Beyond Futurism: Gino Severini’s Poetics at the Collection of MAC USP

Renata Dias Ferraretto Moura Rocco

In the mid-1950s, the Italian artist Gino Severini (1883-1966) registers the following balance about his own artist pathway:

*The intentions of my entire career can be summed up as 1. At first, I wanted to deal and to express life, movement, rhythm: thus divisionism of colors and form – work without reflection – merry – carefree; 2. Later on, I wanted to search for the constructions, the consciousness of the creative action, and therefore, craft research – a long, reflective, with little joy, but fruitful. In this period, I put in the first place the simultaneous study of mathematics and other sciences, the study of nature, and, in order to control my creative and poetic faculties, I resumed the most explored issues, by treating them realistically (that is, transcendental realism); 3. Eventually, I wanted and I still want life, expression. But I review these scopes after years and years of experiences, study and work. Thus, I can abandon myself without reflecting to the almost mechanical work of the painting, which is, such as art itself, already completely solved internally – I work, then, even if not wanting to, in a state of supreme consciousness.*

This statement which shows the way the artist – who is almost seventy years old – sees and is conscious of his legacy, is very significant also if reflected with regard to the four artworks that are part of the MAC USP, once the production the collection comprises expresses, to a great extent, the second and the third moments highlighted by Severini in his review. As for his first artistic step, above all, futurism, the fact that there is no artwork by him in accordance with the movement beliefs, regarding the profile established for the collection whose Severini’s artworks were selected for, that is, the initial core of seventy-one Italian artworks of the former MAM, formed by Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho between 1946-1947. It is fundamental to remember that in 1963, Matarazzo Sobrinho donated to the USP the collection which bore his name, also the collection which bore his name and that of his wife Yolanda Penteado, plus the so called MAM SP’s Collection, a series of events very well documented.

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3 Translated by the author.
by Brazilian art historiography, which gave birth to MAC USP. When it comes to
the four artworks by Severini, it is interesting to point out that as a group, they
have some similarities of profile compared to the other creations of this first
Italian group of the former MAM: the fact that there is no work representing the
futurist movement is the first one, once the same situation can be observed
regarding artists who were crucial for the futurist formation, such as Severini or
Mario Sironi, among others; the second aspect, as observed regarding other
artworks, is that Severini’s artworks stem from the private collections of Carlo
Cardazzo and Vittorio Barbaroux, whose acquisitions were intermediated by
Salvatori Vendramini and Livio Gaetani respectively; another aspect is that these
artworks are linked to great shows such as the Quadriennale di Roma and the
Biennale di Venezia, either because they were present in the exhibitions - as it
is the case of Natura Morta pane e uva [Natureza-morta com pão e uva], 1930,
by Arturo Tosi depicted at the I Quadriennale di Roma - or because they are
very similar to artworks which were actually presented then - as it is the case of
Natura Morta con Piccioni [Natureza Morta com Pássaros] by Severini, as it will
be discussed ahead; the forth aspect is that there are evidences that there had
been a concern about the mapping of the development of some artist’s poetic
pathway along the decades, as is the case of Tosi, Massimo Campigli and Sironi
from whom the museum has five, five and six artworks respectively.

However, when it comes to Severini, it is always necessary to take into
consideration his relation with the futurist movement, once his artistic pathway
was read in the light of this “phase”, both while he was creating his artworks,
and also when his creative legacy was appraised. In that sense, it is worth
remembering the opinion of the important Italian art critic Lionello Venturi
regarding his artwork, expressed in the monograph the critic dedicated to
him in 1961. Venturi’s thesis, is, to some extent, in line with the periodization
thought by Severini - briefly showed at the beginning of this article - labeling his
artistic pathway in three moments: the first one, the most “glorious,” in which
Severini participated in the early 20th-century avant-gardes, above all, futurism;
the second one, in which he “returned to imitation,” during the interwar period;
and the last one, in which he “recovered the fantasy,” from 1945 onwards. This
Venturi’s essay is significant not only because Severini’s critical fortune is
highly linked to its systemization, but also because it reflects an idea that the
most “brilliant” artworks by the artist have been exactly those developed at that
moment in which he was engaged with the first Italian futurism.


