

**Disputes at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo: *Limões* by Danilo Di Prete and its Award**  
**Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco**

**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to discuss the political and artistic implications around the award granted to the painting *Limões* (Lemons) by the Italian artist Danilo Di Prete (Zambra, 1911 - São Paulo, 1985) at the 1<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennial in 1951, as part of the Brazilian representation. The prize caused a lot of controversy in the Brazilian art world, mainly due to three issues. The first relates to the fact that the award was assigned to an Italian artist and not a Brazilian one; the second was that the visual language of Di Prete's award-winning work *Limões* was questioned for not being considered as modern as Max Bill's sculpture, which also received an award at the exhibition; and the third has to do with the suspicion that the prize was awarded to Di Prete because of his involvement in the organisation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. By focusing on this specific case and the controversies it caused, the paper proposes on the one side to analyse the political, national, and artistic factors that led to Di Prete's accolade at the exhibition. On the other, it aims to discuss the theoretical, political, and artistic assumptions that inspired the artist to create *Limões*.

**Keywords**

Danilo Di Prete, 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, Modern art in Brazil, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho

# Disputes at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo: *Limões* by Danilo Di Prete and its Award

Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco

fig. 1  
Danilo Di Prete, *Limões*, 1951.  
Oil on canvas, 48,6 cm x 64  
cm. Museu de Arte Moderna de  
São Paulo's Donation. Museu  
de Arte Contemporânea da  
Universidade de São Paulo.



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

[Danilo Di Prete, the] author of an incipient work [*Limões*], a modest imitation of abandoned forms used in his country, [was rewarded] whereas the great authentic Brazilian painters, undisputed ‘pioneers of modern art’ [were not].<sup>2</sup>

It is with these scorned words that the artist and critic Quirino Campofiorito (1902-1993) refers to the award granted to *Limões* in the context of the Brazilian representation at the 1<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennial (1951). The painting was made by the Italian artist Danilo Di Prete (Zambra, 1911 - São Paulo, 1985), who had immigrated to São Paulo in 1946, *Limões*'s [fig. 1]. Campofiorito's criticisms raised two significant issues. The first had to do with the fact that the artist was awarded regardless of the fact that the painting demonstrated artistic techniques no longer in use in his homeland. The second stemmed from the idea that Di Prete was not one of those “authentic Brazilians” who were, in his opinion, not only original and legitimate Brazilians, but also the pioneers of modern art in the country. [Fig. 1]

Such issues are present in a large part of what contemporaneous experts wrote about the award given to *Limões*.<sup>3</sup> They concern the expectations and assumptions that were being made about who should be awarded,<sup>4</sup> meanwhile pointing to what many considered modern and current at the time through the championing of works with figurative and abstract tendencies. In addition to these issues, there is a rumour that Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, the architect of the São Paulo Biennial, sponsored Di Prete for the award. Blurred by so many ethical and conceptual disputes, the artist and his award have always been discussed in a superficial way, by art critics and historians alike.<sup>5</sup>

The article will begin by examining the artist's biography, which, as previously mentioned, is little known even in local art histories. This will be followed by an analysis of the visual language employed in *Limões* and the selection criteria of the artworks displayed at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. The awarding of the prize will then be discussed with reference to the judging panel's attention to Brazilian artists, with the former of whom, according to the press, responsible for granting the award to Di Prete; and finally, the last section will recover some aspects of Di Prete's practice, thus proposing an alternative understanding of the artist beyond his work *Limões*.

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This article contains excerpts from the first two chapters of the PhD dissertation: Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco, *Danilo Di Prete em ação: a construção de um artista no sistema expositivo da Bienal de São Paulo* (PhD diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2018). All translations from the Italian are of the author. I am grateful to my Supervisor, Professor Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, for her support and guidance over the last decade and to Giuliana Di Prete Campari, who kindly authorised the use of images for this article and contributed greatly to my research.

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Quirino Campofiorito, “Declaração do Júri da ‘Bienal’”, *O Jornal* (October 27, 1951).

3

Some examples can be found at: Walter Zanini, “Último Passeio pelos Salões da Bienal”, *O Tempo* (December 21, 1951); Geraldo Ferraz, “II – Os Pintores Admitidos pelo Júri”, *Jornal de Notícias* (October 27, 1951); Ibiapaba Martins, “Os Pintores, Testemunhas de seu Tempo e a Bienal”, *Correio Paulistano*, October 31, 1951.

4

As is clear in the words of Antonio Bento: “It was expected that one of the three invited artists [Candido Portinari, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, and Lasar Segall] would triumph”, in Antonio Bento, “Surpresas da Bienal de São Paulo”, *Diário Carioca* (October 26, 1951).

5

Even if it were possible to find more information about the artist in Brazil (at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive/Bienal de São Paulo Foundation; the Arquivo Multimeios at the São Paulo Cultural Center, which holds the archive of the Department of Artistic Information and Documentation - IDART; and the family archive, which is maintained by Giuliana Di Prete Campari), Di Prete's name appears, in simplified fashion and generally associated with Matarazzo Sobrinho or with the problems caused by the successive awards, in compendiums about the exhibition, such as Agnaldo Farias, *50 anos: Bienal de São Paulo: 1951-2001* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2001); in dictionaries such as those of José Roberto Teixeira Leite, *Dicionário Crítico da Pintura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Art - Livre, 1988): 163-164; Roberto Pontual, *Dicionário das Artes Plásticas no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1969): 179-180; and even in criticisms full of prejudice, as we will see later, for example, in Pignatari's article from the early 2000s.

### From the Italian Artist in Arms to the “Most Famous Painter in Brazil”<sup>6</sup>

During the inter-war period, Danilo Di Prete established a recognised artistic career in the Tuscan town of Viareggio.<sup>7</sup> At a very young age he worked as a wall painter to help his family financially, and from the end of the 1920s onwards he gradually began to work with a group of artists in the city<sup>8</sup> as an easel painter and as a creator of puppets and floats for the famous Viareggio Carnival.

The artist’s paintings in this period were figurative and based on themes related to his surroundings: the navy, fishermen, and sailors, in addition to several still lifes and portraits. The artist’s visual language demonstrated a clear influence from the Italian *ritorno all’ordine* (Return to Order) movement, particularly evident in the works of Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) whose paintings were featured in exhibitions that the artist, Di Prete, informally participated in. Additional inspiration came from the works of Fortunato Depero (1892-1960) and Lorenzo Viani (1882-1936). Despite operating within an art system controlled by agents of the fascist regime, Di Prete participated in various regional, state, and national exhibitions and gained a comprehensive understanding of the necessary steps an artist should take within such a system<sup>9</sup> He was aware that every exhibition he participated in contributed to his recognition as an artist in the given context. He acknowledged that the Venice Biennale was the prime opportunity to gain the utmost acclaim.

When World War II began, he joined it by working as a radiotelegraph operator and draftsman, and participated in the group called “Italian Artists in Arms”<sup>10</sup> which worked at the service of the regime and under the Fine Arts Union. The latter produced war records that were displayed on a few occasions, open to a wide range of interpretations. With the end of the war, and in the most absolute poverty, he moved with his family to São Paulo in 1946.<sup>11</sup> Although the artist listed “painter” as his profession in his immigrant registration to signal his intention to join the São Paulo scene, his financial struggles forced him into a job as a wall painter. His work as an easel painter would progress at a slower pace compared to his job as an advertiser, and he regarded the latter profession as his initial occupation on Brazilian soil.

