

**The Biennial and the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo:  
Micro-Histories of a Modernist Collection**  
**Ana Magalhães**

**Abstract**

This article aims to contribute to the interpretation of artworks from the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), which originated in the 1950s iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo. The paper proposes micro-narratives of modern art in the Brazilian context, opening up the artworks to new interpretations. The goal is to recontextualise the biographies of the collected items as museum objects, going beyond the disputes surrounding the narrative of modern art that occurred in the early years of the Biennial. This will be accomplished through two case studies: Renato Birolli's works at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1951 and Barbara Hepworth's works at the 5<sup>th</sup> exhibition in 1963.

**Keywords**

Bienal de São Paulo, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), MAC-USP (Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo), collecting, modern art, history of exhibitions.

# The Biennial and the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo: Micro-Histories of a Modernist Collection

Ana Magalhães

## Between the Museum and the Biennial Exhibition

Established in 1963 to house the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (MAC-USP) holds what is unquestionably the most significant collection of art from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South America, both from Brazil and elsewhere. Considered a national treasure, this collection has a unique characteristic: out of the 1693 artworks received from MAM-SP, almost two-thirds of them come from what we can refer to as the ‘Biennial environment’ meaning they were incorporated into the former Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo during the Biennials held between 1951 and 1963, when the two institutions were separated.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the Biennial and the country’s first museum dedicated to modern art is crucial for understanding the collection and what it can reveal about the artworks and artists present there, while also bringing new perspectives to the history of the Bienal de São Paulo. Indeed, these works and their creators were discussed as a kind of remnant of the São Paulo exhibition and its biennial themes. Some of these themes are well established in Brazilian and international historiography, such as the dichotomy between abstraction and figuration, and the emergence of concrete avant-gardes in Brazil, which are now understood as an alternative canon in certain approaches to global art history. In recent years, research on the history of the Bienal de São Paulo has gained momentum. This was particularly evident from its 24<sup>th</sup> exhibition in 1998, which repositioned the Brazilian art system on the international stage and made it a subject of research for exhibition history.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the consolidation of art history as a discipline both in Brazil and in the Anglo-Saxon context, greatly contributed to this development through publications of research on non-Brazilian and Brazilian delegations in

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The expression “Biennial environment” is used here to refer to works that, in some way (whether awarded or not), were shown in exhibitions of the Bienal de São Paulo, or that were acquired at the Venice Biennale specifically in the 1950s, when the MAM-SP and the Venice Biennale had an intense exchange, even resulting in an acquisition prize for the “Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo” in the iterations of the Italian Biennial. See Ana Gonçalves Magalhães (ed.), *Another Collection of MAC USP* (São Paulo: Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo, 2019).

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Not coincidentally, the anthology on the history of exhibitions by Afterall Books dedicated a volume to the 24<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. See Lisette Lagnado, *Cultural Anthropology: The 24th Bienal de São Paulo 1998* (London: Afterall Books, 2015).

the Bienal de São Paulo iterations and in contemporary art curating over the last two decades.<sup>3</sup>

In these studies, the Bienal de São Paulo is often assimilated with its biennial ‘sisters’ from the 1990s onwards, which tends to blur the fundamental differences between it and other more recent biennials and seasonal exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that these analyses emphasise the opposition between the idea of the museum and the concept of a periodic exhibition. According to Hans Belting, for example, the latter has supplanted the modern and contemporary art museum in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only to be replaced by international art fairs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the clear rupture between the Bienal de São Paulo and the museum (MAM-SP, and by consequence, MAC-USP), the Brazilian case in its first decade of activity, by definition involved a coexistence between the museum and the seasonal exhibition, which nourished each other. The role of the Bienal de São Paulo in the formation of a museum collection is still discussed to a limited extent in research, an aspect it perhaps shares with its inspirational model, the Venice Biennale. Although half a century separates the founding of the two biennales, both cities held in common an attempt to reposition themselves in a cycle of modernisation in their respective countries, for which the formation of a collection of modern art involved a broad and public debate, both in Venice and São Paulo. In the case of the Venice Biennale, the creation of a modern art gallery for the city played a fundamental role, at least until the 1930s, in the establishment of a collection for the country as part of the consolidation of the unification of Italy as a modern nation.<sup>6</sup> In the other, the Bienal de São Paulo was born in a context where it was imperative for Brazil to assert itself as a modern and independent nation, with a strategic role in the Americas.<sup>7</sup>

The goal of this text is to explore the ‘Biennial environment’ through art works that are currently part of the MAC-USP collection, in the hope of opening

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In the early 2000s, the field of graduate courses in history, theory and criticism of the visual arts has expanded into research tracks and special MA programmes dedicated to curatorial practices and the history of exhibitions. This is the case, for instance, for research tracks in private higher education institutions in the country, like Santa Marcelina and the São Paulo Catholic University, as well as the emergence of research groups and seminar courses in public universities in Brazil. In 2009 MAC-USP offered a specialised course in curating and art education in museums, for example. Art historian and professor Tadeu Chiarelli, when invited to direct MAM SP between 1996 and 2000, created a study group on curatorial practices, which he later transformed into a research group at the University of São Paulo, through which he formed generations of curators by supervising PhD dissertations. The presence of research on the history of curating and the history of exhibitions in Brazil goes hand in hand with the international context, and a figure like the first director of MAC-USP, Walter Zanini (1924-2013), has received great attention due to his own curatorial practices. See Cristina Freire, *Walter Zanini. Escrituras críticas* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2013) – also accompanied by an exhibition dedicated to Zanini’s exhibition projects at the Museum in the same year. See *Por um museu público. Tributo a Walter Zanini*, catalogue available at: [https://issuu.com/geacccmac/docs/catalogo\\_zanini\\_por\\_um\\_museu\\_2015](https://issuu.com/geacccmac/docs/catalogo_zanini_por_um_museu_2015), accessed May 2023.

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See Vinicius Spriggo, *Modes of Representation of the São Paulo Biennial: The Passage from Artistic Internationalization to Cultural Globalization* (São Paulo: Hedra, 2011).

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See Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

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On the foundation of the Venice Biennale and the city’s relationship with modernisation see Francesca Castellani & Eleonora Caran (eds.), *Crocevia Biennale* (Milan: Scalpendi Editore, 2017); Flavia Scotton (ed.), *Venezia. Ca’ Pesaro. Galleria Internazionale d’Arte Moderna. I disegni e le stampe* (Venice: Musei Civici Veneziani, 2002).

