

Classicism, Realism, Avant-Garde: Italian Painting In Between The Wars At MAC USP

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This paper is an extended version of that¹ presented during the seminar in April 2013 and aims to reevaluate certain points considered fundamental to the research conducted up to the moment on the highly significant collection of Italian painting from the 1920s/40s at MAC USP. First of all, we shall search to contextualize the relations between Italy and Brazil during the modernist period. Secondly, we will reassess the place Italian modern art occupied on the international scene between the wars and immediately after the World War II —when the collection in question was formed. Lastly, we will reconsider the works assembled by São Paulo's first museum of modern art (which now belong to MAC USP).

With this research we have taken up anew a front begun by the museum's first director, Walter Zanini, who went on to publish the first systematic study on Brazilian art during the 1930s and 40s, in which he sought to draw out this relationship with the Italian artistic milieu. His book, published in 1993, came out at a time when Brazilian art historiography was in the middle of some important studies on modernism in Brazil and its relationship with the Italian artistic milieu, works such as Annateresa Fabris' 1994 *Futurismo Paulista*, on how Futurism was received in Brazil, and Tadeu Chiarelli's first articles on the relationship between the Italian Novecento and the São Paulo painters.

For some time now, Brazilian art historiography has been interested in studying Brazil/Italy relations during the modernist period. Like Argentina and the United States, the country received waves of Italian immigrants between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries², who made a significant contribution to shaping a modern culture here. Though the Brazilian intellectual elite mirrored itself on the French — as did many others throughout Latin America and the US — there are many indications of a steady everyday presence of the language and

1 Cf. MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves. CAT. EXP. *Classicismo, Realismo, Vanguarda: Pintura Italiana no Entreguerras*. São Paulo: MAC USP, 2013, pp. 7-26.

2 Some of these were the fruit of governmental agreements between the two countries, such as the influx that occurred in the 1860s. Cf. FABRIS, Annateresa. *Futurismo Paulista*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1993 (chapter 1) and BERTONHA, João Fábio. *O Fascismo e os imigrantes italianos no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Editora da PUCRS, 2001. Fabris (art historian) & Bertonha (social historian) support these references with a good overview of how Italian immigration in Brazil was treated by Brazilian historiography.

culture of Italy in São Paulo during the first half of the 20th Century. As examples of Italian culture in circulation in Brazil at that time we might mention the Italian-language newspapers, such as *Fanfulla*, a daily that made a point of running articles and reviews on art, literature, theater, etc., as well as news about the Italian community in Brazil. In cities like São Paulo, there were also a number of bronze foundries run by Italians that not only worked with artists from the Liceu de Artes & Ofícios, but also with sculptors of funerary statuary³. Finally, the most important of São Paulo's modernist critics, Mário de Andrade, not only read Italian, but quoted from Italian sources in the original (as he also did with French) in his famous essay *A Escrava que não é Isaura* [The slave girl who is not Isaura] – thereby assuming that his readers knew these languages.⁴

For our purposes here, we might also recall that when USP was created in 1934 its team of collaborators included a “French intellectual mission” and a number of intellectuals from a range of fields sent over from Italy to help consolidate the undergraduate courses.⁵ Chief amongst the Italian contributions were the lectures of Giuseppe Ungaretti and the creation of an important center of linguistic and literary studies, within the department of languages studies at USP, which gave rise to specialized publications such as *Revista de Italianística*⁶. If the examples mentioned above seem restricted to São Paulo, one has just to remember that the first Portuguese translation of Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* was published and analyzed in a newspaper from Pernambuco,⁷ where, incidentally, the artist Vicente do Rego Monteiro created a journal inspired by similar Italian publications from the 1930s. Another initiative outside São Paulo was the creation of the University of Brazil in the then-capital city, Rio de Janeiro, by Minister Gustavo Capanema, who invited the Italian architect Marcello Piacentini to design the campus, for the very reason of his recently inaugurated work on the Università La Sapienza in Rome.⁸

These elements serve only to draw up a panorama of the Italian presence in Brazil in general and in São Paulo in particular. However, we still need to better understand the points of contact between the Brazilian and Italian artistic milieus. Some names have been widely studied — Fulvio Pennacchi, Hugo Adami

3 A systematic study is yet to be made, but we do know that the major modernist artist Victor Brecheret worked with casters of Italian origin.

4 Cf. ANDRADE, Mário de. “A Escrava que não é Isaura” In: *Obra imatura* [Aline Nogueira Marques & Telê Ancona Lopez, orgs.]. Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2009, pp. 225-335 [originally published in 1925].

5 Cf. *Anuário da USP 1934-1935*. São Paulo: FFLCH USP, reprinted 2009.

6 The journal was created by a group of Italian language and literature researchers at the FFLCH USP and focuses mainly on Brazil/Italy relations in the literary field.

