

# Relations between identity and landscape in brazilian craftwork

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## Abstract

This paper develops a reflective thinking about Brazilian craftwork. The aim is to understand its identity and its relation to this country landscape. Craft usually reveals its origins, techniques and materiality. Those characteristics make them unique and present the communities involved in the production. Craft can unveil history and culture. It is an aesthetic experience that reflects society and territory occupation.

The case studies feature local and regional characteristics. They are the result of a collective expression or a single craftsman production. These examples are neither about the craft making nor their social relations. They are not about gender, age, ability, distribution, nor marketing. Despite this, their products and methods pay attention to local culture. The objects explore the locality and highlight local landscape to create a cultural identity.

To recognize identity means to demarcate and to establish borders. It is important to distinguish between singular and foreign. Memories, experiences, ambiances and institutions make an identity. Historical, geographical and biological facts also influence it. It is open and temporary. It is changeable to allow new joints and thereby create new identities.

The stereotypical territory always appeared as a defining element of originality in Brazilian identity. The exuberant nature and tropical landscape were the basis for this country characterization. They lie in the origin of its representation tradition. The exotic and picturesque elements were a celebration of this country's wealth.

The cases brought use perceptual awareness to get the real world consciousness. The artisans know that they are in a specific space. Landscape anchors formal references to the objects. In some examples, the use of local materials connects them and their geographical environment. In others, it intensifies their notion of belonging. Craftwork becomes a way of making and understanding places. They create meaningful products that represent themselves, their beliefs and their identity.

## Introduction

The discussions in this article are part of a post-doctoral project titled Identity, Landscape and Time to understand Cultural Crafts, held at the design section of the Research and Studies in Fine Arts Centre at Lisbon University, under the supervision of Professor Raúl Cunca.

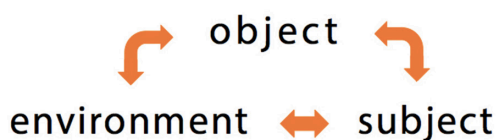
First of all, it is important to leave a special thanks to FAPEMIG (State of Minas Gerais Research Foundation). It promotes development activities, support and encouragement to scientific and technological research in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Its financial assistance permitted my participation at Making Futures: craft and the (re) turn of the maker in the post-global sustainably aware society.

The aim here is to study handmade objects and the environment information brought within themselves. It presents a relation between craft identity and the place production that relates to the term cultural craft.

Cultural craft is the one marked by local and regional characteristics. It is an expression of a collective or of only a single craftsman. Its objects reflect its local cultural characteristics. In this paper, some Brazilian cases were highlighted to explain the proposed hypothesis.

## Identity

Objects are worlds' examples, man's action mediators (Santos, 2002). Reality embeds them and they often change it to recreate it (figure 1).



**Figure 1 - Relationship between objects, reality, and social bodies.**

To discuss the craft object is necessary to speak about identity. It is also important to understand the appreciation of traditions and the process of bringing them to a mass audience, to make it easy to be understood by everyone. According to Paz (1991:51), 'the handmade object retains the fingerprints of the one who did it. These impressions are not the signature of the artist, a brand. They are rather a sign. They are the almost erased scar that commemorates man original brotherhood'.

Handmade products reveal their origins, techniques, materiality and location. They should make a difference and be the identity vehicle of the communities involved. We should be able to recognize a political and social system. We should understand the history and a region cultural life.

But, what is identity? How is it registered? Is it just what someone is? Or is it a cultural significance? To affirm identity is to demarcate borders. It means to make a distinction between individual and collective. It also distinguishes what is proper to what is foreign, or equal to different.

Bernardo (2012) states that

The subject lived as having a unified and stable identity. But it has become fragmented. Not a single one but several identities compounds it. These are sometimes contradictory or unresolved. ... This process produces a postmodern subject that doesn't have a fixed or permanent identity. It is more like a "moving celebration" identity. The things that represent us or the cultural systems that surround us forms it. They also transform it. (Bernardo 2012: 82 in Hall 2000:12)

The contemporary subject is fragmented, consisting of many identities. Cultural attributes base them. Memories, experiences, ambiances, institutions constitute them. History, geographical and biological facts also built them. All these allows new links and establish new identities. They are changeable and temporary, no longer associated with a foundational concept or origin.