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It should be said that in the 1950s, the need for modernisation in Brazil was driven by two main strives: one internal and the other external. Internally modernisation was reflected in Juscelino Kubitschek’s economic policy of “50 years in 5”, with the construction of Brasília serving as a tangible representation of this effort. Externally, as Brazil became a member of the United Nations, there was a clear increase in the professionalisation of the cultural promotion sector, which played a role in projecting Brazil as a modern nation. An exemplary case is the Brazilian pavilion at the Interbau show in Berlin in 1957, which focused on the Brasília construction project. In the past twenty years, international exhibitions on Brazilian art and architecture have highlighted the 1950s as a peak period of modernisation. See Jorge Schwarz (ed.), *Da Antropofagia a Brasília: Brasil, 1920-1950* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Brasileira - FAAP/Cosac & Naify, 2002); and the *Century City* exhibition at Tate Modern, held between February and April 2001, which featured Rio de Janeiro as one of the selected cities from 1955 to 1969.

up their analysis thanks to different frameworks. The first element pertains to how these works and artists contributed to a discourse of national identity, regardless of the transnational experience of modernism, and considers the forced migration and reshaping of entire territories as consequences of the global conflicts of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The second point is to emphasise the artwork's permanent condition as part of a museum collection. This allows for the establishment of new relationships and provides the opportunity for alternative interpretations of the works. The final point focuses on proposing "micro-narratives" by selecting specific works and scrutinising them within the 'macro-narrative' of the Bienal de São Paulo.

### The Biennial Acquisition Award, Brazilian Critique, and the Expansion of the MAM-SP Collection

From its first exhibition in 1951 until its separation from MAM-SP, the Bienal de São Paulo upheld participation and selection regulations for exhibited works that included three different categories based on medium: painting, sculpture, and works on paper. This last category was sometimes divided into drawing and printmaking, and occasionally further categories were introduced, such as architecture, books, and theatre exhibitions, for instance. Additionally, there were two types of awards: the regular award, given to an artist in one of the existing categories for the work they exhibited at the Biennial, and the acquisition award. The latter involved extensive negotiations with sponsors, including companies, collectors, diplomatic bodies, and civil associations or foreign representations in Brazil, to raise funds for the purchase of works from the Biennial exhibitions and expand the MAM-SP collection.<sup>9</sup> The acquisition award established a clear link between the Biennial and the museum's collection. It is possible to posit that the award also had a noteworthy impact on artists who received it through the regulatory prize. They may have been motivated to donate their works to MAM-SP, a gesture which occurred frequently.

However, the acquisition award seems to have had less impact on the art criticism of the period dedicated to reviewing the Biennial editions. Critics appeared to have a greater interest in debating the names nominated for the regular awards and the controversies surrounding them. This same criticism gave little space to the acquisition award, which was sometimes almost treated as a consolation prize for the artists who received it. This was certainly the tone of newspaper reporting on the competition between the works of Danilo di Prete and Maria Leontina, who competed for the regular painting prize at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. Such disputes continued into the 1960s, as seen in the case of the award for foreign sculpture and the acquisition by MAC-USP of *Controlled expansion* by César Baldaccini.<sup>10</sup>

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See Burcu Dogramaci and Birgit Mersmann (eds.), *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices and Challenges* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019). Many of the authors who contributed to the volume drew from works and artists featured in Biennial-type exhibitions.

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Even after the separation between the Bienal de São Paulo and MAM-SP, and the subsequent transfer of its collection to USP, the newly established Bienal de São Paulo Foundation continued the awards system, including acquisition awards, to support the expansion of collections within a network of modern art museums conceived and created in the country in the 1960s. In 1963, for example, the first director of MAC-USP, Walter Zanini, was able to benefit from this strategy and the prerogative given to the university museum (as a continuation of MAM-SP) to incorporate works from that biennial into the museum's collection. This was the case with *Torso/Ritmo* (1915-16) by Anita Malfatti (presented in a special room dedicated to the Brazilian modernist artist that year) and *Hermaphrodite Idol* (1962) by Edoardo Paolozzi (displayed alongside other works by the British artist representing his country in that biennial).

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Regarding the acquisition award given to Maria Leontina at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, see 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 - USP, 2020): <https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/93/93131/tde-14082020-185141/pt-br.php>, accessed May 2023. To explore the controversy surrounding the regular painting award given to Danilo di Prete, see 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.: University of São Paulo - USP, 2018): <https://teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/93/93131/tde-29112018-101540/pt-br.php>, accessed May 2023. See also Rocco, "Disputes at the 1<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennial: *Lemons* by Danilo Di Prete and its Award", *Oboe Journal* 4, no. 1 (2023), 22-40.

The criticism of the period was undoubtedly crucial in shaping the art historiography that addressed these debates, especially in the context of the Bienal de São Paulo, where they reached perhaps their greatest magnitude. At times, they resonated beyond national criticism and influenced Brazil's presence in the international system of visual arts. It is also important to consider that the São Paulo Biennials of the 1950s played a significant role in shaping new generations of artists in Brazil and educating local audiences about the appreciation of modern art. In doing so, the presence of a retrospective gaze, i.e. the representation of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes, was essential.

The first two iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo, in 1951 and 1953, involved two artistic directors who played a defining role not only in the art criticism of the period but also in the institutionalisation of modern art and art history in Brazil: Lourival Gomes Machado (1917-1967) and Sérgio Milliet (1898-1966). Before becoming the director of the MAM São Paulo and the first Biennial, Gomes Machado had written *Retrato da arte no Brasil* (Portrait of Art in Brazil, 1947), which provided an overview of the history of art in the country, with a focus on the emergence of modern art in Brazil. His invitation to participate as the artistic director of the last Biennial of the 1950s resulted in a strong presence of non-geometric abstract art, which was the newest trend in modern art at that time and also the subject of much controversy within the concrete art movement.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Sérgio Milliet led what is still considered the largest iteration of the Bienal de São Paulo: the second, which marked the beginning of São Paulo's 400<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebrations. As a writer and art critic active since the 1920s, Milliet had been involved in the commission that first promoted the creation of a modern art museum in São Paulo.<sup>12</sup> He had also published a survey of modern art in which he made connections to socio-economic theories.<sup>13</sup> In his work *Marginalidade da pintura moderna* (Marginality of Modern Painting), originally published in 1942 and presented during the 1<sup>st</sup> International Congress of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) in Paris in 1949, Milliet discusses the evolution of modern art in cycles, in which the concept of marginality plays a crucial role. The Bienal de São Paulo iterations and MAM-SP were considered a single project until their separation between 1961 and 1962. The idea of the "historical nucleus", as explicitly designated in the 24<sup>th</sup> exhibition, is key to this interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

It is primarily the exhibitions of 1953, 1955, and 1957 that project the idea that there was an effort during that decade by the artistic directors of the Bienal de São Paulo and MAM-SP to present significant panoramas of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde groups. This followed a trend observed in the Venice Biennale between 1948 and 1952 and solidified with the creation of Documenta in Kassel in 1955. One provisional argument of this article is that two competing or complementary projects

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About Lourival Gomes Machado as an art critic, see Ana Avelar, *A raiz emocional: Arte brasileira na crítica de Lourival Gomes Machado* (São Paulo: Alameda Editorial, 2014).

