

Temporary exhibition
Level 0

Brazilian Modernism

In the Fundação Edson Queiroz Collection

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Brazilian Modernism in the Fundação Edson Queiroz Collection

Throughout the last 30 years, the Fundação Edson Queiroz, based in the city of Fortaleza, in the Northeast region of Brazil, has created one of the most substantial collections of Brazilian art in the country. From religious images dating back to the colonial period to contemporary art, the collection assembled by Chancellor Aírton Queiroz covers almost 400 years of artistic production, with significant works from all periods. The exhibition *Brazilian Modernism in the Fundação Edson Queiroz Collection* presents a selection of this wonderful heritage, highlighting a set of works produced between the 1920s and 1960s, both by Brazilian artists and by foreigners residing in the country.



Lasar Segall
Duas Amigas, 1917-1918
Oil on canvas

Reinventing painting

In Brazil, artists from the first Modernist generation shared several common characteristics: the fact that they undertook their training abroad, their (somewhat timid) quest for formal renewal and their adoption of a figurative language. With the exception of Lasar Segall, who was already a mature artist when he arrived in the country in 1924, all the other artists conducted further study in Europe or the United States, in the specific case of Anita Malfatti.

Completed during his German period, the *Duas Amigas* [*Two Friends*] by Lasar Segall, which opens

the exhibition, displays key formal features for understanding an important part of the production of the early days of Modernism in Brazil. On the one hand, Segall uses unrealistic colours, imbued with symbolic value; on the other, he employs Cubist principles, simplifying figures by means of geometric planes.

The use of colour filled with psychological meaning is also a recurring resource in the portraits produced by Flávio de Carvalho. In *Retrato de Berta Singerman* [*Portrait of Berta Singerman*], the painting is constructed by means of vigorous brush strokes which blur the outlines of the subject, confusing figure and background. The viewer's gaze is drawn to the dark circles under the subject's eyes, her large red mouth practically in the centre of the painting, and her thin, green fingers in the foreground. Her expressive hands and heavy make-up are typical of the Argentine actor's on-stage persona, as can be seen in photographs from the era.

While Flávio de Carvalho and Anita Malfatti (in the 1910s) represent an expressionist strand in Brazilian Modernism, Antônio Gomide, Ismael Nery, Vicente do Rego Monteiro and Victor Brecheret display an affiliation with Cubism. Although they assimilated Cubist principles, when this generation of artists came into contact with the movement in the 1920s, it had already lost the radicalism which characterised it in the early years. Thus, a moderate stylisation of the figures can be observed in their works, more akin to *Art Deco*. With regard to the painters, there is a clear preference for pastel colours and a commitment to planning the pictorial space, features borrowed from Cubism. The lines of the painting *O Ceramista* [*The Potter*] by Gomide and of the sculptures *Virgem Oriental* [*Oriental Virgin*] and *Ritmo* [*Rhythm*] by Brecheret trace elegant, sinuous silhouettes. By contrast, Rego Monteiro's inflexible strokes in *Crucificação* [*Crucifixion*], combined with the frontality of the figures and the symmetry of the composition, accentuate the austerity of the religious scene.

Unlike his colleagues, the formal experiments carried out by Ismael Nery were not an end in themselves: they were instead a way to employ art to give substance to Essentialism, a mystical-philosophical system which he had conceived, and which consisted of a quest for a lost ancestral oneness. His goal was to unify the fundamental masculine-feminine polarities which had been divided to allow human beings to regain plenitude, regardless of time and space. In this sense,

Cubism appealed to him not because of the formal renewal which it symbolised, but rather because it facilitated the fusion of bodies inherent to Essentialism. The masculine and feminine merge into one in *Autorretrato* [*Self-portrait*]: Nery represents himself in an ambiguous manner, with features which could be those of either a gloomy female figure, or a man of effeminate appearance; in *Figuras Sobrepostas* [*Superimposed Figures*], the two bodies combine to create a new unit. Both paintings feature attempts to materialise the essence, the spiritual oneness of human life, which for Nery was the fruit of God's will.