It is an open identity. It is not a dissociative identity disorder. It is not two personalities that are in one subject, as a mental condition. Rather than this, it is a transformation considering one's history, temporality, and locality.

Martins (2003) places the identity as a reference, an affinity, as a ransom. This author speaks of the importance of feeling part of something. He also describes the importance of having and being in space. From this perspective, landscape generates identity. A territory is where life and all experiences happen. It helps in the formation of the human being.

The search for a craft identity becomes more complex when pondering this permanent and transitory dichotomy. Is it transferable? Can someone perceive it?

It is possible to date identity, file it in a time and place. That is because the history and the location are fundamental elements for the construction of identity. History refers to what was to come, to what is and what will be. Time places someone in a past, present or future situation. It allows changing respecting the momentary and specific interest for each particular person.

Meanwhile, space has some tangible attributes like its physical aspects and infrastructure. It has its intangible attributes as well like the social relations and culture symbols. It is an identity reaffirmation. Landscape elements can determine sense of place and it can concern the sense of belonging. This affirmation takes place through a territorial self-recognition. People perceive local attributes. It is critical to understand more about this space, this landscape.

## Landscape

'Tell me where you live that I will tell you who you are' said Serres (1998).

The stereotypical landscape appears as a defining element of originality and Brazilian national identity. This is Batista (2011) hypothesis. This author studies the work of Albert Eckhout, Jean Baptiste Debret, Marc Ferrez, and Tarsila do Amaral. The exuberant nature or the tropical landscape were the basis for these artists' characterization of Brazil. The origin of this representation locates in the landscape. Figures 2 and 3 celebrate its wealth, natural resources, and exotic elements.



Figure 2 – East Indian market stall (1640 – 1666) by Albert Eckhout. <sup>1</sup>

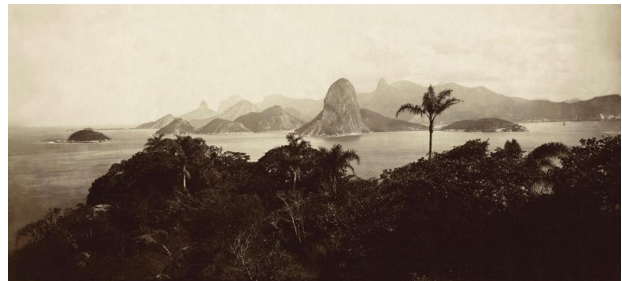


Figure 3 - Guanabara bay entrance (1885) by Marc Ferrez.<sup>11</sup>

This study treats landscape as a (geo) spelling. It is a framing to demarcate situations experienced as proposed by Cosgrove (1998). It is fundamental to realize that it is a social product. It is a place for use, that reveals cultural heritage and people's history.

Meneses (2002) discloses that 'the landscape is not an object. To understand it, it is not through its environmental components. It is not using the perception physiology. One must know the cultural determinations, the social and historical perception. That is what builds human subjectivity'.

Cosgrove (1998) states that landscape is a symbolic way of seeing. It is possible to go further and declare that it also determines this look, its cultivation. Didi-Huberman (1998:155) questions the definition of the world cultivation. 'Cultus is from the Latin verb colere. It appoints to the act of inhabiting a place and looking after it, to cultivate it. But, it is more than that. It relates to the territory and its material, symbolic and imaginary management'.

To look is to worship or as exposed by Vieira (2006:14) and illustrated in figure 4,

The eye is a window. Every window has two sides that communicate through it. Interior and exterior. If the landscape is a look, then it is the meeting of the interior and the externality. The landscape will be the relationship between space and the image. It is this encounter, the window that communicates such instance. René Magritte painting, *La Condition Humaine*, represents it. He painted what he saw or did he see what he was painting?