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See Annateresa Fabris, "A travessia da arte moderna", in Annateresa Fabris, *História e(m) movimento: atas do Seminário MAM 60 Anos* (São Paulo, MAM SP, 2008).

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See Sérgio Milliet, *Marginalidade da pintura moderna* (Porto Alegre: Editora Globo, 1942). About Sérgio Milliet as an art critic, see Lisbeth Reboló Gonçalves, *Sérgio Milliet crítico de arte* (São Paulo: Edusp/Editora Perspectiva, 1992).

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At least since the iterations curated by Walter Zanini (1925-2013) in 1981 and 1983, and by Sheila Leirner in 1985, the Bienal de São Paulo had featured special rooms that showcased prominent figures from the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art who were somewhat connected to the idea of a "historical nucleus" within the exhibition. In the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo Biennials, curated by Nelson Aguilar, the special rooms showcased a reconstruction of Piet Mondrian's studio, a Pablo Picasso room, the presentation of Francisco de Goya y Lucientes's *Tauromaquias*, and the first exhibition in Brazil of a collection of Suprematist paintings by Kasimir Malevitch. See Nelson Aguilar (ed.), *22. Bienal de São Paulo. Salas Especiais* and *23. Bienal de São Paulo. Salas Especiais* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1994 and 1996, respectively). However, the precise use of the term "historical nucleus" came into play only in the 24<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. This section of the exhibition occupied nearly the entire third floor of the pavilion during that iteration and was based on a proposal by its chief curator, Paulo Herkenhoff, to design anew the diagram of art history. This redesign was a response to the one advanced by the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred Barr, in his famous 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. See Paulo Herkenhoff and Adriano Pedrosa (eds.), *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo: Núcleo histórico: Antropofagia e histórias de canibalismo* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998).

existed between MAM-SP and the Bienal de São Paulo, a possibility which can be partly deduced from the actions of Gomes Machado and Milliet. To explore this topic further, it is worth revisiting two documents often cited in Brazilian historiography regarding the organisation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo. The first is a letter prepared by Lourival Gomes Machado for Yolanda Penteado, who traveled with the artist Maria Martins to try to secure important artists and works from various European countries through diplomatic channels.<sup>15</sup> In the letter, Gomes Machado updates her on negotiations with France, England, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and his attempt to bring first-rate representations from those countries. The most famous case mentioned (and also the most complicated) was the request to bring a collection of Vincent van Gogh's works, which only materialised later.<sup>16</sup>

The second text is the introduction in the catalogue of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, in which Gomes Machado states:

By its very definition, the Biennial should fulfill two main tasks: to place modern art of Brazil, not in simple confrontation, but in vibrant contact with the art of the rest of the world, while at the same time seeking to establish São Paulo as a world artistic center.<sup>17</sup>

This statement underscores the ambition of the Bienal de São Paulo to serve as a bridge between the modern art of Brazil and the international art scene. It aimed to bring Brazilian modern art into dialogue with the global artistic context and to position São Paulo as a significant hub for the arts on a global scale. The most evident and emphasised aspect of the missive is its foregrounding of the role of the Bienal de São Paulo as a centre for the renewal and alignment of visual arts in Brazil with international trends. The “vibrant contact” mentioned by Gomes Machado is indeed related to this renewal.<sup>18</sup> However, what is often overlooked is the absence of any commitment to building a panorama of artistic avant-gardes for the MAM-SP collection. While they would certainly be present, their purpose was primarily for the development and renewal of Brazilian artists. The prize system that fuelled the MAM-SP collection since its first iteration lacked any criteria that guaranteed the creation of a historical collection of modern art for São Paulo. On the contrary, the emphasis was on young artists who submitted their work for competition to be selected. This was not the case for established artists, and there were also controversies surrounding their non-competitive

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Lourival Gomes Machado's letter to Yolanda Penteado, informing her about the agreements with countries for participation in the first Bienal de São Paulo, dated March 8, 1951, can be found in the Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho Archive, Wanda Svevo Historical, São Paulo Biennial Foundation, folder FMS\_0023-01a.

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The Dutch artist was of particular interest to Gomes Machado's research on modernism and its connections to the Baroque, which later served as a bridge informing his understanding of Informalism. In the first Bienal de São Paulo, through negotiations initiated by Gomes Machado and with Yolanda's oversight, France was represented by sixty-two artists, including significant names from the international art avant-garde, such as Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Le Corbusier, Alberto Giacometti, and Fernand Léger. England contributed a set of prints from the British Council's collection since the British national collections were committed to a major national event celebrating the centenary of the First Universal Exposition in London, known as the Festival of Britain. Nevertheless, the British Council's commitment to fulfilling MAM-SP's request resulted in the donation of twenty-eight prints from their collection, which remained at MAM-SP and later transferred to MAC-USP. As for Belgium, there were twenty-eight participating artists, with two names standing out in the international avant-garde scene: Paul Delvaux and René Magritte. These details provide valuable insights into the international representation and significance of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo.

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Lourival Gomes Machado, “Apresentação”, in *I Bienal de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1951), 15.

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Several authors have noted this, including for instance, Ivo Mesquita, “BIENAI BIENAI BIENAI BIENAI BIENAI BIENAI”, *Revista USP*, no. 52, (2002): 72-77. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9036.v0i52p72-77>, accessed May 2023.

participation.<sup>19</sup> There are two exceptions here of artists whose historical works were incorporated into the MAM-SP collection in that iteration: Tarsila do Amaral (Reitoria da USP Prize) with her *Estrada de ferro central do Brasil* (Brazil Central Railway, 1924) and Sophie Taeuber-Arp with *Triangles opposed by their vertices, rectangles, squares, bars* (1931), which was presented as the Banco Nacional Imobiliário Acquisition Prize, although this was not the case.<sup>20</sup> The other awarded works, specifically those assigned for mandatory inclusion in the MAM-SP collection, consisted entirely of recent works created by the selected artists.

