capoeira from other types of
combat sports and martial arts.\(^{21}\) At most given moments, the *ginga* step involves one leg
to be extended in front of the other leg, the latter often remaining partially flexed to
maintain corporeal stability and momentum throughout the capoeira dance.\(^{22}\) With the
latter leg staying behind the extended leg, the capoeirista is able to move forward in an
undulating step. Capoeiristas control the angles and spread of their feet placement to
help their bodies rotate around opponents. While moving back and forth, the arms are
generally used to not only counterbalance the weight shift in the body, but also to guard
against attacks.

The two individuals are often surrounded by a circle, or *roda*, of spectators.

*Game of Capoeira* by Rugendas is one of the earliest artistic depictions of capoeira and
its *roda*.\(^{23}\) Obviously, Rugendas was not able to enclose the *roda*, for this would have
covered the principal capoeira participants and would have defeated the documentary
purpose of Rugendas’ work.\(^{24}\) However, one can get the sense of the circle, and of how
the crowd intently watches the capoeira action taking place.

Greg Downey explains that the *roda* is a traditional, historical element in the
capoeira game.\(^{25}\) He mentions that “the most common explanation for the roda’s circular
shape…is that the art was once training for unarmed combat, disguised from the eyes of

\(^{21}\) Downey, 120, 122.


\(^{23}\) Maya Talmon Chvaicer, “The Criminalization of *Capoeira* in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,”

\(^{24}\) Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Vol. 4, Part 1, (Cambridge,
Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 145. See also Assunção, 8. Rugendas’ drawings were
regarded as being documentary in nature, and not fraught with artistic interpretation.

\(^{25}\) Downey, 102-3, 117.
overseers or police…[Slaves] used their bodies to ring the game so that the authorities
could not see what happened inside the roda.”

The implementation of the roda within Aleijadinho’s sculptural composition is therefore significant. First of all, the clear roda composition directly ties this sculptural composition to a traditional aspect of capoeira practice, asserting the connection between capoeira and the Prophets (Fig. 32). Secondly, this composition also manifests that the roda existed at least before 1800, the date of the Prophets – this referential framework is important historically, for although the roda is considered to be “traditional” and “historical,” the earliest decade connected with roda is the 1820s, the date of the Rugendas engraving.

It is almost certain that Aleijadinho never practiced capoeira due to his physical limitations. However, as suggested by Fernandes, it could be that Aleijadinho was able to escape his physical limitations and handicap through his art. This escapist nature in Aleijadinho’s art is heightened by the use of capoeira itself; the fighting dance viewed as a way for slaves to escape from the sorrows of their servitude. Perhaps it is partially for this reason that capoeira is often described as a “paradox of losing oneself and simultaneously finding one’s self.” In addition, it is extremely likely that Aleijadinho satiated his personal desire for movement through the active gestures of capoeira in his sculptures. Aleijadinho could have been exposed to capoeira in his home state; Minas Gerais and the gold-mining regions “were the location of quilombos on a scale almost as

26 Ibid., 102.
27 Assunção, 7. Assunção mistakenly attributes the date 1835 to the Rugendas engraving, which was the publication of the engraving in a travel journal and not the date when the work was first made, which was during Rugendas’ trip in Brazil (1822-1825).
28 Fernandes, 13.
29 Lewis, 3.
large as Palmares." In addition, Aleijadinho could have come into contact with capoeira during one of the times that he visited Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the Viceroyalty of Brazil. It is known that capoeira existed in Rio de Janeiro as early as 1789, and the sport later flourished in this urban setting.

It is highly probable that Aleijadinho was further exposed to capoeira through his own African relations or slaves. Furthermore, the death of Maurício, Aleijadinho’s slave, could have contributed to the inclusion of capoeira in the positioning of the Prophets; perhaps the use of capoeira is a tribute to this devoted friend that willingly gave up his freedom to help his disabled master. It is also possible that Aleijadinho included capoeira because he regretted that he did not ever insist on Maurício’s freedom. Or, since capoeira can be interpreted as a sign for freedom among the Afro-Brazilians, the inclusion of capoeira here also could signify that Aleijadinho is rejoicing in Maurício’s new-found freedom in the afterlife.