**Figure 4 - La Condition Humaine (1933) by René Magritte.<sup>iii</sup>**

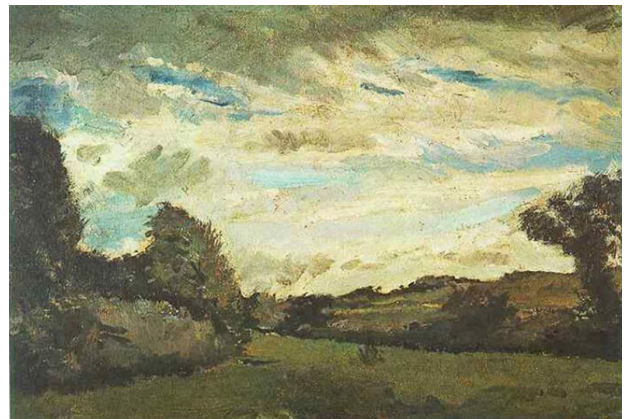
According to a Brazilian dictionary (Ferreira 1986), a landscape is a 'ground space that covers a view. It is a painting, a printmaking, a drawing representing a natural or urban landscape'. This colloquial sense is strong. But it is important to cover all the definitions. Even though, they state that there is no landscape without an observer. It is easy to conclude that visual perception is a fundamental condition for the existence of landscape.

Space visual perception brings only what the eyes cover. To understand it, someone should have an experience in it. It is fundamental to move through it, smell it, hear it and feel it on the skin. As stated by Varela et al (2003), 'the environment stimuli and their light, color, texture, movement and sound influence our perception. It interferes in our relations in the environment'.

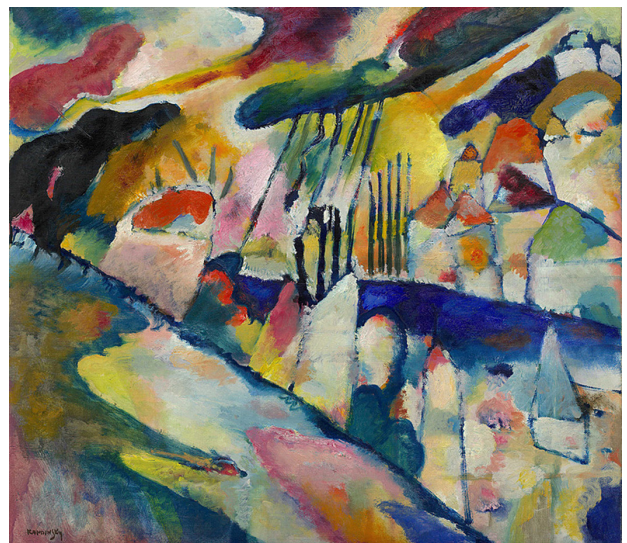
Through the history of painting and the visual arts, many artists painted their landscapes, Claude Monet (figure 5), Vincent van Gogh (figure 6) and Wassily Kandinsky (figure 7) to name a few of them.



**Figure 5 - Landscape Vetheuil (1879) by Claude Monet.<sup>iv</sup>**



**Figure 6 - Landscape with Dunes (1883) by Vincent van Gogh.<sup>v</sup>**



**Figure 7 - Landscape with Rain (1913) by Wassily Kandinsky.<sup>vi</sup>**

Those paintings occurred in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. They oscillate between the symbolic and the pictorial. In the twentieth century, art became more abstract. Artisans renounced the organization model and the perspectival geometry scale.

The notion that the landscape is equal to nature was overcome. It 'got disorganized and away from perspective. It overcame the notion that is only visual and finally got abstract' (Myanaki 2008:11). This new landscape view is in the work of Maya Lin (figure 8), Alexia Vogel (figure 9) and Rodrigo Zeferino (figure 10).



