



4.

“SOMETHING NEVER SEEN BEFORE”

The faces of
the Revolution

If the censorial conditioning during the Marcelo Caetano regime forced João Abel Manta to restrain from portraits/caricatures of the figures of power in Portugal, turning his capacity of deep observation to focus on the country at the end of the dictatorship (i.e., on *us*, the Portuguese), the Revolution releases him to the possibility of drawing the faces of the political moment.

It was on this period, the one from April 1974 to November 1975, that the artist identified himself with the “ongoing revolutionary process”, producing posters for the MFA which would stay as ultimate symbols of that year and a half. It would be, however, still on newspaper pages (*Diário de Lisboa*, *Sempre Fixe*, *Diário de Notícias* and *O Jornal*) that Manta would maintain the dialogue with Portugal and the Portuguese, providing the latter with figures of the new situation, in small first page cartoons or centerfold posters.

From the beautiful drawing of Spínola for *Diário de Lisboa* on May, 12th 1974, when this was still the “general that would save the kids from war” (the first João Abel Manta’s cover on a newspaper), four months before the general would fall into revolutionary disgrace (which would explain that this drawing was, until last year, “hidden” at the artist’s house), to the Mário Soares’ and Álvaro Cunhal’s famous cartoon, for the same paper on November 8th, 1975, after a remarkable TV marathon debate, kneeling in confession to a *Zé Povinho* who had lost the joy of the early days of the Revolution, here we have some of the

best political drawings of the artist. Besides the mandatory ones of Soares e Cunhal, we find Otelo, Adelino da Palma Carlos, Sá Carneiro or Vasco Gonçalves (this last one also on a poster, small variation of the iconic “MFA, Povo”, which filled his opponents with anger) in representations which are much more than just circumstantial caricatures, embarking on a research journey for a psychological and almost mythological explanation of their roles on the revolutionary drama (cf. the brilliant use of Shakespearean *Othello* to show the dangerous dilemma of Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho a few days before the end of the Revolution at November 25th 1975).

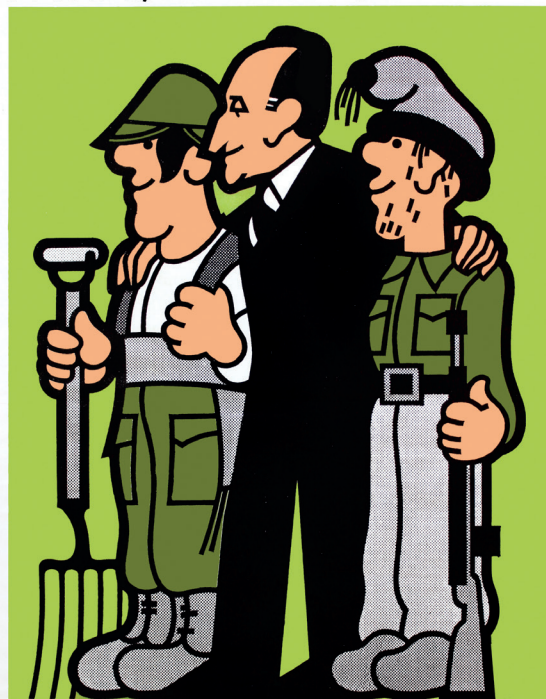


▲ **Untitled** (image of Spínola for the cover of *O Diário de Lisboa* on May 12th, 1974)

An example of João Abel Manta's brilliance as a cartoonist-portraitist on these hot days, of that coldness and distance from the reality of a wild ride, is a lost drawing (with no original left), published on the first page of *Diário de Notícias* on October 2nd, 1974, four days after the aborted demonstration of the "silent majority" in defense of Spínola and two days after the latter's resignation as the President of the Republic: Costa Gomes, who succeeded Spínola, and Vasco Gonçalves, their profiles side by side, look with serenity to a crowd who acclaims them under a sky that was still clouded. In the title, with the peculiar "child like" font which Manta used often, we read: "two profiles for the ages" (in the original Portuguese, "para as selectas", these being the text manuals used in school with the best selections from some authors). The perfect composition of the square, the cleanliness and the impact of the drawing and a slight dry irony in the title which gives the proper distancing tone without denying the personal engagement are the trademarks of the artist.