In 1947, Di Prete worked for the highly respected Standard Advertising Agency,<sup>12</sup> creating adverts and posters. This experience provided him with the opportunity to observe the emergence of commemorative events in Brazil, including the country’s interpretation of Valentine’s Day. During this time, he also experimented with the diverse expressive forms of visual language, showcasing his artistic versatility. In the advertisements for Clipper [fig. 2], the artist demonstrated greater synthesis, agility, and efficiency of brushstrokes. In contrast, the ads created for Casas do Linho Puro [fig. 3] and the São Paulo Jockey Club [fig. 4] communicated straightforward messages and provided more polished solutions.

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6

Translated title of the newspaper article: “Ha Vinto un Premio alla Biennale. È il Pittore Più Famoso del Brasile il Viareggino Danilo Di Prete”, *La Nazione, Cronaca di Viareggio* (c. 1966). Viareggio. Consulted at the Alfredo Catarsini Archive at the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Lorenzo Viani, in Viareggio, Italy.

7

At the Alfredo Catarsini Archive it is possible to see clippings that report his presence at the exhibitions. Other clippings (and a library) are available at Giuliana Di Prete Campari’s archive in São Paulo.

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Such as Alfredo Catarsini (1899-1993), Eugenio Pardini (1912-2003), Mario Marcucci (1910-1992) and Renato Santini (1912-1995).

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Rebollo, 1978.

10

On the group, see Marla Stone, “Potere e Spiritualità: La Prima Mostra degli Artisti Italiani in Armi del 1942”, *Memoria e Ricerca*, no. 33 (January - April 2010).

11

The family already had relatives in the city. For a deeper understanding of the reasons for their migration, see Rocco, Danilo Di Prete em ação, 25.

12

Standard was a large Brazilian agency that had been founded in 1933 by Cicero Leuenroth. For more information, see Luiz Augusto Cama, *Não conformistas, dissidentes e rebeldes: 80 anos de Standard + Ogilvy no Brasil* (São Paulo: Prêmio, 2013).

fig. 2  
Danilo Di Prete, Proof of  
advertisement created for  
Modas Clipper, August 1947, 28  
x 21 cm. Standard Advertising  
Agency. Giuliana Di Prete  
Campari Collection.



fig. 3  
Danilo Di Prete, Poster for  
Casas do Linho Puro, 1950s,  
60 x 40 cm. Giuliana Di Prete  
Campari Collection.



fig. 4  
Danilo Di Prete, Poster for  
Jockey Club, 1948, 60 x 40  
cm. Giuliana Di Prete Campari  
Collection.



Di Prete's work in advertising was fruitful and he only abandoned it around the 1960s when he was definitively able to support himself from the sales of his artworks. It was the prize under consideration in this article that launched his career. From that moment on, he participated in all subsequent Biennials, winning the first painting prize at the 8<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo for the second time, an honour he was the first to receive. This event, nourished by information provided by the painter, echoed in Viareggio's local press with the proud announcement that: "The Most Famous Painter in Brazil is the Viareggini Danilo Di Prete".<sup>13</sup>

Di Prete was highly prolific until the end of his life. He created paintings on canvas and murals, working with both figurative and informal abstract art. Additionally, he delved into kinetic language, crafting pieces with motors, as well as light and sound systems in the late 1960s. In general, however, even after his first award at the Biennial, he wasn't interested only in the fine arts, but also in painting public and private murals, the aforementioned advertising, and designing hallmarks, jewelry, calendars, and furniture.<sup>14</sup> In advertisements, for instance, he experimented with several languages and was an excellent poster artist who was widely renowned in the field.<sup>15</sup> He always sought to meet the needs of agencies by employing modern visual solutions. In addition to these creative practices, the artist had valuable expertise that proved vital in an emerging art system.<sup>16</sup> This knowhow

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"Ha Vinto un Premio alla Biennale", c. 1966.

14

I listed everything I could find related to his production in my PhD dissertation: *Danilo Di Prete em ação*. In this article, I chose to further elaborate on his trajectory in the area of advertising, since it was that in which he was most productive, after painting.

15

See *Publicidade & Negócios*: "O Primeiro Cartaz Digno de Ser Visto", *Revista Publicidade & Negócios* (June 1948): 32.

16

On this issue, see Maria Lucia Bueno, "O Mercado de Galerias e o Comércio de Arte Moderna: São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro nos Anos 1950-1960", *Sociedade e Estado* 20, no. 2 (May - August 2005): 377-402.

included activities such as organising, publicising, and setting up exhibitions. These were then adopted to promote his career as an artist through participation in different exhibition formats, publicising his activities among art historians and journalists,<sup>17</sup> or even collecting vast bibliographic material and distributing it to critics.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the lessons learned and the friends he made in Italy, he was soon able to put his expertise into practice in the conception and production of the Bienal de São Paulo, bringing Di Prete closer to Matarazzo Sobrinho.

### **Limões and the Selection of Artworks for the Brazilian Representation**

The Bienal de São Paulo has long been studied both in Brazil and abroad, and the first exhibition is discussed through different approaches.<sup>19</sup> In the words of the Brazilian-Italian artist Maria Bonomi (1935-): “[it was] basically the watershed moment of our artistic life [in Brazil]”.<sup>20</sup> The temporary pavilion in Trianon Park hosted an exhibition by the former Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP) which generated significant interest from both the art world and the wider public. The exhibition provided an opportunity to experience both local and international art production of the period.

The Brazilian art world was particularly impacted by another award that was granted to the Swiss artist Max Bill (1908-1994), who won the International Prize for Foreign Sculpture with his *Unidade Tripartida* (Tripartite Unity), 1948-1949.<sup>21</sup> This stainless steel piece, which was widely reviewed, reproduced and applauded by critics and artists alike, ended up being recurrently used as a param-

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Examples include: “Statement to Walter Zanini in 1969” in Walter Zanini, *História Geral da Arte no Brasil* (São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 1983), 647; Luiz Ernesto Machado Kawall, “Entrevista com Danilo Di Prete”, *Artes Reportagem* 1 (1972); “Statement by Danilo Di Prete” (September 1, 1976), initially provided by the Matarazzo Foundation Archive; cassette tape copy and transcription with the artist’s family, from the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation; “Statement by Danilo Di Prete to Aracy Amaral” (January 29, 1979), notes in the Archive of the Library of the Pinacoteca of the State of São Paulo; “Speech by Danilo Di Prete in the Lecture Series for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of MAM-SP” (October 9, 1979), cassette tape at the Arquivo Multimeios - São Paulo Cultural Center.

18

Rocco, *Danilo Di Prete em ação*, especially chapter 03.

