

An Overview of Brazilian Art

Ferreira Gullar

I find it hard to understand what can be meant by '*mestiço* (mixed-race) art'.

No one disputes that the Brazilian people are of mixed race, but even if this is the case, the idea that their artistic creations should also be '*mestiço*' seems to be an argument that may be logical but is unverifiable in practice.

The first difficulty is that I can see no causal relationship between an individual's racial make-up and the character of the object he or she produces or creates. In my view human individuals are essentially cultural. So it is on the cultural level that they are defined and their creations described. From this it can be concluded that if a mulatto transmits something of his *mulatice* ('mulatto-ness') to his art, this has nothing to do with the type of blood flowing in his veins, but is related to the influence that his position as a mulatto has on his world view, if indeed he has one. Personally I can see no sign of it in the work of Machado de Assis, for example. Should writers' social and racial position influence their work? Of course. But not to the extent that it becomes visible and less still so that it determines the quality or meaning of the work. In Cruz e Souza's case it is customary to see in his position as a black writer the reason for the presence of numerous metaphorical allusions in his poems to whiteness. But that is not a relevant comment when judgements are being made about the work's aesthetic value. Is Pixinguinha's music identified with the style of music composed by *carioca*¹ negroes and mulattos living on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro in the early decades of the twentieth century? Probably, but in the same way as Bach's music is identified with the kind of music written at his period for masses and religious ceremonies; that is, both are a reflection of the cultural setting, composed of the most diverse elements, in which they were created. Indeed, the term '*mestiço*' has a racial connotation which in my view makes it unsuited for application to cultural and artistic creation.

Nevertheless, the history and nature of Brazilian art cannot be perceived and understood without taking account of the abrupt incursion of European art into the cultural environment of the indigenous people who were soon to become, together with the blacks, the practitioners of that art – building churches and fortresses, sculpting and bringing to life statues of saints – and even its heirs, responsible for its continuation.

It was the hands of people of mixed race, children of blacks, whites and Amerindians, that erected hundreds of churches all over Brazil, carved their façades, pulpits, altars and niches, and painted their ceilings and walls. But neither this architecture nor this carving and painting, these bas-reliefs, indeed any of this art, had anything whatsoever to do with the original culture of blacks or Indians. As the cultures of both groups did not practise these European arts, they could scarcely be influenced by them. So art produced by Brazilians (whether of mixed race or not) during the colonial period – from the sixteenth

to the early nineteenth century – is European art transplanted, which gradually changed, first because of context (lack of building materials like those used in Portugal, sometimes clumsy finishes or limited resources), and later as a consequence of the appearance of people of original talent who left their mark on imported styles, as was the case with Antonio Francisco Lisboa, known as Aleijadinho,² in Minas Gerais, or Master Valentim in Rio de Janeiro. Thus if the Portuguese Baroque – in both architecture and sculpture – did become ‘Brazilian’ in some way, it was not the result of racial or cultural mixing.

In my opinion the main feature of Brazilian art is not mixing, syncretism, but departure, replacement. We have already seen how Portuguese art was imposed on the indigenous people, whose own artistic forms (feathers, body painting, ceramics) bore no relation to it, and also that, after it arrived in Brazil, it evolved through nearly three centuries without any perceptible exchange between them. In fact, indigenous art was the only one to continue through the centuries without a break, and survive into the present, particularly in ceramics and the manufacture of spears, bows and arrows. In the Goiás area, for instance, despite gradual acculturation and the dramatic decline in the number of individuals, the making of Carajá³ dolls and terracotta pots with zoomorphic shapes still persists.

Brazilian colonial art of Portuguese origin, which reached its high point during the golden age in the eighteenth century, a period known as the ‘mineiro Baroque’⁴, was suddenly cut short at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the arrival of the French Artistic Mission. If one can describe the introduction of European art into Brazil in the mid-sixteenth century as an act of violence against indigenous art, the same things can be said, only worse things and with more reason, about the new style, which effectively spelled an end to the art that had been created until then, and about the steps taken to impose a new conception of art following the arrival of French neo-classical artists and the foundation of a College of Fine Arts to train new artists in accordance with the canons approved by European academies.

