

Here and There: Exchanges Between Italy and Brazil from the Biennials (1948-52). A Conversation

Vinicius Spricigo

Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil

Ana Magalhães

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract This dialogue highlights the significant influence of the Venice Biennale model on the establishment of a biennial exhibition in post-war São Paulo. It examines how cultural exchange and artistic collaboration between Italy and Brazil helped the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) to achieve its goals of legitimizing modern Brazilian art and building international connections. It also delves into the role of the first São Paulo Biennial organizers and their relationships with diplomatic and cultural bodies. Additionally, the prevalent historiographical emphasis on Biennial's role in shaping abstractionism in Brazil is contrasted with the first Brazilian representation at the Venice Biennale in 1950 and the national prizes awarded at the inaugural *Modern Art Museum Bienal* in 1951, which focused on figurative art.

Keywords Venice Biennale Model. São Paulo Bienal. São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM). Post-war Abstractionism. Brazilian Art Historiography.

Vinicius Spricigo The São Paulo Biennial had not begun as an independent organization but as an initiative of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), founded in 1948 by Italian-born businessman Francisco Matarazzo. Lourival Gomes Machado, the Biennial's first Artistic Director, suggested that the success of the São Paulo Biennial was tied up with that of the museum itself: "It was felt that MAM was being tested. If the museum could not secure its international reputation, it might as well abandon its entire ambitious project" (Machado 1951, 15).

The *Modern Art Museum Bienal* was the first to implement the Venice Biennale's system of national representation within a different geographical context, aiming for the museum's internationalization. In this conversation,

we will focus on the exchanges between Italy and Brazil in implementing this system within post-war São Paulo. Marina Barbosa in this book traces some connections between Francisco Matarazzo, Pietro Maria Bardi, and Rodolfo Pallucchini regarding the first Brazilian representation in Venice in 1950. The presentation organized by MAM of Brazilian modernism at the 25th Venice Biennale was crucial in paving the way for creating a biennial exhibition in São Paulo. In the opening statement published in the exhibition catalogue, Machado argues that “the reference to Venice was inevitable. Rather than moving away from it, it was seen as a useful and encouraging lesson” (Machado 1951, 15).

In an unpublished interview earlier in 1948, Matarazzo expressed his aspiration to host an art festival in São Paulo similar to the Biennale and remake the *Modern Art Week of '22*.¹ These plans reflected the museum's dual objectives: on the one hand, to institutionalize modern Brazilian art by collecting and displaying it and, on the other hand, to connect the local art scene to international trends of the time.

Ana Magalhães These quotations bring aspects that present historiography might have never considered when dealing with the idea of the formation of the MAM and the Biennial. This quotation from Francisco Matarazzo is extraordinary in one sense. He did not clearly declare his intentions but likely intended to celebrate, in 1951, the thirtieth anniversary of the modernist landmark exhibition in São Paulo. As we saw recently in the 100-year celebration, it is still a major reference. *Modern Art Week of '22* is a milestone, although it has been the subject of hot debate in 2022. However, you can clearly see that, politically and economically speaking, it continues to play a role in projecting Brazil as a modern nation. In this sense, both initiatives were somehow embedded in promoting a narrative of Brazilian modern art. These aspects have never been considered.

How strange it was - if we think of a country like Brazil - coming out of a long *interregnum* after the end of a dictatorship in 1945 and trying to reengage with the international sphere. Brazil needed to affirm itself as a modern nation and embrace its place of the League of Nations into the United Nations. We have some forces that were seeking to do that, to promote Brazil as a modern nation. The country was also kind of compelled to be a modern nation and be part of this game of modernized democratic societies in the Western sense. For instance, it was very revealing to me working with a doctoral student, Breno Faria (2022), who was investigating the making of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs collection and the idea of Modern Art. He went through a great deal of the archives in Rio de Janeiro, and from the results we can clearly see that the Ministry tried to reorganize itself to promote this idea of the Brazilian modern culture by sending lecturers, scholars, and artists abroad and to promote Brazil as a modern nation.

1 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: indications given by Francisco Matarazzo for an interview, 7 October 1948. Considered a milestone in Brazilian modernism, the *Modern Art Week of 1922* was held at the Municipal Theatre in São Paulo from 13 to 18 February 1922. The event covered several fields (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, literature) and included important figures such as Graça Aranha, Oswald de Andrade, Menotti del Picchia, Mario de Andrade, Anita Malfatti, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Victor Brecheret, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and others.

