

Cristo Redentor / Christ the Redeemer

For nearly a century, the statue has been a symbol of Rio de Janeiro. In February 1922, architect Heitor da Silva Costa won the competition to design an enormous statue of Jesus on a high mountain peak. It was inaugurated in 1931. The statue is 30m high with a span of 28m and is a symbol of the famous city.



Paulo Vidal, superintendent of the “Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional” (Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage) said “Civil engineering in Brazil has always been at the forefront of the world, especially in reinforced concrete construction”. He says that although the statue looks like a sculpture, it’s actually a concrete building covered in soapstone tablets.



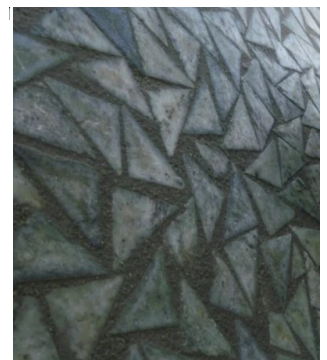
The initial idea for the construction was an attempt to restore a godly world, following the unholy destruction of WWI, by installing a figure of Jesus Christ to watch over Rio, visible from anywhere in the city. Building such a colossal structure on a high mountain was a difficult job. “The biggest challenge was to design a statue that would withstand the weather” says Vidal, who says that the peak of Corcovado is exposed to very aggressive atmospheric conditions.

Da Silva Costa and his team covered the statue’s concrete core in steatite (PT: esteatite), or soapstone (PT: pedra-sabão), which is an insulator, and was traditionally used for cooking pots in the state of Minas Gerais. It’s tough, too, because after nearly 100 years, the stone is still in good condition.

The construction team decided on a mosaic effect – invisible from far away, but adding detail for those who see it up close. Soapstone was taken from a quarry in Minas Gerais, chosen for its calm, gray-green hue. The stone was cut into small pieces, about 4cm long and 0.5cm thick, and attached to the cement core. According to Márcia Braga, a restoration expert, there are about 6 million soapstone tiles on the statue.

Work began in 1926, funded mainly by the church, and on October 12, 1931, statue was inaugurated. Today, it’s part of the UNESCO World Heritage site called “Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea” established in 2012. It’s the largest Art Deco statue in the world.

To visit the statue you must take a small train to the peak, or walk up. There are about 2 million visitors every year, so it’s very important to keep the statue safe. It’s not an easy task. Conservation is a major challenge because the statue is exposed to very aggressive atmospheric conditions – the sun, which causes the mantle and structure to expand and shrink every day, and the wind that hits the statue carrying salt and sand, causing constant abrasion.



Also, Rio de Janeiro is a city of storms, and this high peak attracts lightning strikes like bees to a honeypot. Lightning rods were originally built into the statue’s head, and in 2021, the number of rods

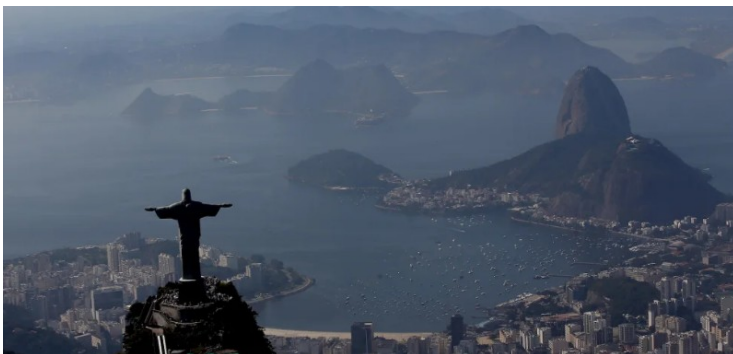
was quadrupled and the earthing system was expanded. The statue has five large, covered holes for maintenance engineers to go inside – one on top of its head, two on the shoulders and two on the elbows. There are 14 smaller holes which, when open, help with air circulation. Márcia Braga says “inside the statue, you feel as if you were totally protected from the weather and environment. There is silence. It is a very strong structure, and as you climb to the head, the spaces to pass through get very narrow. When you finally get out on the top of the head, it is a wonderful sensation of freedom”.

In a 2011 paper about the restoration project, she said that her team found spores from the Atlantic rainforest on the statue. The spores were removed using water jets at 70°C. The grout (PT: rejunte/argamassa) was also replaced. The original quarry has no more soapstone and the colour is increasingly difficult to find, so when pieces of soapstone need replacing, conservators carefully look at stone from other quarries in Minas Gerais to try and match the original colour as best as possible. Such efforts are worth it, says Vidal. “Christ the Redeemer is an iconic image that publicizes the city and the country to the world,” he says, “attracting tourism to the city”.

For “cariocas” (the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro), the statue has become a family member. Tom Jobin wrote about its “open arms over Guanabara” in his song “Samba do Avião”. Another song was called “Corcovado”. In it, he wrote “da janela, ve-se o Corcovado, O Redentor, que lindo” which means “from the window you can see Corcovado, the Redeemer, how beautiful.”

Vidal says “for me, as a carioca, architect and urban planner, Christ the Redeemer is a landmark of territorial identification. If I see Christ the Redeemer, then I know where I am, and that I am at home. The statue is loved by the population. It welcomes and embraces residents and visitors. Rio de Janeiro is a place where great wealth and poverty live side by side, but the sculpture unites them. You can see it from rich and poor neighborhoods. Because of Corcovado, Rio is a city with many visual elements that help a visitor not to get lost in it”.

The statue is one of the seven modern wonders of the world and is Rio’s most visited attraction. Tourists think that it’s amazing. Some people are very sensitive and they cry. For some, it’s a dream come true to be close to the statue. It complements all the beauty of the beaches, the Sugarloaf Mountain, the carnival, the samba dancers, and the entire carioca way of life.



Inside the statue: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kW3_SWMMC_4

Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/christ-redeemer-rio-de-janeiro-brazil-history/index.html>