

# Brazil in the “Renewed International Solidarity” of Biennials (1947-51)

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**Abstract** After a six-year suspension, the 24th Venice Biennale reopened in 1948 with a strong international focus and a desire for “renewed international solidarity”, as stated by its General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini. By late 1947, correspondence from Italo-Brazilian figures in São Paulo showed interest in including Brazil in the Venice Biennale through their recently established institutions: Anna Maria and Pasquale Fiocca of Domus Gallery, Francisco Matarazzo of Museum of Modern Art – MAM, and Pietro Maria Bardi of Museum of Art – MASP. Pallucchini proposed collaborations between Domus Gallery and MAM for the 24th Venice Biennale and, later, between MAM and MASP for the 25th. Despite these efforts, Brazil could not send artworks in 1948, though its name appeared in the catalogue. Brazilian participation was finally realized in 1950, with Francisco Matarazzo’s MAM and Bardi as co-curator of the retrospective exhibition of Ernesto De Fiori. Thus, this essay analyzes the political disputes between MAM and MASP over Brazilian Biennale participation and explores how the Venice Biennale inspired the creation of the São Paulo Biennial, enhancing Brazil’s standing in the global cultural scene.

**Keywords** Venice Biennale. São Paulo Biennial. Francisco Matarazzo. Pietro Maria Bardi. International cultural relations.

The Venice Biennale is renowned as one of the oldest and most prestigious international art organizations, still thriving today. Over its long history, and particularly following its reform in 1930, it expanded its scope by establishing festivals for Music (1930), Film (1932), and Theater (1934). In later years, the Biennale further broadened its influence with the introduction of the Architecture (1980) and Dance (1999), solidifying its position as a global leader in the promotion of the arts across multiple disciplines.

After a six-year suspension due to World War II, the Venice Biennale reopened in 1948. In addition to welcoming the public back with a focus on promoting both Italian and international contemporary art through the exhibition of some European avant-garde movements, it returned with a strong international vision. It sought to re-establish “a renewed

international solidarity”,<sup>1</sup> as described by its General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini (1908-1989),<sup>2</sup> reflecting a post-war desire to foster global artistic connections and cooperation.

Pallucchini played a pivotal role during this era of international openness, organizing the first five post-war editions of the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1956. He was essential in dialoguing and connecting Brazilian cultural institutions and the Venetian exhibition. Another figure to mention is Giovanni Ponti, President of the Venice Biennale and Extraordinary Commissioner of the autonomous body La Biennale di Venezia, who found an opportunity to get involved in cultural activities during this period after liberation.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this paper aims to analyze the disputes surrounding Brazil’s entry into the Venice Biennale, focusing on two museums led by Italo-Brazilian personalities who played a significant role in São Paulo society during the twentieth century, as well as the importance of Brazilian participation at Venice in the establishment of the São Paulo Biennial.

In Brazil and Italy academic research has focused on cultural exchanges between Europe and Brazil, from the perspective of Brazilian and European modernist artistic production (Almeida 1976; Miceli 2003). On the international institutional dialogues between Brazilian and Italian biennials, instead, an unprecedented analysis was carried out in a previous essay of mine (Barbosa 2015)<sup>4</sup> and more recent research has expanded on this argument (Rocco 2018; Andrade 2019; Saroute 2021).

From a methodological perspective, Castelnuevo and Ginzburg’s study of the relationship between center and periphery in the history of the Italian artistic field offers valuable insights into how artistic movements and ideas emerge from cultural centers and are subsequently appropriated in peripheral areas. This framework enables the reflection on the complexity of Brazilian artistic phenomena, shedding light on how Brazil has navigated its position within the international artistic landscape, balancing the influence of dominant global trends while asserting its own unique cultural projects (Castelnuevo, Ginzburg 2019).

In this context, on 28 May 1948, the 24th Venice Biennale was inaugurated. It featured the participation of 14 countries: eleven from

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**1** The quotation is from the cyclostyled text of Pallucchini’s committal greeting, in Bandera 2011, 78.

**2** Rodolfo Pallucchini was born in Milan and graduated in 1931 in Literature from the University of Padua, with a thesis on Giambattista Piazzetta and his school. In 1935 he was appointed Inspector of Antiquities and Fine Arts, with responsibilities at the Estense Gallery in Modena, where he later became director. In 1937, he earned his habilitation in the History of Medieval and Modern Art, and two years later, he directed the Directorate of Fine Arts in Venice until 1950. In 1947, he founded and edited the journal *Arte Veneta* and took on the role of General Secretary of the Venice Biennale, playing a crucial role in the exhibitions of the post-World War II era. For more on Pallucchini’s work in the post-war biennials, see Durante 2011; Lorenzini 2019.