**Capoeira Exhibited by the Prophets**

The Prophets of Aleijadinho exhibit many movements and positions which can directly relate to capoeira. One of the most easily identifiable characteristics of capoeira, the *ginga* footwork, can be seen in different ways in almost all of the twelve statues. This individuality of the *ginga* footwork is also a part of capoeira, and capoeira experts assert that no two gingas are identical. However, it can be agreed that the *ginga* movement

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30 Taylor, 179-80.
32 Assunção, 73.
essentially begins in the waist, spreading to the other parts of the body. A profile view of the prophet Hosea demonstrates well how the *ginga* originates in the torso (Fig. 33). Hosea’s hips are thrust forward, and it appears that his foot has stepped forward to help balance the center of gravity in his mid-section. His back is dramatically curved with his neck thrust forward, balancing the weight and stability of his body’s upper half. This slumping posture is further emphasized by Hosea’s placement in the composition, for he is seen in profile by the approaching viewer. Hosea’s head and his left foot stretch forwards, while his posture slumps backward, giving a true feeling of *ginga* movement.

An examination of Hosea’s foot placement also can tie into the *ginga* footwork, for one foot is usually placed in front of the other (Fig. 34). The weight shift in Hosea’s body and bent knee indicate that he is leaning on his forward foot, taking some of the weight and pressure off of his right foot. From this position, it can be assumed that Hosea is just about to lift his right foot and place it in a new position, only then to switch the weight to his right foot and move his left foot. This constant shifting of weight and body balance is a key part of the *ginga* movement, helping the capoeirista to undulate back and forth.

The prophet Baruch is also positioned in a manner similar to Hosea, although his back is not as dramatically curved. In addition, the prophet Nahum is captured walking forward in the *ginga* step, his body is sinuously twisting and curving. The movement of his right foot is particularly noticeable, for the foot is stepping off of the pedestal. In addition, the impression of *leaning* forward is accentuated by Nahum’s head, which is

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34 Downey, 125.
looking downward. On the other side of the sculptural composition, Amos also steps forward with his foot sliding off of the pedestal. Amos’ movement also is accentuated by his right hand, which sweeps forwards and upwards in the *ginga* fashion. In addition, the sinuous curving of Joel’s body, as well as the pronounced weight shift, suggest the *ginga* movement (Fig. 35).

It is easy to see how Soraia Maria Silva’s analysis of the *Prophets’* sensation of movement ties in directly to the *ginga* footwork. For example, Silva’s discussion of Naum’s sensation of “oscillation” corresponds to the back and forth undulation of *ginga*. This same sense of fluctuating back and forth, particularly the building up and releasing of momentum during the *ginga* swing, ties into Silva’s analysis of Baruch’s “suspension and relaxation.” Furthermore, Silva’s analysis of Joel’s “prolonged rotation,” ties in perfectly with the *ginga* movement; capoeiristas utilize the *ginga* steps to help move their bodies slowly and methodically around their opponents, rotating within the *roda* circle.

Silva’s analysis of Hosea’s movements is particularly interesting, for it can be interpreted in a few ways within the capoeira context. For example, “collapsing, sinking, [and being] relaxed,” can still tie into the *ginga* sensation of undulating and fluctuating backwards. However, the idea of collapsing and sinking is especially intriguing within the context of the capoeira’s evasive techniques, called *esquivas*. The evasive *esquiva* techniques are a unique part of the capoeira game; unlike other martial arts which promote defensive blocks, capoeira practice encourages contestants to escape from oncoming attacks. “The emphasis on escape…reduces body contact and makes possible

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35 For further details regarding any of the references to Silva’s analyses within this chapter, see chapter two.
the dance like interplay characteristic of beautiful capoeira."\(^{36}\) Therefore, Hosea’s backwards lean in the *ginga* step can also be interpreted as an *esquiva*; it is as if Hosea was participating in the *ginga* and gracefully leaned backward to avoid an oncoming attack, still keeping relaxed and consistent in the rhythm of the *ginga* undulation.

The *esquiva* of Hosea is especially dramatic and convincing when viewed within the staircase composition. Hosea is located at the top of the staircase, facing the exit. Directly across from Hosea is the prophet Daniel, who is also turned towards the staircase exit; the sculptures face each other as if they are two capoeira opponents (Fig. 36). Furthermore, Daniel’s right knee is considerably bent with his left leg rather straight. Daniel’s neck is also leaning forward and from this stance, he could arguably have just finished a dramatic forward kick, known as a *benção* in capoeira (Fig. 37). The *benção* is a forward kick in which the leg of the attacker is thrust forward towards the thorax of the opponent.\(^{37}\) Within this context, it would appear logical for Hosea to be in an *esquiva* gesture where his sternum is pulled back far away from Daniel; it appears as if Hosea has just barely escaped a *benção* attack which would have spanned across the exit way. For the visitor who is about to walk through the exit, the drama and tension of this moment is especially present; it is as if the visitor, like Hosea, has narrowly escaped contact with Daniel’s *benção* kick.