5 By way of clarification, the two Boccioni’s artworks, Development of a bottle in space, 1912, and Unique forms of continuity in space, 1913, fundamental representatives of the futurist production, were bought later, in 1952, from Marinetti’s widow, Benedetta, which means that they cannot be understood in the scope of the profile parameters of the first Italian group of seventy-one acquisitions.


Thus, *Natura Morta con Piccioni*, c. 1938\(^9\) (Fig. 01), *Figura con Pagina di Musica* [Figura com Página de Música], 1942\(^10\) (Fig. 02), *Fiori e Libri* [Flores e Livros], 1942\(^11\) (Fig. 03), and *La Femme et L'arlequin* [A Mulher e o Arlequim], 1946 (Fig. 04), which belong to MAC USP, is a group of artworks that makes us think about the artist’s pathway, and how his artistic ideas reflected the spirit of that period and how they were understood and endorsed by the Italian artistic environment. Reflecting about the choice of these artworks among many others produced by the artist, also means, in a broader sense, understanding the kind of art history narrative meant to be developed for the former MAM.

Beginning with the *Natura Morta con Piccioni* analysis, it is important to point out that this genre was assumed by the artist as preferential for his plastic experimentation, since he worked with it during his entire life, based on different solutions, as can be seen, for example, in his artworks made in consonance with the cubist poetics between 1916 e 1919,\(^12\) and those in which he followed an abstract tendency,\(^13\) from the 1950s onwards. Immediately, in *Natura Morta con Piccioni*, the artist’s obsession with rationalization can be seen, due to the rigid way he structured its composition, following an organization determined by geometrical forms and the palette composed by ochre, browns, grays, and its complete submission to the drawing. His writings made during the 1920s and ‘30s show great appreciation for the classical tradition of art, for the renewed dialogue with the great masters from the Trecento to the Cinquecento, and clearly demonstrate the artist’s relation with the “Return to Order” environment, the one which was felt in Italy, above all.\(^14\) In 1921 Severini published his theoretical formulations based on these principles, in *Du Cubisme au Classicisme: esthétique du compas et du nombre*, whose ideas still remain in the MAC USP’s artwork, despite the fact that it was developed more than one decade later, since it reflects his search for a creation which expressed universal values, supported by a composition based on geometry and number. To make these ideas concrete, the artist composed his scene with a bowl, a vase, and a

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\(^9\) The ongoing master research regarding the four artworks by Severini, carried out by the author, made possible the revision of the dates of Severini’s artworks from MAC USP. As for this one, according to MAC USP’s documentation, the artwork was made in 1939–40, however, c. 1938 was defined when the artwork was made, due to the fact that its reproduction was found in the monthly magazine *Il Frontespizio*, dated October 1938, figure VII.

\(^10\) As pointed out in the previous footnote, this artwork went under date revision. According to MAC USP’s documentation, the artwork was made in 1938, but according to Fonti 1988, 481, it was made c. 1942. Confirming that, a letter sent by Severini to Vittorio Barbaroux from Rome on April 13, 1942, was found, in which a *Figure with Music Score* is mentioned (Gino Severini, “Lettere di Gino Severini a Barbaroux 1940 – 1953.” MART, Archivio del ’900, Fondo Gino Severini, Sev. DGSF.IL. 4.11). Moreover, there is the important statement of the artist’s daughter, Mrs. Romana Severini Brunori, who explained to the author in October 2012, that this artistic solution was developed by her father during the 1940s and not during the 1930s. Thus, c. 1942 was defined when the artwork was made.

\(^11\) According to MAC USP’s documentation this artwork was made in 1946, but according to Fonti 1988, 490, this work was reproduced in Cami, M., “Profilo attuali d’artisti.” In *L’Avenire d’Italia*, March 1942. Furthermore, in the same letter to Barbaroux sent in 1942, mentioned in the previous footnote, Severini mentions *Fiori e Libri*, which is also mentioned in the Catalogo Ragionato as a reference of date. Thus, the year of 1942 was defined as the one in which the artwork was made.

\(^12\) It can be seen in his *Still Life (The Blue Vase)*, 1917 (Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice).

\(^13\) In this case, as a reference, it is possible to mention *Still Life*, dated 1963 (Georges Pompidou Collection, Paris).