In the case of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo under the artistic direction of Sérgio Milliet, the emphasis on the history of modern art was evident, as highlighted by art critic Maria Eugênia Franco in 1954:

[...] from a local perspective, it provided Brazilians with a unique opportunity to form an aesthetic culture of modern art, as it favored its two essential foundations: the visual and the historical. We have often heard it said that *the exhibition at Ibirapuera is equivalent to a journey through the museums of modern art worldwide. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial, undoubtedly, is equivalent to an ideal journey through the history of modern art, as it is rare to find works of such importance in the process of the evolution of contemporary art gathered together.*

*In its positive aspect, we could say that the plan of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial is a plan by a history of art teacher, aiming to show the roots of current modern art, starting from its most acute moment of rupture, that is, from the moment when, presenting itself as a more violent reaction to the initial reaction, Expressionism and Cubism opposed Impressionism.*<sup>21</sup>

This quote highlights the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo's role in educating the Brazilian public about the history of modern art, showcasing significant works that played a pivotal role in the evolution of contemporary art. It aimed to provide viewers with a comprehensive journey through the history of modern art, focusing on critical moments of artistic transformation and development.

Franco explicitly draws a connection between the exhibition and the museum and acknowledges Milliet's efforts as those of an art historian working on building the MAM-SP collection. It is worth noting that as a reviewer of the Bienal de São Paulo that year, the critic systematically covered all the delegations, providing almost daily assessments of the artists and their works in local newspapers. Milliet thereby created a textual archive of significant relevance for understanding that particular Biennial.

In this exhibition, Milliet successfully included the participation of several prominent figures from international historical avant-gardes. For example, Picasso participated with a retrospective of his works, including the display of his celebrated *Guernica* (1937) in São Paulo, alongside an overview of Cubism in France (as part of the French delegation). São Paulo also hosted a Futurism retrospective within the Italian delegation. However, the MAM-SP collection retained works by younger artists as acquisition awards, such as the beautiful prints by Henri Georges-Adam from the French delegation.

Regarding Italy, it is worth noting that despite Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, as the president of MAM-SP and the Bienal de São Paulo, having visited Italy the previous year (1952) and made the crucial acquisition for Brazil of Umber-

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Established artists generally did not compete for the awards and were featured in special exhibitions. The same international jury that deliberated on the regular awards also selected the acquisition awards and was called upon to express their opinions on special awards and honourable mentions *hors concours*. See Magalhães, *Another Collection of MAC USP*, 2019.

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See Mariana Leão Silva's MA thesis, *Maria Leontina, Tarsila do Amaral, Prunella Clough e Germaine Richier*, chapter 2.1, which clarifies the matter.

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See Maria Eugênia Franco, "Importância educativa da exposição", article of the series "Panorama da 2a. Bienal", *Última Hora* (February 1, 1954). Emphasis added by the author.

to Boccioni's original plaster sculptures *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) and *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912), these works did not appear in the Italian section of the exhibition. Instead, the posthumous bronze version of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* from the collection of the Municipality of Milan was showcased.<sup>22</sup> From the Italian participants, works like *Sunrise on sickles* (1953) by Giuseppe Santomaso entered the MAM-SP collection. This piece complemented another work by the artist acquired by Matarazzo at the Venice Biennale the previous year in 1952. That year saw the establishment of the Gruppo degli Otto, headed by art critic and historian Lionello Venturi. Santomaso joined the group following his embrace of abstract experimentation.<sup>23</sup> This Bienal and the acquisitions made by Matarazzo were closely followed by Milliet himself, who even selected works from these new Italian trends for the MAM-SP collection.<sup>24</sup>

These elements reveal some aspects that have not been considered by Brazilian art historiography. Firstly, it has often been assumed that the acquisition awards were given without criteria, but this has been shown not to be the case: the same jury that selected the regular awards also chose works for the acquisition awards.<sup>25</sup> Although the funds raised in each exhibition were not always sufficient for acquiring works in this award category, the juries of the 1950s iterations exhibited some consistency in their choices. This suggests a preference for new works by artists who had already established an international reputation during that time. Non-Brazilian artworks added to the MAM-SP collection support this inference. In fact, the late 1950s and early 1960s Biennales had a structure based on national representations. There was a separate section for historic or more established artists and another for emerging artists. For example, the German participation in the 6<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo

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They likely only arrived in Brazil between 1958 and 1959. The MAC-USP archive holds a photograph of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* in plaster exhibited at the modernist tapestry show of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1959. For a comprehensive analysis of the journey of this work to Brazil, see Ana Gonçalves Magalhães and Rosalind McKeever (eds.), *Boccioni in Brazil* (São Paulo: MAC-USP/Edusp, 2022).

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Regarding the presence of the Gruppo degli Otto in the MAC-USP collection, see Marina Barzon Silva's dissertation, *Fugindo da antinomia: a crítica de Lionello Venturi e o Gruppo degli Otto, da Bienal de Veneza ao Brasil*, (MA Thesis: University of São Paulo - USP, 2017): <https://teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/93/93131/tde-24052018-124153/pt-br.php>, accessed May 2023

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See the letter from the lawyer for Matarazzo in Italy, Renato Pacileo, to Arturo Profili (Secretary-General of the Bienal de São Paulo), mentioning Milliet. MAC-USP Archive, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho folder, Renato Pacileo to Arturo Profili, July 20, 1954 (copy, MAC-USP Cataloguing Section): "[...] The acquisitions were made for a precise reason: Turcato is one of the "otto" (abstract) artists who were included once again in Mr. Ciccillo's purchasing list; Moreni, for a matter, let's say, of honour: in fact, he was the artist who gave his painting at the end of the previous Biennial, for which there was a misunderstanding (Moreni claims that this painting of his is the highest achievement of his pictorial activity in the last fifteen years). Prampolini and Capogrossi are two of the artists chosen by Millet for the Museum; Clerici does not have a painting in the Museum [...]" (Translation from Italian by the author). Note that the works of Prampolini and Capogrossi mentioned in the letter never arrived at MAM. Although two works by Capogrossi are currently in the MAC-USP collection, they came from the acquisition that Matarazzo made in Italy between 1946 and 1947, not from the Venice Biennial.

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In the minutes of the first Bienal de São Paulo, names of both the regular awards and acquisition awards can be found. Additionally, the jury for that year indicated two special prizes and eight more names to be awarded with values to be defined later, namely: the Italians Pericle Fazzini, Renato Birolli himself, Afro Basaldella, the Japanese Tetsuro Konai and Kiyoshi Saito, the Portuguese Julio Resende and Carlos Botelho, along with Abraham Palatnik – who submitted a cinechromatic object in the painting category and is explicitly mentioned as "an important modern manifestation, worthy of being included in the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo". See Minutes the jury for the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo (22 October 1951), Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho Collection, Wanda Svevo Historical Archive, São Paulo Biennial Foundation, folder FMS\_39-2.

