

An investigation into the astrological symbols present in the decorative painting *Planisfério* of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

Margarida Toscano Manarte

Abstract. This paper focus on the study of the astrological symbols present in the painting *Planisfério* from the Portuguese artist José Sobral de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970), known as Almada. Considering the painting's size and visibility, the relevance the artist gave to the astrological symbols is worth noting as it can be thought that they should have impacted the presence and development of astrology in Portugal. It is possible that Almada wanted to make astrology visible and *Planisfério* reveals a relationship between earth and sky, although he would have seen each realm differently – the earth as objective and the sky, subjective. Time and space, which can be associated to astrology and geometry respectively, are present in the painting and they are fundamental to an understanding of the cosmos. The painting studied is testimony to Almada's thinking about the cosmos and man's relation with it, providing proof of the presence of astrology in Portuguese society of the 1930s and 1940s.

In 1940 the first building to be constructed to accommodate the whole production of a newspaper was inaugurated in Lisbon, for the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*.¹ The building was designed by the architect Porfírio Pardal Monteiro (1897–1957) and decorated with four mural paintings, dated from 1939 by the Portuguese painter José Sobral de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970), known as Almada. One of these paintings, *Planisfério* (Planisphere) included astrological symbols which were

¹ João Pardal Monteiro, 'Para o Projecto Global: Nove Décadas de Obra: Arte, Design e Técnica na Arquitectura do Atelier Pardal Monteiro', (unpublished Doctor Thesis, Faculdade de Arquitectura, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, 2012), p.404.

Margarida Toscano Manarte, 'An investigation into the astrological symbols present in the decorative painting *Planisfério* of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 29 no 1 and 2, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2025 (Papers from the INSAPXII conference, Corfu, 2024), pp. 293-312.

www.CultureAndCosmos.org

294 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

studied and will be discussed in this paper. The painting remains in its original place as it is integrated artistic heritage, as shown in Fig. 1.²



Fig. 1. Current appearance of the newspaper building hall after the restoration. Image: Telmo Domingues.

The painting *Planisfério*, in Fig. 2, is located on the ground floor public hall in front of the main door, catching the viewer's eye when entering the room, as well as from the outside through two big windows. It is a representation of the world map with the European Continent in its centre, flanked on both sides by the four elements – Air and Earth elements on the left and Fire and Water on the right. Surrounding it are the twelve zodiac signs. On the left side are Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo and Virgo, starting from the bottom to the top in a clockwise sequence. On the right side are Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces, starting from the top to the bottom in a clockwise sequence.

² João Silva, Edifício do Diário de Notícias, SIPA: Sistema de informação para o Património Arquitectónico, SIPA: Sistema de informação para o Património Arquitectónico, <http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=3982>, [accessed 13 January 2022].



Fig. 2. Almada, *Planisfério*, 1939, fresco, 13x4.5 m, *Diário de Notícias* building, Lisbon. Image: Telmo Domingues.

Although much has been said about Almada and his art, not all his pieces have been studied in the same depth, and, in the case of the painting chosen, little attempt has been made to analyse the astrological symbolism. The existing literature has little information that could give any understanding of the painting and even less about the symbols used. *Planisfério* was considered a monumental mural painting that had no equivalents in size and, although the four elements and the twelve zodiac signs were identified by all authors who wrote about the painting, although only the art historian José Augusto França (1922–2021) described the four elements and he considered the signs of Gemini and Aquarius the more creative.³ Aside from this, the art historian Begoña Farré Torras and the architect Rita Almada Negreiros linked the painting to medieval traditions although without presenting any arguments.⁴

The painting was produced during the dictatorial political system installed in 1933 and it influenced the field of the arts above all because

³ João Paulo Freire, ed., *Diário de Notícias: Da sua Fundação às suas Bodas de Diamante, Vol. 2* (Lisboa: Empresa Nacional de Publicidade); João Pardal Monteiro, 'Para o Projecto Global: Nove Décadas de Obra: Arte, Design e Técnica na Arquitectura do Atelier Pardal Monteiro', in Rita Almada Negreiros (ed), *Almada Negreiros Um Percurso Possível* (Lisboa: IPPAR - Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 2017); Begoña Farré Torras, 'Espaço Público, Espaço Privado', in José de Almada Negreiros, *Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno* (Lisboa, 2017); Ana Vasconcelos, 'A pintura como um teatro - Almada e a encomenda artística', in José de Almada Negreiros, *Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno* (Lisboa, 2017) and José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, (Lisboa: Estúdios Cor, 1974), p.131.

⁴ Begoña Farré Torras, in José de Almada Negreiros, *Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno*, p.222; and Rita Almada Negreiros, p.63.