19

Some examples can be mentioned: Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto, “1951, Arte e Internacionalização: a 1st Bienal Internacional de São Paulo”, in Ana Cavalcanti, Emerson Dionísio Oliveira (eds.), *Histórias da Arte em Exposições: Modos de ver e Exibir no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Rio Books, 2016); Bruno Pinheiro, “Que a arte possa vencer como fez o samba: Heitor dos Prazeres na 1ª Bienal de São Paulo”, in Paulo Miyada (ed.), *Bienal de São Paulo: desde 1951* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2022); Mariana Leão Silva, *Maria Leontina, Tarsila do Amaral, Prunella Clough e Germaine Richier: mulheres artistas e prêmios de aquisição na Primeira Bienal de São Paulo* (MA Thesis: University of São Paulo, 2020); Marina Cerchiaro, “As premiações das primeiras Bienais de São Paulo (1951-1965): um enfoque quantitativo e geográfico”, *MODOS. Revista de História da Arte*, no. 2 (May 2020): 55-72, doi: <https://doi.org/10.24978/mod.v4i2.4583>; Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, “A Bienal de São Paulo, o debate artístico dos anos 1950 e a constituição do primeiro museu de arte moderna do Brasil”, *Museologia & interdisciplinaridade*, no. 7 (October - November 2015); Laura Brunello, *La Biennale Internazionale d' Arte di San Paolo: tra Arte e Mercato* (MA Thesis: Università Ca'Foscari Venezia, 2011-2012); also of note is the presentation by Professor Laura Iamurri at CIHA - São Paulo “Motion Migrations”, 2022, titled “Modernity Abroad: Italy at the Bienal de São Paulo, the Early Years”. The proceedings have not been published yet, but the abstract of her presentation can be seen at [http://www.ciha2022.mac.usp.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CIHA\\_2022\\_Abstracts.pdf](http://www.ciha2022.mac.usp.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CIHA_2022_Abstracts.pdf), 154.

20

Maria Bonomi, “Bienal Sempre”, *Revista USP*, no. 52 (December 2001 - February 2002): 28, <https://www.revistas.usp.br/revusp/article/view/32922/35492>, accessed February 2023.

21

The image of the artwork can be seen at: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/16840>, accessed July 2022. As Heloisa Espada explains, the artist participates in the Swiss delegation as an independent artist, and not, as art history in Brazil usually reports, as part of the official representation (Heloisa Espada, “Além da ordem e da razão: A participação suíça na 1a Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo”, *MODOS revista de história da arte* 5, no. 1 (January - April 2021).

ter to invalidate the award granted to *Limões*.<sup>22</sup> An example of this is provided by the art historian Walter Zanini, who affirms that “some prizes even caused unrestrained revolt, as is the case of *Limões*, a painting with neo-academic characteristics that wins laurels at an exhibition in which an award is granted to Max Bill”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, an opposition was created between a piece understood as a major example of new artistic propositions in the Brazilian art world and a genre painting, a still life, made with an artistic language labeled as outdated, or produced with ‘abandoned’ forms from the artist’s homeland, as witnessed in Campofiorito’s affirmation.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, when observing *Limões*, it is clear that the artist did not engage with the most radical experiments of the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite his attempt to employ a post-cubist visual language style.<sup>25</sup> His figurative still life is painted in a figurative and naturalistic manner, with loose brushstrokes in the background and more precise ones on the table, bowl and fruits in the foreground, whose contours seem to have been drawn with the dry tip of the brush. The artist chose cold colours, which give the impression of degradation, if not for the discreet focus of light on one of the lemons and the pear. A careful analysis shows that the composition was well calculated with the presence of two isosceles triangles, one of them inverted, and both sharing the same vertical axis.

It is possible to suggest that Di Prete aimed to evoke his understanding of post-cubism as a reaction to the paintings he came across in the Italian art scene prior to his relocation to São Paulo, specifically the works of Gino Severini (1883-1966) from 1943 onward.<sup>26</sup> This is when Severini, after decades working with a more naturalistic language in the context of the Return to Order movement, re-approached the synthetic cubism<sup>27</sup> with which he had experimented in the early 1910s. The result, though, would be quite different, resulting more a decorative strategy in which his compositions feature coloured elements often surrounded by angular shadows, positioned in intersecting planes. In 1943, Severini’s painting *Natura morta con tavolozza* (Still life with palette)<sup>28</sup> presents precisely this new visual treatment of the canvas’s surface. Di Prete surely saw this painting at the exhibition IV Rome Quadriennale (1943), one of the last shows in which he took part just before moving to São Paulo.<sup>29</sup>

Di Prete’s figurative language choices in *Limões* were, therefore, conscious and deliberate. The painting was an object intended to end up in a museum.

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22

Its image was reproduced in many articles, such as: Yvonne Jean, “O Júri e os Premiados da Bienal de São Paulo”, *Correio da Manhã* (October 23, 1951); “Os Laureados da Bienal”, *Tribuna das Letras* (October 27-29, 1951); Flavio de Aquino, “A I Bienal de São Paulo”, *Diário de Notícias* (October 28, 1951); and reviewed in a comparative manner in others including: Walter Zanini, “Último Passeio pelos Salões da Bienal”, *O Tempo* (December 21, 1951); Geraldo Ferraz, “II – Os Pintores Admitidos pelo Júri”, *Jornal de Notícias* (October 27, 1951).

23

Walter Zanini, “Último Passeio pelos Salões da Bienal”, *O Tempo* (December 21, 1951).

24

Quirino Campofiorito, “Declaração do Júri da ‘Bienal’”, *O Jornal* (October 27, 1951).

25

A term that appears in some articles about other artists in the Italian context, as will be explained later. But it will be used by some critics in Brazil to refer to Di Prete’s production, as well as by the artist himself.

26

On that, see: Cesare Vivaldi, “Gli Anni Quaranta”, in Daniela Fonti (ed.), *Catalogo Ragionato Severini*, (Milan: Mondadori Editore, 1988), 473-475.

27

According to the systematisation proposed by Ingo F. Walther; Carsten-Peter Warncke, *Picasso* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), it took place between 1912 and 1915.

28

The image of the artwork can be seen at <https://www.farsettiarte.it/it/asta-0186-2/gino-severini-natura-morta-con-tavolozza.asp>, accessed March 2023. The painting was exhibited at the IV Rome Quadriennale (1943).

29

According to a statement given to the author on May 14, 2016 by Giuliana Di Prete Campari, the artist’s daughter, Severini was greatly admired by her father. See the website of the “Quadriennale d’Arte Nazionale di Roma”, especially its fourth edition in 1943, in which there is a list of the participants, among them, Di Prete: [https://www.quadriennaleidiroma.org/arbiq\\_web/index.php?sezione=quadrienniali&id=4&ricerca=1](https://www.quadriennaleidiroma.org/arbiq_web/index.php?sezione=quadrienniali&id=4&ricerca=1), accessed February 2023.



He did not opt for abstractionism, even though he had worked with it for the layout of the poster for the 1<sup>st</sup> National Advertising Salon at the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP), which was created at the end of 1950 [fig. 5], shortly before *Limões*. In this case the choice of abstract language for the poster was certainly determined by its scope: ephemerality and communicability. As mentioned above, the artist was inventive and receptive to the poster. Before the 1960s, he preached that it was essential to reduce the distance between art and advertising. It is possible that he was testing the limits of language and that this more temporary means of communicating with the public encouraged him to explore a tendency that was still experimental for him.<sup>30</sup> For Di Prete, the poster probably did not carry the weight of the so-called ‘great arts’,<sup>31</sup> as did celebrated painting, and it was a safe place in which to work more freely.

fig. 5  
Danilo Di Prete. Poster for the 1st National Advertising Salon at the Museum of Art of São Paulo, 1950. Giuliana Di Prete Campari Collection.