MAC-USP now possesses a cinechromatic object by the artist purchased during Aracy Amaral's administration in 1985, deliberately filling the gap left in the MAM SP collection in 1951. Of the other artists specially awarded by the jury of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, only the two Japanese artists are not currently in the MAC-USP collection. Works by Fazzini, Afro, Birolli, Resende, and Botelho were incorporated into MAM SP and subsequently transferred to MAC-USP.

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Here, there was a strong negotiation led by Mário Pedrosa, as artistic director of the exhibition, for the acquisition of Kurt Schwitters's collage *Duke Size* (1946) for the MAM-SP collection, which is now part of the MAC-USP collection.



in 1961 included a monographic exhibition of Kurt Schwitters alongside the works of Julius Bissier, an emerging German artist at that time.<sup>26</sup> This model of representing national works seems to have fulfilled the dual role envisioned by the representatives of MAM-SP and the Bienal de São Paulo, as well as their artistic directors: the names of historical avant-gardes educated the public in modern art and provided important references for fostering new generations of artists in Brazil, while the emerging artists, more than showcasing new trends, gained a foothold in the collection of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, what the MAC-USP inherited from MAM-SP in the twelve years when the latter was responsible for the Bienal de São Paulo exhibitions was not exactly a collection of early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde artworks but rather a collection of contemporary works in which the idea of documenting new trends seems to have been fundamental. Although many of the works brought to educate the Brazilian public about the so-called historical avant-gardes were already in public collections abroad making their acquisition impossible – as in the case of Picasso’s *Guernica*, Boccioni’s bronze *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, and Vincent van Gogh’s paintings – there were choices that clearly reflected the desire to collect the ‘new’. Furthermore, some works incorporated into the MAM-SP collection through acquisition awards had been explicitly created for the Bienal de São Paulo. This practice became imperative for biennials overall especially after globalisation and has been a tool for enriching local collections and stimulating the art market.

### **Renato Birolli and Barbara Hepworth “micro-narratives” within the larger “macro-narrative” of the Bienal de São Paulo**

Among the artists who entered the MAM-SP collection through acquisition prizes during the 1950s Biennials, two non-Brazilian artists, the Italian Renato Birolli and the British Barbara Hepworth, will be highlighted, proposing an exercise in reading their works beyond their presence at the São Paulo event and suggesting new connections and interactions within the Brazilian context. The first was selected as an acquisition prize when Sérgio Milliet was a member of the jury for the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, and in the following year (as we have seen), he was involved in selecting the works that would be acquired by Ciccillo Matarazzo at the Venice Biennale. As for Hepworth, her award came during Lourival Gomes Machado’s second period as artistic director at the helm of the Bienal de São Paulo, in which the critic appeared as a clear advocate of new trends in lyrical abstraction, and the exhibition becoming a platform for these. In both cases, Milliet and Gomes Machado cast their eyes and votes on the works we will discuss, in addition to their experience in the artistic direction of MAM-SP in its first decade of existence, as well as their active participation in deliberations over the acquisition programme for the Museum’s collection. Another aspect to be analysed here is precisely to what extent these works could engage with issues in the local art scene, as their impact has never been considered by art historiography in Brazil, except in a few isolated cases.<sup>28</sup>

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In this regard, MAM-SP did not deviate from the model of its inspirational source, the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York, nor did it differ significantly from other modern art museums that established themselves in the Western world in the post-World War II period. These museums were built on national collections of living artists. This can be seen in the creation of the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, which received part of its collection from the Museum of Luxembourg and from acquisitions made starting in the 1930s in its Gallery of Contemporary Art Schools at the Jeu de Paume. Similarly, the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome pursued a programme, especially during Palma Bucarelli’s tenure (1942-1975), aimed at acquiring and promoting contemporary art.

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In this context, *Tripartite Unity* (1948/49) by Max Bill is emblematic, as it continues to be evoked as a symbol of the impetus given to concretist groups in Brazil within the framework of the Bienal de São Paulo in the 1950s. For a discussion of its impact, see 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 (2021): 179–197, available at: <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8664232>, accessed July 2022.

**Picasso as a Transnational Reference: *Breton Woman* (1950)<sup>29</sup> by Renato Birolli and Emiliano di Cavalcanti**

Although the São Paulo event was influenced by the Venice Biennale, given the strong ties between the local art scene and Italy since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, little research has focused on Italy's involvement in the Bienal de São Paulo, or on the links between Brazilian and Italian artists in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>30</sup> However, the number of works by Italian artists is considerable within the group under analysis here. It indeed reflects the overall MAC-USP collection, where Italian artists represent the second largest nationality after Brazil.

Renato Birolli (1905-1959) was part of the Italian delegation at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, along with other younger painters such as Afro Basaldella, Ennio Morlotti, Emilio Vedova, Mattia Moreni, and Giuseppe Santomaso. This group would later become known as the Gruppo degli Otto in 1952, with a dedicated room at the Venice Biennale of that year and a critical review by the renowned art historian Lionello Venturi.<sup>31</sup> In addition to *Breton Woman*, incorporated into the MAM-SP collection as a special prize from the Italian Community of São Paulo, other works by his colleagues from the Gruppo degli Otto were acquired for the Museum.<sup>32</sup>

Initially exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1950, *Breton Woman*, along with the two other works exhibited in São Paulo, resulted from the artist's stay in Brittany (France) three years earlier, where he dedicated himself to depicting the life of the local community and the fishermen of the region. From both a thematic and formal perspective, the painting is a testament to the artist's encounter with Picasso's work, and his interest in the stylistic elements of *Guernica*. Birolli, like the other members of the Gruppo degli Otto and their peers in the early 1940s, joined the Italian resistance through his involvement with the so-called Gruppo Corrente di Vita Giovanile between 1939 and 1942/43. This engagement was reflected in his poetics when revisiting Cubism, in pieces chiefly inspired by Picasso's work. This can be clearly observed in the fragmented composition of the background, in which the female figure here depicted alludes to certain elements of Picasso's figures from the 1930s/40s, while also being present in *Guernica* itself.

In his famous *Taccuini* (Notebooks), Birolli affirmed: "Painting replaces nature and is born and develops, resembling it".<sup>33</sup> This statement originated from his research into colour as a constitutive element of objects, dating back to the 1930s. In the early 1950s, this idea found parallels in the coexistence of abstraction with figuration among this generation of painters, ones theorised, so to speak, by Lionello Venturi in his notion of the "abstract-concrete", with which Venturi interprets the Gruppo degli Otto.<sup>34</sup> The theme of the life of the Breton fishing community also finds echoes in the work of other artists who, like Birolli, were deeply involved in the debates surrounding the issue of realism and their commitment to the Italian Communist Party. This understanding of abstraction in terms of its links to Cubism and figuration also

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The image is available at this URL: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/16841>, accessed July 2022.