7 Cf. FABRIS, Annateresa. Op. Cit.

8 Piacentini's project did not make it off the drawing board, as the French architect Le Corbusier spearheaded the project. On Piacentini and Brazil, cf. TOGNON, Marcos. *Arquitetura italiana no Brasil. A obra de Marcello Piacentini*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 1999.

and Paulo Rossi Osir⁹, for example — but others await more systematic attention (such as Danilo di Prete and Vittorio Gobbis¹⁰). Connections also need to be drawn which we have reason to presume would plot a new artistic topography spanning Paris, certainly, but also Rome, Milan and Florence. If, on one hand, the figures mentioned here are more directly associated with the São Paulo art scene, with less relevant roles in the wider story of Brazilian art, on the other, they reveal ties between the heroes of Brazilian modernism and the Italian artistic milieu: through these São Paulo artists we arrive at the Milanese gallery-owners and critics who, in turn, nurtured connections with the French capital through a highly active and eminent group of critics and gallerists also known to our modernists. This is the case of Waldemar George, a great admirer of Italian art from the 1920s and 30s and enthusiast for Mussolini's New Italy of the beginning of the 1930s¹¹.

In other words, it was not only because of a strong Italian community in Brazil that Italian culture was of such interest to our modernists, but also because Italian art and culture was heavily promoted abroad, especially in the 1930s. Between 1932 and 1938¹², Italy organized various campaigns to promote its art and culture throughout Europe and the Americas¹³. When we consider the history of the visual arts in this context, it is impossible not to think of the role the secretary of the Biennale di Venezia played in organizing international exhibitions of Italian modern art that toured the European capitals.¹⁴ The use of the visual arts as a means of divulging Italian culture also extended to exhibitions on the art of Italian Renaissance. In 1934, Mussolini and his advisors organized a traveling exhibition of Renaissance masterpieces in the United States — the only time

9 Fulvio Pennacchi (1905-1992), from Tuscany, studied under Pio Semeghini before settling in Brazil in 1929. See, in this volume, Neville Rowley's text on Pennacchi's training under Semeghini. Hugo Adami (1899-1999) was born in São Paulo to Italian parents and made two study trips to Italy between 1922 and 1932. In 1926, he took part in the I Mostra del Novecento Italiano at the Palazzo della Permanente in Milan. Paulo Rossi Osir (1890-1959) was a pivotal figure in the formation of the so-called Santa Helena Group in São Paulo in 1934. For more on these artists and the Santa Helena Group, see the bibliography in: MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves. "A narrativa de arte moderna no Brasil e as Coleções Matarazzo, MAC USP", *Museologia e Interdisciplinaridade. Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência da Informação da Universidade de Brasília*, vol. 1, no. 1, Jan/Jun 2012, pp. 77-108. Link: <http://seer.bce.unb.br/index.php/museologia/issue/view/732>

10 Born in Pisa, Danilo di Prete (1911-1985) arrived in Brazil in 1946 and settled in São Paulo. Vittorio Gobbis (1894-1968) arrived in 1923, and played a key role as animator with the Santa Helena Group, alongside Paulo Rossi Osir in the 1930s.

11 For a brief analysis of Waldemar George's career, cf. DESBIOLLES, Yves Chevretil, "Le critique d'art Waldemar-George. Les paradoxes d'un non-conformiste", *Archives Juives*, 2008/2, n° 41, p. 101-117.

12 1932 was the year of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista in Rome (extended to 1934), and the starting date of a series of donations of Italian modern art to France through the para-diplomatic organ Comité France-Italie (for an analysis of these donations and French/Italian diplomatic relations during the period, cf. FRAIXE, Catherine. *Art français ou art européen? L'histoire de l'art moderne en France: culture, politique et récits historiques, 1900-1960*. École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Supervised by: Eric Michaud. France, 2011, doctoral thesis). After 1935, the political distance widened between Italy and the nations of the Allied Front (Britain, France and the United States), with Italy no longer viewed as a third way in the face of capitalist crisis and a strengthening communist foothold in Europe. The rupture came with Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) and his gradual alliance with Adolf Hitler. 1938 was the year that cemented this rupture, with treaties agreed between the German and Italian heads of state and the publication of the Race Laws in Italy.

13 Cf. BERTONHA, João Fábio, op. cit., who also deals with the substitution of Italian diplomats in countries like Brazil with members National Fascist Party as of 1927 and the funds channeled into the creation of three important organs for the promotion of the Italian language and culture, namely the Casas da Itália, the Casas do Fascio and recreational organs known as Dopolavoro. For a comparative study with North America, see BERTONHA, João Fábio, "Fascism and the Italian Immigrant Experience in Brazil and Canada: A Comparative Perspective", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 25, Spring, 2002, pp. 169-193.