Figure 8 – Systematic landscapes (2009) by Maya Lin.<sup>vii</sup>

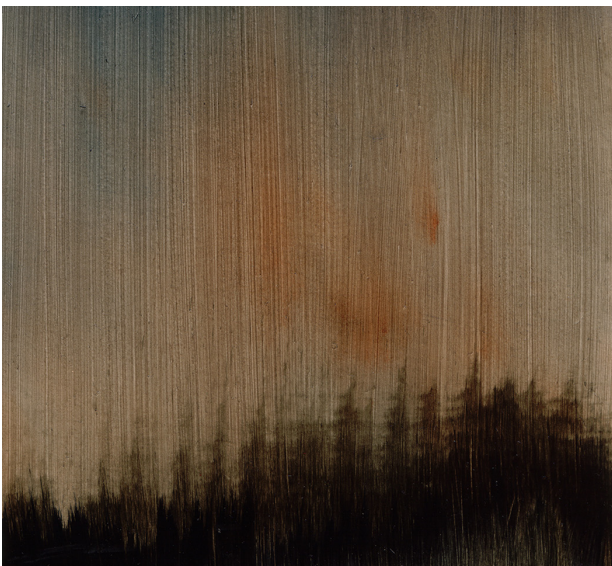


Figure 9 – Landscape test 2 (2014) by Alexia Vogel.<sup>viii</sup>

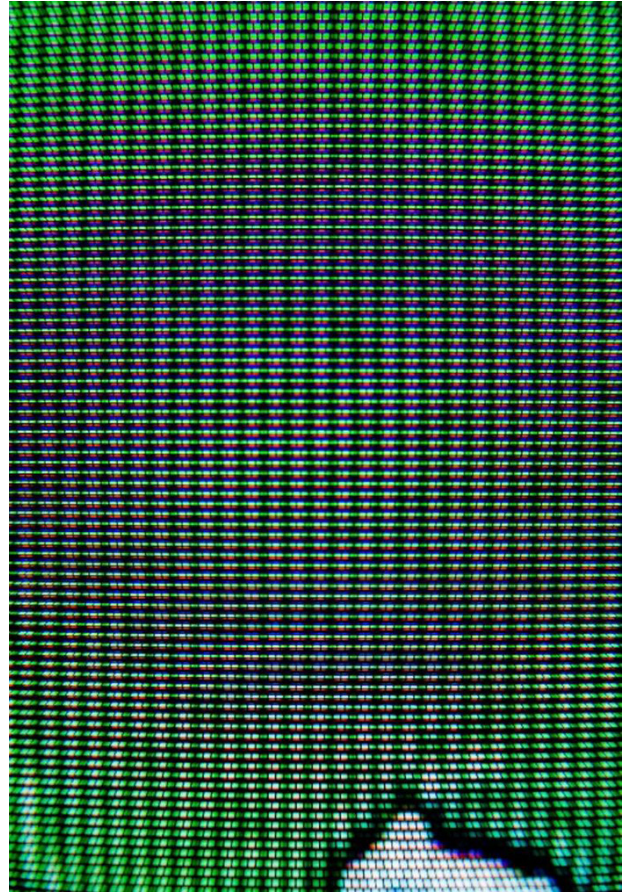


Figure 10 – Contemporary landscape 2 (2010) by Rodrigo Zeferino.<sup>ix</sup>

These works feature diverse landscapes. You can understand them partially by only looking at them. To understand them completely, the experience is required. They must create meaning and recreate purposes. It is important to remember the concept of topophilia. It is when there is an emotional link between the person and the place, as defined by Tuan (1980:6). He said that two people don't see the same reality. This look is individual. It is the result of cultural differences and of what each person can see and live.

At this point, it is worth clarifying the difference between landscape, space and place. Milton Santos is Brazil's main theoretician in this area. He established the difference between all these concepts. According to him (Santos 2002:103), the landscape is a set of forms. It expresses the localized relations between man and nature represented at any given time. Meanwhile, 'space is where the production, circulation, residence, communication, politician, beliefs, recreation happen. It imposes the conditions of living. It is subject to a subjective evaluation' (Santos 2002:55).

For Maciel (2014), the geometric space concept is finite and precise. It has measurable dimensions such as height, width, depth, area and volume. This same author presents place as 'anthropological, intangible and subjective. It is usually linked to the notion of time where human actions happen. All cultural experiences, the social and symbolic aspect of everyday life manifest in it'.

Thus, the landscape also connects to space and places. It can be filtered and reworked and this process creates another perspective. In this case, it is a social experience. It forms personal and inter-subjective worlds. Landscapes can also be decoded. In Sainte-Victoire paintings by Paul Cézanne, this statement becomes clear, see figure 11.



**Figure 11 - Sainte-Victoire (1897-98; 1902-04; 1904-1906) by Paul Cézanne.<sup>x</sup>**

There is another difference when the landscape is not only a point of view. The visit to a place requires movement. It is an action. Santos (2002:314) says that 'the fluidity of the world, the speed vertigo, the frequency of movement, the banality and allusions to places reveal, by contrast, the human being'.

He says that the relationship with the world has changed. It was local x local and now it is local x global (Santos 2002:313). The everyday experience points to other possibilities. It comes with the desire or the need to approach the environment in different ways. It establishes new routine actions and suggests other everyday modes.

It is believed that in this way, you can seize a particular place. You can also build a place awareness, a world consciousness (Santos 2005:161). And this new world will be a historic, cultural and social context.