\(^14\) It is important to mention that the “Return to Order” phenomenon cannot be reductive for the understanding of the artistic experiments that were made in the interwar period, because, as a matter of fact, in Italy, there were many other manifestations, such as abstractionism, aerofuturism, magical realism, among others, under the “name” of this environment. For a broader picture of arts in the interwar period, see: CAT. EXP. *Anni ’30: arte in Italia oltre il fascismo. Italia: Giunti, 2012 and CAT. EXP. Italia Nova: une aventure de l’art italien 1900-1950. Italia: Skira, 2006.*
shell (in addition to the doves and grapes) taken from his private collection of objects and organized into a “geometrical architecture.” It is not clear where the light that illuminates the objects comes from, and the tray on which the objects lie seems to be floating. Thus, Severini suggested a reflection around the time issue, that should not be transitory and ephemeral, but in suspension. Artists such as Giorgio Morandi and Arturo Tosi developed artworks with the same conceptual thread, even if based on very different plastic researches, as can be noticed in their artworks in the MAC USP Collection that were made in the same period. The representation of grapes and doves\(^{15}\) in *Natura Morta con Piccioni* equally serves to the purpose of reflecting about the time, within the religious scope, since the artist, who was an atheist during his futurist period, converted to Catholicism in 1923, and became a great believer and disseminator, which can be also proved by his texts and church mural creations. In this sense, it is a key issue to mention the friendship with the neo-Thomist French philosopher Jacques Maritain, which also began in 1923, and which highly contributed to the artist’s religious and philosophic orientation\(^{16}\).

It is important to situate this still life from MAC USP Collection as a “representative” of a greater group of artworks that the artist developed during the 1930s, and notice that very similar compositions to this one were exhibited at the II Quadriennale di Roma (1935) – such as *Natura morta con anguria*, c. 1932-1933, *e Pesci e vasi*, 1934 - when Severini was granted the 1st prize for his painting, receiving for that a hundred Italian lire, counting on Benito Mussolini’s approval, which encouraged Severini to return to live in Rome, after some many years living in Paris\(^{17}\).

The three other Severini’s artworks in MAC USP Collection are part of another referential context, since they do not refer anymore to the 1930s propositions. In an immediate comparison to the other still life from MAC USP Collection, *Fiori e Libri*, it is clear that Severini abandoned many of the resources he used to apply in his artworks during the previous decades, and took certain elements out of its religious associations, subverting the time issue, that was no longer treated as something solemn and “frozen”, on the contrary, his flowers now vibrate, the vase contains water, the pages of the book seem to be just handled. The fact that Severini demonstrated his concern in surrounding the still life with the sensation of space, situating it at a precise place and time, reinforces Severini’s proposal of operating with the idea of transitory and the present moment. When it comes to the plastic solution, one can notice that the artist worked with lighter and looser brushstrokes, and his palette became more vibrant and colorful; it is worth mentioning that like *Natura Morta con Piccioni*, *Fiori e Libri* is also linked to the Quadriennale di Roma, but with its fourth edition (1943), once some of his depicted creations remind a lot the plastic solution applied on *Fiori e Libri*, such

\(^{15}\) There is a curious episode mentioned by the artist’s daughter, Mrs. Romana Severini Brunori, to the author in October 2012, which helps elucidate the relation between her father and the dove: a dove entered the Severinis’ house and it could not eat by itself, thus they decided to “adopt” it, and it remained with them for approximately a month. Cf. RADIN, Giulia (org.). *Correspondance Gino Severini Jacques Maritain (1923-1966).* Itália: Leo Olschki, 2011, it is possible to see its picture in the figure 15, which was shot around 1936, and is part of Romana Severini Brunori’s archives, whose title is *Gino Severini avec le pigeon Don Glu-Glu*, in which the artist poses holding the dove.

\(^{16}\) To comprehend the relationship between the two, it is recommended the reading of: RADIN, Giulia (org.), op. cit.

\(^{17}\) Severini was born in Cortona in 1883 and moved to Paris in 1906.
as *Natura Morta con Fiori*, 1942-1943 and *Natura Morta con Tavolozza*, 1943. A key aspect regarding these three still lifes mentioned above is that Severini applied on them shadows and angular format elements, which evidences that the artist had recovered in his artworks the poetics proposed by the French artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century, above all, the cubist one. Regarding that moment, the critic Raffaele De Grada pointed out in an essay in Emporium magazine in 1942, that Severini had undertaken a “richiamo Braque-Gris”.