14 See researcher Chiara Fabi's paper in this volume.

Sandro Botticelli's famous *Birth of Venus* (1485 ca., Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) has ever left Italian soil. That same year, the critic Margherita Sarfatti made her first trip to the US, where she addressed a conference at MoMA on the subject of Italian modern art and most likely advised Nelson Rockefeller on the acquisition of works by the new generation of Italian artists¹⁵. In the case of Brazil, we do not yet know the full range of actions the Italian government undertook in this regard, but we do know of at least one important event (though later when compared to similar initiatives in France and the US), namely the Italian pavilion set up in São Paulo in 1937¹⁶ to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Italian immigration.

What this set of events shows us is that the presence of Italian modernist experiments was also significant. A hallmark of Modernism was certainly international circulation and exchange among artists, mostly spearheaded by the avant-garde artists. Futurism is a well-known case in point. However, with the exception of the surrealists, Dadaists and artists somehow connected with the Bauhaus and experiments in abstraction (De Stijl and Concrete Art), less obvious is the fact that the initiatives taken during the interwar period deserve to be seen in a similar light. There was a lot of Italian art going around, in the most diverse styles, but in the context of Fascism, this work is doomed to be read as propaganda art and dismissed as scions of the Novecento Italiano and Futurism¹⁷. If, on one hand, the new regime installed in Italy in 1922 created a large apparatus to promote the new art being produced there — which it did through official exhibitions designed to stress those elements that might accentuate an *italianità*¹⁸ — on the other, the Italian artistic milieu made a genuine contribution to the modernist debate. One can readily identify the vocabulary of nationalism in the art criticism of the period (even at the School of Paris) and in the first steps toward the institutionalization of modern art, or at least an attempt to understand modernist practices in the light of a national school or style. In this context, Italy played a fundamental role in rekindling the debate on a Latin, Mediterranean identity. Such terms as *latinità*, “Mediterranean culture” and *italianità* were often used interchangeably here. Within the same formulation of the nation's artistic profile, some key figures emerged who could rival the School of Paris, thus consolidating the Italian contribution to the grand narrative of modern art. The painter Amedeo Modigliani, for example, could not have hoped for better promotion than he received in this context. Seen by the historiographers as the natural heir to the throne of Italian art, he was also one

15 Cf. “Distinguished Visitors”, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (May, 1934), p. 4.

16 “Exposição Comemorativa do Cinquentenário da Imigração Oficial no Estado de São Paulo”, information gathered by master's degree student Dúnia Roquetti, currently researching the work of Arturo Tosi in the Matarazzo collections. Roquetti found the material in a copy of the *Correio do Povo* (June 20, 1937), and has been given access to correspondence from the pavilion's commissioner requesting works by the artist for the show (provided by the Arturo Tosi Archive, Rovetta, Italy).

17 The notion of the Novecento Italiano in circulation at the time was discussed in MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves (org.), op. cit., pp. 22-26. As for Futurism, we should consider the special rooms dedicated to the futurists and aerofuturists at editions of the Biennale di Venezia, the special rooms at Italian exhibitions abroad, and the major exhibitions of futurist art held in Italy during the period.

18 The term was coined and crystallized in Mussolini's speeches. From 1927/28, one can note its use in critical texts on art and architecture. Margherita Sarfatti, for example, argued for an art of the regime (her Novecento Italiano) trying to find therein aspects of this *italianità*. Cf. SARFATTI, Margherita, “L'Arte e il Fascismo”. In: POMBA, Giuseppe Luigi (org.). *La Civiltà Fascista*. Turin: Unione Tipografico/Editrice Torinese, 1928.

of the “damned”, the artist who best reflected Paris during its “wild years”¹⁹. After his tragic death in 1920, he was almost immediately rehabilitated by the Parisian market, exalted by the critics and named as the Italian modernist master par excellence at the first international exhibitions of the 1930s. Nothing could be more emblematic or ironic about the image built around this artist than the fact that his one and only self-portrait hangs in a museum in a peripheral nation like Brazil.²⁰ The painting shows a robed Modigliani at work in his studio, palette in-hand, immersed in the creative act. The swift brushstrokes and the transparent surface of the canvas convey the artist’s agitation, as if he were seized by inspiration. This notion of the brilliant/heroic artist is reinforced by the possible references he used in making the painting. The ambiance brings to mind the photographs of his studio in Paris between 1916 and 1917, which include portraits of himself and others, such as his first dealer, Paul Guillaume, then a gallerist on the rise, and a major promoter of other Paris School figures. In fact, Modigliani painted a portrait of Guillaume in a very similar pose. There were two portraits of famous Parisian figures that resonated here: a portrait of Émile Zola painted by Manet in the 1860s; and Edward Steichen’s portrait of Auguste Rodin, depicted wearing the dressing gown he had used to shape the body of his monumental *Balzac* (1894). On the other hand, the elongated features and the sleek silhouette are reminiscent of Modigliani’s sculptures from the 1910s, heavily influenced by his fascination with Primitivism. All of these elements place Modigliani firmly on the international scene of the French capital, but they were later used to demonstrate his connections with his homeland.