296 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

the majority of artworks were commissioned by the government, who would use those artistic creations as a vehicle to transmit governmental propaganda. According to França, the public commissions would have to be done ‘within a more conventional taste’.⁵ However, private commissions would also have to be concordant with government ideas and would have to go through a censorship commission. Thus, although there are no records about the government’s opinion, the existence of Almada’s painting prove that they had been accepted. According to Ellen Sapega, due to his talent and renown, Monteiro ‘was to a large extent exempt from the new restrictions’, which might have contributed to Almada having more freedom in his painting.⁶ As far as evidence can tell it was Monteiro who invited Almada, according to a letter written by the artist to his wife Sarah Affonso (1899–1983), saying that the architect told him, ‘I have several jobs for you in the *Diário de Notícias*’ and furthermore ‘for me to do what I want’.⁷

For Monteiro decorative paintings should be ‘adapted to their respective place and function’, suggesting that the artistic program needed to serve the building itself.⁸ Yet, for Almada, a building with no artistic decoration was ‘like an open book with no story for the people read and fix’, an indication of how his paintings would be a means of communication.⁹ In that period, newspapers were important sources of information, being a bridge that connected people to other realities, and Almada mirrored it in *Planisfério*, which is full of details that would show the world to the newspaper readers, seemingly following Monteiro’s opinion. Also, the

⁵ ‘dentro de um gosto mais convencional’, José Augusto França, *A Arte em Portugal no Século XX: 1911-1961*, 4th edn (Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2009), p.157.

⁶ Ellen W. Sapega, in *Consensus and Debate in Salazar's Portugal: visual and literary negotiations of the national text, 1933-1948* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), p.62.

⁷ ‘tenho vários trabalhos para si para o Diário de Notícias’, ‘para eu fazer o que me der na gana’, ANSA-COR-550, Modern!smo – Arquivo Virtual da Geração de Orpheu, Modern!smo – Arquivo Virtual da Geração de Orpheu, <<https://modernismo.pt/index.php/arquivo-almada-negreiros>> [accessed 12 August 2022].

⁸ ‘adaptadas ao seu respectivo lugar e a função que lhes compete’, *Sudoeste*, (Lisboa: Contexto Editora, 1982), p.170.

⁹ ‘como um livro aberto sem nenhuma história para o povo ler e fixar’, José de Almada Negreiros, ‘Duas Palavras de um Colaborador’, in *Obras Completas 6 - Textos de Intervenção* (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1972), p.168.

artist chose a world map that would relate to the Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century, aligning with government's ideas of glorifying the nation, but, rather than highlighting maritime discoveries, Almada characterized each region's unique culture following an idea and position of independence instead of colonization. It is interesting to note the relevance Almada gave to the astrological symbols, which in their huge dimensions would never pass unnoticed, perhaps trying to bring attention to the subject. It appears that Almada had freedom in the choice of themes for the paintings, following his own personal interests and messages, although apparently aligning with Monteiro's opinion as well as the political and social environment of the epoch.

In the online archive *Modernismo!* there are three drawings from Almada that probably were drafts for the painting *Planisfério* and which demonstrate that the artist changed his thinking. Since the draft dates do not clarify their chronological order, they were ordered based on the progressive similarities with the final painting. The first draft, undated, shows that Almada did not always include astrological symbols – it surrounded the world map with four figures representing the four seasons and agriculture activities. The second and third drafts, dated 1939 as is the final painting, already featured astrological symbols. However, in the second draft the four elements appear to have been all represented through female figures, which Almada changed in the third draft and final painting. These drafts show that Almada's use of astrological symbols was not always his idea.

Astrology in 1930s Portugal might not have been widely disseminated but its presence in Portuguese society was found in different mediums of communications. First, the almanacs sold during that period informed their readers about the moon cycle, eclipses, the ingress of the sun in each sign, and the dates when the planets would be visible in the sky, and some included small symbols for each zodiac sign.¹⁰ Also, some books and newspaper articles were published relating to investigations into astrological references in Portuguese literary works.¹¹ A considerable

¹⁰ Manuel Rodrigues, *O Verdadeiro Almanaque Borda d'Água. Relatório útil a toda a gente* (Lisboa: Manoel Rodrigues - Livraria Minerva, 1938); Bento Serrano, *Relatório Saragoçano do Borda d'Água* (Porto: Livraria Joaquim Maria da Costa, 1939).

¹¹ Augusta Faria Gersão Ventura, *Estudos Vicentinos I - Astrologia e Astronomia* (Coimbra: Edições de Biblos, 1937); Augusta Faria Gersão Ventura, *A Máquina do Mundo*, 1st edn (Porto: Portucalense Editora, 1944); Mário Saa, *Memórias Astrológicas de Camões* (Lisboa: Empresa Nacional de Publicidade, 1940).

