Santos-Dumont, Alberto (1873-1932)

by Mark Staebler

Top: A portrait of Alberto Santos-Dumont.
Center: A powered dirigible piloted by Santos near the Eiffel Tower in Paris.
Above: Santos flying aircraft number 14-bis in 1906.
Portrait of Santos courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Is a gay Brazilian--rather than the American brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright--actually most responsible for modern aviation? Such a question leads us on a fascinating trip from South America through belle époque Paris, around the Eiffel Tower, and into what we know of Alberto Santos-Dumont, the Brazilian dandy who is regarded by many as the father of modern aviation and the inventor of the airplane. While his sexuality is a matter of controversy, suspicions of his homosexuality may have contributed to a neglect of his achievement.

Early Life and Aviation Pioneer

Born in Cabangu, Minas Gerais, Brazil on July 20, 1873, Santos was the son of a coffee tycoon father and an upper-class mother. His father's interest in high-tech machinery for use in the coffee trade led to Santos's early fascination with trains and steam-powered locomotives, which he learned to drive before the age of 10.

The novels of French science-fiction writer Jules Verne were among the boy's favorite childhood reading and informed his mechanical interests. Indeed, Santos's visionary genius, delicate nature, and pacific temperament allied to make his life seem a fantastic narrative written by the French master.

As a teenager in 1888 Santos made his first aerial ascent in a tethered balloon at the São Paolo state fair. Two years later he accompanied his father on a trip to Paris, where he saw for the first time the newly-invented gasoline engine, an object he regarded with fascination. In 1892 Santos's father, disabled by an industrial accident, gave Alberto his own fortune, the independent means that the young inventor used to finance his research. He embarked for Paris to study mechanical arts and engineering. His father allegedly hoped that the experience of Paris would "make a man out of him."

Since the price of a flight-capable balloon was prohibitive, Santos-Dumont bought himself an automobile (he is credited with bringing the first gasoline-powered automobile to Brazil on one of his trips home). When he learned that the Parisian balloon-maker Lachambre had reduced the cost of his balloons, Santos purchased one and made his own first ascent, accompanied by Lachambre, on March 23, 1898.

His twin interests in balloon flight and gasoline-powered engines led Santos-Dumont to construct his first two dirigibles (or "directables," after the French verb *diriger*, to direct or steer). His first flight, in the craft he called No. 1, ended with his barely escaping injury when the vehicle struck tree branches. For his No. 2 and No. 3 balloons, Santos--despite the obvious risk of fire from flammable gas--suspended a rigid frame from the gas bag, into which he put a gasoline engine. Utilizing this design in his dirigible No. 6, Santos achieved the first powered air flight known to history--at least in Europe.

Santos's success made him an overnight sensation in Paris, leading petroleum baron Henry Deutsch de la Muerthe to offer a 100,000-franc prize to whoever could leave Parc Saint Cloud under his power, circumnavigate the Eiffel Tower, and return in less than 30 minutes. French Aero Club members constituted the panel of judges and controlled the award.

After several tries, Santos-Dumont made the prescribed trip on October 19, 1901 in his dirigible No. 6 and received the Deutsch Prize. Photographs show the cigar-shaped craft above the 100-story tower, with Parisian throngs below waving their hats in admiration of *le petit Santos* (who stood only 5'1" and weighed only 100 pounds). In a characteristic act of generosity, Santos gave the 100,000-franc prize to his workers and the Parisian poor.

Superstitious about the number eight, Santos skipped that digit in his sequence of craft as he improved and enlarged his earlier designs. No. 9 formed an integral, aerial part in the Bastille Day Parade of 1903. No. 10 was capable of holding 12 passengers; No. 11 was a two-motor design; No. 12 was a two-rotor helicopter.

Of the two aircraft with the number 14, it was the 14B (or 14-bis, as it is known by its French name) that became Santos's first heavier-than-aircraft to actually fly. On October 23, 1906, he won the Ernest Archdeacon Cup for a flight of at least 25 meters by flying about 50 meters under his own power. Several weeks later, on November 12, he flew a distance of 220 meters, winning the Aero Club's 1500-franc prize for a self-propelled flight over 220 meters.

Santos's airplanes took off and landed under their own power, while many of the Wright brothers' flights (though not the famous one of December 17, 1903) at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina had to be launched into the air by a catapult. Thus, many aviation historians credit Santos as the inventor of the airplane.

Santos again commanded public acclaim with his *Demoiselle* ("Little Lady") model monoplanes, Nos. 19, 20, 21, and 22, in which he flew to visit friends' distant chateaux and set records for speed and distance.

Unlike other aviation pioneers, including the Wright brothers, who conducted their research in secrecy (and even the December 17, 1903 flight was only revealed to the public two years after it had occurred) and who patented each step, Santos distributed the blueprints and plans of his aircrafts to the public and allowed them to be published in *Popular Mechanics*, thus exhibiting the same generosity seen when he distributed the proceeds of the Deutsch prize to others.

Regarding them as a contribution to the cause of peace, Santos never patented his inventions. He hoped that air travel would help unite mankind and usher in a period of unprecedented prosperity. The open-source technology that Santos pioneered formed the template for over 200 similar aircraft subsequently patented with minor alterations, including that of German aviation pioneer Anthony Fokker.

On September 18, 1909, Santos made his last flight in his small, simple, and light *Demoiselle*, which had become the first aircraft in history to be copied and serially produced. He bid farewell with outstretched arms to his admiring Parisian public.

Aesthete and Dandy

Whereas the Wright brothers apparently lived conventional Midwestern lives (though like Santos they never married), the Brazilian pioneer lived the life of a fin-de-siècle Parisian aesthete, always dressed to the nines and impeccably mannered, as if in open imitation of J.-K. Huysmans' notorious homosexual hero des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. His mode of dress and flamboyant demeanor constituted the visible, acknowledged signs of the dandy and the decadent.