Between 1928 and 1933, the painter Mario Tozzi, alongside Renato Paresce, Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Savinio, Massimo Campigli and Filippo de Pisis, the so-called Italians of Paris, held a series of exhibitions in Paris. Supported by the critic Waldemar George and the gallerist Léonce Rosenberg, these Italian artists were incorporated into the modern art collections being assembled at the time²¹. This was another attempt, albeit from the outside in, to affirm the status of Italian modern art on the international scene. From the outside in, that is, insofar as these artists were acting on their own behalf, with the support of the Parisian art scene, to latter be promoted within Italy.

The World War II had a massive impact on these activities and temporarily interrupted the artistic flux and interchange between the countries. However, the resumption of these ties can be seen as early as 1943, when groups of anti-fascist artists (such as the Gruppo Corrente) and other independent artists, such

19 Paolo Rusconi devoted a class on his mini-course “Anos 1930 na Itália. As Artes Figurativas, As Revistas e as Exposições durante o Fascismo” (April 16 to 19, 2013) to analyzing how Modigliani was seen by the contemporary critic, especially in the book *Les peintres maudits*, by André Salmon, published in 1924, and the artist’s first monograph in Italian, organized by the editor Giovanni Scheiwiller, in 1927, which renovated Italian interest in his work.

20 Purchased by the Matarazzos in Milan in 1946, along with 70 other Italian paintings. The acquisitions went toward building a collection for the former MAM. The “Self-portrait”, from 1919, bore the distinction of having belonged to the famous Riccardo Gualino collection before being passed on to Alberto della Ragione, before being bought by Matarazzo.

21 For a brief analysis of the Italians of Paris and pertinent bibliography, cf. ROCCO, Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura, “O caso dos Italianos de Paris” In: MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves (org.), op. cit., pp. 27-31.

as Gino Severini, went back to interpreting Picasso and Matisse.²² The years immediately after the war saw the restart of strategies very similar to those pursued throughout the 1930s, with the sealing of cultural cooperation agreements between Italy and other countries which facilitated the continuation of commercial exchange and support for the international art market. In the case of the Americas, it is important to mention two particular initiatives. The first of these was the formation of an association with a diplomatic remit to promote friendship between Italy and Latin-American nations. Pietro Maria Bardi was sent to Brazil in 1946, in this context, to organize two exhibitions of Italian art, one of old masters and the other of modern art²³. The second was the exhibition entitled 20th-century Italian Art, held at MoMA in 1949, which clearly accentuated Futurism, Metaphysical Painting and the work of Modigliani in modern art history. There was also an obvious effort to develop a compendium/manual that could provide an overview of Italian art in the first half of the 20th Century²⁴. The tone had certainly changed, that is, in rescuing the historical avant-gardes, Italy had contributed with Futurism and Metaphysical Painting, but it is interesting to note how some artists of fundamental importance in the 1930s still feature in this discourse, such as Felice Casorati, Massimo Campigli, Giorgio Morandi (a significant number of whose works were reproduced in the volume) and Mario Sironi. Sironi – the most closely associated with the fascist regime – is represented not by his work from the futurist period, but by his output from the 1920s and 1940s. Such works as *Luce nello spazio*, 1941, and *La flagellazione*, 1948 (both in private Milanese collections at the time),²⁵ echo the paintings published in the volume devoted to Sironi in the series *Artisti Italiani Contemporanei*, conceived by Galleria Il Milione in the early 1940s, and which, at the same time, guided the acquisition choices of the Matarazzos²⁶. The surface treatment, the idea of the fragment in the composition, the almost expressionist brushstrokes of *La flagellazione* are all very similar to those in *Invocazione*, 1946, now part of the MAC USP collection. The same logic can be observed in the choice of works by Campigli, Casorati, and others for the first nucleus of the former MAM collection.

Over the 23 years of fascist Italy, one element that differed from the way artists, intellectuals and the cultural industry were treated in nazi Germany and soviet Russia was that there was never any clear delineation of what was (or what could be) the official art of the fascist Regime. The Italian historiographers who returned to the problem of art and architecture under fascism in the 1970s were able to do so thanks, in part, to a certain “consensus” and the tacit agreement of “clear-minded despots” like the Minister for National Education,

22 See the analysis of “Fiori e Libri” and “La femme et l’arlequin” at the MAC USP collection, in the text by Renata Dias Ferraretto Rocco In: MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves (org.), op. cit., pp. 162-167.

23 For an analysis of Bardi’s arrival in Brazil, see the paper by the researcher Viviana Pozzoli in this volume.

24 Cf. SOBY, James Thrall; BARR, Alfred. CAT. EXP. *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. New York: MoMA, 1949. The catalogue is effectively divided into four parts: Futurism, Metaphysical Painting, a shorter section on the painting of Amedeo Modigliani, and a section on Italian painting and sculpture since the 1920s. The first part, dedicated to Futurism, was Barr’s contribution to the publication.