With regard to *Limões* it is plausible that the figurative option was chosen for two reasons. The first, as mentioned above, was that Di Prete, having seen the ‘post-cubist’ creations of the Italian art world shortly before his emigration, considered this visual solution to be the most ‘current’. At the same time, he could assume that a work with such characteristics would be suitable for an exhibition that derived from the Venetian one, which since 1948 had been recovering and reevaluating the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and their exponents. The second reason is related to the debates that took place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between the supporters of figurative and abstract tendencies, symbolised by the inaugural exhibition of the former Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP), titled *Do Figurativismo ao Abstracionismo* (From Figurative to Abstract Art), organised in 1949 by the museum’s first director, the Belgian Léon Degand. Di Prete witnessed the quarrel and debates in the press, such as those led by the critics Sérgio

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It is worth mentioning that the artist did not come into contact with abstract art only in São Paulo. He saw this type of production at exhibitions in which he took part in Italy.

31

Di Prete does not use these terms, nor will this article make any judgments in this regard. Inst the terms current at the time will be made use of, as clarified by: Silvana Brunelli, *Diálogo Entre as Artes Plásticas e a Publicidade no Brasil* (PhD diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2007), 54-68. Lourival Gomes Machado touches on the subject in the introduction to the catalogue of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. Lourival Gomes Machado, “Introdução”, in *I Bienal de São Paulo* (October 20 - December 23, 1951), exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1951), 22.

Milliet and Ibiapaba Martins, and the artist Emiliano Di Cavalcanti (1897-1976).<sup>32</sup> Di Cavalcanti, who has been regarded as one of Brazil's most significant modern artists since the Week of Modern Art (1922), vehemently opposed abstraction. He believed it lacked connection to the broader aims of art and the socio-political realities of his country. Other artists joined him in this battle. Candido Portinari (1903-1962), who, like Di Cavalcanti, was one of the greatest representatives of modern art in Brazil, also spoke of abstraction as something that had already been born "old".<sup>33</sup> For both artists, in the wake of what modernist writer Mário de Andrade already preached, art should present elements that expressed Brazil, its people, and its customs, without succumbing to the fads of foreign "isms".<sup>34</sup>

In his first years in São Paulo, until approximately 1953 (on the occasion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo), Di Prete used only figurative language in his paintings. It can be suggested that he perceived this language as a means to establish himself in the field of artistic debates, with the protection provided by the Italian term post-cubism being a reliable strategy.<sup>35</sup> Otherwise, he may have opted for abstract language well-versed in exhibitions like *Do Figurativismo ao Abstracionismo*. In any case, figurative painting was the dominant style in the Brazilian art world before the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, and this would be reflected in the Brazilian representation at the exhibition. Within a very heterogeneous set of over three hundred works, submitted to a selection jury and including *Limões* and the two other paintings by Di Prete, *Rua do Gasômetro* (Gasometer Street, n.d.) and *Natureza Morta* (Still Life, 1949), it is worth recalling the strong presence precisely of Di Cavalcanti and Portinari as guest artists with special rooms dedicated to their works.<sup>36</sup>

The works selected to represent Brazil had been created by artists linked to the modernist movement of the 1920s, such as Anita Malfatti (1889-1964) and Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973); the already extinct figurative groups of São Paulo, Santa Helena<sup>37</sup> and Família Artística Paulista (São Paulo Artistic Family);<sup>38</sup> concrete<sup>39</sup> and informal<sup>40</sup> abstractionists; the so-called "primitives";<sup>41</sup> figurative artists from the Japanese-Brazilian group Seibe;<sup>42</sup> and Italian immigrants,<sup>43</sup> in addition to other quite eclectic artists such as: Milton Dacosta (1915-1988), Flávio de Carvalho

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There is a vast bibliography on the issue from which two references will be indicated here: Glória Ferreira, *Figuração x Abstração – Brasil final anos 40* (São Paulo: Instituto de Arte Contemporânea, 2013); Aracy Amaral, *Arte Para Quê? A Preocupação Social na Arte Brasileira 1930-1970* (São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 2003).

33

Ferreira, *Figuração x Abstração*, 136.

34

On the topic, see: Tadeu Chiarelli, "Naturalismo, Regionalismo e Retorno à Ordem no Ocaso do Modernismo Brasileiro" [1996] in *Um Modernismo Que Veio Depois* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2012).

35

He would take a public position in this debate only in 1953; see Walter Zanini, "Di Prete Procura Nova Linguagem para sua Arte. Ultrapassada a Fase dos 'Limões' com que Levantou o Prêmio Nacional de Pintura da I Bienal – Uma Tradição que Pesa nos Ombros - Cartazista de Muitos Prêmios, mas Pintor sem Público", *O Tempo* (June 21, 1953), consulted at the archive of Giuliana Di Prete Campari.

36

Other guests were: Lasar Segall (1891-1957), Victor Brecheret (1894-1955), Bruno Giorgi (1905-1993), Maria Martins (1894-1973), Oswald Goeldi (1895-1961), and Lívio Abramo (1903-1993).

37

Mario Zanini (1907-1971), Aldo Bonadei (1906-1974), Francisco Rebolo (1902-1980), Fulvio Pennacchi (1905-1992), and Alfredo Volpi (1896-1988).

38

Paulo Rossi Osir (1890-1959) and Vittorio Gobbis (1894-1968).

39

Waldemar Cordeiro (1925-1973), Luiz Sacilotto (1924-2003), Lothar Charoux (1912-1987), Anatol Wladyslaw (1913-2004).

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Antônio Bandeira (1922-1967).

41

Heitor dos Prazeres (1898-1966) and José Antonio da Silva (1909-1996)

42

Tomoo Handa (1906-1996), Tikashi Fukushima (1920-2001), Tadashi Kaminagai (1899-1982)

43

For example: Paolo Rissoni (1925-1989), Tiziana Bonazzola (1921-2011), Gaetano Miani (1920-2009), and Gastone Novelli (1925-1968).

(1899-1973), Antonio Gomide (1895-1967), José Pancetti (1902-1958), Carybé (1911-1997), and Yolanda Mohalyi (1909-1978). It is clear from this selection that a group characterised by diverse styles and artistic languages included not just Brazilian artists.