298 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

number of these newspaper articles were published in 1938, a year before Almada's *Planisfério*.¹²

Artistic works with astrological symbols were also found, for instance the pavilion *Esfera dos Descobrimentos* (Discoveries Sphere), constructed for the *Exposição do Mundo Português* (Portuguese World Exposition), inaugurated a few months after Almada's mural painting, in the form of a sphere and decorated with the first six signs of the zodiac. Apparently it was a project by Monteiro, although the author of the decoration was not referred to, leaving doubt as to whether it was Monteiro or another artist.¹³ The images used for the zodiac signs representations are similar to those found in the *Chronographia ou Reportorio dos Tempos* from André de Avelar, who copied Hieronymo de Chaves, from the sixteenth century.¹⁴

Almada and Astrology

Almada was born on the 7th April 1893 in São Tomé and moved to Portugal when he was ten years old.¹⁵ Almada was a modernist multifaceted artist who experienced different mediums and expressed his ideas in multiple forms. He started by illustrating anecdotes for magazines along with paintings in oil on canvas, and he wrote manifestos, short stories and a novel as well as presented conferences throughout his career.¹⁶ In these written works he expressed his ideas about his homeland and the artistic

¹² The exchange of opinions was made in the newspaper *Diário de Lisboa* on the year 1938 on the following days: 20 January, 27 January, 8 March, 16 March, 24 March, 31 March, 07 April, 14 April, 21 April, 12 May, 19 May, 16 May. One article was published in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* on the date 16 February 1938.

¹³ Augusto de Castro, 'Guia da Exposição do Mundo Português' (1940). João Paulo Martins, in *Exposição do Mundo Português: Explicação de um Lugar*, p.59.

¹⁴ André de Avelar, *Chronographia ou eportorio dos Tempos: O mais copioso que te agora sayo a luz* (Lisboa: Jorge Rodriguez e Estevão Lopez, 1602), p.71; Hieronymo de Chaves, *Chronographia o reportorio de los tiempos, el mas copioso y preciso que hasta ahora he salido a luz* (1576), p.79.

¹⁵ José Augusto França, *O Português Sem Mestre*, p.16.

¹⁶ José Sobral de Almada Negreiros, 'Razão Ponderosa', *A Sátira*, 4, 1 Jun (1911), p.45. <http://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/Periodicos/ASatira/1911/N04/N04_master/ASatiraN4.pdf> [accessed 18 February 2022]; José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, pp.17, 81. Rui Mário Gonçalves, *Almada Negreiros* (Lisboa: Editorial Caminho, 2005), p.5.

environment that he considered conservative and stagnant.¹⁷ Throughout his career Almada always embraced new challenges, working with stained glasses, mural paintings, tiles, tapestries and stone. Almada demonstrated a strong interest in number and geometry and his quest was to find the canon showing the rules, such as the golden number and the relation 9/10, that the masters from each epoch would have learned to create their artworks.¹⁸ As Almada said, the ‘new is perpetually in the ancient’, showing that modernity would never be constructed without ancient knowledge.¹⁹ His last work was a stone panel with geometric constructions, which encapsulates his whole life, called *Começar* (Begin). Almada’s feeling might have been that he was only beginning. Almada died at the age of 77 in 1970.

Almada’s interest in astrology was evident in the symbols he used in his paintings; however, his knowledge of the discipline is unknown. Almada was friend of Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), a Portuguese writer and astrologer, probably from 1913.²⁰ According to Paulo Cardoso (b. 1953) and Jerónimo Pizarro (b. 1977), Pessoa calculated and studied Almada’s natal chart likely around 1915 and 1916.²¹ Considering their relationship, it is a strong possibility that Pessoa shared his interest in astrology with his friend, although there is no record of what might have been transmitted about it. According to the online database constructed by the foundation *Casa Fernando Pessoa*, Pessoa had thirty books about astrology with a considerable number of authors linked to the theosophical society, being Alan Leo (1860–1917) the most present.²² Therefore, the astrological

¹⁷ . José de Almada Negreiros, 'Manifesto da Exposição de Amadeo de Souza Cardoso', in *Textos de Intervenção - Obras Completas Vol. 6*, p.22. José de Almada Negreiros, 'Ultimatum Futurista às gerações portuguesas do século XX', in *Portugal Futurista*, p.37.

¹⁸ José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, pp.155, 157; Simão Palmeirim Costa, Pedro Freitas, *Almada Negreiros e o Mosteiro da Batalha: Quinze Pinturas Primitivas, num Retábulo*, 1st edn (Batalha: Mosteiro da Batalha: Documenta, 2021), p.95.

¹⁹ ‘O novo está perpetuamente no antigo’, António Valdemar, José Manuel Santos, *Almada: Os Painéis, a Geometria e Tudo*, 1st edn (Lisboa: Assírio e Alvim, 2015), p.65.

²⁰ Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação* (Lisboa: Edições Ática, 1966), p.42.

²¹ Paulo Cardoso, Jerónimo Pizarro, *Fernando Pessoa: Cartas Astrológicas*, (Lisboa: Bertrand Editora, 2011), p.3.

²² Other authors were Raphael (1850–1923) and Sepharial (1864–1929). Biblioteca Particular Fernando Pessoa,

300 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

knowledge published by Leo will be considered within the analyses of Almada's astrological representations.