25 Cf. SOBY, James Thrall; BARR, Alfred. op. cit., plates 69 and 70, which belonged, respectively, to the collections of Carlo Frua de Angeli (a member of the Comité France-Italie throughout the 1930s and the patron behind a donation of Italian modern art to the Jeu de Paume in Paris, 1932) and the fashion designer Cesare Tosi.

26 Cf. *12 Tempere di Mario Sironi/presentate da Massimo Bontempelli*. Milan: Edizione del Milione, 1943.

Giuseppe Bottai (1895-1959)²⁷. It would also seem that the latter half of the 1920s and the onset of the 1930s saw the effective structuring of an art system in the modern sense of the term, with the creation of innumerable art galleries trading in modern Italian and non-Italian art (with significant presence of French artists), the emergence and consolidation of important collections of modern Italian art and a robust apparatus for its promotion through art exhibitions²⁸ and specialist publications, as well as periodicals and dailies with wide circulation.²⁹ Italy was modernized under fascism, and the apparent contradiction this poses is one that needs to be addressed, particularly by the historiography of modern art. With the end of the World War II, the revelation of the Holocaust and the allied forces' liberation of large swathes of European territory from authoritarian regimes, modern art was suddenly raised as a bastion of free, democratic society – as the manuals and essays written in the 1950s and the first attempts to systematize the modern experience attest. In accordance with this vision, there was no way the idea of social, cultural, economic and political modernization could ever have been connected with political systems as totalitarian and brutal as those in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy.

So neither the futurists, nor the gruppo Novecento, nor the Scuola Romana, or any others, were creators of an official, fascist art. There was certainly a drive to promote a number of modernist trends that helped to build the image of a modern Italy, with an identity of its own, and yet, contradictorily, Mussolini had never openly supported any one artistic approach. In the case of architecture, the Duce's position seems to have been somewhat clearer in the second half of the 1930s, when he centralized his reconstruction, reformation, renovation and promotional efforts in Rome and on formulating the myth of *romanità*³⁰. However, in the field of the visual arts, the latter end of the 1930s saw the emergence of trends that rediscovered aspects of expressionism, surrealism and Concrete Art, and a revaluing of French impressionism and other foreign currents. Even if these did not feature prominently in the exhibitions and events organized by the fascist regime, they received the support of important figures, among critics, gallerists and collectors³¹. So the relationship the Fascists forged with modern art was very different to that of the Nazis, who

27 Lawyer, journalist and art collector, Bottai was in charge of the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione from 1936 to 1943. In 1939, he introduced a new policy whereby the ministry provided incentives for the creation of new private collections of modern Italian art through an awards program. The historiography tends to view him as a moderate fascist under whose protection many anti-fascist intellectuals and artists continued to work unmolested. The consensus argument was recently reassessed by such historians as Giovanni Sedita (cf. *Gli Intelletuali di Mussolini: La cultura finanziata dal Fascismo*. Florence: Le Lettere, 2010) and Paolo Nicoloso (cf. *Mussolini architetto*. Milan: Einaudi, 2008) in lectures delivered at the conference *Anni 30 in Italia*, December 9, 2012, Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e Ambientali, UNIMI. For a critical analysis of the relationship between the Italian intelligentsia and fascism, see the contribution by the historian Angelo d'Orsi in the present volume.

28 For a history of the modern arts system in Italy, cf. SALVAGNINI, Sileno. *Il sistema delle arti in Italia, 1919-1943*. Bologna: Minerva Edizione, 2000. On the formation of modern art collections in this context, see the author's work in the present volume.

29 See the results of a thematic project coordinated by Prof. Antonello Negri, from the UNIMI, with the collaboration of Paolo Rusconi, Silvia Bignami (both from UNIMI), Barbara Cinelli (Università Tor Vergata, Rome) and Chiara Fabi (Università degli Studi di Udine), among others. See, for example, Silvia Bignami's text in the present volume on the monuments projects as documented by magazines during the Fascist era.

30 Cf. NICOLOSO, Paolo, op. cit.

31 The Gruppo Corrente, for example, whose members, such as Renato Birolli, Renato Guttuso and Aligi Sassu, were all overtly anti-fascist, was nonetheless supported by the Galleria della Spiga in Milan, funded by the collector Alberto della Ragione (from whose collection the Renato Guttuso still-life in the MAC USP collection today comes from).

opted resolutely for a classicizing aesthetic, of which the Exhibition of German Art held in Munich in 1937, with its enormous allegories by Alfred Ziegler, was an unmistakable statement of intent.