With the best of intentions Don João VI, who had had to move to Rio de Janeiro with the Lisbon court, thought he was doing the right thing in providing the colony’s capital with the cultural and artistic conditions worthy of the seat of a kingdom. However, the neo-classical style was not the emperor’s aesthetic choice but the result of a political contingency: the discontent of artists who had supported the 1789 Revolution and were now being discriminated against by the Restoration. Joachim Lebreton, who had been dismissed from the Institut de France, was charged with choosing the artists who were to accompany him on this mission to Brazil. So the artistic modernization of Brazil in the nineteenth century was a government action, just like dividing the country into hereditary capitanerías in the sixteenth, or the ban on all manufacturing in eighteenth-century Brazil. An authoritarian government action that, in all these instances, ignored the interests of the inhabitants, whether they were the Indians from the period of the discovery of America or the Brazilians produced by colonization. The idea that one or another form of art or culture emerged in Brazil and was important for the country certainly did not enter Don João’s mind, which was focused solely on creating the conditions and the backdrop in Rio de Janeiro that would allow his court to function with a minimum of dignity.

The foundation of the Fine Arts Academy in 1820, as well as the erection of neo-classical buildings planned by Granjean de Montigny, altered the course of Brazilian art, which experienced a new period of expansion, starting with the proclamation of Independence in 1822, that made a profound mark on our artistic history. Nationalist and patriotic

feeling encouraged Victor Meireles and Pedro Américo to paint historical scenes such as *Primeira missa no Brasil*, *Batalha de Guararapes*, *Batalha do Avaí* ('First Mass in Brazil', 'The Battle of Guararapes', 'The Battle of the Avaí'), huge canvases that were incorporated into the historical iconography of Brazil. But academic painting gave rise to other consequences, both negative and positive, by making fashionable this art full of stereotypes, but also uncovering a few artists of true talent like Rodolfo Amoedo (1857–1941) and Almeida Júnior (1850–1899). With some changes of direction reflecting the different emphases brought into French painting by Impressionism, which canvases by Giovanni Battista Castagneto and Eliseu D'Angelo Visconti (1866–1944), among others, bear witness to, this period of Brazilian art closes, like others, not as the endpoint of a natural development, but under the influence of another intervention from abroad interrupting the process under way: the Modernist revolution proclaimed during the 1922 Modern Art Week in São Paulo.

Nevertheless it should be recognized that this new break with the past is different from the two previous ones for, far from being a government action, it was a sign of the individualist rebellion that is a typical feature of twentieth-century artists. Because of this, it not only had no official function whatsoever but was resolutely opposed to 'official' art, whose bastions were the National College of Fine Arts and the National Salon. Modernism was seen by its supporters as a proclamation of the independence of Brazilian art, and it was with the intention of stressing this that they chose to launch it in 1922, the year when the centenary of Independence was being celebrated.

Brazilian Modernism drew its inspiration from turn-of-the-century European avant-garde movements, but it was not purely imitation. This was because our Modernists had only a superficial acquaintance with these movements, and also because the Brazilian cultural context of the period was unable to assimilate the aesthetic and ideological questions implied by Cubism, Expressionism and Dadaism. It was only Futurism, with its enthusiasm for industrial progress and modernity, that fitted in with the aspirations of these young intellectuals who identified with the industrial development and modernization of the city of São Paulo. But the identification stopped there, it did not spill over into the specific aesthetic issues that were typical of Futurist works, especially in the visual arts. There is no affinity between Brazilian Modernist painters and sculptors and the work of a Boccioni, a Balla or a Carrà.

Brazilian Modernism has two faces: on the one hand it claims to chime with modernity, but on the other it feels the need to go back into the past to seek out the country's authentic roots. Because of this particular characteristic it had nothing in common with European avant-gardes, which rejected the past and proclaimed the birth of a new art whose meaning was to be found in the present and the future. This was why, while the representatives of the European avant-garde looked for the wellspring of art in the Unconscious, Brazilians looked to Indian myths and an attempt to see Brazilian history and nature with an 'innocent eye'. This re-appropriation of the past was not restricted to indigenous culture; it also meant re-evaluating colonial art – especially the *mineiro* Baroque, the art of Aleijadinho and Manuel da Costa Athayde – which had been completely forgotten after the French Artistic Mission and the introduction of academic art. According to their criteria the Congonhas⁵ prophets, for instance, were a simple example of a primitive aesthetic.

Though it is the case that the chief disseminators and defenders of Modernist ideas were two writers – Oswald and Mário de Andrade – it was in the visual arts that the

movement began. Historically its starting point was in fact an exhibition of painting: the solo show by Anita Malfatti (1896–1964), which was mounted in 1917 and scandalized São Paulo society and its intelligentsia. Her canvases were Expressionist in style, since she had studied in Europe and the USA with teachers of that school. But Expressionism was not to be the dominant style of Brazilian Modernist painting, or even of Anita Malfatti's painting since she soon moved in another direction.