This interplay between Hosea, Daniel, and the visitor is one manifestation of the capoeira dynamic exhibited by the *Prophets*. However, it appears that Aleijadinho considered the interaction of the visitor and statues to take place before the visitor entered the staircase space. Instead, as the visitor or pilgrim begins the *via sacra* trek up the hill

\(^{36}\) Lewis, 99-100.

\(^{37}\) Tigges, 121.
to the sanctuary, the positioning and changing perspectives of the *Prophets* is important in its relationship to capoeira. Although most of the Passion chapels were not constructed while Aleijadinho worked on the *Prophets*, it is likely that he had a good idea of where the chapels would be placed, taking into consideration the criss-crossed *via sacra* that pilgrims would follow.\(^{38}\) Germain Bazin suggests that there is a close relationship between the *via sacra* program of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos and another church in Portugal, Bom Jesus de Braga.\(^{39}\)

Like most *sacro monte* constructions in Europe, Bom Jesus de Braga and Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos both utilize this criss-crossed *via sacra* (Fig. 38). However, it should be recognized that there are also differences between the main staircases of the Braga and Congonhas do Campo sanctuaries. Eleven reversing and parallel elevations comprise the Braga staircase, whereas the Congonhas staircase is split into only two elevations. The staircase of the Braga sanctuary, called the Stairway of the Five Senses, is flanked at each elevation by two statues, with one additional statue placed in the center of each wall that divides the elevations (Fig. 39).\(^{40}\) Overall, the Braga staircase composition gives the effect of three vertical lines of statues (Fig. 40). In contrast, the Congonhas do Campo sanctuary has statues which line the whole staircase: two at the entrance, two flanking the central elevation wall, two at the exit, three on each side. Instead of stressing vertical alignment, the Congonhas do Campo statues form a circular

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\(^{38}\) Lisboa, 123.

\(^{39}\) Bazin, 206, 219. Although Bom Jesus de Braga was built in the early eighteenth century, Bazin also indicates that the Portuguese participated in the *via sacra* tradition since the seventeenth century.

\(^{40}\) Instead of prophets, the statues at Braga mostly consist of mythological characters such as Diana, Mercury, Saturn, and Jupiter. After 1770 some of these statues were renamed, since the contrast of secular and sacred was considered to be “indecorous and indecent.” For example, Argus became Joseph and Orpheus was named Solomon. See Kubler, 427.
composition with two statues placed in the center of the circle. This difference in staircase decoration furthers the argument that Aleijadinho may have redesigned the Congonhas staircase for his sculptural composition; it is possible that the original Congonhas architect Brito may have envisioned a staircase composition similar to the one at Braga.

As the Congonhas visitor follows the *via sacra*, the different interactions and roles that the *Prophets* assume are a visual manifestation that Aleijadinho was at least generally aware of how the visitor would travel up the hill to the *Prophets*. The most noticeable change in capoeirista roles can be observed at the base of sanctuary grounds, near the first Passion chapel. As the visitor approaches from the lower to mid-section of the hill, the prophets Daniel and Hosea stand out as the primary capoeira contestants. As explained previously, the two capoeirista dancers are generally surrounded by a circle, or *roda* of investigators. When gazing upward at this lower part of the hill near the first Passion chapel, the perspective causes all of the prophets on the central staircase elevation, Baruch and Ezekiel, to appear as if they were instead on the outer wall of the staircase (Fig. 41). In other words, Baruch and Ezekiel appear to be in the front part of the capoeira *roda*, with the circle sweeping around Daniel and Hosea. From this lower perspective as well, the viewer cannot see much of the space beyond Daniel and Hosea, which would lead the viewer to assume that the capoeira *roda* completes itself with other sculptures behind these two capoeirista contestants.

Therefore, from this lower perspective Baruch and Ezekiel have assumed part of the capoeirista *roda*, taking part as spectators. It is not until the visitor closely approximates the staircase that Baruch and Ezekiel’s function changes; instead of
spectators, they assume the role of the two capoeirista contestants. When acting as capoeira contestants, the statues face each other as symbolic resistors of oppression, not as literal enemies. Just as slaves would face each other and practice the movements of capoeira through a dance-like interplay, Aleijadinho emphasizes the symbolic significance of capoeira by focusing on the interplay between statues. Therefore, none of the prophets are shown physically striking each other, for this would detract from the symbolism and incorrectly suggest that the prophets are enemies.