**3** The Venice Biennale, along with Italy’s national exhibitions such as the Triennale in Milan and the Quadriennale in Rome, has a direct relationship with the political moments experienced in Italy, being led by figures with significant political activism. Following the end of World War II and the onset of liberation, this organization began to be composed of some leaders affiliated with anti-fascist parties, as its new president, Giovanni Ponti. For more on Giovanni Ponti’s involvement in the Venice Biennale see Tomasella 2011, 609.

**4** My doctoral thesis (Barbosa 2015) analyzes the origins and early developments of two museums established in post-World War II São Paulo by prominent Italian figures: Francisco Matarazzo and Pietro Maria Bardi. It examines the significance of their international relationships, particularly with MoMA in New York for the MAM and with the Venice Biennale for the MAM and the MASP.

Europe, two from the Americas, and one from Africa. While Brazil's name appears in the catalogue for this exhibition, it did not take part in the event (24. *Biennale di Venezia* 1948).

Since late 1947, correspondence from Italo-Brazilian figures in São Paulo has indicated a desire to include Brazil in the Venice Biennale through their artistic institutions. Even before the official inauguration of São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (Museu de Arte Moderna) – MAM, on 15 July 1948, Francisco Matarazzo (1898-1977)<sup>5</sup> initiated contact with the Biennale, expressing interest in organizing a Brazilian art exhibition for its 24th edition through his museum. This is evidenced by the correspondence between the Venice Biennale and the Domus Gallery, owned by the Italian immigrant couple Anna Maria (1913-1994) and Pasquale Fiocca (1914-1994), who shared a similar interest.<sup>6</sup> Pallucchini suggested to Fiocca that, due to the limited space for foreign participation, a partnership between MAM and the Domus Gallery should be established.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the short timeframe, Pallucchini recommended that, even before the official invitation for Brazilian participation in the Biennale was issued, a process that began in January 1948, Matarazzo should contact the Brazilian Ministry of Education to accept the invitation. He also advised Matarazzo to send photographs of the Brazilian artworks to be submitted for approval by the Biennale's Visual Arts Committee (Commissione Arti Visive). This would be the only way for Brazil to participate; otherwise, MAM could organize a show under the museum's name and take responsibility for transporting the works.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the concerted efforts of Pallucchini and Matarazzo to secure Brazil's inaugural participation in the Venice Biennale, the initiative ultimately failed due to the “absolute disinterest of Brazilian authorities and the disunity among local artistic communities”.<sup>9</sup> In a telegram, Brazilian ambassador Pedro de Moraes Barros cited also technical difficulties related

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**5** Francisco Matarazzo was a prominent Brazilian industrialist and art patron. Born into a family of Italian immigrants and nephew of Francesco Matarazzo, he played a crucial role in establishing MAM and was instrumental in organizing the inaugural São Paulo Biennial in 1951. Matarazzo was also one of the founders of the *Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia* and the studios of *Companhia Cinematográfica Vera Cruz*. His marriage to Yolanda Penteadó further strengthened his commitment to fostering artistic exchange and supporting Brazilian artists. Together, they left a lasting legacy in the arts, while Matarazzo's involvement in various industrial ventures helped shape Brazil's economic development in the mid-twentieth century. For more info see Almeida 1976.

**6** Venice, The Venice Biennale, Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), Fondo Storico (FS), Arti Visive (AV), serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pasquale Fiocca to the Director of the 24 Biennale d'Arte, undated: “Tramite la nostra Galleria, alcuni artisti Brasiliani e Italiani qui residenti, aspirerebbero a partecipare alla prossima Biennale che si terrà in Venezia in maggio 1948”. As a side note, the Domus Gallery was established in February 1947 in São Paulo and quickly became the primary venue for modern art exhibitions in the city. It played a vital role during its five-year existence until the founding of the MAM.