But if Mussolini made no declarations as to what might have been the official art of the fascist regime in Italy that does not mean that certain avant-gardes and other trends more closely connected with the international environment (Concrete Art, for example) faced no resistance from Fascist party top brass. The official Fascist Fine Art unions, the Quadriennale di Roma, the creation of the Cremona Award in 1939, and of its counterweight, the Bergamo Prize, in 1940, were all contexts in which the issue of propaganda art never failed to arise³². At the same time, this overlapped with an inter-war return to figuration in Italy and in other countries, with the reinterpretation of certain elements of the western artistic tradition — especially from classical art, related to Greco-Roman aesthetics and its re-reading during the Italian Renaissance — and the re-evaluation of mastery of traditional artistic techniques (mural painting, fresco, easel painting), as well as traditional genres (especially the still-life, portrait and landscape). Art historiography tends to treat this moment as particularly conservative in its approach to artistic practices, which turned toward realism under the generic banner of a “Return to Order”. Historiographers have been studying this period since the 1980s in an attempt to understand it as a phenomenon of modernity, but perhaps without being able to interpret it as a phenomenon of modernism, considering that this would have meant the refusal of avant-garde experiments. Since the exhibition *Les Réalismes, 1919-1939*, organized by Pontus Hulten and featuring contributions by Éric Michaud, Jean Clair, Zeno Birolli and others, held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1980, up until the most recent attempt to reassess the period with the exhibition *Chaos and Classicism* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, in 2012, this period was always treated as a counterweight to the historical avant-gardes³³. Likewise, in virtue of the general narrative that emerged about modern art since the 1950s, modernism was effectively understood in terms of a spectrum of avant-garde experiments.

However, it will be necessary to reevaluate the practices that developed after a return to certain aspects of classicism, not only in Italy, but also in France, and other countries besides, in the light of the avant-gardes. Considering the artistic trends that emerged in Italy between 1918 and 1925/6, we see that the main names associated with the Novecento (Mario Sironi and Achille Funi) came from Futurism, and that metaphysical painting went way beyond the Scuola Metafisica: the enthusiasm generated by the work of Giorgio de Chirico in the surrealist environment lingered until the mid-1920s at least, while, in the

32 The scathing criticism the conservative fascist faction, led by Roberto Farinacci (creator of the Cremona award), levelled against Giuseppe Bottai (creator of the Bergamo), and the freedom conferred under the artistic policy he pursued, is well known. From the late 1920s, Farinacci had been attacking artistic initiatives of a more liberal ilk. From Farinacci's conservative perspective, even the program proposed by Margherita Sarfatti, with her Novecento Italiano, was considered a threat.

33 Cf. CAT. EXP. *Les Réalismes, 1919-1939*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980 (later at the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Berlin) and BRAUN, Emily; SILVER, Kenneth et alii (orgs.). CAT. EXP. *Chaos and Classicism. Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2011. Here is not the place to explore the differences between these two exhibitions. One can say that the French exhibition of 1980 analyzed the specificities of each artistic trend of the period, and their relationships with a range of contexts. The New York show, on the other hand, tended to erase the differences, by making a more formalistic reading of the works and the phenomenon they involved.

Italian artistic milieu, a certain metaphysical vocabulary began to spread, and continued to reverberate through the post-war emergence of abstractionism and even into the 1950s. The paintings of Giorgio Morandi could also be described as metaphysical, but so too could the still-lives of Felice Casorati, Filippo de Pisis, Felice Carena, or Gianfilippo Usellini. In this respect, the set of Italian paintings the Mararazzos put together as the first nucleus for the former MAM collection really was exemplary. We would certainly have little difficulty analyzing Morandi's two still-lives from this group as deriving from metaphysical painting — in fact, the artist has been treated as a metaphysical in modern art literature. *Testa dell'armatura*, by Felice Casorati, is part of a series of still-lives composed in the early 1940s, in which he depicted a head, probably rendered in plaster, surrounded by other objects from his studio. As variations upon a theme, Casorati placed an old helmet and visor (which can still be seen today at the Casorati Archive in Turin) on the head, surrounded it with other items and set the group against a background of abstract surfaces (virgin canvases lying around his studio). He was thus able to create a very particular context for his still-lives, in which the objects should be taken almost as painterly allegories. Like De Chirico's famous versions of the *piazze d'Italia*, or the numerous models ensconced in the chambers of a metaphysical Carrà, Casorati's compositions clearly recall classical tradition without necessarily referencing it, or specific exponents of it. Yet they do look for balance in their composition, a harmony of elements. This metaphysical lexicon can even be identified in Usellini, the youngest artist in the Matarazzo collection. In his *Il Cardinale*, the artist depicts a scene that falls somewhere between a newspaper comic strip and a Quattrocento painting: looking down the long corridor of a cloister, with a perspective and geometric floor reminiscent of Paolo Uccello, we see a cardinal, with his train of red robes, fleeing from a tiny demon staring down at him from the ledge of the vaulted roof.

These paintings are neither copies of, nor references to, the tradition they take as their base, much less a total negation of the avant-garde experience...Furthermore, they seem constantly to play with various levels and layers of modernist experience, which runs from the constitution of large museums and collections and their importance to artistic formation (which was effectively consolidated by modernism) to the emergence of mass media, the sublimation of high from low culture and the differences between popular culture and mass culture, etc.

