In 2008, an exhibition presenting Mário de Miranda’s caricatures of Paris was hosted by the French embassy in New Delhi. Members of the Indian government and from the international diplomatic milieu flocked to the event intended to celebrate such a long and popular career. Mário himself attended the opening ceremony. The exhibition was then taken on tour around India, encompassing other aspects of his work, from early sketches to artistic pieces, including a selection of caricatures from the different publications he collaborated with. The exhibition was then hosted by the Indian Institute of Cartoonists, in Bangalore, and in Goa, his homeland, it was on display at the state’s capital, Panjim, in June 2008. This set of exhibitions to commemorate his career also promoted the publication of an anthology of selected works - Mário de Miranda (2008) - an initiative that worked as a catalogue to the exhibition.

I first came across Mário de Miranda’s work when, on my way to the Central Library, I walked by his big exhibition in Panjim. I decided to follow the crowd attending the event and entered a big, noble building, which displayed, by the entrance and across the street, huge billboards of Mário’s caricatures flowing in the gentle wind. Inside, Mário’s drawings and caricatures were displayed on rows, with explanatory comments next to each set. Standing there, in front of his drawings, I was immediately seduced by the amazing personality behind the art works, so deeply perceptive of life and human nature, and

yet, revealing such an unscathed hope in the positive drives among human flaws, such an inherent kindness in the eye of the beholder. The passing away of Mário de Miranda in December 2011 changed the context of this essay beyond its academic focus. It is also a tribute to someone you would like to keep in this complex world a bit longer, to learn from and be inspired by.

Though based in India, Mário de Miranda was a globetrotter, curious and perceptive, choosing to see the best in a world whose darker shades he understood with such sensitivity. His caricatures in the set “A Tale of Two Cities”, comparing Bombay to London and Paris, were the subject of another article where I addressed his deconstruction of cultural differences between East and West. In that specific set of drawings, touristic expectations of the exotic are denounced as frozen projections that deny India its modernity. Simultaneously, the representation of Bombay’s chaos and crowds, in that comparative set, were a means to reclaim, under a festive, larger-than-life light, Bombay’s excess (of population, of traffic, of street business life) as the alternative equivalent to London’s dry self-restrain or Parisian Belle Vie (Paris is always represented as a place of leisure, full of cafés, restaurants, street music, book fairs and sexy, fashionable ladies). According to Mário, each of these three cities has its own atmosphere and lifestyles, and these are comparable, alternative versions of urban life, which is to say that he represents Bombay as one of the emblematic centres of the XX century, a Southern capital, on the same civilizational scale as London or Paris. The reason why I recall his comparative drawings on these three cities is that, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, they provide clear evidence of Mário de Miranda’s commitment to socio-political critique, beyond his famous, hilarious caricatures, rather lighter in meaning and aims. Between these two poles, critique and comic, his work contains multiple layers of meaning to be uncovered in each concrete case study. In other words, if many of Mário de Miranda’s caricatures aim at provoking genuine laughter and warm empathy (which is no small service by any account), there are other compositions that convey a serious, thought provoking message, and this oscillation, (together with the mastery to fit depth or lightness to the requirements of subject matter) is an important feature of his work. For the present study, as an example of his reflective, more committed mode, I will take his “Man on a bench in Central Park”:

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2 Passos, Joana (2011) “Nômade de olhar atento e traço certo: Mário de Miranda, a arte da caricatura e os desencontros entre o mundo indiano e o olhar ocidental” in Via Atlântica, nº 19, São Paulo: USP.
Accordingly, one can conclude from the example reproduced here that there is a serious dimension to Mário de Miranda’s work beyond his most visible and known facet which relates to his satirical works. Even so, in what concerns Mário de Miranda’s oeuvre, his comic cartoons imply deep perception, sensitivity and a clever attention to detail, features that provide enough ground to reject as false the general view that caricature is a secondary art form, anchored on the volatile nature of the circumstantial and the ephemeral. On the contrary, as Mário de Miranda’s caricatures show, there is a sense of ethics and a critical awareness that confer deeper layers of meaning to each work, without denying that the nature of caricature is its optimistic celebration of life and the depiction of chaos, human frailty and human flaws. But beyond Mário’s cosmopolitanism and his insightful perception of reality, another important aspect to consider in a general appreciation of his work is his undeniable passion for cultivating a dialogue with other arts, especially with architecture.
Sometimes, Mário de Miranda explores colour in an otherwise monochromatic work - just the black line on white paper - but this sober palette reveals his interest in other elements of drawing technique such as shape, perspective and geometry. Consequently, when Mário de Miranda interprets a landscape, the composition reveals the eye of an architect instead of the vision of a painter.