**7** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Pasquale Fiocca, 1 December 1947.

**8** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Matarazzo, 8 January 1948.

**9** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Enrico Salvatori to Illustrissimo Professor [Ponti or Pallucchini], on 24 May 1948. In this Salvatori reports having received a letter from Matarazzo on 17 April 1948, informing him that this initiative had failed.

to the shipment of artworks but conveyed hope for Brazil's participation in the next edition of the Venice Biennale.<sup>10</sup>

Dissatisfied with the outcome, Pallucchini continued to advocate for Brazil's participation, even offering to accept the late shipment of artworks, as had been arranged for the United States. He also emphasized that Brazil's name had already been printed in the exhibition catalogue and that the country's absence would be a significant disappointment for visitors.<sup>11</sup> Despite his efforts, Brazil's participation ultimately did not materialize.

Although the challenges, diplomatic contact between Italy and Brazil was maintained particularly favoring Matarazzo,<sup>12</sup> who visited the Venice Biennale in the latter half of 1948 (Alambert, Canhête 2004, 32). The following year the Brazilian preparation for participation in the 25th Venice Biennale began, this time with the MAM, which would assume the cost of transportation and insurance of the works, besides offering a prize in the currency of the time of 500,000 lire, which could be given freely. Matarazzo also requested that the choice of the works should be made in partnership between him, Pallucchini and a group of critics São Paulo (Sérgio Milliet, Quirino da Silva, Geraldo Ferraz) and from Rio de Janeiro (Mário Barata Santa Rosa, Mário Pedrosa).<sup>13</sup>

The involvement of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro art critics in the in the 25th edition of the Venice Biennale initiative suggests it could have been an attempt to establish partnerships between the two modern art museums in the country, both founded in 1948 with the support of the American businessman Nelson Rockefeller, who was the president of the MoMA of New York since 1939. It may also have been a strategy to prevent alliances with São Paulo institutions, as Pietro Maria Bardi (1900-1999),<sup>14</sup> director of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (Museu de Arte de São Paulo) – MASP, had also expressed interest in participating in the Venetian event.

Actually, Bardi initially proposed to hold a retrospective exhibition of the artist Lasar Segall, because he was hosting in his gallery a solo exhibition

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**10** ASAC, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64), Telegram 15 June 1948, from Moraes Barros to Rodolfo Pallucchini: “CON VIVO RAMMARICO DEBBO COMUNICARLE CHE MALGRADO OGNI SFORZO GOVERNO BRASILIANO NON ESSENDO STATO POSSIBILE CAUSA MOTIVI TECNICI SPEDIRE QUADRI DESTINATI BIENNALE MIO PAESE NON POTRE QUESTA VOLTA PRENDERE PARTE GRANDE MOSTRA VENEZIANA MIGLIORI SALUTI MORAES BARROS AMBASCIATORE BRASILE”.

**11** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Pallucchini to Moraes Barros, 17 June 1948.

**12** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In a correspondence dated 17 July 1948, Giovanni Ponti asked the Italian diplomatic and consular representatives to maintain active contact with Brazil and to particularly support Matarazzo's work.

**13** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Matarazzo to the President of the Venice Biennale [Giovanni Ponti], 5 December 1949.

**14** Pietro Maria Bardi was an Italian writer, curator, and collector. He began his career in the 1920s as a journalist, writing for prominent newspapers such as *Gazzetta di Genova* and *Corriere della Sera*. Later, he transitioned to the art world by opening the Galleria Bardi in Milan in 1928. After moving to Rome, he founded the Galleria d'Arte Palma, supported by the *Sindacato Nazionale Fascista di Belle Arti*, and became involved in the debate surrounding Rationalist architecture. Bardi first visited Brazil in 1933 and permanently relocated there in 1946 with his wife, architect Lina Bo Bardi. In 1947, he co-founded the MASP, where Lina Bo Bardi designed innovative exhibition methods, including the use of crystal easels to enhance the presentation of artworks and make art more accessible to the public. His significant contributions had a lasting impact on the Brazilian art scene. For more information on Bardi's career in Italy, see his first biography Tentori 1990.

of this artist.<sup>15</sup> He was also aware that the Biennale was organizing a posthumous exhibition of the artist Ernesto De Fiori, and offered to collaborate.<sup>16</sup> Finally, he proposed the participation of MASP in the Brazilian show at the Venice Biennale, criticizing the MAM.<sup>17</sup>

Although Bardi's co-curation with Carlo Carrà and Giovanni Scheiwiller was confirmed during the retrospective exhibition of Ernesto De Fiori at Palazzo Centrale (that was the main pavilion, previously also known as the Italian Pavilion), there were efforts to include Bardi in the Brazilian participation. Umbro Apollonio,<sup>18</sup> the curator of the Historical Archives of Contemporary Art, requested that Edoardo Bizzarri, the director of the Italo-Brazilian Cultural Institute of São Paulo, should consider including Bardi. He suggested exploring the possibility of appointing Bardi as “segretario per l'organizzazione o per la scelta” expressing his concern that “mi spiacerebbe di vederlo escluso” while noting Bardi's affiliation with another museum in São Paulo (25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* 1950).