Placed on a separate elevation in the middle of the staircase, Baruch and Ezekiel are divorced from the rest of the prophets and thus are clearly surrounded in a *roda* by the remaining sculptures (Fig. 42). At this point Hosea and Daniel, who previously assumed the roles of the capoeira contestants, do not appear to be facing each other as opponents but are merely facing different directions, each absorbed in the action taking place at opposite areas of the *roda*.

Baruch and Ezekiel are also involved in dynamic capoeira movements. As explained earlier, Baruch’s stance can also be tied to the forward and backward undulation of the *ginga* footwork. Although Ezekiel’s left leg is covered by his scroll, it can be assumed that he is also doing the *ginga* footwork, for his right leg is bent and is positioned well in front of his left leg. In addition, Ezekiel is also positioned in other capoeira movements, thus implying that he and Baruch are truly two contestants in the *roda*. The connection between these two combatants is seen in the positioning of Ezekiel’s head, which is tilted slightly towards Baruch. In addition, Ezekiel’s right hand is clenched, dramatically lifted across his body, towards his left shoulder. This gesture
can be interpreted as part of the *ginga* movement, where the arms often swing back and forth to help balance the constant shift in body weight.

In addition, this movement is also seen in the preparatory step of the capoeira movement *queixada*, which is an offensive kick combination. To perform the *queixada*, the capoeirista must first begin by doing the *ginga* footwork; the sway of the *ginga* helps to build the physical momentum necessary to produce the *queixada* kick.\(^41\) This *queixada* movement of “contraction” (through the bent arm as it builds momentum) and “expansion” (through the final kick) relates perfectly to Silva’s earlier analysis of Ezekiel’s movements. Given the distance between where Ezekiel and Baruch are placed, it would appear likely that Ezekiel is preparing to perform the *queixada*, in order to better reach across the space where Baruch is positioned. Robert Farris Thompson points out that the *queixada* is shown in the *Game of Capoeira* engraving by Rugendas, which demonstrates that this movement was extant around the time of Aleijadinho.\(^42\)

Therefore, it appears that the sculptural composition in the form of a *roda* has been influenced by capoeira, with Baruch and Ezekiel as two contestants and symbolic resistors of oppression. This circular *roda* composition would be further enhanced by repositioning two figures, Jonas and Joel. At present, these two statues are gazing away from the capoeira action which takes place in the center of the *roda*. Hans Mann noted the discrepancy in the body positions and gazes of these two prophets, and has concluded that an error was made when positioning these statues. He argues that “the artist intended the chronological order of the Bible to be followed. . . Artistic and chronological

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\(^{41}\) Tigges, 127.

symmetry would be restored merely by interchanging these two statues.” Not only would chronological and artistic symmetry be restored, but then the true feeling of the capoeira roda would return to this sculptural ensemble as well.

In addition, Aleijadinho apparently considered the participation and experience of the visitor when designing the roda composition, for the visitor enters and moves within the roda in order to use the stairs. As the visitor enters and ascends the staircase, winding around Baruch and Ezekiel, the visitor becomes part of the capoeira action. Even the staircase itself is divided into two sections, and the visitor literally needs to walk around either Baruch or Ezekiel in order to continue up the stairs, as though they are moving around the roda area as well, participating in the combat. Through this composition, Aleijadinho has manipulated the visitor’s own physical movements within the roda. Furthermore, the stairs themselves cause the visitor to move his/her legs back and forth, up and down, recalling the undulating movements involved with the capoeira footwork of ginga. Perhaps Aleijadinho used this visitor participation to help emphasize the capoeira elements within his own composition; he could have also wished the visitor to consider his or her political convictions regarding freedom through physical involvement with the art.

Changes in perspective and viewer participation further assert that this sculptural composition falls within the Baroque paradigm, as was discussed earlier in connection with Silva’s writing. Another way that the Prophets interact with the visitor is by having sculptures directly confront and challenge visitors that enter the stairway. For example, Jonah holds out his left hand vertically, with his palm facing the viewer. This gesture is also seen in a capoeira movement, chamada, or “call” (Fig. 43). A capoeirista performs a

43 Mann, 129.
*chamada* to formally “call” or challenge another player. Had Jonah been placed in his intended location on the staircase, on the far left hand side of the composition, the *chamada* call would be even more striking and significant. When walking through the staircase, especially for a visitor which turned to walk up the right-hand side, Jonah would be facing the viewer, performing the *chamada* call, inviting the caller to participate in the capoeira action. In addition, if Jonah was placed in his intended position, from a certain angle it would appear as if he is “calling” Ezekiel. This interaction between these statues would further support the ways in which Aleijadinho positioned his statues based on the different movements and perspectives of the visitor.