This time of Revolution, for a graphic artist who was already fully revolutionary five years before the Revolution hatched, simply confirmed his top spot in the press political framework. This was a period of maximum media exposure of João Abel Manta, and also of his highest fame and popularity, partly caused by the huge circulation and range of *Diário de Notícias*. But it was also a period that, according to the artist, marked him negatively: that popularity (and quality) of his press drawings overshadowed any possibility of recognition for the painting that he produced starting in the 1980s.

MFA, VASCO, POVO



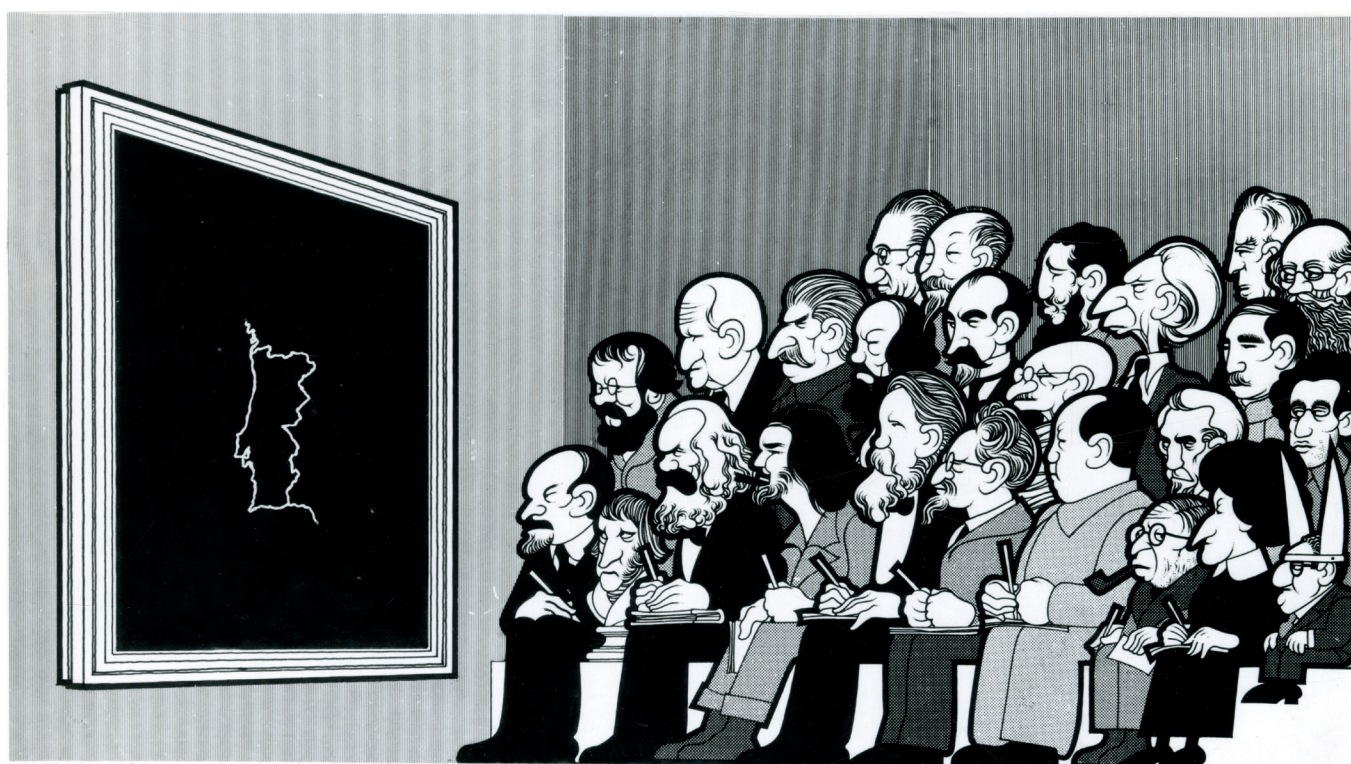
POVO, VASCO, MFA

FORÇA, FORÇA COMPANHEIRO VASCO
NÓS SEREMOS A MURALHA D' AÇO

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▲ *MFA, Vasco, Povo* (1975)

▼ *A difficult problem* (1975)



UM PROBLEMA DIFÍCIL