In fact, the different artists belonging to the movement had no common style, and this was due to the fact that the Modernists, whether artists or writers, had no idea what the new art they wished to develop would be like. All they knew was that it would not be the academic art currently in vogue. In other words they rejected the art they saw as dead, since they believed that it was only by freeing themselves from it that they could create something new. What kind of thing they did not know.

Besides Anita Malfatti, another artist who had an influence on the young Modernists' desire for renewal was the sculptor Victor Brecheret, who had recently arrived from Italy where he had studied. His sculpture, which was quietly innovative, had even gained the approval of people who had reacted with dissatisfaction to Malfatti's painting. From a style inspired by Rodin, then by Art Deco, he developed a personal style that contained elements of abstract sculpture and Brazilian indigenous art. But he did not start a school or influence the sculptors who followed him, nor did he give Brazilian sculpture an orientation.

The painter who best represents the Modernism of the 1920s is Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973). Having studied in Paris with Fernand Léger, she took some of the features of his style and made a painting that was both modern and naïve; her '*pau-brasil*' period, which lasted only a few years, since she then executed a series of paintings that could be called Surrealist, but with a Brazilian accent. Even though these pictures spurred Oswald de Andrade to write the *Manifesto Antropofágico* ('Cannibal Manifesto'), they did not influence other painters. 'Cannibalism' went no further than the manifesto, and in the following year its author rejected the avant-garde and committed himself to Marxism.

The Lithuanian Lasar Segall⁶, who had put on Brazil's first exhibition of modern painting in 1913, settled permanently in São Paulo ten years later and joined the Modernist movement. Trained in the Expressionist style, Segall was enchanted by Brazil's landscapes, light and colours, which had an initial influence on his painting. Later his enthusiasm for things tropical died down; he emphasized the elements peculiar to his temperament and training, and executed one of the most important bodies of work in modern Brazilian art. He did not have any successors either.

The same can be said of the other figures in the Modernist revolution, Di Cavalcanti as well as Rego Monteiro. Cândido Portinari (1903–1964), who received an academic training, also struck out on an individual path when he turned to Modernism. He was the only one to have some influence on his young contemporaries, but with no significant results since another turning point in Brazilian art was already on the horizon with the development of Art Concret.

Nothing could be more different than Art Concret from the Brazilian art that came out of Modernism. It originated in Switzerland and was a cerebral style based on geometry and mathematics. In Brazil it took a dogmatic form which caused a split and gave rise to the Neo-Concrete movement, whose manifesto was published in 1959. Given the impasse resulting from avant-garde experiments, the Neo-Concrete artists took their own

experiments to the furthest extreme, taking apart the picture (which is the basis for the paint) and abolishing the boundaries between virtual space (that of the work) and real space. The work of Lygia Clark (1920–1988) was the starting point for this radical process, which had her creating sculptures that could be moved about and later carrying out sensory experiments that were no longer art. Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) developed a body of work that was similar to Lygia Clark's experiments but more concerned with the relationship of colour and space, and he ended up in the same kind of dismantling of artistic language. Less radical and more committed to the search for a core language were sculptors Franz Weissmann and Amílcar de Castro.

To all intents and purposes, Neo-Concrete art imprisoned the experimentalist adventure in the narrow realm of artistic languages. By breaking them down it contributed to the rise of a type of conceptual art in Brazil that cannot be assessed critically. As I see it, this consists of improvisations using any material that are impossible to classify in any artistic category. It would be difficult to see them as works of art. It is no accident that the criticism that defends it claims that "everything that you and I call art is art". However, one can reply that "everything that you and I say is not art is not art . . ."

This overview *à vol d'oiseau*⁷ of Brazilian art has ignored some important phenomena, though it must be said that they occurred on the margins of movements and schools; this is true of the wood-engraver Oswaldo Goeldi (1895–1961), who was a pioneer and a great master in this field. Contrary to what happened with painters and sculptors, Goeldi did indeed influence the training of young printmakers who play an important part in Brazilian art, such as Lívio Abramo, Marcelo Grassmann, Gilvan Samico and Rubens Grilo. In a different style, the female printmakers Fayga Ostrower and Ana Letycia stand out.

Among the painters, mention must also be made of those who worked outside the radical avant-garde, such as Antônio Henrique do Amaral, João Câmara Filho and Siron Franco; they were masters of a highly developed painting technique and completed a solid and inspired body of work.