Haesbaert (1999) states that territory is the wealth of the excluded and the refugees. For them, losing territory is tantamount to disappearing. In these territorial segregation processes or migration, the subject abandons their relations. They become deterritorialized. They lose their identity due to the territory loss.

'Distance is a feeling of space-form' as said by Didi-Huberman (1998:162). Distance modifies relations, deforms objects and places. It makes us see again. It opens a timeline for the memory. At the end, it reconstitutes the affective perception (Merleau-Ponty 1999:32).

To perceive is to remember, is it simple as that? Merleau-Ponty (1999:44) said that 'memories exists from the diverse datum.' First, we have to organize the things that we see. We have to classify them using previous experiences. That is when recognition takes place.

Finally, we can say that there are several ways to the landscape seizure. We can do it from its social aspects, with the change in the way we look. We can experiment it, use perception or evaluate it through identity. We can use memory, imagination or everyday life situations.

## Case Studies

There is no doubt that landscape plays an important component in setting national identities. As stated before, it reveals people's cultural heritage (Haesbaert 1999). The hypothesis in this study is that landscape causes the strengthening of the identity. It gives meaning to Brazilian handmade objects and to the craftsmen who produce them. The recognition, respect, and appreciation happens because of it.

Barbosa (2002) presents some actions needed to landscape understanding. Adapted from this author, it is important to:

- know the different parts of a given territory. To understand the studied space as part of a broader context;
- appropriate to geographical concepts and reflect on the meaning of landscape;
- observe and describe the landscapes through different forms of languages. To analyze text, images and photographs that represent them;
- compare the various organization forms and study the relations between people and places. To understand specific ways of life;
- realize that each place has an identity and a natural heritage. To understand that each of them has an economic and cultural territorial unit; and
- use different languages to established the concepts and data collected.

The result is that the respect towards landscape enhances cultural identity. It also encourages local self-placement, strengthening the sense of community. To illustrate the relation between landscape, identity, and craft, we will present some cases. We could do it by presenting the work of recognized national artists. We could talk about Irmãos Campana, Ronaldo Fraga or Renato Imbroisi work. We could also mention Heloisa Crocco or Lars Diederichsen. But we chose to present other works that are as important as those cited but less known.

We divided the study into three types of landscape. We did it to facilitate the understanding of the study proposed. The types are:

1. the landscape as perception, as an everyday way of life;
2. the landscape from memory and remembrance; and
3. the landscape as a material result.

It is important to say that we transform the landscape in an index. Peirce (2000:74) said that index is 'a sign or a representation as regards its object. It is not so much because of a similarity or analogy whatsoever with him...It can be a dynamic connection. It can be with the individual object, the direction and the memory of someone'.

The products shown embody their cultural heritage. They present and use the landscape as a formal and a symbolic reference. Some were already executed using territory in their first pieces. Others underwent interventions to develop specific craft collections. From those last ones, it is importante to state that any formal or technical change in the objects also implies a transformation in the person who made them. It also implies a change in the context to which it belongs. Objects influence the subject that influences the environment that influence objects. It has been already said here (figure 1), but it was important to repeat.

#### 1. The landscape as perception, as an everyday way of life

The first two works - Brumal and ComViver - are examples of my professional practice. I seek to strengthen the identity of craft products using the perception of landscape in both of them. I used the artisan awareness in relation to its surroundings living and community.

At Brumal, we have vertical lines that, at a glance, seem randomly arranged. It looks like there is no clear relationship between thickness, proportion, arrangement and colors. But these lines store data, such as a barcode. It is an extended landscape, synthesizing Brumal, a district of Santa Barbara, Minas Gerais, Brazil. We decoded and reinterpreted it. We transformed them into a region product (figure 12).