The artistic director of this 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal, Lourival Gomes Machado, was aware of this heterogeneity. In the catalogue, he explains that:

although the selection did not represent a panorama of Brazilian modern art, something almost impossible in a set equipped from the spontaneous presentation of works in limited number, it is still a representative sample of what is being produced today in Brazil.<sup>44</sup>

The selection for this exhibition had been made by the artists Tomás Santa Rosa (1909-1956) and Clovis Graciano (1907-1988), and by the critics Quirino Campofiorito and Luís Martins, with the support of Matarazzo Sobrinho. It is noteworthy that each of the three jurors utilised figurative language in their respective works. Graciano, a former member of the Santa Helena Group, defended figurativism in his art review while also expressing support for the Return to Order movement in the face of abstract art's progress.<sup>45</sup> Luís Martins was the only member who did not seem to adopt an extremist position.<sup>46</sup> In fact, he explained to the newspapers that having to choose among so many artists, the jury decided on those works that, in addition to their intrinsic qualities, were also most characteristic of modern art in Brazil.<sup>47</sup> It is evident that the definition of modern art and the reflection of Brazil's production during that period were primarily based on figurative tendencies. This is discernible from the selection criteria of the jury, the artists chosen for special rooms, and the Brazilian representation. However, it should be noted that despite this preference for figurative art, it cannot be categorised as academic.<sup>48</sup> Although the themes of the artworks were often from conventional genres of painting associated with the naturalism of the Return to Order movement, they still presented a visual quality that referred to the surface of the canvas and offered multiple viewpoints to the viewer.<sup>49</sup>

### The Jury and the Award

Once the works comprising the Brazilian and foreign contributions were exhibited, it was necessary for the awarding jury to choose and publicise those that they considered the best of the exhibition.<sup>50</sup> According to the catalogue of the exhibition, the award had to be decided by the museum's artistic director, two members of the selection jury chosen by the artists, and at least three international art critics nominated by the biennial foundation. Nevertheless, what appeared in the media was that the

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Lourival Gomes Machado, "Introdução", in *I Bienal de São Paulo*, 17.

45

Beatriz Pinheiro de Campos, *Quirino Campofiorito e Mário Pedrosa: Entre a Figuração e a Abstração. A Crítica de Arte e o Surgimento da Arte Abstrata no Brasil (1940 a 1960)* (MA Thesis: Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, 2014), especially chapter 03.

46

See in Ana Luisa Martins, José Armando Pereira da Silva (eds.), *Luís Martins: um Cronista de Arte em São Paulo nos Anos 1940* (São Paulo: MAM-SP, 2009).

47

Luís Martins, "Reflexões de um Membro do Júri" (September, 27, 1951), in *Luís Martins*, 354-355.

48

In reference to the teaching transmitted at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes, strongly contested by the modernists.

49

An example is the painting *Moringa* by Volpi, no date (*I Bienal de São Paulo*, exh. cat.), 191.

50

The members of the jury were: Émile Langui (Belgium); Eric Newton (England); Jan Van As (Netherlands); Jacques Lassaigue (France); Jorge Romero Brest (Argentina); Marco Valsecchi (Italy); René d'Harnoncourt (USA); Wolfgang Pfeiffer (Germany); Lourival Gomes Machado, Sérgio Milliet, and Tomás Santa Rosa (Brazil).

final decision on awards for Brazilian artists was made by Brazilian members alone. As such, it becomes crucial to discuss the choices and rationale behind this decision in greater detail.

At the time of the Bienal de São Paulo, Sérgio Milliet was a renowned art critic from São Paulo. Since the 1930s, he had had a significant influence on the art scene. In his book, *Pintura Moderna* (Modern Painting), published in 1938, Milliet advocates for the creation of a public museum dedicated to modern art, which would later become the former MAM-SP. Additionally, he comments on exhibitions within the city, praising figurative artists like Aldo Bonadei, Francisco Rebolo, and Clóvis Graciano. He also criticises experiments with abstract language, although refrains from naming any specific artist. Four years later, in *Marginalidade da Pintura Moderna* (Marginalisation of Modern Painting), Milliet proposed an explanatory model directly related to the degree of communicability of works to the public. In addition to this model, Milliet evaluated the state of art at the time and predicted the paths it would take, while also criticising Dadaist, Surrealist and abstract art.

By the end of the 1940s, his critical attitude towards abstract art had become less and less pronounced, as can be seen in the inaugural exhibition of the former MAM-SP, when Milliet declared that he was neither a “partisan of abstract art” nor “a blind enthusiast of figurative art” or any other tendency.<sup>51</sup> In his words, “what always matters, above research, fashions, doctrines, is artistic achievement”.<sup>52</sup> In clashes staged through the press, the critic would take a more neutral position, opposing any exclusivist stance, but would suffer attacks from the defenders of both sides precisely because of his lack of a clear position. In any case, he tried to be receptive to research in artistic language by understanding the context in which it was carried out. As for national versus international production, Milliet was concerned with the absorption of foreign tendencies and how these could compromise local production. A text published on the occasion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo addresses the issue: “this event will serve as a school and a source of information for Brazilian artists. [...] We have to succeed in expressing ourselves, our moment, our people, to take advantage of the lessons of the old world”.<sup>53</sup> The critic thought it opportune to “take advantage of the lessons”,<sup>54</sup> but not to embrace them indiscriminately.

The other member of the jury, Tomás Santa Rosa, had a more heterogeneous background. In addition to being an art critic, he painted, illustrated, worked as a visual programmer, and created scenography for theatre plays. According to his writings from the late 1930s, he believed that the future of Brazilian and international art was related to *métier*. In the decades that followed, he would reaffirm that any artist worthy of the name must master the smallest craft secrets of the genre he cultivates. What mattered most to him was the command of the *métier*.<sup>55</sup>

The visual language Santa Rosa used to create his own works was varied, ranging from metaphysical to cubist to abstract. However, according to the biography written by Cássio Barsante, his main concern was figurative art, his real *raison d'être*, and he always considered Portinari to be his master.<sup>56</sup> At the time of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal, although his paintings were figurative, Santa Rosa was of the opinion that both tendencies, based on the mastery of the *métier*, could coexist in the broader concept of visual diversity.

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51

Sérgio Milliet, *Do Figurativismo ao Abstracionismo* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1949), 19.

52

Milliet, *Do Figurativismo ao Abstracionismo*, 21.

53

Sérgio Milliet, “À margem da I Bienal”, in Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves (ed.), *Sérgio Milliet, Crítico de Arte* (São Paulo: Perspectiva; Edusp, 1992), 91.

54

Milliet, “À margem da I Bienal”, 91.

55

Cássio Emmanuel Barsante, *Santa Rosa em Cena* (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Nacional de Artes Cênicas, 1982), 110.

56

Barsante, *Santa Rosa em Cena*, 12.

The third member of the jury, Lourival Gomes Machado, who was to become one of the greatest defenders of informal art from the late 1950s onwards, had previously focused on Minas Gerais Baroque and Brazilian Modernism. Since the 1940s, he had appreciated artists who worked with a figurative tendency with a more expressionist approach, such as Graciano at the time of the Santa Helena group and, in the context of Modernism, the production of Segall. According to Ana Cândida Avelar, although he wrote little at the time of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, Gomes Machado's criticism of figurative and, later, abstract art, like that of Mário de Andrade, was motivated by the search for an art that would express what were then considered to be typically Brazilian.<sup>57</sup>

Arguably, the three jurors wanted to reward an artistic production that, despite its contact with foreign languages and the benefits that can be derived from them, presents elements linked to the idea of national production and demonstrates mastery of the *métier* without appearing 'academic', but rather modern.