Both these international aspirations concerned constructing a narrative of modern art in Brazil [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Max Bill, *Tripartite unit*. First São Paulo Bienal, Swiss section, 1951.
Credited to: Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo

A group of well-known critical texts also points out to the *Modern Art Week of '22*. They are classics in Brazilian historiography: if we consider the

'Modernist movement', we can mention Mário de Andrade's lecture to his students at the University of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro in 1942, and when Mario Pedrosa writes about it in a different context ten years later. Then, in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Paulo Mendes de Almeida, also one of the directors of MAM, considered the *Modern Art Week of '22* as the starting point of the history that brought to the creation of the MAM. This group of texts and essays was trying to build a narrative of Brazilian modern art, with the museum and the Biennial. Of course, it was essential in 1951 the nucleus of Brazilian artists presented in São Paulo Biennial's special room with the presence of Tarsila do Amaral, Anita Malfatti, and Cândido Portinari, among other big names. We can count also Sérgio Milliet's monograph, as director of MAM, on Tarsila do Amaral, published in 1953. Many signs justify and argue in favor of this idea of international aspirations. Brazil was also trying to be a modern and cosmopolitan nation.

VS The historiography you commented on is a familiar territory, mainly due to Francisco Alambert and Polyana Canhête's book *As Bienais de São Paulo* (2004), in which they trace the genealogy of the Biennial back to the *Modern Art Week of '22*. This prevailing narrative also highlights Biennial's role in the post-war development of geometric abstraction. The connection between Max Bill's *Tripartite Unity* (1948), awarded the International Sculpture Prize at the Biennial's inaugural edition, and his influence on two concrete art groups is well known. In a letter sent to Yolanda Penteado (Matarazzo's wife), Bill referred to a great exhibition held at the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP), founded by Assis Chateaubriand in 1947.² Despite a dispute between Matarazzo and Chateaubriand, both museums worked together and used the same venues in São Paulo. Furthermore, Bill's exhibition at MASP was crucial for his participation in the first Biennial.

It met existing debates cultivated within Brazil's established artistic and critical milieu. As an explicitly internationalist project, the Biennial provoked a clash between modernist figuration in Brazil and post-war abstraction as an international language. From a geopolitical point of view, Switzerland had less influence on the Brazilian art scene compared to France or Italy. The presence of Bill's *Tripartite Unity* is representative of the Biennial's role in the circulation of European concretism. Still, its recognition by the jury must be understood in relation to other prizes awarded at this inaugural edition. The equivalent prize for painting was granted to French artist Roger Chastel's figurative abstract *Les Amoureux au Café* (1951). The dispute between abstraction and figuration was also evident in the prizes awarded to Danilo Di Prete (painting) and Victor Brecheret (sculpture), both Italian-born. Art historian Michael Asbury (2006) observed that certain Brazilian artists who later contributed to Grupo Frente in Rio de Janeiro and Ruptura in São Paulo, including Ivan Serpa and Geraldo de Barros, were awarded minor acquisition prizes. Other concretist artists, including Franz Weissmann, had their artworks refused, and Abraham Palatnik's *Aparelho Cinecromático* was selected only after an intervention from the art critic Mário Pedrosa.

² Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Letter from Max Bill to Yolanda Matarazzo, 12 April 1951.

AM The emphasis on abstraction, especially geometric abstraction, comes from the fact that by the end of the decade Brazil had promoted new concrete groups in exhibitions abroad. This is a significant point after the *National Exhibition of Concrete Art* (1956) in Brazil. This exhibition will have a heading with another exhibition that Max Bill organized in 1960 on concrete art groups worldwide in which Brazilians also took part. By 1958-59, a traveling exhibition of Brazilian modern art was held, where these concrete art groups were widely promoted. Not only were they exhibited, but they were also very much commented on by a figure like Mário Pedrosa. He was a major agent in making these artists known through critical debate abroad. There was a huge dispute about abstraction and figuration between 1948 and 1952. This is unclear for the Brazilian artistic *milieu*, not to mention the international artistic world. The experiences on abstraction were already there, playing their roles, and you had a lot of debates and discussions, but this was not a one-line progressive narrative.