**Figure 12 – A presentation image of the weavers from Brumal, designer Carla Paoliello.**

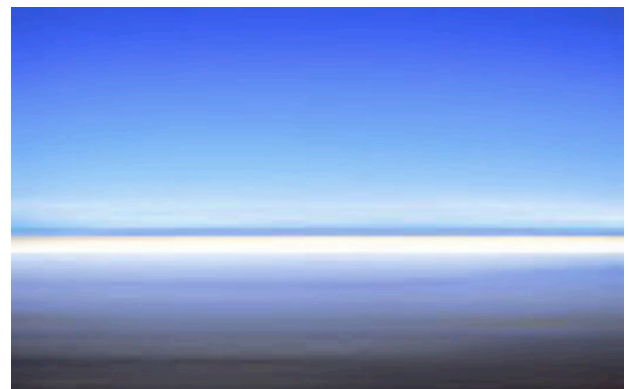
I invited the artisans of Brumal to view and capture the local landscape. This was the beginning of a collection of images of this district. The locality was not represented as in the Renaissance using distance and perspective. It was not from the point of view of a medieval spectator with a heavenly eye. The landscape was also not stereotypical. Each participant looked at the surrounding from their subjectivity. The collection came from the look of these ‘ordinary practitioners’.

They use photography as an instrument to review the everyday. They had to decide what should be recorded. They chose the places, people, and buildings that should perpetuate as an image. It was necessary to understand the reality in which they operate. I worked with the community needs to recognize the landscape and to (re) insert them into the world.

The starting point was that landscape, in its essence and as said before, is not just to be seen. It requires the man’s presence in the world to occur its full understanding. When the artisans walked through the district, taking pictures of it, they reviewed places. They emerged forgotten aspects of the existing reality.

Their history, lived in the district or perceived, unfolded in a diversity of content. The group made 270 images of the city, its landscape, flora, and fauna.

I presented the work as Michael Wesely (figure 13) and Landscape Pallets (figure 14). They started a good conversation and helped in the manipulation of the images brought. To turn photos into lines was a way out of realistic representation. It permitted a symbolic representation. The landscape has lost its materiality. The colors have emerged as synthesis. They have opened new perspectives. This exercise allowed the rewriting of the captured territory.



**Figure 13 - Zabriskie Point, American Landscape (1999-2000) by Michel Wesely.<sup>xi</sup>**

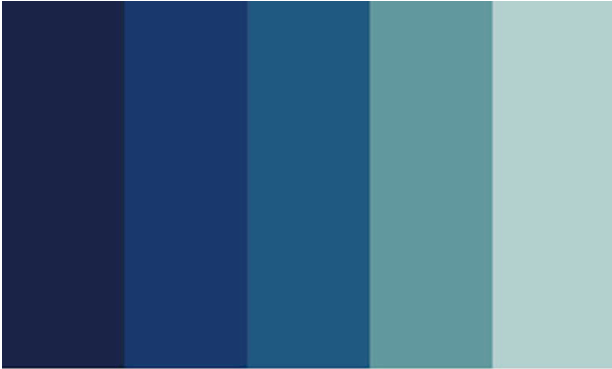


Figura 14 - Untitled (2013) by Anna Verlet Shelton.<sup>xii</sup>

The photos were the result of new points of view to the ordinary place. They were a defense of natural values. We can say that they were a need to retrain the day-to-day territory. They were also important to draw attention to local facts elected as exceptional.

At the end, the reconstruction of the district identity builds a place root. The artisans realized that they were not only residents of Brumal. They are also co-actors in the construction of this territory.

The district photography was not to reduce it to a pure two-dimensional image. It was important to the artisans experience it and look at it otherwise.

The next example presents an embroidery made by artisans from ComViver Association. It holds a photograph of Ipatinga downtown, a Minas Gerais city. It is a construction of an experience memory transformed into a cushion (figure 15).



Figure 15 - Craftwork by ComViver Association, designer Carla Paoliello.

At this example, the photographic perception was also used as an appropriation technique. It was also an attitude of approaching to the surrounding countryside. It was a development support to create an authentic and expressive product.

The process began with a search of the city places that are important to the artisans. They learned digital photography basics. They photographed their neighbor to start the registration of places and their people. Then they went to town to build a urban memory. They printed the photos and redraw them. The drawings transformed into risks that were ready to be embroidered.

These embroidered objects are a possibility of verbalization. They are a way of seeing and living Ipatinga. They restore this landscape. They put the community that lives in the periphery at the city center.

The artisans understood that the act of shooting is a selection, a cut, a record. They recognize the place and captured the landscape. They selected places and situations and elect their world.

Barthes said that a picture never distinguishes from its reference. 'I would say that the picture is still always carrying his referring to her' (1984:17); 'for I saw only the referent, the object you want, dear body' (1984:19); 'photography is literally an emanation of the referent' (1984:126).