When Nery travelled to Paris for the second time in 1927, his use of the language derived from Cubism was replaced with an approach involving Surrealist figuration. It was most likely through him that Cícero Dias came into contact with Surrealist imagery for the first time in Rio de Janeiro. However, while for Nery the representation of man was linked to mystical thought, for Dias it was related to the memory of his childhood in rural Pernambuco. The memories of the era he spent in a sugar mill are linked to a visuality typical of popular art, as can be seen in *Moças na Janela* [*Girls at the Window*]. The 'mismatch' of proportions and depths lends a naïve air to the painting, and suggests that the girls in question resemble both prostitutes waiting for clients and ex-votos piled up against the walls of Catholic churches in north eastern Brazil.



Emiliano di Cavalcanti
Mulata com Flores, 1936
Oil on canvas

Reinventing Brazil

Alongside formal renewal, some artists from the first Modernist generation also took an interest in seeking images reflecting a Brazilian identity. Although the historiography of art based on the Modernist discourse reiterates that this search was unique to that period, similar concerns may be observed up until the first half of the 19th century. Urgency surrounding the creation of an imagery specific to the country intensified following independence, when the need to forge an identity for the young nation emerged. Therefore, although the initial artistic benchmark was the European academy, in the 20th century, the nationalist debate was revived from a different perspective. It was no longer romantic idealisation which guided the symbolic production of an authentically Brazilian imagery. On the one hand, there was a commitment to reviving native elements originating prior to the Portuguese colonisation; on the other hand, efforts were made by intellectuals to understand the contradictions of the colonial system and to include miscegenation as a decisive factor in the formation of the Brazilian people. The Modernist artists who embraced the search for themes and images corresponding to a national identity include Tarsila do Amaral (with *pau-brasil* and anthropophagical landscapes), Cícero Dias – whose childhood reminiscences, filled with nostalgia, bring us to the world of north eastern Brazil –, Vicente do Rego Monteiro (with studies related to indigenous imagery), Di Cavalcanti and Cândido Portinari, among others. Known as “the painter of mulattas”, Di Cavalcanti dedicated his life to formulating a national visuality. A staunch Bohemian, he chose women, music and popular festivals as the quintessential representatives of Brazilian identity. He noted: “Culture does not dull my senses, I remain the vagabond, the man of the dawn, the lover of my many lovers”.¹ His lifestyle fuelled his art and vice versa. He shared a predilection for the human form (especially female), the use of intense colour and a hedonistic notion of art with Matisse, a painter he greatly admired. The paintings *Mulata com Flores* [*Mulatta with Flowers*], *Figuras* [*Figures*] and later *Batuque* [*Drummers*] illustrate his poetry. Di Cavalcanti shares a penchant for the human figure as representative of the nation with Portinari. However, while the former views

¹ Di Cavalcanti. *Viagem da Minha Vida I: o Testamento da Alvorada*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1955, p. 145.

miscegenation as cause for celebration, Portinari - an artist from the so-called second Modernist generation - considers Brazilians to be virtuous and noble, but generally worthy of compassion due to the extreme poverty in which they live. From the farmers depicted in *Colhendo Batatas* [*Harvesting Potatoes*], we learn that they go barefoot, their hands calloused from struggling on the land, their knee joints likely worn and their backs ground down. They are determined workers who take advantage of the first and last rays of sunshine to look for potatoes which bear a closer resemblance to stones. The proximity between the two voluminous bodies and the predominance of warm colours constructs an intimate atmosphere between the two, although the viewer, almost certainly of a different social class, is explicitly excluded. Meanwhile, the figures in *Mulher e Crianças* [*Woman and Children*], albeit depicted from the front, are drawn with blurred lines, as a representation of human types rather than of individual portraits. The plight common to many families is visible in the frightened eyes of certain figures, and the lost expression of others. The only trace of strength and hope to be found here lies in the red ribbon decorating the mother's head.