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At the last World Congress of the International Committee of Art History (35<sup>th</sup> CIHA) in São Paulo, held in January 2022, art historians Laura Iamurri and Tommaso Casini presented initial analyses of Italian participation in the Bienal de São Paulo and the relationships between Italian art criticism and Brazil, respectively. The conference proceedings are currently in preparation. Additionally, Heloísa Espada's studies explore possible connections between Grupo Ruptura and Gruppo Forma 1 in Italy, especially in the context of emerging debates on geometric abstraction. See Heloísa Espada, "Além da ordem e da razão".

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See Marina Barzon Silva, *Fugindo da antinomia*.

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This is the case of "The third shot of the battery" from 1951 by Afro Basaldella, which was also acquired as a special prize from the Italian Colony in São Paulo.

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See Renato Birolli, *Taccuini, 1936-1959*, Taccuino VI (Turin: Einaudi Editori, 1960), 13.

34

See Lionello Venturi, "Astratto e Concreto", *La Biennale. Rivista Trimestrale di Arte Cinema Teatro Musica Moda della Biennale di Venezia*, no. 1 (1950), 11.

had its reverberations in Brazil. The creation of the MAM-SP was a major controversy and its inaugural exhibition *From Figurativism to Abstractionism* (1949) led its first artistic director, the Belgian critic Léon Dégand, to organise a panel discussion for the exhibition's tour in Rio de Janeiro in May 1949.<sup>35</sup>

One of the key figures opposing full adherence to abstraction was undoubtedly the Brazilian painter Emiliano Di Cavalcanti who was featured at the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo as an invited artist – therefore not eligible for any awards – and as a representative of the Brazilian modernist avant-garde. The collection of fourteen pieces exhibited by the artist made up his most recent output (1946-1951). Four of these works depict the fishermen's way of life. Two additional works on the same theme from this period, now part of the MAC-USP collection, present stylistic elements akin to Picasso's late period Cubism. In them, it appears that Di Cavalcanti was responding to how the post-war generation perceived his production from the 1930s/40s.

In the second iteration of the Bienal de São Paulo in 1953, the Brazilian painter won the National Painting Regular Prize, through which he donated a work which was exhibited that year, *Fishermen* (1951).<sup>36</sup> Although there are many differences between Birolli's *Breton Woman* and the two figures (male and female) that Di Cavalcanti portrays on his canvas, the monumentality of the figures in both cases, combined with the presence of still life elements with geometric aspects, indeed allow us to immerse ourselves in the debates surrounding abstraction and figuration in the early years of the decade.

### **Informal Abstraction as a Universal Language: *Cantate Domino* (1958)<sup>37</sup> by Barbara Hepworth and Maria Martins**

The British sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), meanwhile, was part of the British delegation at the 5<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1959.<sup>38</sup> Alongside the painter Francis Bacon and the printmaker Stanley William Hayter, she was considered one of the major figures of international modern art at that time and, like her two male compatriots, she was given a special room. Her work *Cantate Domino* was incorporated into the MAM SP collection as the Grand São Paulo Prize. Unlike the other non-Brazilian artists present at the Bienal de São Paulo in that decade, the artist received attention from local critics, in the context of articles dedicated to women artists in that year's exhibition.<sup>39</sup> Hepworth was introduced to the Brazilian audience during the moment of peak promotion of lyrical abstraction at the Bienal de São Paulo, and in the critical debate within the local art scene between proponents of geometric abstraction with a concretist approach and those who embraced support for non-geometric abstraction. The latter, often referred to as informal art, was advocated by Lourival Gomes Machado (the aforementioned artistic director of that year's Biennial).<sup>40</sup> *Cantate Domino* was one

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See Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, "O debate crítico na exposição do Edifício Sul América, Rio de Janeiro, 1949", in Roberto Conduru and Vera Beatriz Siqueira (eds.), *Anais do XXIX Colóquio do Comitê Brasileiro de História da Arte* (Rio de Janeiro: Comitê Brasileiro de História da Arte - CBHA, 2009), 120-128: [http://www.cbha.art.br/coloquios/2009/anais/pdfs/anais\\_coloquio\\_2009.pdf](http://www.cbha.art.br/coloquios/2009/anais/pdfs/anais_coloquio_2009.pdf), accessed April 2023.

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Image available at this URL: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/17893>, accessed April 2023.

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Image is available at this URL: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/16406>, accessed April 2023.

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For a more in-depth analysis of Barbara Hepworth's presence at the Bienal de São Paulo, see Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, "Barbara Hepworth in Brazil", *British Art Studies*, no. 3 (July 16, 2016): <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/agmagalhaes>, accessed July 2022.

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See Lisetta Levi, "Ideias de Barbara Hepworth" [column "Itinerário das Artes Plásticas"], *O Estado de São Paulo* (June 28, 1959); and Maria Lucia Nogueira, "A mulher na V Bienal de artes plásticas", *O Estado de São Paulo* (August 21, 1959).

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See Ana Cândida de Avelar, "O informalismo no Brasil: Lourival Gomes Machado e a 5a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo", *Atas do VII Encontro de História da Arte* (São Paulo: Campinas, 2011), 31-40: <http://www.unicamp.br/cha/eha/atas/2011/Ana%20Candida%20F%20de%20Avelar.pdf>, accessed July 2022.

of twenty sculptures, alongside fifteen drawings by Hepworth, presented in São Paulo that year. The collection provided an overview of the artist's production from the mid-1940s onwards, with the exception of one work from 1937 (the *Two Forms in White Marble*). Nevertheless, in the records made of the exhibition room and in the critical texts found in both the British delegation's catalogue and the Brazilian press, there was a tendency to first associate her with the production of another British artist, Henry Moore. Secondly, there was an emphasis on aspects seen as "feminine" due to Hepworth's organic forms.<sup>41</sup> *Two Forms in White Marble* (1937), *Pelagos* (1946), and *Two Figures* (1955), however, are highly representative of the artist's poetics before her exploration of metal, particularly bronze (as in the case of *Cantate Domino*). Made from marble, wood, and, in the case of *Pelagos*, metal wires in curved and perforated forms, these sculptures appear to be developments of Hepworth's close association with the circle of artists around her then-husband Ben Nicholson, the critic Herbert Read, and the colony of artists who took refuge in England during World War II. This group, along with Naum Gabo and Nicholson himself, published a panorama of concrete art in Europe in 1937, titled *Circle*.<sup>42</sup> On the basis of these criteria, Hepworth aligned herself with the regular award for national painting at the 4<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1957, which was granted to the Rio de Janeiro artist Lygia Clark.<sup>43</sup>