In Almada's written works astrology was only referenced in the novel *Nome de Guerra*.²³ Yet, Almada wrote some ideas that reveal that he possibly thought about a relationship between earth and heaven, establishing a link between the sky, man, and place.²⁴ That idea is in accord with Patrick Curry's (b. 1951) definition of astrology, which was 'any practise or belief that centred on interpreting the human or terrestrial meaning of the stars'.²⁵ In his book from 1921, *A Invenção do Dia Claro*, Almada cited the hermetic law 'as above so below', although with no explanation of his interpretation of it.²⁶ Therefore, *Planisfério*, in how it brings together astrology and the world map, might reflect Almada's thinking on the connection between earth and sky, and may cast light on how he interpreted it.

Almada left some unfinished texts, from the 1940s, that were compiled after his death by Lima de Freitas (1927–1998), where he mentioned astronomy as one of the two primary sciences of humankind along with geometry because, as he wrote, 'the first visible to Man was the Sky and himself on earth'.²⁷ However, Almada did not fail to criticize society, considering that man had lost some important knowledge about his relationship with the heavens and the earth.²⁸ In 1932, Almada wrote about the earth cycle around the sun and the moon cycle around the earth, that 'we have no choice but to go and learn technically how these very natural things work'.²⁹ This could explain Almada's interest in ancient knowledge

<<https://bibliotecaparticular.casafernandopessoa.pt/index/index.htm>> [Accessed 17 October 2022].

²³ José de Almada Negreiros, *Nome de Guerra* (Porto: Assírio e Alvim, 2020), p.142.

²⁴ José de Almada Negreiros, *A Invenção do dia Claro*, Facsimile edn (Porto: Assírio e Alvim, 2017), pp.14, 23.

²⁵ Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p.4.

²⁶ José de Almada Negreiros, *A Invenção do dia Claro*, p.14.

²⁷ 'o primeiro visível para o Homem foi o Céu e ele próprio na terra', José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.123.

²⁸ José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.124.

²⁹ 'não temos mais remédio do que ir aprender tecnicamente como funcionam estas coisas tão naturais', José de Almada Negreiros, 'Direcção Única', in *Textos de Intervenção - Obras Completas Vol. 6*, p.88.

related to the functioning of the cosmos. As he wrote, modernists would ‘go back to antiquity to meet current modernity’.³⁰

Also in those texts Almada referred to the four elements, writing that ‘the Earth is where Man first arrives, then the water that connects the continents and finally the Air where Fate hovers invisible’, and that Fire is what connects man to the sacred and is present along with each the other three elements.³¹ These four elements were presented by Plato (c. 428–347 BCE) in the *Timaeus*, a book that Almada cited in one of the 1940s texts when writing about the time cycles established by the stars, which as will be seen are central in the paintings under study.³² Almada also referenced Aristotle (c. 384–322 BCE) and Homer showing how he was involved with ancient Greek knowledge.³³ Luís Castro considered that Almada constructed his theoretical thinking based on Pythagoreanism and Platonism having been ‘pouring into modernity the ancient thought’.³⁴

Analyses and Discussion

As a representation of the world through geographical depiction and iconographical representation, *Planisfério* can be related to the medieval mappaemundi.³⁵ However, its oval shape and orientation to the north puts it in the late fifteenth century, the time when the medieval map changed its common form and orientation.³⁶ Even so, Almada did not follow the accuracy of the geographical forms that had been gained through the

³⁰ ‘Irmos à antiguidade para o encontro da modernidade actual’, José de Almada Negreiros, *Orpheu 1915-1965*, p. 18.

³¹ ‘A Terra é onde o Homem chega primeiro, depois à água que liga os continentes e por fim o Ar onde paira invisível o Destino’, José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.136.

³² Plato, *Timaeus*. trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 61.D32; D. José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.57.

³³ José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.107. José de Almada Negreiros, *Mito-Alegoria-Símbolo: Monólogo autodidata na oficina de pintura* (Lisboa: Livraria Sá da Costa, 1948), p.11.

³⁴ Luís F N A Castro, ‘Almada Negreiros: Herança Grega e Teoria das Proporções Harmónicas 1ºV’, (Unpublished Master Dissertation. Faculdade de Belas Artes - Universidade de Lisboa, 2003), p.179.

³⁵ José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, p.131; Begoña Farré Torras, in *José de Almada Negreiros, Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno*, p.222.; Rita Almada Negreiros, p.63.

³⁶ Evelyn Edson, *The World Map 1300-1492. The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation*, p.230.

302 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

influence of sea charts.³⁷ Also, Almada decorated the world map mostly with secular motifs, showing again a proximity to late medieval practises instead of the initial practise commonly fulfilled in religious iconography.³⁸ Torras and Negreiros opinion can be followed although the last seems more accurate.³⁹ Almada spread throughout the world map telegraph poles that Ana Vasconcelos related with the transmission of the news, that can be linked to the itineraries found in medieval mappaemundi, as in the Hereford map.⁴⁰ Evelyn Edson observed that a world map serves to demonstrate one's view and opinion about the world.⁴¹ Taking this into consideration, *Planisfério* appears to be Almada's statement about the world, and so he transforms this world map into a visual source where one can learn about each place's culture and history.