Return to order

The 1930s and 1940s were marked by the incorporation of Modernist languages. Even Lasar Segall and Anita Malfatti, two exponents of formal renewal in Brazil, returned to a less experimental type of art. Anita painted *Interior* [*Interior*], a carefully arranged untidy corner of a room, in which the prints and artworks stand out as motifs. Segall, in turn, produced the portraits *Mulher Sentada Entre Flores* [*Woman Seated Among Flowers*] and *Mulher com Blusa Rosa* [*Woman in Blue Blouse*]. The former, painted in the 1920s, preserves the vivid colours which characterise what Mário de Andrade called the "Brazilian phase". In the latter, more representative of the return to order, Segall makes use of short brush strokes in pale pinks, greyish greens and earthy colours to create textures and volumes in the subject and in the context in which she sits. Although quite different from one another in style, in both portraits the models pose facing forward, with their hands joined in their laps. The same pose is replicated in *Menina com Fita* [*Girl with Ribbon*] by Portinari, which is similar to *Mulher com Blusa Rosa* [*Woman in Blue Blouse*] in terms of style.

The revival of more traditional artistic trends was not limited to painting. When Ernesto de Fiori arrived in Brazil in 1936, he brought with him the conviction that art should be informed by the production of the past. In his sculpture *Mulher em Pé* [*Woman Standing*], he chooses the classic theme of the female nude and casts the piece in bronze, an equally traditional material. However, the rough surface of the bronze is indicative of the process by which his fingers have worked the original material (clay or plaster), signalling his affiliation with Modernism. Yet it was as a painter that De Fiori had the greatest influence. His experiments with the construction of a painting in terms of colour and visual possibilities - from intense chromaticism to formal synthesis, from energetic brush strokes to plays on transparency - were revelatory for artists living in São Paulo, such as Alfredo Volpi.

While De Fiori was a referential artist in the capital of São Paulo both for his contemporaries and for future generations of painters, in Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, that role was played by Alberto da Veiga Guignard. Just like De Fiori, Guignard was a skilled colourist. In the landscapes he painted of the historic cities of Minas Gerais, of which *Balões* [*Balloons*] is an excellent example, the churches and houses are depicted on the



Alberto da Veiga Guignard
Balões, 1947
Oil on wood canvas

lower half of the canvas, while the mountains and sky occupy the upper half. It is in the distant clouds and mountains that the artist's skill in using diluted paint in order to construct even the most improbable spaces using transparencies and juxtapositions of colours can be most clearly observed.

Figure, non-figure

The second half of the 1940s began with several significant events: internationally, the end of World War II; in Brazil, the end of the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas. The winds of change blowing across the country gave rise to important changes in the art world. The Museu de Arte de São Paulo opened in 1947, along with the modern art museums of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1948. With their opening, modern art exhibitions were held and international speakers invited, enlivening the cultural circuit with new images and debates. Furthermore, the recently inaugurated institutions offered pioneering courses with up-to-date pedagogical approaches as an alternative to the traditional artistic training offered by the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios in São Paulo, and by the Academia Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to these developments, there was also an appearance by Samson Flexor, an artist of Romanian origin who migrated to São Paulo in 1948 and began to teach in his studio. His method consisted of "interpreting the forms of the chosen subjects, fragmenting them into geometric planes in the Cubist manner, encouraging a composition further removed from the fundamental contrasts in painting: value (light-dark) and colour".² In other words, his proposal was based on the exercise of translating form into a representation permeated with geometry, inviting the students to explore the ambiguous field between figuration and abstraction.