On 6 June 1950, the 25th Venice Biennale was inaugurated, featuring the participation of 22 countries: fifteen from Europe, four from the Americas, two from Africa, and one from the Middle East. Brazil was represented by MAM, with no possibility for co-participation, as Matarazzo was both the organizer and financier of the Brazilian exhibition. The exhibition was curated by José Simeão Leal, the director of the documental service of the Ministry of Education, while Paolo Matarazzo, Francisco's brother, was responsible for its setup. The introductory text for the Brazilian section of the catalogue was written by Sérgio Milliet (25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* 1950, 224) [fig. 1].

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**15** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In correspondence dated 26 August 1949, Bardi expressed to Pallucchini that the nomination for the Venice Biennale proposed by Olsvaldo Teixeira, the Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts, was inadequate. He proposed Lasar Segall as a more suitable artist.

**16** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). In correspondence dated 23 November 1949, Bardi informed Pallucchini about the De Fiori exhibition, noting that he owned *La Bagnante* from 1917 in his private collection. He also mentioned writing the preface for the artist's biography included in the volume published by Giovanni Scheiwiller through Ulrico Hoepli.

**17** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Paesi, b. 5 (1948-64). Correspondence from Bardi to Pallucchini, 23 November 1949.

**18** For more information on Umbro Apollonio's role at the Venice Biennale see Pajusco 2019.



**Figure 1** 25. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, Brazil Exhibition*, 1950, room 53.  
Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC)

Another relevant element was the announcement, in the Brazilian section of the Venice Biennale catalogue, of the creation of the MAM Biennial, that would have been the 1st São Paulo Biennial, based on the Venetian show.

A few days before the opening of the 25th Venice Biennale, Matarazzo wrote to Pallucchini to request the statute of the Venice Biennale and advice on the creation and organization of the São Paulo Biennial. He also expressed a desire for cooperation between the two institutions.<sup>19</sup> Among Pallucchini's suggestions was the idea that the São Paulo Biennial should have more autonomy in inviting nations, allowing for invitations without necessarily going through diplomatic channels and without selecting specific works. However, this was a difficult rule to change, as evidenced by various correspondences with the contacted countries.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, Matarazzo and his wife, Yolanda Penteado – an aristocrat and socialite from São Paulo, and the niece of one of the greatest promoters of modernism in the city – embarked on an intense period of work. While Matarazzo sought support from his industrial friends, Penteado traveled to Europe to persuade the countries she visited to participate in the exhibition. Thanks to her strong connections and occasionally accompanied by Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins, who was married to diplomat Carlos Martins and

**19** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Mostre all'estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile, folder no. 1 (1951-73). Correspondence from Matarazzo to Pallucchini, 1 June 1950

**20** Countries like the USA chose their artists through MoMA, Italian artists were nominated by the Venice Biennale and other countries used representatives from their governments or embassies, as was the case with Mexico. Probably it was difficult to break some rules that were already established and frequent in the countries that already took part in the Venice Biennale, which is why the Brazilian system was later criticized by France, which asked the São Paulo Biennial to issue invitations directly to its delegation.



well-versed in the national and international art scene, she effectively served as Brazil's cultural ambassador. Penteado also received political backing for her visits, including letters signed by then-Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas.

France was the first country to join the Brazilian exhibition. Following that, Italy accepted the invitation, albeit at great cost. Initially reluctant, Holland changed its mind after Yolanda's visit, paving the way for participation from Belgium, Switzerland, and Great Britain. This shift encouraged other countries, including Japan, Canada, the United States, and various Central and South American nations, to join as well, accepting invitations directly from the Biennale's board of directors (Amarante 1989, 13).