Ipatinga is presented in this handmade collection. It certifies the existence and confirm the identity of each artisan. Dubois (1994) said that the picture was not a neutral mirror. In this case, it was a transposing instrument of analysis and interpretation of reality. If we consider each photo a landscape reduction, it is a precise point in space-time. It is a visual interface. It carries the author and the experience that gave him space.

The work from ComViver could discipline the ways of seeing the landscape. It could establish points of views and the proper angles and components. But, more than that, it produced a change in the way they look at the city. And also a change in the body and in the perception of the artisan who photographed it.

Photography is understood as a possible space builder, achieving realities and attesting existence. The photograph records an experience. It packages the landscape that was transformed in an object.

Sontag (2004) said that 'to photograph is to attach importance'. It is interesting to see this technique as a strategy to understand the landscape. It is a perceptual process experiment. It is a 'result of the effort that avoids two of four-dimensional space-time situation' (Flusser 1985:7).

Peirce (2000) states that someone only realizes what they are prepared to interpret. The photographer recognizes its territory. They are made from that elected place. They reconstruct their individual subjectivity. They create a social posture and finally confirm their identity.

## 2. The landscape from memory and remembrance

Clement Rosset (2007:26 in Becker 2011:117) pointed to an important issue: the continuity of a person's identity lies in their ability to remember. Artisanal products stated here are based on the understanding that to notice is to remember. The formal and symbolic reference used are the results of memories that reach visibility.

The products establish a relationship between the past and the present. They work with memory. They transport it to the present and create another memory. They have a strong emotional bond and an intense sense of belonging.

The example of the landscape as memory is the work of Domingos Tótoro. He is from Maria da Fé, Minas Gerais, Brazil. He uses cardboard as a single material. His objects forms have inspiration in the forms found in nature (figure 16).

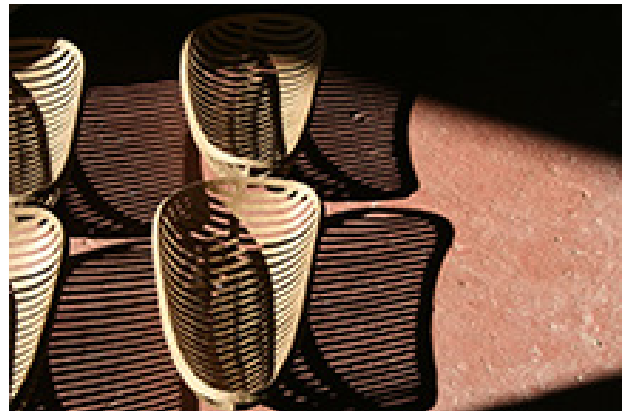


Figure 16 – Piece by Domingos Tótoro whose reference leaves' structure.<sup>xiii</sup>

His objects have a huge tactile appeal. They bring up memories not only by visual but also by the tactile (figure 17). The agricultural land, the walk along them, their textures, shadows, lights, and colors. As stated in his site 'the cardboard come back to home, back to wood again. It is between the blue sky and the emerald green mountains' (Tótoro 2015).



Figure 17 – Mandala by Domingos Tótoro which refers to the typical topography of Minas Gerais.<sup>xiv</sup>

The final shapes of the objects are not only readings of nature next to him. But they are in the memory of those who wonders in Brazil lands. They talk with those who have walked in its mountains, with who have seen close enough the flora and fauna of this rich Brazilian state.

This table have won several awards. It translates in a simple way the application of his method. It is a tempered glass overlay to three massive pieces that refer to stones. It is the vision of a crystal and clear river, as seen in figure 18.

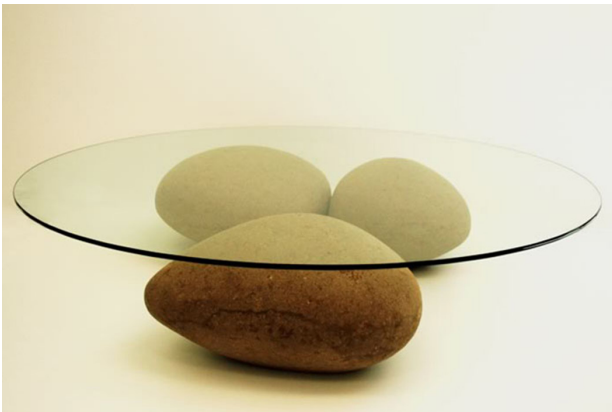


Figure 18 – Table Water by Domingos Tótoro.<sup>xv</sup>

### 3. The landscape as a material result

To understand the landscape as a material result, we present the golden grass. It is a kind of evergreen (figure 19) that only grows in Jalapão, Tocantins, Brazil.