Therefore, one of the most stimulating debates in those years concerned the "arrival" of abstraction, a language which had until then been ignored in Brazilian Modernism. A number of artists, such as Di Cavalcanti and Flávio de Carvalho, remained staunch supporters of figuration; nonetheless, many ventured at least into operations to reduce form, if not into complete abstraction. The results of this confrontation are visible in the works of artists present in the exhibition, such as Alfredo Volpi, Antônio Bandeira, Bruno Giorgi, Ione Saldanha, José Pancetti, Lasar Segall, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Maria Leontina. From the latter,

the fruitful interaction between figuration and abstraction is visible in *Episódios III [Episodes III]*, in which geometric elements filled with different shades of blue organise the space, creating a sense of depth. In the case of Antônio Bandeira, the orthogonal lines inspired by the roads and crossroads of the cities weave tight meshes, with the reference source only to be recognised through the indication in the titles. Meanwhile, the grids present in the painting *Intérieur [Interior]* by Vieira da Silva³ suggest a closed environment, but they also remain on the threshold between figure and non-figure, between the suggestion of a represented space and the recognition of the canvas as a flat surface. For Segall, the conflict unfolds in the forests of Campos do Jordão, which he depicted with great lyricism in the latter years of his life.

The bleak *Floresta [Forest]*, painted when José Pancetti belonged to the Núcleo Bernardelli and structured by means of short, vertical brush strokes, differs entirely from the seascapes he produced in Bahia at the end of his life. Strong, bright colours replace the dark tones, and the dense matter is replaced by thin layers of coloured paint. The landscape and human figures undergo significant formal simplification, bordering on abstraction. Land, sand and sea are represented by little more than three slightly uneven bands of colour, as can be seen in *Monteserrat, Bahia*. However, it is in Alfredo Volpi's body of work that the journey from conventional figuration (if this term can be applied to an artist who received no formal education) to abstraction may be observed most clearly. His landscape paintings in the 1910s and 1920s underwent their first transformation in the middle of the following decade, when Volpi began to frequent what would come to be known as Grupo Santa Helena. The canvases *Paisagem de Itanhaém [Itanhaém Landscape]* and *Casario de Cambuci [Cambuci Houses]*, both from the 1940s, visibly display the influence of De Fiori's painting (although Volpi was reluctant to admit this): the partially flattened space is structured using translucent expanses of colour, distributed in various directions by the brush. As the years went

² Statement by Alberto Teixeira to Maria Alice Milliet, March 1997. MILLIET, M.A. "Atelier Abstração". In AMARAL, Aracy (ed.). *Arte Construtiva no Brasil: Coleção Adolpho Leirner*. São Paulo: Companhia Melhoramentos-DBA, 1988, p. 75.

³ Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Arpad Szenes lived in Rio de Janeiro from 1940 to 1947 and interacted intensively with Modernist artists and writers residing in the city.



Amílcar de Castro
Untitled, 1980s
Iron

on, Volpi gradually distanced himself from the architectural referent, with many of his façades, flagpoles and flags transformed into unique abstract paintings, guided by a flexible geometry and great chromatic sensitivity.

Abstractions

Brazil entered the 1950s with optimism: its industrial complexes were expanding, its cities were growing and the desire for the country to make its mark on international markets was gradually becoming a reality. It was the momentum provoked by these expectations of modernisation which prompted Juscelino Kubitschek to order the new capital of Brazil to be built on the open land of the Central Plateau, the ultimate symbol of the developmentalist euphoria which had taken hold. In this context, the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo organised the first edition of the International Biennial (1951), boosting interaction between Brazilian and foreign artists. The prizes awarded by the jury in the Sculpture category confirmed Víctor Brecheret as the great sculptor of Brazilian Modernism and Max Bill from Switzerland as the best representative of an abstract language based on mathematical principles, a novelty which had emerged in the local art world not long before. The Young National Painter Prize was awarded to Ivan Serpa from Rio de Janeiro, also for an abstract canvas. In the following year, 1952, the MAM-SP presented an exhibition by Grupo Ruptura, which became a watershed in the history of abstract art in Brazil.

The group, led by Waldemar Cordeiro, launched a manifesto in which it positioned itself against any type of figurative art and against gestural abstraction, which it deemed “a product of wanton enthusiasm”.⁴ They called for a new type of art, based on the “clear and intelligent principles” of geometry, and preached the use of lines and geometric figures in solid primary colours, without reference to the world beyond art. For them, art was the embodiment of an idea (conceived mathematically) in which traces of subjectivity should remain under no circumstances. In other words, the artistic object was understood as a product, preferably reproducible by industrial technology. The members of Grupo Ruptura present in this exhibition include Hermelindo Fiaminghi, Judith Lauand, Lothar Charoux, Luiz Sacilotto and Maurício Nogueira Lima.