But an overview of Brazilian art could not be complete without the artists of the Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente⁸, especially Emygdio de Barros, Raphael, Fernando Diniz, Isaac and Carlos Pertuis. These artists have flowered thanks to the creation of painting and sculpture studios by Nise da Silveira at the Don Pedro II National Psychiatric Centre, Rio de Janeiro. As she disagreed with the methods of medical treatment used in the 1940s, at the start of her career, she suggested that therapeutic work (which was then limited to cleaning jobs undertaken by patients in the hospital) should be replaced by the practice of a craft or art. The result was astonishing: in a very short time some of the patients created works revealing the schizophrenic's internal world that had such expressive force that she decided to create the Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente to house them. This museum's holdings today consist of more than 300,000 works. As early as 1949 the São Paulo MAM (Museum of Modern Art), which was then directed by the French critic Léon Degand, exhibited the works of these artists, who were making amazingly contemporary artefacts on the margins of artistic movements. Among them I would particularly like to highlight the painter Emygdio de Barros who, after 25 years without speaking a word to anyone, exploded with a series of extraordinarily dense canvases on which the paint resembles burning magma spurting up from the bottom of the soul. Raphael is another exceptional artist, whose drawings are imbued with a strange psychic charge and also have a musical limpid quality similar to Matisse or Picasso. These works,

together with those by Diniz and Carlos, must be considered among the highest points reached by Brazilian art.

In conclusion I should mention another great artist from the enigmatic world of madness: Arthur Bispo do Rosário, a resident in the Colônia Juliano Moreira psychiatric hospital. Arthur Bispo did not paint or sculpt, nor did he make prints or drawings; he collected objects of all kinds: a grill or a frying-pan, a chisel, a shovel, a shopping trolley, street signs, a trowel, a ladder, a saw, a clasp, etc. When a critic suggested that he should show his objects in the Rio MAM, he refused the invitation saying by way of excuse that what he did "was not art". In fact, he was just following orders from a voice that had told him to organize the objects in the world and preserve them. So it was something more important: preserving the world. Nevertheless, Arthur Bispo created at least one magnificent work of art: his *Manto da Apresentação* ('Presentation Robe'), whose outside is minutely embroidered and shows – among a host of other motifs – letters, figures, signs, dice, flags, a railway track, a train station, a globe, a compass rose, as well as loose threads, strings, coloured ribbons, which make it look like a uniform or a royal robe; on the inside, covering the whole surface, are hundreds of women's names. It is impossible to work out the meaning of such an impressive work, sprung from an artist's inspiration and a madman's determination. But its magnificence can be understood when one learns that Arthur Bispo do Rosário intended to wear this robe to appear before God after his death.

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Rio de Janeiro

(translated from the French by Jean Burrell)

Notes

1. *Cariocas* are the people from Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the state of Rio de Janeiro. (Translator's note.)
2. *Aleijadinho* is the affectionate diminutive form of *aleijado*, crippled. (Translator's note.)
3. The Carajá are a group living on the banks of the Araguaia river in west central Brazil. (Translator's note.)
4. *Mineiro* relates to the state of Minas Gerais. (Translator's note.)
5. The author is referring to twelve statues of prophets by Aleijadinho which stand in front of the church of Dom Jesus de Matosinhos in Congonhas do Campo, Minas Gerais. In the remarkably perceptive pages on Aleijadinho he has recently published, the philosopher Henri Maldiney says: "the pedestals of Abdias and Habakuk lean towards the centre. These apparently slight variations are in fact crucial, for here Abdias and Habakuk organize the space. In the foreground, on the highest part of the wall, one on each side, almost at the edge of the terrace, they reach towards the heavens more than any of the others. Their bodies are inclined towards the centre and the inclination of the pedestals make them lean still more, whereas, on the outer side, one of their arms, which is raised away from their bodies, appeals to heaven in a gesture of consecration. Thus they delineate the space in which the other prophets' figures rise up in a wavy vertical line." See Henri Maldiney (2000), *Ouvrir le rien, l'art nu* (encre marine), p. 399. See also Germain Bazin (1956), *L'architecture religieuse baroque au Brésil* (Plon). (Editor's note.)
6. After an outing in Chicago and New York, an exhibition entitled 'Lasar Segall "New Worlds"' was put on in Paris from 3 February to 14 May 2000 at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du judaïsme. (See the catalogue *Lasar Segall Nouveaux Mondes* (2000), under the direction of Stéphanie d'Alessandro, Paris: Adam Biro.) (Editor's note.)
7. In French in the original. (Translator's note.)
8. The exhibition entitled 'A Mostra do Redescubrimento', organized by the Associação Brasil 500 anos Artes Visuais, in fact devotes one of its modules to 'Imagens do Inconsciente'. (Editor's note.)