Figure 19 – Golden grass field.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is like a yellow straw that gleams like gold (figure 20) that turns into objects and accessories in the hands of local artisans.



Figure 20 – Golden grass in detail.<sup>xvii</sup>

This material is so typical that it has been smuggled into other areas of central Brazil. The local artisans have sought from the National Institute of Industrial Property (INPI) its protection. They applied for a Geographical Indication (GI).

This seal is a consumers guarantee. It serves also to producers as proof of the product genuineness. It harnesses their particular qualities to a true geographical origin. A certain intrinsic value is assigned. It is a particular identity that distinguishes it from others on the market.

Because of its importance, great artists of Brazilian design have worked with this material. The Capim Dourado project developed by Marcelo Rosenbaum is one of them. The Jalapa collection was carried out from the partnership between artisans community and the designer (figure 21). This approach generated the ‘improvement of the quality of craftsmanship. It forced tradition to continue and improved social conditions’ as stated by the designer.



**Figure 21 – Jalapa collection by Marcelo Rosenbaum.<sup>xviii</sup>**

Another example is the work of Rodrigo Calixto of Ethos Workshop. His S1 table has an emotional value and a historical and scientific significance. It preserves the memory and praises the wood material. It can be made of different types of wood such as ipe, roxinho, angelim, jequitibá, espeteiro, garapeira, jatobá, mirindiba, pine, maple and sucupira.

Each table is unique because of the wood arrangement in its production. Each wood piece has its name recorded in it (figure 22). It is an object of art, a biology class, an inventory of Brazilian woods, a design piece, a craft object.



**Figure 22 – Table S1 by Rodrigo Calixto.<sup>xix</sup>**

It is worth mentioning that in all the examples presented here, there was a careful choice. The landscape was not turned into an illustration. Ideally, it is to be used and experienced. It should modify a craftsman and / or a consumer, and these craft pieces should outcrop this feeling.

Landscape can be reduced to abstract symbols. It can become a picture of consumption. But when it is offered as memory, sensation and consciousness, it is an experience. It would be interesting if it becomes a lived moment to alter the identity of those who see it and of those who buys craft products that embraces it.

## Conclusion

This work is a reflection on the Brazilian handicrafts. The aim was to understand how it establishes its identity. The hypothesis was that it has a relation with its landscape.

We could prove that landscape is a reference that strengthens national identity. It gives meaning to handmade objects and the artisan who makes them. When we use handmade objects, it engenders recognition, respect and appreciation to the place, to the subject and to the work done.

The landscape is a perception, a way of living everyday life. It is a memory and a remembrance. It is a result of the material used. The recognition of the landscape and the craft creates the enhancement of cultural identity. It elevates the local self-worth and strengthens the sense of community.

The case studies present the local and regional features. They understand the landscape as a social and cultural construction. They do not present picturesque or exotic parts, common in objects made for tourists. Otherwise, the objects explore the territory. They highlight the surrounding to create what was called a cultural craft. They reveal stories and they build local capabilities. They recreate the artisans identity and thus the existing craft.

This research seeks the authentic, the typical, and the unique in handicraft. It was a search for the craft that presents its characteristics associated with a landscape.

However, during this study, it was noted that globalization and the internet are providing new ways to interact and communicate with the artisans communities. They have changed the way to form groups, to seek for references, to distribute products. In these cases, the determination by geography no longer happens. Groups are born without physical presence. They become without territories. Therefore, if the present location is not important why should it be the basis for the a craft identity development?

It is believed that the tangible aspects (physical, infrastructure, and property) and the intangible ones (social relations and symbols) are important tools for the craft products competitiveness. If they are connected to local culture, they will differentiate them in a globalized market.

The local landscape brings a self-recognition and a sense of belonging to the community. The community feels safer with its high and proud self-esteem. It is good to be part of a place. This redefinition and cultural representation system multiplies all the time. That is how you realize that identity is mutable and changeable. In this study I tried to, at least temporarily, identify a possibility.

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