The awarded work by Hepworth was indeed linked to a series of metal sculptures that marked a new phase in the British artist's research,<sup>44</sup> one that her friend the critic Herbert Read interpreted as an expression of the "vital image".<sup>45</sup> In his famous book *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (1961), Read dedicates the final chapter to discussing this notion, perhaps articulating a synthesis between informal and geometric abstraction. Particularly significant for the Brazilian context is that Hepworth is presented alongside the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins. According to Read, the "vital image" was a way through which some artists sought to deal with elements of subjectivity, with form in motion, and with the numinous. Hepworth and Martins are among the examples provided by the British critic. The chapter is illustrated with Maria Martins's work *Rituel du rythme* (1958), which was created in Brasília for the Palácio da Alvorada, the official house of the president of Brazil, alongside works by Hepworth and other artists. Not only can Maria Martins's *Rituel du rythme* be compared to Hepworth's *Cantate Domino*, but also her *Sum of Our Days* which received the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo regular award for national sculpture in 1955.<sup>46</sup> The elongated and perforated forms in Hepworth's work resonate with the *Sum of Our Days*, which resembles the skeleton of a primitive animal. Both titles suggest

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From J. P. Hodin, *Barbara Hepworth*, exh. cat. (London: Lund Humphries; Neuchâtel: Editions du Griffon, 1961): "[...] the artist embarked on the adventure of proposing open and twisted forms that express the pulse of life more than its order, the dynamic more than the static, the stage at which the fragrant forms of petals and flowers are discovered, replacing the forms of fruit and the body, and in which a new material enters – metal". And regarding the comparison with Henry Moore, see Lisetta Levi, "Ideias de Barbara Hepworth", 8: "Sculptor Barbara Hepworth will be the great name from England for the V Biennial. Among British artists, she is famous for her technique, only surpassed by that of Henry Moore, who won the regulatory sculpture award at the II Biennial".

42

See Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo (eds.), *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1937). In the Brazilian context, Ben Nicholson's output, as well as that of other refugee constructive artists, had been exhibited at the II Salão de Maio, in São Paulo, 1938, by invitation of artist Flávio de Carvalho. See Flávio de Carvalho (ed.), *III Salão de Maio*, São Paulo, 1939, in which the artist gathered the documents on the two former editions of the salon as part of the catalogue.

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A reproduction of "Planes of modular surfaces no. 2" from the MAC-USP collection is available at the following link: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/17214>, accessed July 2023.

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In this regard, see the artworks exhibited in that iteration, including *Curved Form (Trevalgan)* from 1956, made of bronze, and especially *Figure (Oread)* from 1958, also in bronze.

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See Herbert Read's chapter 5, "The Vital Image", in *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1961), 163-228.

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Image available at the following link: <https://acervo.mac.usp.br/acervo/index.php/Detail/objects/17340>, accessed July 2023.

the fragility of human life and tense relationships with nature, as well as a narrative dimension in which the theme of temporality is fundamental to both artists' poetics.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, both works result from an experimentation with new materials.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond the dialogue with Maria Martins's sculpture, there are also potential connections with artists like Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Mira Schendel during the period, which would call for further in-depth study. Moreover, Hepworth's special exhibition was intended to travel to other capitals in South America (Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, and Caracas) until 1960. Therefore, it's possible to consider other connections between her work and artistic production in the subcontinent. This touring exhibition also points to further developments in the iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo in the 1950s and 1960s, as it was not an isolated action. On the contrary, the practice of touring part of the works or entire rooms from national delegations in the Bienal de São Paulo seems to have been common, especially considering that it relied on the infrastructure of local diplomatic and para-diplomatic institutions, which played a role in disseminating what they understood as "national culture".<sup>49</sup> In the context of these considerations, it is important to acknowledge the current effort in art research to interpret works and artists beyond the label of nationality and medium. As seen in the case of Barbara Hepworth, the category of 'sculpture' may not fully capture the artist's experimentation with the medium. Furthermore, this nomenclature completely decontextualises the artist's pursuit of perforated, flat, suspended forms in the air, which have nothing to do with traditional notions of sculpture.<sup>50</sup>

### Collecting the New: A transnational and interdisciplinary perspective

This essay highlights the importance of examining the works and artists featured in the MAC-USP collection from the 1950s Bienal de São Paulo, from various perspectives. Based on the available evidence, it can be tentatively concluded that the acquisition of specific works was motivated by the desire to collect more contemporary propositions and artworks, including those created specifically for major seasonal exhibitions such as the Bienal de São Paulo or the Venice Biennale. This, in turn, seems in response to the programme of a modern art museum linked to the idea of a museum of living artists. Considering this aspect, the programme undertaken by the first director of MAC-USP in the museum's first two decades of activity at USP con-

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It is worth noting that Barbara Hepworth had originally conceived that her artwork *Cantate Domino* would decorate her tomb in St. Ives Cemetery in England. However, it was rejected for being taller than the permissible height according to local regulations. The artist was actually opposed to sending the work to Brazil, and the decision to exhibit it in the Bienal de São Paulo was instead made by the curator Lilian Sommerville.

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Even though Hepworth was using a traditional material, namely bronze, she began working with it at that time, see also note 33. The artist had to develop screen-like structures with aluminum sheets to create her open and flat works on a large scale. See, for example, the documentation of the execution process of her *Unique Form (Memorial)*, commissioned by the British government for the gardens of the United Nations building in New York in 1964, available at <https://barbarahepworth.org.uk/commissions/list/single-form.html>, accessed July 2023.

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Examples of the touring exhibitions of artist rooms and works present in the iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo Biennial include: the Futurism room of the Italian delegation at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo was exhibited in the second half of 1954 at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York; the exhibition of West Coast American art, which was conceived as the US delegation for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1955, was later presented at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco, California; from this exhibition by the US delegation, the Californian artist Ralph Du Casse received a Fulbright scholarship due to his acquisition award and subsequently held another exhibition of his work in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the scholarship; Spanish artist Isabel Pons, who received the printmaking award at the 6<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1961, later had her collection of works exhibited in Colombia.