Bearing these concerns in mind, it is worth returning to *Limões*. If it is easy to understand that it was accepted by the selection jury, it is difficult to imagine why it was rewarded. After all, it neither presented a theme understood in national terms (such as Di Cavalcanti's *Carnival in Ouro Preto* or *Fishermen*, or Portinari's *Cangaceiros*, *Migrants*, or *First Mass in Brazil*<sup>58</sup>), nor was its language particularly disruptive. However, if one wants to venture a hypothesis for this choice, it is plausible that an immediate point in its favour was that *Limões* reflected the 'safe' tendency of figurative art and the mastering of the *métier*. Even though it did not present a specifically 'Brazilian theme', a still life was something highly indicative of the Brazilian representation and, therefore, not out of tune with the broader set.

A second point about *Limões*'s imagery is that it could be considered 'innovative' when compared to some of the works in the Brazilian cohort, such as Rossi Osir's *Still Life* [fig. 6]. Osir's painting is largely indebted to his apprenticeship with Italian *Novecento* and was certainly not considered the most contemporary. We see a rigid composition with a naturalistic figure in the foreground and a metaphysical landscape in the background, in perspective. All the elements were carefully designed with an economical palette of downgraded tones, in a supporting role.

*Limões*, on the other hand, can be placed within the context of a figuration that introduced a novel exploration of form that was contemporarily necessary. However, it never abandoned the figure outright or introduced a new conception of pictorial space, unlike the works of abstract-concrete artists.<sup>59</sup> It was necessary to innovate, but without going beyond certain limits, some of which were imposed by the members of the jury and some of which were imposed by the narratives proposed by the special spaces. These hypotheses are questionable, because other artists also wanted to present new problems based on the figurative tendency, but often in a much more radical way. They achieved this through the use of overlapping planes or flatter surfaces, which drew attention to the flatness of the canvas, or through greater stylisation and synthesis of forms. Such productions were figurative, but far from naturalism. Certainly, the results were achieved both by Italian artists living in Brazil, such as Di Prete, and by Brazilians already dear to the art world.<sup>60</sup> The reason why these artists were not chosen to receive the award leads us to a crucial point: the suspicion that the laurels were granted to Di Prete due to his sponsorship of Matarazzo Sobrinho.

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Ana Cândida Avelar, *A Raiz Emocional: Arte Brasileira na Crítica de Lourival Gomes Machado* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2014), 17. On Mário de Andrade and the issue of Brazilianess, see Tadeu Chiarelli, "Não cairás no cubismo. Mário de Andrade e as artes visuais. Contra as vanguardas históricas, Mário de Andrade propõe para o Brasil uma arte moderna, porém atenta à tradição e à brasilidade". *Cienc. Cult.* 74, no. 2 (2022): 1-9, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5935/2317-6660.20220022>, accessed January 2023.

58

The list of works by both artists can be seen at: *I Bienal de São Paulo*, 166-167.

59

See, for example, Waldemar Cordeiro and Luiz Sacilotto, who would be part of the Ruptura group, founded in São Paulo in 1952. This group would be a milestone in the Brazilian art scene, spreading the abstract-concrete language in the country.

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The former include Rissoni and Bonazzola. Among the latter, Mario Zanini and Antonio Gomide, to name but a few.

fig. 6  
Paulo Rossi Osir, *Still Life*,  
1939. Oil on plywood, 62 x 70  
cm. Wanda Svevo Historical  
Archive / Bienal de São Paulo  
Foundation.



### The Agents Involved in a Contested Award

As soon as the prize was awarded to Di Prete, critics and artists in Brazil reacted strongly to the decision and immediately expressed their disagreement. The many criticisms had certain points in common<sup>61</sup>: firstly, the jury had made a mistake by awarding the prize to an Italian artist who was not a native Brazilian. This was felt to be to the detriment of many Brazilians who represented the latest developments in national art. Secondly, the decision to award the prize to new names and avoid established ones such as Di Cavalcanti, Portinari and Segall was seen as a desire for originality. Finally, there was the sponsorship of Di Prete by Matarazzo Sobrinho. Each of these aspects raises different problems. The first concerns the artist's Italian origin. According to the exhibition's regulations, any foreigner residing in Brazil for more than two years could compete for the first prize in national painting in the same way as someone born in Brazil.<sup>62</sup> In other words, there was no room for criticism on that matter. The issue went further, having to do with the 'foreign' visual language used by the artist.

An article published in the *Tribuna das Letras Rio de Janeiro* addresses the jury's indecision between Di Prete and Brazilian artist Maria Leontina Dacosta

61

See for instance Yvonne Jean, "O Júri e os Premiados da Bienal de São Paulo", *Correio da Manhã* (October 23, 1951); Quirino Campofiorito, "Declaração do Júri da 'Bienal'", *O Jornal* (October 27, 1951); Ibiapaba Martins, "Os Pintores, Testemunhas de seu Tempo e a Bienal", *Correio Paulistano* (October 31, 1951); Walter Zanini, "Último Passeio pelos Salões da Bienal", *O Tempo* (December 21, 1951); Geraldo Ferraz, "II – Os Pintores Admitidos pelo Júri", *Jornal de Notícias* (October 27, 1951); Raul Netto, "Escândalo na Bienal", *Hoje* (October 26, 1951); "Querem Debate Público no Recinto da Bienal", *Diário da Noite* (October 30, 1951); Patrícia Galvão, "Considerações Sobre a Bienal e os Limões do Primeiro Prêmio", *Fanfulla* (October 31, 1951).

62

*I Bienal de São Paulo*, 25.

(1917-1984), offering a perspective on the issue. According to the columnist, they were tied in the number of votes, but Di Prete ended up winning, surprising everyone:

The awarded work [...] is not representative of current Brazilian painting, since it does not hide its Italian origin. Its author, in fact, is a painter who is still a product of the great modern Italian painting, especially that descending from Morandi and Carrà. Di Prete, who is undoubtedly a sensible painter [...] is not yet a truly Brazilian artist.<sup>63</sup>

The second problem is that, if the jury members defended themselves from criticism by saying that the award was meant to promote new artists instead of already illustrious ones, this did not correspond to reality because three artists with special rooms were also awarded first prizes: Brecheret (First National Sculpture Prize), Giorgi (Acquisition Prize), and Oswald Goeldi (1895-1961, First National Engraving Prize).

