

NOVA REVEALS THE HEROIC AND TRAGIC STORY OF A VISIONARY WHO CONQUERED THE SKIES BEFORE KITTY HAWK

NOVA PRESENTS
WINGS OF MADNESS

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2006 AT 8PM ET/PT ON PBS

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Boston, MA — In the early 1900s, the most acclaimed celebrity in Europe, and arguably the world, was a fashionable, frail, Brazilian-born aviator named Alberto Santos-Dumont. The first to fly an airplane in Europe, Santos-Dumont also built and flew the first practical dirigibles, or powered balloons. At a time when most balloons were at the mercy of the wind and many still thought the airplane an impossibility, Santos-Dumont's bold exploits sparked a sensation. He was the spiritual father of aviation, and at the same time, a flying P.T. Barnum, intrepidly demonstrating his incredible flying machines in Paris, London, New York, and St. Louis. NOVA brings to life the little-known story of one of the world's great aviation pioneers in *Wings of Madness*, premiering Tuesday, November 7, 2006 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS (check local listings).

But his burst of glory was short-lived. When the Wright Brothers finally unveiled their closely guarded flying machine in France in 1908, Wilbur's piloting skills dazzled the public and instantly eclipsed Santos-Dumont's fame. Over the next three decades, Santos-Dumont slipped gradually into illness and despair until he finally committed suicide, tormented by the knowledge that the airplane, which he believed to be his invention, had become a lethal weapon of war.

Based on the acclaimed biography by Paul Hoffman, *Wings of Madness* tells the colorful and tragic life of this neglected pioneer, a brilliant technical improviser who cut an unforgettable figure of high fashion in turn-of-the-century Paris. Always impeccably tailored, Santos-Dumont delighted in steering his airship down the boulevards and dropping in at cafés or the garden parties of his wealthy friends, while suffering numerous scrapes among the rooftops of Paris. His friend Louis Cartier, the Parisian jeweler, created the first wristwatch specifically so that he could keep track of time while maneuvering his airship.

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In the 1890s, Santos-Dumont inherited a fortune from his Brazilian coffee plantation-owning family and threw himself obsessively into solving the challenge of flight. With characteristic ingenuity, he figured out how to combine gasoline engines with hydrogen balloons and avoid the explosions that everyone thought inevitable. A landmark, prize-winning flight around the Eiffel Tower in 1901 turned him into an instant celebrity; the press and public affirmed that mankind had indeed conquered the skies.

Ever the innovator, Santos-Dumont continued to push the envelope. His dirigibles were driven by propeller and steered with a rudder, anticipating airplanes yet to come. He introduced piano wire in place of ropes and heavy cords, an innovation that would be used in aeronautics for the next 40 years. Tiring of balloons, Santos-Dumont built the *14-bis*, an ungainly tail-first flying machine that nevertheless made the first powered airplane flight in Europe in 1906. At that time, the Wright Brothers' secret early flights were widely disbelieved, so Santos-Dumont and his adoring public were convinced he was the first to fly. When Wilbur made his triumphant European tour in 1908, Santos-Dumont had to face the terrible realization that, after all, the Wrights were the true pioneers. But just before his long descent into illness began, he designed an exquisite new airplane out of bamboo: the *Demoiselle*, or Damsel fly. One of the classic aircraft of the pioneering era, it was the true forerunner of today's ultralight planes.

NOVA's ***Wings of Madness*** combines captivating hands-on technology with a human story of triumph and tragedy. The program includes rare movie archive of Santos-Dumont's original flights as well as new footage of the recent building of a *14-bis* replica in Brazil. The hair-raising test flights of this modern replica vividly evoke the ingenuity and extreme courage of Alberto Santos-Dumont as he pursued his lifelong dream of flight.

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