Many capoeiristas feel like the *chamada* “embodies the essence of capoeira.” The *chamada* is made by a capoeira player withdrawing from the usual movements of the sport. Instead, the player steps backwards and stands still. Although there are not specific movements for the *chamada* beyond this withdrawal, it is very common for the “caller” to also raise his arm or hold both arms out wide. After assuming this stance, the “caller” waits for his opponent to cautiously approach. The two players come together, tensely and cautiously aware of sudden attacks by their respective opponents. In the end, the “called” capoeirista lightly rests his hands on the caller for a few moments, until the “caller” stops and offers the floor to his opponent. The tension in the *roda* created by the *chamada*, as well as the physical separation of the “caller” from typical capoeira interaction, can tie into Silva’s analysis of Jonah’s movements; Jonah “emerges” from the capoeira interaction and “focuses” as he waits for his opponent to approach.

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44 Downey, 107.


46 Ibid.
In one variation of the *chamada*, an adversary places his or her head against the stomach of the caller, and the two “waltz” back and forth in that position. (Fig. 44). Jonah exhibits particular similarities between this figural example and description. In addition, the prophet Jonah is positioned in a stance which directly echoes the *chamada*. He rests back on his left foot, with his right foot pointing forward. By placing his weight on the left foot, Jonah appears to be more static and rigid, not actively involved in the *ginga* footwork like other prophets around him. The difference between the undulating *ginga* movement and the stance of Jonah can be seen by comparing Hosea and Jonah’s leg movements. Hosea has both legs slightly bent at the knee, giving the impression of continuous movement and undulation, whereas Jonah is clearly placing his body weight on his left leg. There is no indication of the left leg being bent underneath the drapery; in fact, the right side of Jonah’s body appears to be more columnar, disappearing beneath not only folds of drapery but also the whale’s head. Although Jonah’s right leg is pointed forward, there is no sense that this leg supports any weight, nor is there an indication that Jonah will shift weight onto this leg. Instead, Jonah gives the impression of standing still, the core element of the *chamada*. Furthermore, Jonah holds up his left hand, performing the *chamada* invitation.

The prophet Habakkuk also appears to be involved in a dramatic capoeira gesture, the *aú*, or cartwheel. The *aú* is a form of attack in the capoeira sport, and variations of the *aú* can include performing a cartwheel while balancing on the head instead of extended arms. Here, however, Habakkuk appears to be extending and locking his left arm in preparation for the *aú* (Fig. 45). In addition, Habakkuk’s body is leaning the

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47 Lewis, 123-4.

48 Downey, 194.
opposite direction of his left arm, preparing to turn and flip the body upside down. This spread of Habbakuk’s body in two different directions, in preparation for the _aú_, is supported by Silva’s analysis of Habbakuk’s movements; Silva states that he appears to be involved in “expansion and opposition of the body in two diagonals.”

On the opposite side of the staircase is the prophet Obadiah who is mirroring the movement of Habakkuk. Silva states that Obadiah is also involved in “expansion;” Obadiah’s right arm is lifted and stretched, although not nearly as fully extended as Habakkuk’s. Like Habakkuk, Obadiah’s body is also leaning the opposite direction of his arm. Although his arm is not yet locked in position to support his body weight in the _aú_, Obadiah could be prepping for a cartwheel as well. The idea of the _aú_ movement for Obadiah and Habakkuk is further supported by the smaller figures, Isaiah and Jeremiah, which are located beneath Obadiah and Habakkuk. In order to defend against the _aú_ attack, one must crouch down in the _cocorinha_ position, which involves lowering the body and shielding the head (Fig. 46). Not only are Jeremiah and Isaiah noticeably lower towards the ground, due to their positioning at the staircase entryway, but they are also smaller in scale than the rest of the prophets. Although Isaiah and Jeremiah are not shielding their head from an oncoming attack, their smaller position, scale, and even hunched posture give the impression of the _cocorinha_ (Fig. 47).