It is not possible to locate an official document which explains the reasons for the choices; there is only the record with the final decision.<sup>64</sup> However, an article in the *Correio da Manhã* newspaper reproduced an interview with some of the jurors. The three Brazilians asserted that the prize was given to Di Prete because famous artists were excluded, since they wanted to make room for new talents. Regarding the quality of *Limões*, they emphasised that “if the awarded work is not excellent, it is because the general Brazilian level is not very high”.<sup>65</sup> This explanation was given *a posteriori*, as the exhibition catalogue had stated the opposite: the Brazilian representation was a reflection of what was being done in the country. Individually, the critics sought to position themselves. Santa Rosa affirmed that Brazilian painting was going through an impressive crisis and that the Brazilian representation was an amorphous mass. He also stated that the Brazilian jury members honestly tried to grant the award to the artist that was most representative and worked to “fix the physiognomy of his people”: Portinari.<sup>66</sup>

Returning to Milliet’s explanations, his discomfort in dealing with the situation becomes evident. In one of his articles, he asserts that the general level of the paintings was not “so bad” and criticises those who played “abstractionist games”.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, he claims not to be against this tendency, reiterating his position of neutrality and emphasising the need to seek a national art, “an expression of ourselves, of our moment, and of our people”.<sup>68</sup> Although his answer encompasses several points, he does not explain the choice to acknowledge Di Prete, nor does he provide explanations to an art world which affirmed that he was the one who had made the decision. The art critic Antonio Bento, in turn, just said that “in the face of the confirmed impasse and to avoid a greater surprise, [Milliet] broke the tie, by voting for Danilo Di Prete”.<sup>69</sup> The Italian critic Marco Valsecchi, who was dispatched to the Bienal de São Paulo to replace Rodolfo Pallucchini, sent his colleague an assessment of the exhibition, also discussing the discomfort with the award and the tie:

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“Os Laureados da Bienal”, *Tribuna das Letras* (October 29, 1951).

64

Available for consultation at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation.

65

[no title], *Correio da Manhã* (October 23, 1951). Available at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation.

66

Tomás Santa Rosa, “A Bienal de São Paulo: sua Importância e Vitalidade”, in Barsante, *Santa Rosa em Cena*, 160-162.

67

Sérgio Milliet, *Diário Crítico* (São Paulo: Martins, 1951), 99-103.

68

Milliet, *Diário Crítico*, 99-103.

69

Antonio Bento, “Surpresas da Bienal de São Paulo”, *Diário Carioca* (October 26, 1951).

the attention of the press concerns the Brazilian section; the controversies are numerous and the jury's verdict, which "jubileed" the masters, offered many pretexts. The fact that the winner of the Brazilian section (Danilo Di Prete) is an Italian who has been living in Brazil for two or three years offers other arguments, even of resentment [...] It is not easy to admit, in the field of local artists, that the award has gone to a foreigner [...] and at a certain moment during the voting I made the proposal to split the prize between the two emerging names, that of Di Prete and the Brazilian Leontina da Costa [sic]. In general, they [members of the jury] were cordial and fair.<sup>70</sup>

The third Brazilian member, Gomes Machado, commented on the jury's decision only in the following year. Although he did not provide a deep reflection on Di Prete's case, he revealed that almost no one, including himself, agreed with the exhibition's selection and award juries.<sup>71</sup> He also drew attention to political interests in the final distribution of the awards.<sup>72</sup>

It is possible that Machado was referring to the third aspect mentioned earlier: that Matarazzo Sobrinho had sponsored Di Prete for the award. In the newspaper *Fanfulla*, writer and journalist Patrícia Galvão suggests that he had manipulated the award.<sup>73</sup> Such an assumption, which echoed the thoughts of many Brazilian critics and artists, was to persist for a long time, as the poet and essayist Décio Pignatari attested in 2001 in a review of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bienal de São Paulo, in which Pignatari recalls that Matarazzo Sobrinho's inaugural speech was a strange event of disdain in which the:

São Paulo intelligentsia, laughing and talking, did not even listen to him. And the patron would get revenge, lengthily and methodically, first, by having the first prize given to a mediocre painting titled *Limões*, by an almost unknown illustrator of leaflets named Di Prete.<sup>74</sup>

As might be expected, there is no record of an official stance on the controversy from the patron at the time of the award. Nevertheless, what is undeniable is that Matarazzo Sobrinho and Di Prete had always enjoyed a close relationship. Yet there was also an unsolved issue between them. From 1969 until his death, Di Prete came to publicly assert that he had given Matarazzo Sobrinho, in December 1949, the idea of creating an exhibition in the biennial format. He claimed that after understanding the São Paulo art scene through his knowledge of the Italian art system, he realised that there was room for an exhibition like Venice's.<sup>75</sup> However the patron had already expressed, through an interlocutor, his desire to have such an exhibition ever since

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Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Mostre all'Estero. Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile, Busta 1.

71

Machado believed the problem was related to the composition of the two juries and the fact they followed the model of the Venice Biennale. See Lourival Gomes Machado, "Se Nem Sempre Conseguiram os Membros do Júri Agir Mais Livremente, É Porque Traziam de seus Governos Expressa Recomendação de Conseguir Prêmios para suas Representações", *Folha da Manhã* (1952). Consulted at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation.

72

*Folha da Manhã* (1952).

73

Patrícia Galvão, "Considerações sobre a Bienal e os Limões do Primeiro Prêmio", *Fanfulla* (October 31, 1951).

74

Décio Pignatari, "Desvio Para o Concreto", *Folha de São Paulo* (April 20, 2001). To clarify, according to a newspaper article, "Atribuídos os prêmios da I Bienal", *A Época* (October 21, 1951), the choice of the prizes took place at the opening of the exhibition and was announced in the media on the following day. "Minutes of the awards meeting" (October 22, 1951), Wanda Svevo Historical Archive/Bienal de São Paulo Foundation.

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This information would be repeated by him a few times, as in the statement given in the context of the conference cycle for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MAM-SP, on October 9, 1979 (consulted at Arquivo Multimeios at the São Paulo Cultural Center).



the creation of the former MAM-SP in 1948.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, Di Prete's role in the initiation of the biennial was the catalyst for the consolidation of the idea.<sup>77</sup> Once the exhibition was underway, the artist was involved in numerous activities that went beyond simply exhibiting his paintings. He worked on the assembly, painted walls, helped to raise cash prizes, and welcomed the Italian delegation at the exhibition.<sup>78</sup>

Having considered all the factors involved in the awarding of *Limões* and the various statements that point to the nomination of winners and the awarded collaborators, Matarazzo Sobrinho instructed Milliet to be the 'tie breaker' in the dispute between Di Prete and Leontina. Such a suggestion would fit the critic very well, given that he was romantically involved with Leontina's sister, Maria Eugênia Franco.<sup>79</sup> The choice of Di Prete could therefore avoid comments about possible personal favouritism. The hypothesis of Matarazzo Sobrinho's nomination of Di Prete is reinforced by the range of competing works of equal or greater experimental weight, by better known artists or by those who, like Di Prete, were immigrants.

Intertwined with the aforementioned reasons for Di Prete's recognition are two additional details raised by Maria Bonomi.<sup>80</sup> The first is that the prize awarded to Di Prete was a gift for the artist and for Matarazzo Sobrinho, since the latter was fond of him; second, that giving the award to Di Prete was like "giving the peninsula an award". In other words, it would mean that Matarazzo Sobrinho was simultaneously recognising Di Prete's efforts and contribution and demonstrating the prestige conferred to the Italian participants at the biennial to the directors of the Venice Biennale, thus strengthening diplomatic ties.<sup>81</sup>

### Not So Final Considerations

At the 6<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, Di Prete was granted a special room [fig. 7], in a gesture which was widely accepted by the Brazilian art world. It was the first and only time that he would receive such a favourable welcome. At the time, Di Prete and José Geraldo Vieira, the critic who wrote the text for the catalogue, made an interesting retrospective of his artistic career until then:

Here, his visual journey is represented by works made in Brazil, where he arrived in 1946 [...] Escaping the war, he emigrated to Brazil and would later collect [...] in the short span of four years, 23 prizes awarded for his advertising activity in poster contests. In 1951, however, here in São Paulo, he had both a wonderful and terrible surprise, for although it was an honor, it caused trouble: at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal, accepted in our contingent as a foreigner living in Brazil for more than two years, the international jury awarded him the Grand Prize for Brazilian Painting. The astonished elation turned into unease. For although he is not an intruder, and respects our painting and even allows himself to cannibalize through it, Danilo Di Prete fears xenophobia and resentment. Responsibility and self-love forced him to work even

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76

Ibiapaba Martins, "Duas Entrevistas Oportunas", *Correio Paulistano* (November 14, 1948).