These 71 Italian paintings the Matarazzos acquired for the former MAM can, therefore, be seen as a nexus of new problems about modernism. Some of the questions we have raised so far were important in terms of looking anew at the history of Brazilian modernism and the role this collection played within it, not so much as a maker or constituent of the debates on what interested the Brazilian modernists of the 1920s and 30s, but, particularly, as a legitimizer and consolidator of that modernism among Brazil. So far, we have reconstructed the context of these acquisitions and confronted them with similar situations in other countries. In 1930s France, for instance, we saw how collections very similar to this one were also part of a modern art program promoted by the institutions. We could also attest that the private Italian modern art collections formed in Italy from 1939 on, with the support of Bottai's Public Instruction Ministry, bear a strong resemblance to that on-show at MAC USP. In arriving at this observation,

we have had the chance to establish some comparisons between the collection here in Brazil and collections elsewhere, such as the one put together by Boschi di Stefano and Gian Ferrari³⁴.

In 1927, Antonio Boschi and Mariadda di Stefano started an important Italian modern art collection, acquiring such renowned works as Giorgio de Chirico's large-scale gladiator composition (previously part of the Léonce Rosenberg collection). In the post-war years, they continued to accompany the development of Italian art and, like Matarazzo, acquired works by the first Italian abstract painters and, later (1960s), the Italian conceptualists. The Gian Ferrari Collection was formed in much the same spirit, and under Claudia Gian Ferrari's management, the gallery became an important center of documentation on interwar Italian modern art — containing the personal archives of artists from the period, publishing catalogues and organizing numerous exhibitions about the Italian Novecento³⁵. In this respect, the collections put together by Boschi di Stefano, Gian Ferrari and Matarazzo really do bear resemblances and join each other in reflecting on the spirit of an age and on the notion of modernism that emerged in Italy between the 1920s and 1960s. The same occurs if we compare the collections of gallerists like Carlo Cardazzo and Vittorio Barbaroux, from whom Ciccillo Matarazzo bought works for the former MAM collection³⁶. Finally, we must not forget the industrialist, collector and patron of the arts Riccardo Gualino, whose collection had been pulled asunder by the end of the 1930s, but whose prestige was nonetheless enormous³⁷. Gualino is particularly interesting in relation to Matarazzo's endeavors to found MAM, as, like the industrialist, Matarazzo was arriving on the scene as a self-made man, involved in the creation of several art and cultural institutions. In the 1920s, in addition to his modern art collection, Gualino was a theater promoter in Turin and sponsored the creation of a film company. Ciccillo, for his part, helped create the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, the Cinemateca Brasileira, and the Companhia Cinematográfica Vera Cruz during his tenure as MAM chairman³⁸. However, there is one significant difference between these Italian collectors and Ciccillo Matarazzo: Boschi di Stefano, Cardazzo,

34 The collection of the engineer Antonio Boschi and his ceramicist wife Mariadda di Stefano can be seen at the museum house Fondazione Boschi di Stefano in Milan. Antonio Boschi donated the collection to the city of Milan in 1974, after his wife's death. The house was opened to the public in 2003. Today, some of the works can be seen at the Museo del Novecento, in the same city. The collection of the gallerist Ettore Gian Ferrari, later managed by his daughter, the art critic and historian Claudia Gian Ferrari, was largely formed from the second half of the 1930s. In her father's honor, Claudia Gian Ferrari donated the collection to the FAI — Fondo Ambiente Italiano, which entrusted it to one of its Milanese institutions, the Villa Necchi Campiglio. Built between 1932 and 1935, and designed by the architect Piero Portaluppi, Villa Necchi Campiglio, like the Boschi di Stefano apartment, is an emblematic example of how the modern-art collecting Milanese bourgeoisie lived in the 1930s.

35 Rossana Bossaglia's seminal work (cf. BOSSAGLIA, Rossana. *Il Novecento Italiano: Storia, Documenti, Iconografia*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979) involved the collaboration of Claudia Gian Ferrari and the archives in her possession. After the gallerist's death in 2011, the archives were transferred to the Museo del Novecento, though legal challenges from her heirs remain unresolved.

36 For an identification of works that effectively came from the Cardazzo collection, cf. MAGALHÃES, Ana Gonçalves (org.), op. cit.

37 The industrialist Riccardo Gualino (1879-1964) put together one of the most important ancient and modern art collections of the early 20th century. He started collecting in 1912. After the World War I he met Lionello Venturi, who helped him form a modern art collection. This collaboration led to an impressive set of modernist works, many of which were commissioned especially. Imprisoned under the fascist regime in 1929, his collections ended up going to auction. On Gualino, cf. GUALINO, Riccardo. *Frammenti di vita* (introduction by Angelo d'Orsi). Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2007 (1st. edition 1931)

38 On the creation of Vera Cruz, see Ana Carolina Maciel, in the present volume.

Barbaroux, Gian Ferrari and even Riccardo Gualino had always maintained close relationships with the artists whose works they collected, while Matarazzo put together “his” collection toward the specific end of founding MAM São Paulo as part of a broader cultural and political project of the local elite to consolidate the city as a cultural hub and engine of Brazilian modernization. In this sense, perhaps Matarazzo’s collecting activities are closer to those of Gualino, whose patronage was also largely a means of breaking into an elite for which he had no previous bounds. Though Matarazzo had already cemented his social standing among his São Paulo peers — largely due to the fortune amassed by his uncle, Count Francesco Matarazzo — he seems to have associated himself with the modernists in order to appear as a key figure in the modernization process. Also unlike his Italian contemporaries, it is still not known whether or not Ciccillo was a modern art collector before the MAM endeavor.