Almada might have also been influenced by celestial maps which represented the heavens through the stars and constellations visible in the sky.⁴² Considering Emily Urban's studies, there are different types of celestial charts and Almada's *Planisfério* is close to the encyclopaedic maps that 'contain all the signs of the zodiac or planets in groupings that do not form a cartographically accurate representation of the sky', since Almada drew the twelve zodiacal signs without considering the constellations and their exact spatial location.⁴³ The decorations of the Sala dei Mesi in Palazzo Schifanoia, painted in 1468–1470, are an example of an encyclopaedic celestial map which is also integrated with geographical maps representations. Almada also linked a celestial sky with a world map, showing that possibly he was interested in the relationship between heaven and earth. However, although he accurately depicted the world which was

³⁷ Evelyn Edson, p.230

³⁸ Peter Whitfield, *The Image of the World – 20 centuries of world maps*, (London: The British Library, 1994), p.39.

³⁹ José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, p.131; Begoña Farré Torras, in *José de Almada Negreiros, Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno*, p.222; Rita Almada Negreiros, p.63.

⁴⁰ Ana Vasconcelos, in *José de Almada Negreiros, Uma Maneira de Ser Moderno*, p.54; G. R. Crone, 'New Light on the Hereford Map', *The Geographical Journal* 131, no. 4, (1965): p.455.

⁴¹ Evelyn Edson, 'The Medieval World View: Contemplating the Mappamundi', *History Compass* 8, no. 6 (2010): pp.504, 505, 509.

⁴² Emily Urban, 'Mapping the Heavens: The Ceiling of the Sala Bologna in the Vatican Palace', in *The Imagined Sky: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Darrelyn Gunzburg (London: Equinox Publishing, 2026), p.144.

⁴³ Emily Urban, p.144.

real and concrete, he did not do so for the celestial heavens, which were depicted in a subjective and symbolic way, revealing a different approach between heaven and earth.

Similar to *Planisfério* is the map of the United States of America painted by the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias (1905–1957) (Fig. 3) and published in *Esquire Magazine* in 1943.⁴⁴



Fig.3. Miguel Covarrubias, United States, 1943, print on paper, 35 x 45 cm, Digital Collection – Persuasive Cartography. Image: Cornell University Library – Persuasive Cartography.

The geographical representation of the country was likewise filled with figures native/related to each region. Covarrubias also created a set of six maps, called the Pageant of the Pacific, comparable to *Planisfério*, made for the exhibition *The Golden Gate International Exposition of San Francisco*, which opened in February 1939. Some representations are strongly analogous between Covarrubias's maps and Almada's *Planisfério*, as for example the shark, the lama and the ships. The artists worked in the same time period and Portugal had an artistic committee in

⁴⁴ Miguel Covarrubias, 'Pictorial Map of America', *Esquire Magazine* XIX, no. 1 (January 1943): pp.47–48. <<https://classic.esquire.com/issue/19430101>>, [accessed 3 October 2022].

304 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

the San Francisco exhibition, although Almada was not part of it, and it is difficult to establish if either saw each other's work.⁴⁵ Either way, Covarrubias's maps showed that Almada was not the only one using this type of map, which followed some medieval features but within a contemporary context, even though Almada differs including astrological symbols.

Four elements

The representation of air and fire elements are represented by men, with strong muscular bodies, and earth and water elements are represented by a woman and a female mermaid, both showing flexible and gentle bodies. This may be associated with the characterization of the elements by Alan Leo, who wrote that air and fire are masculine and earth and water are feminine.⁴⁶ Almada wrote that humanity is composed of two halves, the masculine and the feminine, and those two halves 'cease, each one, to be a half if there is no other half'.⁴⁷ Almada knew about the two poles, masculine and feminine, and applied those in the final drawing, including both men and women instead of only women as appeared in the second draft, showing a dualistic approach where the two energies would be part of a whole.

The figure of the earth element was represented by a female figure lying on the floor asleep under a blue blanket and covered with a transparent veil, representing what Plato described as 'that which goes on foot on dry land'.⁴⁸ Next to the figure there is a sphere that might represent the terrestrial globe and in the background there are mountains and a white house and a tree with red fruits that could be apples or pomegranates. Almada figured a tree with red fruits in the Faculty of Letters façade to represent the expulsion

⁴⁵ Margarida Magalhães Ramalho, 'Da República à Ditadura Portugal dos Anos 40', in *Exposição do Mundo Português: Explicação de um lugar*, ed. by Margarida de Magalhães Ramalho and Margarida da Cunha Belém (Lisboa: Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, 2016), p.38; Jorge Segurado, 'Comentários e considerações de Jorge Segurado, arquitecto dos Pavilhões naquelas Exposições', *Revista Oficial do Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos* 11 (1939): p.312.