In addition to capoeira movements, it is also possible that Aleijadinho was influenced by the contemporary dress of the capoeira practitioners, arguably witnessed in the prophet Amos’ garb. Robert Smith noted previously that Amos is clothed in trousers, unlike any of the other prophets, who are robed. Amos also wears a long coat with

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49 Tigges, 124.
rolled up cuffs. His clothing has some similarities to the clothing of slaves and early capoeira practitioners (Fig. 48). Gabriela Tigges points out that, “Slaves used to wear long white shirts over white pants that covered the heels . . . During breaks [the capoeirista slave] would play the Capoeira game after rolling up the cuff of his pants and taking off his shoes.”

Although the prophet Amos is depicted wearing shoes, his trousers and rolled up cuffs could be a further reference to capoeira and the slaves which actually practiced the sport at the time.

**Capoeira Signs as Propaganda**

As mentioned in the last chapter, Aleijadinho’s prophets hold scrolls whose messages often can be interpreted as political propaganda, speaking out against social injustice and rousing the reader to oppose tyranny. The propagandistic message on these scrolls could have been understood by educated colonists and slaves; political propaganda also could find specific relevance with both of these groups at the time, given the political situation. Even outside the capoeira context, the vivacious stances and expressions of the *Prophets* also function to enliven the propagandistic messages on the scrolls, emphasizing a call for action.

However, within the capoeira context, a deeper level of propagandistic signification can occur. For example, the prophet Jonah would have been facing outward, away from the composition, towards inhabitants of the area and visitors of the sanctuary. Within the capoeira context, the outward palm and gesture of Jonah can be seen as a signifier for an “invitation” to join in the capoeira fight. As explained earlier, this *chamada* gesture is used in capoeira to call or challenge another player. If placed in

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50 Smith, 87.

51 Tigges, 27.
its intended location, Jonah also would have been one of the first prophets seen when a visitor approached the staircase entryway. Whether seen from a distance or at the base of the Congonhas staircase, the prophet Jonah is spreading the invitation for people to join him in fighting against unjust rule or domination.

In another sense, the *chamada* gesture can also be interpreted as a signifier for resistance. When performing the *chamada*, the capoeirista withdraws from the usual rhythm and interaction of the game and stands still. By stopping the ebb and flow of the capoeira action, the capoeirista can be seen as performing an act of resistance.

Furthermore, since capoeira players sometimes perform the *chamada* to help reestablish control or rhythm in the game, this idea of resistance is appropriate – the capoeirista is manifesting in this instance that he or she does not like the current environment within the *roda*. As a rebel and non-conformist in society, Aleijadinho’s own sentiments could easily be embodied in Jonah’s gesture, manifesting that he opposes the political situation of his day.

The front of the staircase is flanked on either side by Habakkuk and Obadiah, each leaning in opposite directions as they are prepping for the *aú* cartwheel. When performing the *aú*, the capoeirista can attack the head of their opponent. As an attack movement, the *aú* can be interpreted as an invitation to attack those which oppose freedom. In addition to the *aú*, other attack movements such as the *queixada* and *benção* kicks can serve as advertisements that these attacks are available to utilize when fighting against oppression.

Invitations for resistance, attack, and aggression are not the only signs which are included in the capoeira composition. For example, the *esquiva* employed by Hosea and
the *cocorinha* exhibited by Isaiah and Jeremiah are signs of escape and evasion. Not only do these movements demonstrate means whereby people can escape from the attacks of oppressors, but these evasive movements can also be interpreted as a call to escape from the bonds of slavery. It is fitting that this propagandistic message to escape would be embodied in these statues; Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah are placed at the physical beginning and end of the *Prophets* composition, thus beginning and ending the visitor’s experience with this reminder.

Within the realm of capoeira, the gestures and stances of the *Prophets* signify invitation, resistance, fighting, aggression, evasion, and action. However, these subversive signifiers are subtle enough that they might not be recognized outside the capoeira context. Aleijadinho did not pick expressly overt signs of capoeira to infuse into his sculptural composition, particularly those signs which were easily recognized as pertaining to capoeira, such as the acrobatic *floreios* or head butts. Any of these inclusions would have seemed suspicious and unconventional to the brotherhood which commissioned these statues. Instead, Aleijadinho’s message would have been recognized by African slaves and any one else who was familiar with the dance. In addition, for those colonists who could not understand the capoeira signifiers, Aleijadinho emphasized his political message through the biblical scrolls and expressive stances of the *Prophets*. Therefore, through the signifiers of words and capoeira gestures, Aleijadinho is able to express his political propaganda to colonists and slaves, appealing to both the literate and non-literate.
CONCLUSION