One fascinating fact about the Biennial of 1951 is that Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, the major Brazilian modern artist, was furious that he was not allowed to be considered for the prize. He was considered as a major artist, and the prize was not given to anything similar to what he understood as good modern art. In 1952, Di Cavalcanti made a significant donation to the MAM, now at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (MAC USP). He donated 569 drawings and works on paper from his studio and build another idea of modern art in the museum collection. If we consider that it held probably about 200 works of art, donating 569 drawings is really a huge gesture. So, this is one index of the temperature of the discussion at that time. Leon Degand's exhibition *From Figurativism to Abstractionism* (1949), which opened the MAM to the public, created a huge battle and Emiliano Di Cavalcanti was very aggressive in attacking all the tendencies of abstraction. This opened discussions and the dispute over what modern art should be, which was not solved until the end of the decade.

One can see conversations between groups of artists from different countries trying to work with abstract and figurative languages, sometimes in similar ways. On the other hand, there was a large variety of experiences of modern art language and a wide range of artistic geographies. Having groups and artists organized in national pavilions creates a very strange arrangement, because they lived in a period when nationality was very fluid.³ There were many immigrant artists, especially in a country like Brazil, where there was a strong wave of immigration during and after the Second World War. That is very well-known in Brazilian historiography. There was a lot of criticism from the press about the National Prize for Painting given to Danilo Di Prete, an Italian artist who had just arrived in Brazil and was not a Brazilian artist. The painting awarded was not an abstract experience, and it has much more to do with certain ideas of realism and figurativism.

I have always wondered how we nowadays speak very easily about national avant-garde movements in the context of the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Biennial. We can speak about Italian futurism, French cubism, and German expressionism as if it were like this from the beginning. This

³ Unlike Venice, the São Paulo Biennial did not have discrete purpose-built pavilions. However, the perceived power or cultural influence of specific nations and regions did govern their position within a shared exhibitionary space.

was not the reality of these groups at the beginning of the twentieth century, nor of these artists at the beginning of the 1950s when they were dislocated from their motherland or native countries.

VS Matarazzo's Italian roots and his continued connections to both Italy and São Paulo's substantial Italian émigré community were significant to the museum's international purview. MAM had aspired to be a point of contact with Italian artists and intellectuals, having planned a reciprocal arrangement for transporting works to the biennials of Venice and São Paulo, and outlined broader ambitions for an Italian-Brazilian study center, travel bursaries for artists, film screenings, and exhibitions that would offer an overview of the Italian art scene. A 1950 MAM statement underlines this

desire to contribute as much as possible to the development of cultural relations between Italy and Brazil, aims to intensify these relations and facilitate contacts between the artistic and cultural environments and elements of the two countries as much as possible.⁴

Considering its close relationship with Italy, the museum established a respectful distinction between the two biennials and positioned São Paulo as a Southern-hemispheric, specifically Latin American, counterpoint to Venice: "Without intending to rival the most famous and traditional artistic expression in the world".⁵

The Brazilian government's decision to participate in the Venice Biennale for the first time in 1950 was crucial to consolidate Matarazzo's initial plans, first outlined in 1948, to set up a biennial in São Paulo. Presided over by Matarazzo and commissioned by the Brazilian Ministry of Health and Education, Brazil's first exhibition in Venice included the pioneers of modernism, such as Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Candido Portinari, alongside a selection of works from younger artists, including Milton Dacosta and José Pancetti. It indicates criteria also observed in the Italian representation at the first Biennial one year later, from Carlo Carrà to the youngest Sergio Vacchi [fig. 2].

⁴ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 15 June 1950, 1.

⁵ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 15 June 1950, 5.



Figure 2 Sculptures by Giacomo Manzù, *Grande Ritratto di Signora*; Luciano Minguzzi, *Ballerina Giapponese*; Pericle Fazzini, *Figura che cammina*, *Donna seduta* and *Caduta da cavallo*; and Massimo Campigli. First São Paulo Biennial, Italian section, 1951. Credited to: Cav. Giov. Strazza, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo

AM We should consider what happened before the creation of the São Paulo Biennial and the museum. What Matarazzo did as a gesture when he started to get involved with the creation of MAM was actually to ‘hire’ agents or mediators in Italy and France to buy an international collection for the museum. We know that the Italian group of works he bought for the initial nucleus of the MAM collection is the largest, it actually doubles the number of works that Matarazzo bought in France.

