

FISH FIN OF UACARIGUAÇU (BRAZIL, 1786)

In this month of celebration of the 200 years of his death, the MUHNAC pays tribute to Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira (Baía, April 27, 1756 - Lisbon, April 23, 1815), one of the most remarkable Portuguese-Brazilian naturalists of the late 18th century. He distinguished himself in command of a long scientific exploration by the captaincies of Grão-Pará, Rio Negro, Mato Grosso and Cuiabá, in Brazil, between 1783 and 1792.

At the end of 18th century, Portuguese Crown sponsored a wide and unprecedented scientific endeavor: 'philosophical' exploration to overseas colonies (among others, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde) to study the many local natural resources, hitherto virtually unexplored. Formed at the University of Coimbra, Rodrigues Ferreira was appointed in 1778 to head the scientific committee in charge of exploring the Amazon region.

Under his command, the expedition left Lisbon in September 1783. During nine years, he traveled the Amazon basin, reaching Mato Grosso. The collecting, study and description led to the delivery of an unusual amount of scientific material (memories, drawings, and zoological, botanical and mineralogical specimens) to the Royal Museum and Botanical Garden of Ajuda (Lisbon).



In mid-1793, Rodrigues Ferreira returned to Lisbon and devoted himself to the metropolitan administration. He died in April 1815, without studying most of the species and samples collected in Brazil.

MUHNAC preserves, since 1858, part of the rich collection collected during this journey: circa 600 pages of manuscripts on fauna, flora and inhabitants of the Amazon region; a herbarium of 1260 botanical specimens and a collection of about 215 drawings of extraordinary quality, representing animals, plants, people, medicinal herbs, trees, fruits, seeds, ethnographic artifacts, landscapes, caves, villages, clothing and fortifications of these Brazilian areas.

Of the specimens collected, MUHNAC only preserves nowadays the remains of a uacariguaçu fish, sent by Rodrigues Ferreira on April 20, 1786 to the Royal Museum. This sample had been offered by Captain of Pará, João Pereira Caldas (1724-1794), to the Portuguese naturalist. This fin was recovered in the remains of the fire of March 1978 that destroyed the zoological and anthropological collections of the Museum.