When the Prophets are examined within the capoeira context, Aleijadinho’s political protest against slavery and oppression becomes apparent. These statues represent both a call for African freedom and Brazilian freedom from the Portuguese. Aleijadinho communicates his ideas of freedom and independence not only through references to capoeira, but also through the contextual symbolism associated with the different prophets and their biblical scrolls. Aleijadinho’s attempt to free his own slaves is a further indication of his political sentiments regarding freedom and emancipation. This same desire for freedom was echoed not only by members of the Inconfidência Mineira, but also by escaped African slaves who formed quilombos in the area. Ultimately, the purpose of early capoeira practice is a manifestation of how the African slaves yearned for liberation.

Aleijadinho’s Prophets therefore express a subversive message on many accounts. For example, this message not only opposes the Portuguese crown, but it also opposes the institution of slavery in Minas Gerais, an institution upon which the local economy was founded. This message potentially could have infuriated many miners and slave owners. In addition, this subversive message also can be seen in opposition to the brotherhood which commissioned the sculptures at the sanctuary. It is known that the brotherhood dealt with the problem of an escaped slave just before Aleijadinho began to sculpt the Prophets; this propagandistic message of slave resistance probably would have been deemed controversial by this group as well. However, since most people probably did not understand the gestures of the Prophets within the capoeira context, it appears that this controversial propaganda escaped notice.
I recognize that the subversive message of rebellion through capoeira can be interpreted as a further aggrandizement of the legends which already surround Aleijadinho. However, this study sought to be historically accurate by fitting Aleijadinho’s work within the context of the day and not within the context of his legend. Furthermore, my argument for capoeira is based primarily upon empirical observation and the comparative method, finding that the capoeira movements and signs reveal themselves upon examination.

This thesis finds alignment and purpose within the current discourse on Aleijadinho scholarship, particularly with the preceding work by Brazilian art historians. By connecting the political context of Aleijadinho’s period with his ethnic heritage, this thesis spans between the two main groups of Brazilian scholars. In addition, the element of viewer participation in the capoeira context also fits within the European tradition of Baroque spectacle, which contributes to previous connections between Aleijadinho and the European tradition. The argument for capoeira also contributes to the current discussion regarding the dance-like aesthetic of the Prophets and Passion figures. In particular, this thesis helps to expand upon and clarify some of the semiotic and dance analyses which were recently made by Soraia Maria Silva in 2001.

This thesis also contributes to current discussion on how Tiradentes and the Inconfidência Mineira influenced the Brazilian art produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Although Aleijadinho’s Prophets previously have been suggested as political imagery through their biblical scrolls, the discussion of capoeira solidifies this political sentiment. In addition, the capoeira also contributes to the other political associations with the Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos complex, specifically those relating to
the Passion figures. Finally, the political and abolitionist sentiment expressed through capoeira can tie into other works produced by Aleijadinho during this same period, such as the Jeremiah altarpiece at Nossa Senhora do Carmo.

In addition, this discussion of capoeira within the region of Minas Gerais is a contribution to the field of Brazilian and capoeira studies. The empirical evidence of capoeira presented in this thesis suggests better historical reference and documentation of capoeira within Minas Gerais during this time. At this point, poor documentation of early capoeira in Minas Gerais has made it difficult for scholars and writers to adequately discuss the dance within this period and area. It is known that large quilombos existed in Minas Gerais during this time, where it can be assumed that capoeira was practiced. Also, slaves in Minas Gerais could have become familiar with capoeira through transport to and from Rio de Janeiro, where the sport was known to exist in the eighteenth century. It may be that Aleijadinho became familiar with capoeira during one of the times he visited Rio de Janeiro. In addition, the reference to “covers of capoeiras” near the sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos also could indicate that the sport was being practiced in the Congonhas do Campo area. Therefore, with the evidence of capoeira manifest by the Prophets, scholars may be able to better understand the influence of capoeira in the Minas Gerais region.