In her gouache *Concreto 144 [Concrete 144]*, Judith Lauand, the only female member of the group, creates optical illusions: if we observe from a distance, we appear to be faced with horizontal lines in two colours; however, when moving closer, we see that short segments of straight lines with slight differences in inclination, meticulously calculated, produce the effect of undulation and movement. A similar effect, but one of rotation, features on the screen prints by Luiz Sacilotto, in which slightly rounded lozenge shapes, increasing in size, move out like spirals from a single central point. The elongated apex, combined with alternating colours, leads us to identify a spinning movement. Similar principles, described by the gestalt, were applied by Hermelindo Fiaminghi and Maurício Nogueira Lima in *11 GHF and Reticulas Transcendentais [Transcendental Grids]*, respectively.

In Rio de Janeiro, artists who were interested in geometric abstraction gathered around Ivan Serpa, who taught painting to children and adults at the Museu de Arte Moderna, creating Grupo Frente, whose first exhibition took place in 1954. Although they also adopted geometry as a guiding principle, the artists in Rio de Janeiro had a rather different idea of its applications. For them, logical thought was primarily a form of communication conducive to the exercise of freedom in experimentation, and not an end in itself. Although at first glance, the works of both groups of artists do not appear to differ greatly, upon closer examination we observe that Ivan Serpa, for

⁴ Manifesto do Grupo Ruptura, São Paulo, 1952.

example, does not limit himself to primary colours to fix the geometric forms, instead prioritising the optical illusion caused by the juxtaposition of warm colours in the painting *Sem Título [Untitled]*, 1953. In *Metaesquemias [Metaschemas]* by Hélio Oiticica, the rectangles appear to be about to lose their balance and fall out of the support (this occurs in *Relevos Espaciais [Spatial Reliefs]*, created shortly after).

Among the sculptors who participated in Grupo Frente are Amilcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann and Abraham Palatnik, if we may take the liberty to class the latter as a sculptor. Although the works of the three artists presented in this exhibition are from a later period, they all maintain features from this specific period. For Amilcar and Weissmann, the shaping and carving typical of traditional sculpture give way to three-dimensional experiments with the line in the space: in Amilcar's piece, it is the absence of matter; in *Coluna em Fio [Column in Wire]* by Weissmann, the line structures the rectangles and the void is presented as potential matter.

When Abraham Palatnik presented his cinechromatic object at the 1st São Paulo Biennial, the selection panel did not know which category to class it in. Nonetheless, the jury understood that the work – a box with coloured lights powered by contraptions and projecting colours and shapes onto a sheet of frosted glass – deserved special mention. In *Cinético P-4 PA [Kinetic P-4 PA]*, coloured circles attached to metal rods turn at different speeds, creating a new visual possibility with each rotation. The instability and playful nature of Palatnik's work are shared by the piece *E7521 (Vermelho) [E7521 (Red)]* by Sérvulo Esmeraldo. In this 'excitable', the wooden rods remain still until a source of static energy (like the visitor's hand) touches the acrylic surface. The small, spaced out structures are then disrupted and form infinite possibilities of ephemeral compositions, stimulating our perceptive ability. Both the cinechromatic devices by Palatnik and the 'excitables' by Esmeraldo make a unique contribution to Brazilian and international kinetic art.