The 1st São Paulo Biennial was inaugurated then on 20 October 1951, at the esplanade of Trianon, a site of historical significance due to its location on Avenida Paulista. The São Paulo City Hall designated this area for the Biennial,<sup>21</sup> which later sparked disputes between MAM and MASP. At that time, both institutions were based in a building on Rua 7 de Abril in São Paulo, and they both sought to establish their headquarters on the same site on Avenida Paulista, where MASP is located today.

Designed by Brazilian architects Luís Saia and Eduardo Kneese de Mello, the 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> pavilion, popularly known as the 'caixotão' (big box) and referred to by intellectuals as the 'Muro de Sartre' (Sartre's wall), was distinguished by its rigid, modern forms (Amarante 1989, 13). Inside, it housed the works of 21 countries participating in the São Paulo Biennial: eleven from the Americas, nine from Europe and one from Asia (*I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo* 1951, 42).

On the occasion of the 1st São Paulo Biennial, the International Architecture Exhibition (EIA) was established. Similar to Yolanda Penteado's efforts, it was Eduardo Kneese de Mello who traveled for two months, giving lectures on modern Brazilian architecture in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, England, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru, seeking participation in the EIA.<sup>22</sup> This exhibition would later, in 1973, be renamed as São Paulo International Biennial of Architecture (BIA), with effectively anticipating the Venice Architecture Biennale, which officially opened in 1980 (Herbst 2007, 82).

Additionally, exhibitions of Performing Arts, Film, Music, and a Ceramics Competition were organized that year, echoing similar events that had been held from the 1930s at the Venice Biennale. This reflects an effort to create an event comparable to its Venetian counterpart, with the São Paulo Biennial even being referred to in the Italian media as a rival to Venice.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the expressed rivalry, there was no genuine competition between the two Biennials. On the contrary, Matarazzo ensured that the São Paulo Biennial was scheduled in alternate years to the Venice Biennale, thus avoiding technical issues and preserving Italian support. His goal was to establish an official collaboration between the two art events, much like he

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**21** Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo FMS\_00024-2A. *Termo de Cessão do terreno do Trianon*.

**22** LINS, Paulo de Tarso Amendola. *Arquitetura nas Bienais internacionais de São Paulo* (1951-61), 27

**23** ASAC, FS, AV. *Raccolta Documentaria Extra Biennale. Mostre all'Estero. Biennale di Sao Paulo 1951-1971. "Sao Paulo rivale di Venezia". Il Momento*, 29 November 1951.

had done with MoMA in New York when he secured the support of Nelson Rockefeller for the creation of MAM.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 2** Francisco Matarazzo at the 33rd Venice Biennale, 1966.  
Courtesy of Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo - Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

Italian immigration in São Paulo played a pivotal role in fostering cultural collaborations between Brazil and Italy in the post-war period, particularly evident in the context of the Venice Biennale. This collaboration laid the groundwork for various projects, albeit of different scales, between notable institutions and figures, such as Matarazzo at the MAM and Bardi at the MASP.<sup>25</sup> Their efforts not only opened doors for their respective institutions but also sought to establish lasting partnerships that bridged the artistic communities of both countries. Through their engagement with international institutions, they facilitated a rich exchange of ideas and practices, enhancing the cultural landscape in Brazil and reinforcing ties with abroad.

Another significant aspect to highlight is that Brazil's participation in the Venice Biennale provided an immediate impetus for the creation of the São Paulo Biennial, benefiting from Italian support and involvement from its inception. Today, the São Paulo Biennial is often regarded as the 'primogenitor' of the Venetian one, which bolstered Brazil's credibility in the international cultural landscape, a country still finding its footing at the time.

**24** ASAC, FS, AV, serie Mostre all'estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile (1951-73), folder no. 18. Correspondence from Matarazzo to Pallucchini, 18 November 1950.

**25** After its debut in Venice, the MAM handled Brazil's representation at the Venice Biennale until 1963. The newly created Fundação Bienal de São Paulo then took over, managing this role until 1968 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed responsibility due to Matarazzo's declining health. In 1993, the Fundação Bienal resumed the task.



This newfound recognition attracted greater participation from countries across the Americas and beyond, fostering a spirit of new international solidarity and collaboration in a different geography of the arts.

The success of the São Paulo Biennial was so remarkable that, in its second edition, in 1953, it presented one of Picasso's most important works, *Guernica* (1937). This achievement was particularly impressive for a newly established biennial and further solidified its reputation as a vital platform for contemporary art enhancing Brazil's cultural profile but also facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas and artistic practices on a global scale [fig. 2].

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