The two Goan landscapes reproduced in figures 2 and 3 testify to the importance of architecture for Mário de Miranda as aesthetic model to organize representation. These are not compositions where a building features in the landscape. These are landscapes organized around the centrality of a building. And these two drawings also reveal something else beyond the author’s aesthetics, namely, the author’s hybrid/fragmented representation of Goa. The apparent contradiction in terms in the last sentence is easily clarified by considering what is represented. Both of these religious buildings are in Goa, celebrating different types of worship. Thus, they materialize distinctive facets in the state’s multiple identity, fragmented across diversity. However, by evoking two different Goan heritages, the temple and the church,
Miranda points out that across tension and oppression, these two worlds did, in fact, survive together, and influenced each other, in spite of the political and religious barriers dividing the two communities. Yet again, such a long co-existence of communities fostered forms of hybridity that are no longer clearly identifiable. Whatever is unique to Goan identity is the product of this contradictory history, encompassing fusion and difference, hybridity and fragmentation. Accordingly, in spite of possible rivalries and tension that surely permeate Goan society, Mário de Miranda chose to represent this shared world under a peaceful, self-contained light, as in the two examples above, where two fragments, though isolated within a closed world, live in undisturbed peace. These drawings seem to suggest that the aesthetic achievement, which lies behind the construction of such buildings (moreover, intended for worship), entails other forms of integrated social wholeness as the co-existence of different aesthetic traditions demonstrates.

The set of reflections offered above are intended as references to understand Mário’s work in all its complexity and aesthetic quality. However, “Mário” became popular, first and foremost, for his happy, joyful caricatures.
Consequently, it is time to address laughter and irony as constitutive key elements in his work, epitomized by his hilarious crowds, united in benign chaos, as in “Night of the Stars” (see figure 4).

Mário de Miranda published his caricatures in wide circulation periodicals, such as the Illustrated Weekly of India or the magazines Femina and Filmfare. These two last publications implied a continuous dialogue between Mário’s work, fashion and Bollywood cinema. As a creator of cartoons for a wide public, Mario would have to combine his achieved drawing technique with other specific skills that constitute core challenges for any caricaturist: 1) the ability to communicate effectively, finding horizontal affinities among a diverse public; 2) the capacity to manipulate humour and compose recognizable types 3) the wisdom to provide both meaningful and interesting comment on social types, events or politics, 4) and the art of getting immediate impact (since a caricature has to hold a diverse and wide audience at first glance; otherwise, it is a “flop”). In spite of all these components, caricature has not been considered high art because it is in fact a product of popular (press) consumption, without the aura of exclusive, original fine arts. However, the popular connotation associated to caricature, as a product for the masses, has not been a problem for caricaturists, as the impulse behind satire is vernacular laughter, celebrating the freedom to laugh at human flaws in character, our very own human decay, deviance and failure. In caricature, our ungodly (and so viscerally) human limits are visually translated as forms of physical deformity, grotesque features and celebrated ugliness. This is to say that the aesthetic model of caricature represents the opposite set of references by comparison to classical culture or idealized, romantic aesthetics. Caricatures work with grotesque distortion and exaggerated features, and yet, the final effect has to be attractive and provoke a positive effect out of improbable elements. Thus, like fine arts, caricature has its own code, context and rules and these have been working perfectly since the XVII century[3]. I would rather argue it is time for a change on the part of the critics regarding