The programming differences between Grupo Ruptura and Grupo Frente became evident at the I Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta [1st National Concrete Art Exhibition], held in December 1956 at the MAM-SP, and in January of the following year at the Ministério de Educação e Saúde in Rio de Janeiro. The critic Mário Pedrosa summarised the differences as follows: "Compared with them [the

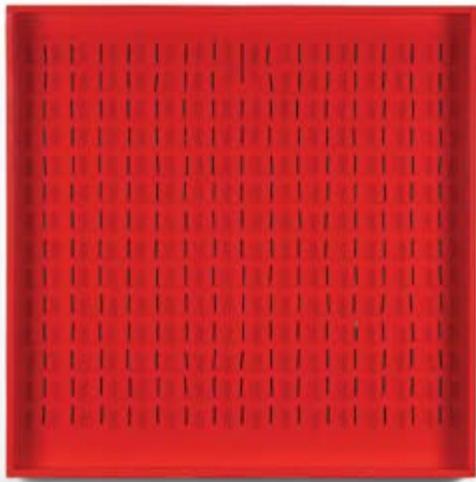
artists from São Paulo], the painters from Rio are almost romantic".⁵ Indeed, in the introduction to the catalogue of Grupo Frente's second exhibition Pedrosa himself stated: "An autonomous and vital activity, it [art] strives to fulfil the highest social mission, that of bringing style to the era and transforming men, teaching them to use their senses fully and to model their very emotions".⁶ In other words, the uniqueness of the São Paulo group derived more from its attitude towards art than from a style *per se*.

The final rupture between the two groups occurred in 1959, when the *Jornal do Brasil* published the Manifesto Neoconcreto, signed by Amilcar de Castro, Ferreira Gullar, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Reynaldo Jardim and Theon Spanudis. Challenging the "dangerous rationalist exacerbation" of the São Paulo group, the manifesto states that geometry is merely an instrument allowing the initiation of a new meaning, which transcends the materiality of the work to awaken intuitive creativity and imagination. That experience could only be guaranteed through the bodily interaction between the viewer and the art work. The application of these concepts can be seen in *Bicho Linear [Linear Animal]* by Lygia Clark. In her work, the multiple joints in the triangular sheets invite the viewer to handle the object, in such a way as to transform it into new animals. The artist acts as the proposer of tangible experiences and the viewer takes on the role of co-creator. Throughout the 1950s, other artists took an interest in experimenting with geometry, but without joining a particular group. Some touched briefly on non-figuration, such as Mira Schendel, who at that time was focusing on experimentation with the materiality of colour. Others, like Willys de Castro and Hércules Barsotti adopted an abstract-geometric language throughout their lives, but always in an independent manner. Rubem Valentim used circles, triangles and rectangles to create structures inspired by Afro-Brazilian religions. In both its more orthodox and more lyrical forms, the constructive trend which took root during that period left an important legacy for the history of Brazilian art.

⁵ PEDROSA, Mário. "Paulistas e cariocas." *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 19 February 1957.

⁶ PEDROSA, Mário. "Grupo Frente". Introduction to the Catalogue of the 2nd Exhibition of Grupo Frente, July 1955. In ARANTES, Otília (ed.). *Acadêmicos e Modernos: Textos Escolhidos III*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2004, p. 248.

In the same year as the launch of the Manifesto Neoconcreto, the 5th São Paulo Biennial awarded the Best National Painter Prize to Manabu Mabe for his abstract canvases, characterised by long brush strokes and patches of colour. In this way, informal abstraction gradually gained relevance at the beginning of the 1960s, reviving artistic debate in the country. In the years which followed, the large-scale paintings by Tomie Ohtake, organised into contrasting areas of colour, coexisted alongside Iberê Camargo's canvases, structured by dense masses of paint, and with the newly expressive style of Ivan Serpa. At the same time, experimentation with non-conventional materials continued - as observed in *Relevo [Relief]*, created by Frans Krajcberg in Ibiza -, as well as more radical proposals from artists who had participated in the Rio strand of Neo-Concretism, who swept away completely the barriers between art and life, giving rise to a new moment in Brazilian art.



Sérvulo Esmeraldo
E7521 (Vermelho), 1975
Wood, cardboard, cotton and acrylic

Texts:

Regina Teixeira de Barros
Exhibition Curator

Cover:

José Pancetti
Monteserrat, Bahia, 1956
Oil on canvas

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