When the MAM opened its doors in 1949, it mainly had a large collection of Italian artworks, a half collection of French artworks, and a collection of Brazilian artworks. This collection of Brazilian artworks was very much connected to what we might call a *São Paulo School of Painting*, for instance, to figures like Alfredo Volpi, Fulvio Pennacchi, and other artists. Among his connections with Italy, which are the same as those in France, Matarazzo hired Italian intermediates.

Regarding the Italian works, it is clear now that he had a two-phase acquisition process. In the first, he engaged Pietro Maria Bardi, who was still in Italy, to buy some artworks. In the second phase and the more significant number of works, he hired Margarita Sarfatti, a very important art critic. She had a great role in Italy during a period of the fascist government, but she exiled herself to Argentina by then, and she was helping Matarazzo with his acquisitions in Italy. She used her influence as an art critic in Italy, side by side with gallerists and artists, to buy the works for the collection.

In the case of France, he was helped by the painter Alberto Magnelli, the brother of a very well-known Brazilian industrialist in São Paulo. Matarazzo spawns of course in the elite of São Paulo but also has very important diplomatic connections. We still have to consider the role of Yolanda Penteado, his wife then, and Maria Martins, who connected Matarazzo with diplomatic structures and the artistic milieu. Martins was an artist very well connected in the US, where she had made the initial part of her career in the framework of very important groups that we know were engaged in the preparation of the show *From Figurativism to Abstractionism*. She was following the decision steps made in the US to send works from that country that never came to Brazil for the show. She was engaged in such a crucial role and was one of the artists to have been presented, but she never came. We are mentioning a woman who was the wife of the Brazilian ambassador in Washington at that time. This was also the case for Yolanda Penteado because she had also divorced her first husband, who was a diplomat as well. These two women in the Brazilian elite had very important international connections and it was crucial that Yolanda Penteado also traveled in 1950-51 to engage in conversation with diplomats in France, England, Belgium, and Italy.

I have never really studied the documentation to define the names of those who came from Italy. However, what is interesting, at least from my viewpoint, regarding Italian representations in the São Paulo Biennial, which is also somehow pursued by other delegations, is the presentation of a comprehensive number of artists that would establish a narrative. Older artists or senior artists with younger artists. This was a model that was somehow established in the 1950s. In the case of Italy, this is even more important because Italy was trying to rehabilitate its tone after the fall of the fascist regime. Italy was also trying to show that it was a modernizing nation that needed to engage with a democratic society.

A series of modern Italian art exhibitions in South America started as early as 1946. They preceded not only the creation of the São Paulo Biennial but also of the Museums of Modern Art in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. These exhibitions of young artists and modern Italian art ran until 1952, traveling to São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires. That was also an exciting diplomatic effort from Italy, and we cannot forget a figure like Bardi. He first came to Brazil as part of a diplomatic initiative to reconnect Italy and Latin America. His exhibition of old masters in Rio de Janeiro in the Ministry of Health and Education, as well as the one of modern Italian painting, was made in the context of cooperation between Italy and Latin America.

VS I just want to highlight that the combination of formal diplomacy and personal relationships underpinned the Biennial's ability to represent a sufficiently broad range of nations. To achieve a biennial that could adequately present a local contribution to the international art scene while also bringing artists from all over the world into Brazil, MAM needed to strengthen its international relations, and it did so in part by international agencies and embassies. Before adopting a curatorial model, the Biennial operated under what Anthony Gardner and Charles Green called "consular curating" (2015, 30). A system whereby selecting works largely lies with diplomatic and cultural bodies is characteristic of second-wave biennials, including São Paulo.

The impact of this was particularly evident in the case of Cuba, whose participation faced more significant logistical and financial difficulties. Cuba's representation at the inaugural Biennial was not secured in a direct relationship with that nation but rather via a US-based intermediary headed by José Gómez-Sicre. The geopolitical role played by the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union in the Biennial is also analyzed by Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto in this book, so this discussion leads also on how the Biennial established a specific position within an international art scene and offered a unique perspective on modern art. As Ana Magalhães and other Brazilian researchers have also pointed out, cultural diplomacy in the context of US Cold War policies towards Latin America played an important role in the first São Paulo Biennial, as well as in the formation of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, which is now part of the MAC USP.

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