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In this context, it is important to remember that in 1955, Hepworth had been invited by her friend, the British composer Michael Tippett, to create costumes for his ballet *The Midsummer Marriage*, which premiered in 1956 at Covent Garden in London. The costumes designed by the artist were also exhibited at the 5<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in the section dedicated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Theatre Biennial. For this purpose, Hepworth conceived objects made of extended wires in pyramidal shapes to characterise the dancers. These wire structures sketched imaginary designs suspended in the air, casting shadows with their dancing movements. The structure of wires attached to metal rods appears to benefit from Hepworth's experimentation with the inner framework of her metal sculptures.

tinued the same prerogative. According to recent analyses of the art historian Walter Zanini's work at MAC-USP, he is believed to have conceived a dual programme for the institution: retrospective (in the re-evaluation of modern art from a historical perspective) and prospective. The latter is perhaps the most debated in recent historiography, as it resulted in a rapid updating of the collection received from MAM-SP, and pioneering collecting of new forms of artistic expression.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, when examining Zanini's choices within the 7<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo (1963), the evidence for such a programme becomes clear. On the one hand, the acquisition of *Torso/Rhythm* (1915-16) by Anita Malfatti represents Zanini's concern with a retrospective view. On the other hand, *Hermaphrodite Idol* by Edoardo Paolozzi pointed towards a prospective investigation. *Controlled Expansion* by César would be one of Walter Zanini's controversial acquisitions for MAC-USP, at the IX Bienal de São Paulo, in 1967. Writing to the artist in February 1968, Zanini says:

Dear César, how are you? After four weeks, "Controlled Expansion" is now in the museum. I moved Max Bill's "Tripartite Unity" and placed your work in the large semicircular space of the room where Paolozzi's "Hermaphrodite Idol" is also located (do you remember?). Isolated against the white exedra's expanse, the work has gained an extraordinary presence. Critics and artists who see it now say they understand it much better [...] In fact, at the Biennial, in the small room, despite its monumentality, the work suffered from the proximity of small pieces and the presence of glass [the external walls of the Biennial pavilion].<sup>52</sup>

All three works, originating from iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo, with Max Bill's work "relocated" to make room for César's new experimentation (his actions with polyurethane), and Paolozzi's work within the space of MAC-USP (still located in the Biennial pavilion), ultimately reinforce Zanini's program, which in turn reaffirmed the collecting of the "new", initiated at MAM-SP.

By creating an exhibition for young artists at MAC-USP, starting in 1967 and titled *Young Contemporary Art*, Zanini seemed to be trying to put into practice what he effectively did later in the 1981 and 1983 exhibitions when he was the general curator of the Bienal de São Paulo. But above all, he addressed the issues that had emerged from the special committee created by the Bienal de São Paulo Foundation in 1966 for a reassessment of the event. At that time, the critics participating in the committee appointed by Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, including Zanini himself, suggested that the Biennial should no longer be organised with rooms specifically designated for national delegations. They already pointed to the need to create cross-references between artists from various countries, which, eventually, Zanini proposed as "analogies of languages" for the 17<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 1983.<sup>53</sup>

From a contemporary perspective, it is worth noting that since the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, the internationalization of artistic practices initiated by historical avant-gardes has been consolidated as "national". The Futurist room for the Italian representation in the second Bienal de São Paulo and the Bauhaus room for the German representation in the third Bienal are emblematic examples. In the case of Italy, Futurism had been domesticated, so to speak, to become an authentically Italian avant-garde through the agency of the group under Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's leadership during fascism. In its early version, Marinetti himself wished for Futurism to be a transnational group, hence his enormous effort to promote the movement outside Italy – which resulted in interactions with artist groups in various places, particularly

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See Cristina Freire, *Walter Zanini. Escrituras críticas*, and Eduardo de Jesus, *Walter Zanini: vanguardas, desmaterialização, tecnologias na arte* (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2018).

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Letter from Walter Zanini to César, dated February 8, 1968. César's folder, Registrar's Section, MAC-USP (original in French, translation by the author).

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See Walter Zanini, "Introdução" in Walter Zanini (ed.), *17a Bienal de São Paulo. Catálogo Geral* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1983), 5.

in Latin America.<sup>54</sup> The Bauhaus, recently remembered during the centenary celebrations of the school's founding in 2018-19, grew in the face of encounters between artists from all over the world (many of whom were in exile) who experimented with various technical means and had as a principle the integration of art and life. For this reason, it was closed shortly after the rise of Nazism in Germany and condemned as an environment of “degeneration” and unpatriotic propaganda. In their very essence, then, modernist experiences were indeed supra-national experiences, seeking an aggregation of diverse cultures and favouring transcultural exchanges. In this sense, constructive abstract practices were the result of these processes and created international networks to support artists and intellectuals persecuted by the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s in Europe. With the emergence of the Cold War in the 1950s, these experiences seem to have been once again mobilised to promote the “game of nations”.<sup>55</sup> The Bienal de São Paulo, like the Venice Biennale, was a conducive environment for the instrumentalisation of modern art for this purpose. Therefore, its repercussions in the local art scene cannot be understood as passive processes or merely exchanges of aesthetic and poetic experiences.

Finally, it should be noted that alongside this exhibition model, in addition to the modern art museums that sprang up worldwide, the discipline of art history established itself within the local academic context in parallel with the international environment. What about “In view of its instrumentalisation and its relevance as a bargaining chip in the political sphere, the study of the collection of works from the biennial environment preserved by MAC-USP is crucial for developing analytical perspectives.

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See Mario Sartor, “Italian Futurism and its Latin American Echoes”, in Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, Paolo Rusconi and Luciano Migliaccio (eds.), *Modernidade latina. Os italianos e os centros do modernismo latino-americano* (São Paulo: MAC-USP, 2013), available at: [http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/conteudo/academico/publicacoes/anais/modernidade/pdfs/MARIO\\_ING.pdf](http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/conteudo/academico/publicacoes/anais/modernidade/pdfs/MARIO_ING.pdf), accessed July 2022.

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Not coincidentally, artists who were present at the Bienal de São Paulo and the Venice Biennale were included in the list of national commissions for the decoration of the United Nations building in New York. This includes artists like Cândido Portinari for Brazil, Afro Basaldella for Italy, and Barbara Hepworth for Britain. The most emblematic example of this process is certainly Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, which was displayed in the press conference room of the UN President until the 1970s. Regarding the use of abstract painting languages as soft power in the context of the Cold War in the Western world, see Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

### Author's Biography

Ana Gonçalves Magalhães is a Brazilian art historian, Associate Professor, curator, and now Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC-USP). She is an expert in the visual arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on a transnational approach of Modernism, and more specifically in the exchange between Italy and Brazil. Among her publications are the catalogues *Classicismo,*

*Realismo, Vanguarda: Pintura Italiana no Entreguerras* (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2013; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2018), *Um Outro Acervo do MAC USP. Prêmios-Aquisição da Bienal de São Paulo, 1951-1963* (2019), and the books *Clasicismo Moderno. Margherita Sarfatti e a Pintura Italiana no MAC USP* (2016), and *Boccioni no Brasil. Reavaliando Formas Únicas da Continuidade no Espaço e sua História Material* (2022).