⁴⁶ Alan Leo, *How to Judge a Nativity* (London: Modern Astrology Office, 1912), p.16.

⁴⁷ 'deixam, cada uma, de ser uma metade se não houver outra metade', José de Almada Negreiros, *A Invenção do dia Claro*, p.17.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, pp.83, 85.B 40A.

from Paradise.⁴⁹ The presence of the same tree that condemned Adam and Eve in the earth element might show that Almada regarded the earth as the place where sins are rife. Also, following the episode of the expulsion from Paradise, which attributed primal sin to Eve, there is an association between the earth element and sins to women. This idea follows Plato's teaching that divided souls into those that come from the ground 'covered in filth and dust' and those that come from the sky 'purified'.⁵⁰

Unlike the figures of the other elements represented in very active positions, the lying woman is sleeping: she is disconnected from the real world. This might be a representation of Plato's cave allegory, that men on earth only live in the shadows, without seeing real things. Plato described the coming out of the cave towards light through a process of adaptation, coming from the earth, seeing the shadows first then the water reflections, following the night sky with the moon and the stars and finally the sun 'by itself alone in its proper place'.⁵¹ Watching the sun, men would see 'that this is what provides the seasons, and the years, and governs everything in the visible world'.⁵²

The water element is represented by a mermaid with her torso out of the water and bending backwards, fitting Plato's definition of 'the class which inhabits the waters'.⁵³ In her hands, and resting on her right shoulder, she is holding a large conch that is pouring water into the sea. The figure's pose of back bending denotes her body flexibility, an illustration of the 'plasticity and mobility' that according to Leo characterizes the Water element.⁵⁴ The mermaid is represented with her buttocks uncovered and with two fins resembling two legs, a representation that Almada used in all the mermaids, female and male, throughout *Planisfério* and also in other paintings, for example in the mural painting in the maritime station of Alcântara from 1945. Almada's first use of this particular way of representing a mermaid was found in a theatre play written between 1927

⁴⁹ Ana Mehnert Pascoal, 'A cidade do saber: estudo do património artístico integrado nos edifícios projectados pelo arquitecto Porfírio Pardal Monteiro para a Cidade Universitária de Lisboa (1934-1961)' (unpublished Master Dissertation, Universidade de Lisboa, 2011), p.176.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic*. trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.467. Book X 614D-E; Plato, *Republic*, p.481. Book X 619D.

⁵¹ Plato, *Republic*, p 113. Book VII 516a-b.

⁵² Plato, *Republic*, p.113. Book VII 516c.

⁵³ Plato, *Timaeus*, pp.83, 85. B 40A.

⁵⁴ Alan Leo, p.14.

306 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

and 1932 but only published in 1959. The play ends with a scene with a mermaid with two ‘fish fins’ who gave birth, in Almada’s words, ‘holding a small human being with two fish tails’.⁵⁵ Besides the resemblance of the fins to two human legs, this way of representing the mermaid might reflect Almada’s idea of dualism, which he considered as complementary and part of a whole, as already seen in his presentation of the masculine and feminine division of the elements.

The Air element is represented by a naked male figure with gold wings flying from left to right above clouds and looking up. Almada incorporated the natural capacity of a bird to fly in a man, following Plato’s definition of the ‘winged kind’, but mixing reality and imagination which can be related to the artistic characteristic that Leo associated with the air element.⁵⁶ Also, Almada wrote, ‘Air is thinking’, following Leo’s association of the air element with the intellect and mind, which is man’s vehicle for imagination.⁵⁷ Probably alluding to the intellectual characteristic of the air element, Almada arranged ten clouds under the man to resemble the Tetractys, a Pythagorean mathematical discovery that he also represented in the tapestry *O Número*. Almada studied that symbol, which he called the sacred quaternary, defining it as ‘the symmetry that four units of the Decade have among themselves’.⁵⁸ Having used this disposition only in the final painting, Almada might have done it purposely.

The Fire element is represented by a naked male figure, coloured in yellow and with red hair or what resembles a sunburst, holding the sun in his hands. He is standing on a partially depicted globe, probably the planet earth, with a camp fire at his feet on his left side (the viewer’s right) with a smoke cloud above it; around the figure there is a black shadow. The human figure holding the sun might be viewed as a man trying to grab the sun or a man carrying the sun – which was Almada’s intention cannot be stated. Considering that the sun is being carried by the figure, it resembles Helios, the god who drove the sun in his chariot around the world, fitting Plato’s definition of the fire element as ‘the heavenly kind of gods’.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ ‘trazendo ao colo um serzinho humano com duas caudas de peixe’, José de Almada Negreiros, *Deseja-se Mulher* (Lisboa: Verbo, 1959), pp.75, 76.

⁵⁶ Alan Leo, *Astrology for All* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), p.54.

⁵⁷ Alan Leo, *Astrology for All*, p.54.

⁵⁸ ‘simetria quem têm entre si quatro unidades da Década’, José de Almada Negreiros, *Ver*, p.207.

