

A Part of São Paulo's History: The Story Behind Casa da Dona Yayá

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Disclaimer: 3rd year Political Science teacher, João Alexandre Peschanski developed a Wikipedia project in collaboration with Sao Paulo's Historic Patrimony Department. Each 3rd year journalism student adopted a historical propriety and wrote an entry in Wikipedia with the story, architectural details and historical value of each assigned place. The story you will read below was written by Journalism junior, Ana Carolina, who adopted "Casa da Dona Yayá", a house in Bixiga, full of history and a bit of tragedy. To see Ana's complete entry in Wikipedia, [click here](#).

Credit: Ana Carolina Siedschlag, uploaded in Wikipedia Commons

How would you feel if someone told you that you're not capable of living among other people anymore and tried to lock you away from society for 40 years? Nope, that's not a story taken from a Disney movie or an episode of Black Mirror. That's actually what happened with Sebastiana de Mello Freire, a rich orphan that lived in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, in the early years of the twentieth century.

Sebastiana, better known as Dona Yayá, was born on 1887 in Mogi das Cruzes, a city near the state capital. She was the daughter of a really, really rich politician of the region, who basically owned the whole city, plus some real state proprieties in the center of São Paulo.

Dona Yayá had a happy childhood. She loved horses and with very few age learned how to photograph. Her favourite site in her region was one of her father's farm, where she would spend hours chasing after her dogs.

But, unfortunately, Dona Yayá's life had a lot of tragic turnpoints that changed her history, and São Paulo's too, forever.

Before even completing 10 years old, she lost two of her three siblings. In least than 3 years, her two sisters died at 6 and 13 years old. With the tragic events, her family decided to move to the capital, to a mansion in the very new and rich center.

For two years, they tried to reconstruct their lives without the two girls. But, in the year of 1900, Sebastiana lost, in a terribly short period of two days, both of her parents, leaving her alone with her older brother Manuel to administrate their fortune.

Well, if you think that Sebastiana's life was already totally miserable, fate didn't think the same. In 1905, her brother committed suicide during a trip to Buenos Aires, after showing lots of sintoms of we know today as depression.

After that, Sebastiana, who was highly educated in the best schools of São Paulo, started to participate in the city's social life, donating major amounts of money for the construction of the Sé Cathedral and other charity projects.

She was the heir of 70 real state proprieties in São Paulo, plus literally half of her hometown of Mogi das Cruzes. It's safe to say that she was a real celebrity in town. Even with all the tragic events in her life, Sebastiana was known for her extreme kindness and good humor. She managed to build her own photography studio and spent hours taking pictures of statues and constructions.

She was a kind of modern woman for the time, too. She decided she didn't want to marry and started to travel part of the world with her friends in the early 1910's.

In 1918, after a short trip to Europe, Sebastiana caught the Spanish Flu. After that, her life had a severe change.

She never treated the disease really well. After having such a sad and tragic life, the flu got together with her fate to bring a mental illness that was never really understood.

After trying to kill herself in 1919, her tutors decided it would be better if she kept distance from the society of the time. So they bought a house in a rural area of the town, that today is actually the center of the city, and transformed it into a private sanatory.

From 1921 to 1961, Dona Yayá lived locked behind the doors of this mansion, obviously getting worse with time. Her meals were delivered through small doors and the windows could only be opened from the outside.

She was treated like a crazy, dangerous woman for 40 years. Meanwhile, her fortune was administrated by a man, a family's friend, José de Souza.

After she passed away, at the age of 74, all of her fortune became a property of the state, having her no heirs. In 1968, the University of São Paulo received all of it, which was the largest amount of money ever received by the institution.



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