Another important aspect of these collections is how harmoniously various strains of Italian modern art from the interwar period shared their collectors’ domestic environments. The Boschi di Stefano house museum gives us some measure of how these patrons lived in the midst of their collections and how they chose to arrange their works. The study room of Antonio Boschi was decorated with Achille Funi’s bathers compositions from the 1930s, alongside landscapes by Arturo Tosi and other works from the Italian Novecento — even though the Funi works in his collection were not on Margherita Sarfatti’s original program. On from the study to the dining room, with furnishings by Mario Sironi, we see a series of his compositions from the 1930s and 1940s. On from there into the living room, a piano sits against a background of Giorgio de Chirico’s large gladiator composition³⁹, alongside works by Massimo Campigli, Renato Paresce and others. These household spaces pieced together a history of Italian modern art much like that which crystallized in the museums, as their collectors strove to devise a general panorama of the art of the period. It is hard to identify preferences or any personal taste in these collections, though these can be gleaned from the numerical preponderance of certain artists.

The 71 paintings bought for the former MAM follow a similar logic, that is, they sought to span the main directions taken by Italian modern art in the interwar years, with two very clear exceptions: the futurists/aerofuturists and abstractionists — such as the Gruppo di Como or works by Alberto Magnelli⁴⁰. These two absences may come down to questions of taste, not of the Matarazzos themselves, but of the São Paulo artistic milieu during the years of the MAM’s formation, which, it seems, were heavily marked by the experiences of the Santa Helena Group, and a revaluation of master of the *metier*, realism and certain genres of painting, such as the landscape and still-life. This is reflected in the significant contingent of still-lives that go a long way toward setting the tone for the collection. Unlike the private collections mentioned above, the body of works the Matarazzos put together in order to make their contribution to, and leave

39 The painting *La scuola dei gladiatori: il combattimento*, 1928, by de Chirico, was purchased by Léonce Rosenberg. The canvas was originally painted for the French gallerist’s apartment.

40 Works by Alberto Magnelli were also acquired by the Matarazzos for the former MAM, but as part of a collection of 32 works purchased in Paris, with Magnelli as intermediary. These works include *Composizione*, 1933, which does resemble Magnelli’s rocky formations from the period, such as those presented at the II Quadriennale di Roma in 1935.

their mark on, MAM is extremely homogeneous and, in that sense, makes little effort to delineate the different “schools” of Italian modernist painting, though it does seem to take its bearings from other quarters. The large number of still-lives, a genre that tends to be interpreted in Brazil as a Cezannean pursuit, of mastery of composition and technique, is telling. One needs only compare the beautiful *Natura morta con lume* by Renato Guttuso with Morandi’s *Natura morta* from 1939. Practically contemporary, the compositions are similar in terms of palette and the objects rendered, but very different in craft, raising anew the issue of model for this generation in Italy (and Brazil) —Paris (Guttuso) or Rome/Milan (Morandi). However, this reading could only have been made by someone looking in from the outside, neither French nor Italian, but who saw in them something that resonated with the experiments of the Santa Helena Group, yet to be plumbed.

Finally, another question to be understood concerns the way these works were acquired for Brazil. At the same time as Matarazzo was employing middlemen in Italy to purchase the works for him, commercial exhibitions of Italian modern art were touring South America. Here we return to Bardi, who brought an exhibition of modern Italian art to Rio de Janeiro in 1947. Wouldn’t it have been much easier to buy the art on-show over here? We have not yet had the chance to compare the artworks on tour here in Brazil with the collection bought for the former MAM, but it would seem that they had a lot in common. Be that as it may, the Matarazzos opted to use agents in Italy to get their works. However, the Matarazzo paintings do have two things in common — origin and homogeneity — that set them apart from the collections on show in Brazil and Argentina at the time. With regard to origin, we could say the 71 works form a collection of private collections from the 1930s and 1940s, with seven coming from the Cardazzo collection, four from the Alberto della Ragione⁴¹ collection, one from the award-winning collection of the lawyer Rino Valdameri and four from that of the industrialist Carlo Peroni, from Como. In terms of homogeneity, further investigation is merited here, especially on the still-lives.

41 Considering that Modigliani’s *Self-portrait* was acquired by him at the auction of Riccardo Gualino’s collection, only to be sold on to a gallery in Milan and finally to Matarazzo.