⁵⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, pp.83, 85. B 40A.

Considering Helios's representation by the German painter Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1590) the figure's corporal posture, naked and standing showing his strength, and also the sunburst around the head, are similar to Almada's painting. For Almada the fire element was a link between man and the sacred, and follows Plato's idea that the gods were the intermediate creators of mortal beings, being asked by God to imitate 'the power shown by me in my generating of you', because if they were to be created by God himself, 'they would be made equal unto god'.⁶⁰ Following this, Almada might have had the intention to draw the fire element figuring a god, the intermediary between man and God, the sacred, as well as resembling his description as Plato's generator of mortal beings. If this is the case then, by representing a Greek God, Almada reveals his interest and knowledge not only about Greek philosophy but also mythology.



Fig. 4. Detail of the elements and zodiac signs on the left side. Image: Telmo Domingues.

⁶⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, p.89. B 41C.

308 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)



Fig.5. Detail of the elements and zodiac signs on the right side. Image: Telmo Domingues.

Zodiac signs

The zodiac signs are drawn around the elements following the zodiacal order already used by Ptolemy, from Aries to Pisces.⁶¹ The figures are on a blue background filled with white stars resembling the constellations that gave their names to the zodiac signs, making a link with the celestial sky. Although it might be apparent that Almada was aware of the sequence of the zodiac signs, it is unknown what was Almada thinking when positioning the figures, whether they were carefully chosen or a random choice.

Almada represented the zodiac signs in two other paintings, an illustration for a book from 1938 and in the decoration of the rectory's façade of the University of Lisbon, from 1961, which show small

⁶¹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*. trans. F. E. Robbins. Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), p.47. Book I9, 23.

differences in the signs of Gemini, Capricorn and Aquarius.⁶² These variations show how the artist developed his drawings and his versatility and adaptability. Almada's sources for the zodiac signs could have been from the almanacs already referred to, but Almada recreated the symbols differently. He also distanced himself from the representation made for the 1940 exhibition through his modernist and provocative eye, using sometimes uncommon versions of the symbols.

In all three paintings the zodiacal order is the same but the starting point is different; the reasons for each choice are unknown. In the illustration, the first sign was Pisces, which is Almada's rising sign, considering the natal chart calculated by Pessoa, and it can be asked if the painter wanted to make the drawing more personal. Following this thought, it might be hypothesized that, in *Planisfério*, Almada's choice relates to his sun and rising signs, Aries and Pisces respectively, which flank the world map in the bottom.

The zodiac signs of Aries, Taurus, Cancer, Leo, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn and Pisces are represented by the animals and mythological figures associated with them. The sign of Taurus is the only one turning outward from the centre of the painting, which might be related to Leo's characterization of the sign as 'exceedingly obstinate'.⁶³ In the representation of the sign of Pisces, Almada added a fishhook in the middle of the line that links the two fishes, linking it to a human activity.

The zodiac signs represented as human figures might appear to be the most striking, as França noticed.⁶⁴ However, although Almada might have figured those in uncommon representations they are not unique. The sign of Gemini was represented by a couple instead of identical twins, probably linking it to the idea of a soulmate or twin soul. However, it was not innovative, since in the *Zodiac Man* from the fifteenth century manuscript *Très Riches Heurs du duc de Berry*, this zodiac sign was already painted as a couple. Considering that this was not the first choice of Almada, as seen in the second draft, he knew the identical twin representation, but chose to follow this version.

The sign of Aquarius was represented by a naked male figure, running with his head facing down and both arms up with bent elbows, with a vessel in each hand, pouring water. Likewise, the movement given to the figure might be uncommon but it was not the first time this sign was represented by a man in a hurry to pour water from two vessels. Another painting was

⁶² Joaquim Manso, *Primavera da Lenda* (Lisboa: Ática, 1938), p.27.

⁶³ Alan Leo, *Astrology for All*, p.16.

⁶⁴ José Augusto França, *Almada, O Português sem Mestre*, p.131.

310 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

in a illuminated manuscript dating from 1450-1460 that, although in a different style, gives the figure a similar movement.

For the sign of Virgo, the third zodiac sign represented by a human figure Almada also opted for an uncommon version of its representation. Instead of a woman in a modest and prudish representation, as depicted in his draft, wearing a dress and in a posture evolving the body, in the final painting the figure is completely different. Besides being nude, the woman is lying belly up with her arms stretched open to the sides. Although her legs are bent and close to each other, the upper part of the body shows some openness, which is an unusual characteristic for the sign of Virgo.

The sign of Libra is the only one being represented by an inanimate object, yet it is depicted full of movement. Once more, although this might be an uncommon representation for the sign of Libra, this was not the first time that this movement was used in the representation of this zodiac sign. Johann Bayer draw a similar representation in his work *Uranometria* from 1603.