Santos's flair for offhand, casually outrageous aerial stunts--such as mooring his airship outside his downtown Paris apartment, or hosting an "Aerial Dinner Party" where the guests all sat on stools twelve feet high, drinking absinthe--made him the toast of Parisian society and a beloved hero of the people.

In keeping with the aviator's practical needs as well as his habitually elegant clothing (always including a starched high collar and straw boater), jeweler Louis Cartier designed for him a watch to be worn on his wrist, hitherto an ornament for ladies only. This original wristwatch was given to Santos-Dumont in 1904; to this day the firm of Cartier still carries a line of watches called Santos-Dumont.

Retirement and Death

By 1910, however, Santos was already suffering from periodic depressions and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Although he was not yet 40, he retired from active aviation and design.

Santos retreated first to a provincial French village and then to his native Brazil, where he built a small chalet on a hillside. The house featured such then-exotic novelties as a speaking tube and a heated shower with running water.

Santos's return to Brazil was intended to be a triumphant occasion; a dozen members of the Brazilian scientific community boarded a seaplane in order to welcome his ship. Unfortunately, the plane crashed, killing all aboard. This tragedy, as well as the use of airplanes in World War I and in the Brazilian Constitutional Rebellion, deepened Santos-Dumont's depression.

On July 23, 1932, Santos hanged himself in a hotel room in the city of Guarujá in São Paulo.

Santos's Sexuality

In Brazil and in France, Santos is celebrated as a national hero on a level with Thomas Edison or Benjamin Franklin in the United States. Yet only now is the Anglo-American scientific world coming to recognize his unique and lasting achievements.

While some of this disregard springs from nationalistic motives, part of this scholarly neglect may also be due to the reluctance of the Anglo-American scientific establishment to acknowledge the achievement of a man who in all likelihood was a homosexual. The tendency has been for Brazilians to deny Santos's homosexuality while celebrating his accomplishments and for English and American historians to admit his homosexuality while denying the singularity of his achievements.

It is true that Santos's sexuality is not absolutely certain--and perhaps can never be in the absence of more concrete documentation. Two recent scholarly biographies agree on the importance of Santos's scientific contributions but differ on the question of his sexuality. Paul Hoffman in *Wings of Madness* (2003) insists that Santos was indeed gay, while Henrique Lins de Barros in *Santos-Dumont E a Invenção Do Vôo* (2003) asserts that he was "asexual." (Tellingly, Lins de Barros's work reveals a homophobic bias, as when he writes that Santos "didn't suffer from homosexuality . . . he suffered from multiple sclerosis." Here the disease metaphor exposes Lins de Barros' own prejudice more than it tells us about the aviator.) The PBS television segment of NOVA, entitled after Hoffman's book, first aired on November 7, 2006, presents both authors and their perspectives.

An important context for considering Santos's sexuality is that of Decadence, Dandyism, and the example of Oscar Wilde. The Irish writer's trial, persecution, and exile ushered in a period of terror for homosexuals that can scarcely be understood today. The terror affected even men of such power as arms tycoon Friedrich Alfred Krupp, who committed suicide in 1902 when his homosexuality was exposed in newspapers.

Given this context, it is not surprising that little documentation of Santos's romantic and sexual interests survive. After the Wilde persecution, the inventor burned all of his diaries, letters, and papers, except for volumes specifically intended for publication.

Some historians attempt to "defend" Santos from allegations of homosexuality by noting that he "enjoyed the company of women," and that he felt especially close to the Cuban Aida D'Acosta, whom he allowed to pilot one of his inventions in a solo flight around Paris in 1903. However, enjoying the company of women says little about a man's sexual interests; after all, Wilde, the most famous homosexual of the era, was married and the father of two children. Moreover, D'Acosta herself laughed at the idea of romantic involvement with Santos, declaring, "I simply wanted to be able to fly an aircraft all alone!"

When Brazilian social scientist and gay liberation pioneer Luiz Mott made a case for Santos-Dumont's homosexuality in the early 1990s, he faced death threats from some of his countrymen, who wished to see their hero remain "unblemished." Interestingly, however, the commemorative website maintained by the Brazilian Air Force now acknowledges that Santos may well have been gay: it reprints an article by Norma Couri that discusses just that probability.

Pointing out that he was known to be close friends with the then-famous gay cartoonist SEM (Georges Goursat), Couri quotes Santos's writing the cartoonist to say, "you have captured me." She reports that when openly gay writer Jean Lorrain saw the two together, he remarked to the cartoonist, "Ah, here you are with your little bird." She also argues that "Santos' homosexuality is expressed in his suicide note[:] 'I have loved men and women; I'm both male and female, in my heart as well as mind; for better or worse, I couldn't ever separate such complementary, integral categories.'"

Novelist Patricia Nell Warren includes Santos-Dumont in her 2006 study of gay athletes, *The Lavender Locker Room*. Relying on biographers Peter Wykeham and Hoffman, Warren offers no new evidence of Santos's sexuality, but she places his achievements in a perspective quite independent of the controversy regarding the Wright brothers and who invented the airplane: "After all," she concludes, "Santos-Dumont was the man who first proved in 1909 that controlled flight was even possible; his innovations on balloon No. 1--propeller, tail rudder, etc.--became standard equipment on later aircraft, including the Wright planes."

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About the Author

Mark Staebler helped organize the first gay student group in the 300-plus year history of Harvard College in 1971. He holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University and has published a verse translation of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, over 500 reviews and essays on music, a study of gay Puerto Rican poet Manuel Ramos Otero, and feature articles in *TWN*, South Florida's longest-running gay newsweekly.