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3 It is known that caricature was current in the XVII, but it circulated “privately”, among a closed milieu of artists and friends. It was used to make fun of some obnoxious authority figure, aristocrat or archbishop, on whom these bohemian circles depended. In the XVIII, caricatures found a much wider circulation with the expansion of the press and the publication of cheap leaflets or pamphlets. It is at this stage, following popular press and political struggle that the caricature becomes vernacular, a popular product, easily and democratically available as lithographs were invented in 1798. In France, there is an entry for caricature in the Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, published in 1751.
the status accorded to caricature as a secondary sub-genre of the visual arts. As an example of both Mário’s irresistible talent and the charms of the art of caricature, allow me to introduce you, in all her glory and elaborate excess, to “Miss Rajni Nimbupani”, Bollywood star, one of Mário’s most successful creations (figure 4). No one smiles as the Bollywood star does, flashing her lovely, sumptuous looks to an adoring crowd. Totally indifferent to the chaos she brings about, she just smiles, beaming among traffic jams, feminine envy, masculine “wishful thinking” and high society’s acclaim. Even her pet can bite a paparazzo with impunity. This belle, covered with her jewels and traditional attire, embodies India’s modernity and its Bollywood successful film industry. Seeing her, Indian public will recognize contemporary India, its “homemade” leisure, its own, private star system. This feeling of recognition and identification promotes a cosy Indian identity, underlining the democratic, vernacular appeal of Indian cinema, across caste and class. Besides, another reason to make the audience feel drawn to the caricature is, as I said above, her charming, though exaggerated, aesthetics. Even if far from slim and sober, and obviously artificial in her trained sympathy, would you deny Mário’s star is simply wonderful? True, she looks very different from a classical, ideal beauty, but that is precisely why caricature is so fleshy, so alive, so attuned to the spirit of a place and an epoch[4]. Indeed, Miss Nimbupani will provoke all sorts of reaction, except boredom and indifference. Still, if you can take your eyes away from the star and pause to consider the background, other elements are worth reflecting upon. Modern caricature works with stylized features. Until the 19th century caricatures would be more naturalistic, profusely decorated with shades and details. Modernism brought the art of caricature simplicity and geometry. Do not mistake the crowds in Mário’s caricatures for a heavy, detailed, drawing technique. If you look at the crowd closely you will notice that most characters are totally stylized geometrical figures, a receding sequence of balloons with eyes. However, among this general, anonymous, clownish background, there will always be surprising characters, and that is an extra treat in his drawings: the challenge to the public to have a second look, taking one’s time to explore amusing details in each composition.

Another relevant feature of Mário de Miranda’s work is the continuous and intense dialogue with other art forms like literature, theatre and music (beyond the passion for architecture discussed above). I will next explore these inter/arts dialogues within the frame of his caricatures representing Goa, as I want to focus on the cultural and social features the artist selected to represent his homeland to Goans themselves, and to the world.

The duality of temple and church exemplified by figures 2 and 3 above is revisited in other drawings concerning Goa, as if each time Mário made a drawing of one of Goa’s communities, he had to draw something relating to the others, always representing religious, caste and class polarities internal to Goa as an essential part of its nature. Nevertheless, if one is to believe Mário’s representation, these polarities seem functional, integrated parts of a complex, multiple whole, made of Catholic and Hindu elements (with the probable presence of Muslim figures among the crowds) together with a strong touristic presence and a particular, appropriated brand of western cultural influence. Consequently, Mário de Miranda’s drawings about

(Figure 5: M. Miranda, 2008: 146)
Goa depict several separate fragments that co-exist inside the state, keeping within the global frame of its oeuvre alternative segments, each of them representing a different identity component. Such fragments can be invoked by characters from Maratha history, like the emperor Shivaji Bhosale (1630-1680), or Hindu Gods, Portuguese historical figures, peasant Kunbi weddings, Catholic processions (happy and noisy), memories of the inquisition (bleak and sad) and “trance tourists”. Equally representative of Goan culture are his caricatures of Carnival celebrations and nocturnal street scenes, from romantic glances exchanged between balcony belle and street passer by to serenades and informal gatherings after a days’ work.

Together with these local elements, Mário makes continuous references to Goa’s connection to western cultural references and that is the reason why he places Cassio, Desdemona and Othello in a café in Goa, drawing his own interpretation of Shakespeare’s play. Likewise, he imagines Camões in a “Taberna” (a liquor shop) in a narrow alley of Old Goa. All of these historical and literary figures are for Mário de Miranda constitutive elements of Goa’s
(appropriated, made local) heritage, and only this view would explain the attitude of drawing them in Goan scenarios. To conclude this evocation of the way Mário de Miranda represented Goan multiple heritages I will recall his homage to two important art forms specifically originating from Goa: the Tyatr (figure 6), a sequence of small three acts with musical interludes, usually performed in Bombay among the Goan community of emigrants (by male, amateur actors), and the “Mando” (figure 7), Goan traditional music, sang and danced by Catholics at weddings and other festive occasions.

From Goa, to India and the world, Mário shared with us, through visual art, his rich imagination and clever comments as well as his festive (though aware and concerned) celebration of life. One can only be thankful for this generous and meaningful legacy.

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