That Almada's painting can be related to mappae mundi and celestial maps traditions shows how Almada was engaged and interested in ancient techniques, using them as the structure of his work that followed modernist lines within the contemporary context.⁶⁵ The four elements appeared to have been more thoughtful and elaborate, as Almada's studies, particularly of Plato, showed. However, some connections were found to Leo's writings, indicating that Almada was close to the astrological knowledge of this time. The emphasis on the four elements might reveal that Almada was not interested in astrology in its interpretative and perhaps predictive sense, but only in its practical relation to the natural cycles, and that his focus was on trying to understand its functions and relationship with the earth. *Planisfério* shows that Almada was interested in acknowledging the conception of the cosmos and the place of man in it.

Planisfério might be seen as Almada's vision of the cosmos where he expressed his idea of a connection between earth and heaven although differentiating the two planes. Yet, it also appears that he would have also considered it a three levelled composition – the world, the four elements and the zodiac signs. While the human figures represented in the world map are dressed as per their culture, the human figures of the four elements and the three zodiac signs are naked as they would be in different planes where they would not need terrestrial things like clothes. Almada wrote in 1917, 'trying to divinize man is the first symptom of amnesia. Man is the

⁶⁵ António Valdemar, José Manuel Santos, p.65.

contrast of the divine'.⁶⁶ And here that contrast is revealed by this separation between earthly and heavenly figures that could be considered closer to the divine. Although he did humanize the mermaid in the water element with two fins resembling two legs and added a hook between the two fishes in the sign of Pisces, he did not divinise the earthly figures, yet he did so in the elements, giving wings to the air element figure and putting the sun in the hands of the fire element figure. Plato's cave allegory can be also linked to this division of the entire composition, with the earth in the centre followed by the elements and then the celestial sky, coming from the shadowed earth to the illuminated heavens.

Also interesting to note is the relation between the three paintings in the newspaper hall, visible in Figure 1, which are *Planisfério*, *Mapa de Portugal* (Map of Portugal), a geographical representation of the country surrounded by the four seasons, and Hours' Cycle, a representation of the twenty-four hour cycle of the production of a newspaper, divided into day hours and night hours. The themes of all three paintings are related to time cycles and a particular place. Working as a set of time and space representations, each painting has its own scale: the Hours' Cycle represents the smallest period of time – the hour – in the most particular space, a newspaper building; the *Mapa de Portugal* shows the four seasons related to the country of Portugal; and *Planisfério* represents the twelve months of a year but also the twelve zodiac signs, related to celestial bodies that never cease their movement, around the world map, the most encompassing time and space scale.

Final thoughts

In 1939 Almada was already a recognized artist and his paintings were appreciated by their positive impact on the building's decoration. Nowadays Almada continues to be a recognized artist widely studied. Yet, the references to the astrological symbols were occasional, and even rarer their significance. Possible reasons for this, in 1939 as now, is the reliance on the paintings' importance in terms of their quality and creator, and not in the themes depicted. However, considering the paintings' size and visibility, as well as Almada's consistent intention given to everything he painted, it can be thought that they should have impacted the presence and development of astrology in Portugal. The silence around its significance might have been to not accord astrology much space – or perhaps Almada

⁶⁶ 'tentar divinizar o homem é o primeiro sintoma de amnesia. O homem é o contraste do divino', José de Almada Negreiros, *K4 O Quadrado Azul* (Lisboa: A Bela e o Monstro Edições, 2011), p.23.

312 An investigation into the astrological symbols present in two decorative paintings of José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970)

was not completely understood. Almada's work in the newspaper hall might show that Almada tried to share astrology with people, and perhaps the ancient knowledge he sought, through images that could easily reach more people, even the illiterate. Throughout Almada's texts some references to the relation between man's life and the stars were found but those ideas would need a separate investigation.

These paintings reveal that Almada assumed a relationship between earth and sky and had an awareness of astrology and its symbols, but, perhaps, he may have been attracted to it in order to understand the earth/sky connection and not so much to interpret astrological charts. It seems possible that Pessoa shared with Almada his knowledge of astrology. However, Almada's studies went deeper, pursuing the ancient knowledge of Greek philosophy and culture, particularly through Plato's ideas, but also through Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Homer.

Thus, Almada showed an intention to study astrology's foundations and not only what contemporary astrologers were writing. Few were able to understand the artist's thinking. Almada himself, when talking about his studies in geometry, stated that he made his way alone, hoping to find someone who could accompany him in his studies.⁶⁷ Considering the extensive work of Almada in the discipline of geometry, seeking its origins, it might be the case that the artist intended to do the same with astrology but at some point clearly focused on the pursuit of geometry. Time and space, which can be associated to astrology and geometry respectively, which are fundamental to an understanding of the cosmos, are consistently present in these paintings, but further in his life Almada deepened his interest more on space and thus, geometry. The paintings studied in this paper are testimony to Almada's thinking about the cosmos and humanity's relation with it, providing proof of the presence of astrology in the Portuguese society of the 1930s and 1940s, and their study is a contribution to the history of astrology in Portugal.

⁶⁷ António Valdemar, José Manuel Santos, p.65.