77

On this issue, see Rocco, *Danilo Di Prete em ação*, 2018.

78

It is important to highlight that he was not the only one who assumed different roles in the production of the exhibition. Aldemir Martins and Marcelo Grassmann also contributed with other activities. Martins was even awarded the drawing prize at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo.

79

As commented in Silva, *Maria Leontina, Tarsila do Amaral, Prunella Clough e Germaine Richier*, 112.

80

Conversation with the author, September 15, 2015.

81

Matarazzo Sobrinho made a major effort beforehand to approach the directors of the Venice Biennale in order to receive an official seal of approval. This issue is explored in chapter 02 of Rocco, *Danilo Di Prete em ação*.

harder; he participated in contests here in Brazil and abroad. The bad luck of laurels haunts him [...] Gradually, the figurative artist of trench scenes, elderly faces, and lyrical episodes, the neo-cubist of still lifes, the landscaper of bucolic themes, the sensible chromatic painter, moves toward abstract art. [...] He desires a modern art of his time [...] In the atrium, [we see] the neo-impressionist figurative art of the émigré, with his saddlebag of pigments and European themes. Then in the vestibule, the metaphysician and the neo-cubist who is equidistant from De Chirico and Carrà. In the actual lobby, the informal artist.<sup>82</sup>

Without considering the possibility of a supposed evolution that begins in figuration and reaches its apex in informal abstraction, the critic's words about the prize seem to touch on a greater problem involved in the award. The words 'intruder', 'xenophobia', and 'resentment' indicate how Di Prete was perceived and treated by the Brazilian art world both during and after the 1951 event. The unfortunate association with this award, irrevocably damaged the artist's reputation.

This reductive reading, always reiterated by Brazilian historiography, has prevented scholars from grasping significant aspects of Di Prete's career, such as his contributions to the so-called applied arts. The diverse visual languages evident in his advertisements and posters could, for instance, be examined within the wider context of advertising creations during the period, which were significantly impacted by both European and American tendencies. Under the umbrella of applied arts, it would also be fascinating to consider the illustrations produced by Di Prete for newspapers and books, as well as his panels and murals in spaces such as hotels, banks, sports clubs, and private buildings. Furthermore, it would be worth examining how he tried to meet the demands for those commissioned works, by exploring the visual techniques he employed at the time. These latter amount to a vast and interesting artistic production that could be the subject of further reflection.

In addition to his work as a painter and draughtsman, there is an important part of his heritage that has to do with the expertise he acquired and applied in Italy, and later in São Paulo, in organising and promoting exhibitions. A relevant skill that proved useful in the production of an exhibition on the scale of a biennial, in a city that still lacked a developed art system. In addition to exhibiting, Di Prete contributed to the exhibition with a variety of activities, from the more practical, such as painting walls, to public relations, such as welcoming the Italian delegation.

Di Prete's relationship with the biennial was complex and did not end with the first exhibition. Indeed, it is arguably precisely because of the artist's involvement with the biennial, since its conception, that Matarazzo Sobrinho favoured him, even though there is no supporting documentation other than written or oral statements from the artist's contemporaries to substantiate this.<sup>83</sup> It is easy to agree with Francisco Alambert and Polyanna Canhête, who suggest that Matarazzo Sobrinho's "enchantment" with and "generosity" towards Di Prete (not only at this first biennial) both have to do with the painter's "assistance".<sup>84</sup> The authors also recall that "the constant awards granted to Di Prete have always divided critics, serving as a subject for debates and distrust".<sup>85</sup> A fact that not only had a negative impact on the artist's recognition, but also overshadowed his various activities and productions.

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José Geraldo Vieira, "Danilo Di Prete", in *VI Bienal de São Paulo* (October 1 - December 31, 1961), exh. cat. (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1961), 33-35.

83

Some statements can be found at: Liliana Mendes, *Tomos de Entrevistas I e II* (Unpublished research), Wanda Svevo Historical Archive / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation.

84

Francisco Alambert, Polyanna Canhête, *As Bienais de São Paulo: da Era do Museu à Era dos Curadores (1951-2001)* (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2004), 37-38.

85

Alambert, Canhête, *As Bienais de São Paulo*, 37-38.

fig. 7  
Image of the Special room by  
Danilo Di Prete at the 6<sup>th</sup> Bienal  
de São Paulo. Wanda Svevo  
Historical Archive / Bienal de  
São Paulo Foundation.



In any case, even if *Limões* was favoured, two points should be highlighted. The first is that it appears evident that, regardless of the artist, a figurative work would have won the national painting prize at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. This theory is supported not only because *Limões* competed with Leontina's work, but also because Portinari and Di Cavalcanti, with their special rooms, were strong candidates for the prize. The use of a national theme also does not seem to have been imperative, since Leontina's work was also a still life. Thus, the award for *Limões* cannot be considered an anomaly.

Nor would it be strange for an Italian to have won the award, which leads to a second point, since most of the prizes awarded at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo were addressed to Italian artists, in addition to the specific prizes created for them.<sup>86</sup> It is not by chance that Valsecchi reported to Pallucchini that "the hospitality reserved for the Italian delegation was very cordial", which reinforces Bonomi's argument.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, although agreeing with the hypothesis that Di Prete was favoured, it is crucial to recognise that the award as a whole must be problematised. Di Prete, labeled as a sponsored painter and creator of a 'mediocre painting', was

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Such as "Italian from Rio de Janeiro" and "Italian from São Paulo" (*I Bienal de São Paulo*, 1951, 41). According to the quantitative survey carried out by Marina Mazze Cerchiaro, at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, the largest number of prizes was granted to the Italian delegation. Marina Mazze Cerchiaro, *Escultoras e Bienais: a construção do reconhecimento artístico no pós-guerra* (PhD Diss.: Universidade de São Paulo, 2020), 75.

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"Letter from Valsecchi to Pallucchini" (November 10, 1951). Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Mostre all'Estero. Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile, Busta 1.

relegated to the margins, always appearing as a strange character in historiography and criticism. This contribution, then, seeks to reverse the historical framework, by reviewing his presence in an expanded way. It invites a perspective that is not limited to the field of painting, but that approaches Di Prete in a more transversal way. Otherwise, there will continue to be no space for and little understanding of his work and his presence.

#### **Author's Biography**

Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco concluded a postdoctoral fellowship in June 2023 at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (FAPESP scholarship). She obtained her PhD at the Post-Graduation Interunits Program in Aesthetics and Art History of the University of São Paulo

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