It is my intent that this contribution to the field of art history will spur further research of Aleijadinho and his oeuvre. With sparse information surrounding the artist and his life, there is a great need for scholarly information to help separate fact from fiction. In addition, there are a plethora of works in Minas Gerais which are attributed to Aleijadinho but lack historical documentation. The Prophets are some of the few works
that are concretely attributed to the artist. For this reason, there is still a need for art historical analysis as fundamental as connoisseurship. In addition, it is intended that this study will also spark further interest within the field of Brazilian Baroque art, particularly for scholars within the United States and England. Although some scholarship has been conducted by Europeans and Americans on the subject, most of the developed scholarship has stayed within the Brazilian discourse. A greater worldwide interest in Brazilian Baroque will also create more communication between Brazilian art historians and the rest of the world. With further exploration and discussion of Aleijadinho in the English language, it will facilitate more people outside of Brazil becoming familiar with the Brazilian Baroque.


Museum text panel, permanent collection, Ouro Preto, Brazil, Museu da Inconfidência, 14 August 2007.


Fig. 1 Sanctuary Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos, Congonhas do Campo, 1758-1805

Fig. 2 Aleijadinho, *Isaiah*, 1800-1805
Fig. 3 Aleijadinho, *Jeremiah*, 1800-1805

Fig. 4 Aleijadinho, *Baruch*, 1800-1805
Fig. 5 Aleijadinho, *Ezekiel*, 1800-1805

Fig. 6 Aleijadinho, *Amos*, 1800-1805
Fig. 7 Aleijadinho, 
*Obadiah*, 1800-1805

Fig. 8 Aleijadinho, 
*Jonah*, 1800-1805
Fig. 9 Aleijadinho, *Habakkuk*, 1800-1805

Fig. 10 Aleijadinho, *Nahum*, 1800-1805
Fig. 11 Aleijadinho, *Joel*, 1800-1805

Fig. 12 Aleijadinho, *Daniel*, 1800-1805
Fig. 13 Aleijadinho, *Hosea*, 1800-1805

Fig. 14 Aleijadinho, detail of Roman soldier, Passion scene of the Crucifixion, 1796-1799
Fig. 15 Aleijadinho, detail of Christ, Passion scene of the Flagellation, 1796-1799

Fig. 16 Aleijadinho, Jeremiah, altarpiece of São João, 1807-1809
Fig. 17 Aleijadinho, *Jeremiah*, altarpiece of São João, detail

Fig. 18 Aleijadinho, detail of *Jonah*
Fig. 19 Aleijadinho, *Christ in the Garden*, Passion scene of the Garden, 1796-1799

Fig. 20 Basilica San Sebastiano di Acireale, Sicily, begun 1603
Fig. 21 Giovan Battista Marino (after drawings by Paolo Vasta), *Joseph of Egypt*, 1754

Fig. 22 Aleijadinho, detail of *Ezekiel*
Fig. 23 Anonymous, *The Prophet Obadiah*, Franciscan Tertiary Order, Rio de Janeiro, 18th century

Fig. 24 Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Congonhas do Campo, 1677
Fig. 25 View of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos from Nossa Senhora do Rosário

Fig. 26 Anonymous, *View of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos Complex*, end of the 19th century
Fig. 27 Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Congonhas do Campo, begun 1732

Fig. 28 View of Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos from Nossa Senhora da Conceição
Fig. 29 Johann Moritz Rugendas, São Salvador, 1822-1825

Fig. 30 Augustus Earle, *Negroes Fighting, Brazil*, 1821-1823
Fig. 31 Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Game of Capoeira*, 1822-1825

Fig. 32 Diagram of *Prophets* composition
Fig. 33 Aleijadinho, side view of *Hosea*

Fig. 34 Aleijadinho, detail of *Hosea*
Fig. 35 Aleijadinho, side view of Joel

Fig. 36 Aleijadinho, detail of Daniel and Hosea
Fig. 37 C. Peçanha, *Benção Kick with Escape*, n.d.

Fig. 38 Diagram of *Via Sacra* path at Bom Jesus dos Matozinhos
Fig. 39 Staircase of Bom Jesus de Braga, Portugal, designed in 1722

Fig. 40 Carlos da Cruz Amarante, *The Stairway of the Five Senses* (Bom Jesus de Braga Sanctuary), 1781
Fig. 41 View of *Prophets* from first Passion chapel, at beginning of *via sacra*

Fig. 42 Aerial view of *Prophets* composition
Fig. 43 C. Peçanha, *Chamada with Turned Back*, n.d.

Fig. 44 Michael Goldstein, *Variation of Chamada*, n.d.
Fig. 45 Aleijadinho, reverse side of *Habakkuk*

![Fig. 46 Example of cocorinha stance](image)

*Cocorinha*
Fig. 47 Aleijadinho, detail of Isaiah

Fig. 48 Example of shirt and trousers typically worn by capoeiristas in colonial times, n.d.