This avant-gardes recovery orientation, in spite of being very common among the artists from the 1940s onwards and more vigorously from the end of World War II onwards, could already be seen in Severini’s artworks from the early 1940s. It is not by chance that in a letter addressed to the artist Renato Biroli by Severini on October 19th, 1942, from Rome, his discourse was about the greatness of Picasso’s art, saying that cubism, as far as its theory goes, was developed in France, but that it was actually developed by Spanish, French, and Italian artists, adding that it was not an exclusively French movement belonging to a determined period. Severini also affirms that Picasso was capable of establishing new conditions in art, whose invariables could be equally found on Caravaggio’s or Piero della Francesca’s legacies. Thus, Severini finds in cubism a way of developing another kind of universality in his artworks, no longer based on geometry and number. It is clear that during the 1940s, the artist felt free from the theories and solutions defended and expressed in his artworks during the two previous decades, and started to search for a painting of joy, often decorative, whose motives could be, besides the still life, female figures, portraits, and the *Commedia dell’Arte*’s character. This orientation can also be found in his paintings *Figura con Pagina di Musica* and *La Femme et L’arlequin* in the MAC USP Collection, but in both cases, the renewed look to the artistic avant-gardes was geared towards Henri Matisse’s plastic solutions. The French master was a constant reference in the work of Severini in the 1940s, to whom the latter dedicated a monograph in 1944. Choosing this artist was not random, because, if we analyze some of the texts written by Severini about Matisse or those in which he mentions him, it is possible to see that he agrees with his way of thinking, and, in his opinion, Matisse is a true “architect of sensitiveness”. Therefore, in this artist, Severini finds a way to justify a production that conciliates fantasy and organization. In the case of *Figura con Pagina di Musica*, Matisse’s influence is noticed, more precisely in his production of the late 1920s, comprised by the so-called Nice Period, as proved by the similar plastic language, same thematic choice, that is, a depicted thoughtful female figure in the household environment, not performing any activity. This depicted figure, most probably the artist’s wife, Jeanne Fort Severini, was developed based on a work with thick outlines, in an intimate scenario where these are decorative elements, such as colorful wallpaper with arabesques in the background, and a well-ornamented curtain.

18 Documentation consulted in Florence, at Archivio Contemporaneo Gabinetto G. P. Vieusseux on 19th October 2012.


It is important to underline the dress the figure is wearing, since it is a kind of outfit that does not seem to have a correspondence, when it comes to the outfit worn in the period in which the artwork was painting, thus it seems to have been chosen exclusively due to the plastic effect it brought about. When it comes to the use of colors, one can notice, in comparison to Matisse’s creations, that Severini did not venture out with explosions of pure colors, on the contrary, he made a very calculated use of them.

It is still important to point out that, in addition to the French master’s reference, Severini was also affected by part of the Italian environment he was experiencing in those years, due to a constant circulation of images of female figures depicted in the household environment, whether in magazines or paintings.

In La Femme et L’arlequin, Severini worked with the theme of Commedia Dell’Arte, which can be mentioned as a mark of his style, since it was worked by him as of 1915, as can be seen in several drawings and paintings based on a cubist plastic research. It is worth remembering that, in addition to depicting the characters of Commedia Dell’Arte in his paintings, Severini designed stage sets and costumes, such as in Pulcinella, by Igor Stravinsky, in 1940, and the canvas in which he was working when he passed away was precisely a harlequin. In La Femme et L’arlequin, there is also a reference to Matisse’s artistic solution, in which Severini drew based on fluid and sinuous outlines, making a rich use of colors, and also the black as a color itself. The artist also applied different patterns in the pillows and fabrics near to the bergère, used arabesques in the wallpaper in the background. In the same year in which this artwork was developed, Severini had a personal show at Galleria Santa Radegonda in Milan, Punti di Partenza e Punti di Arrivo nell’opera di Gino Severini, that is important because it shows the positive reaction the art market had regarding Severini’s artistic orientation in the 1940s. The texts signed by Renzo Bertoni, Jacques Maritain, and Umbro Apollonio for the exhibition catalog clearly demonstrate the approval of his researches, and also highlight that the present period was the one in which Severini finally managed to conciliate the diverse beliefs he defended in previous decades. According to Maritain, after a: “...phase of instinctive explosion and a phase of rational rigor, his art, after having suffered the regular flow and reflux of the vital renewal, again can make room for the

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22 In this sense, some examples: the Rivista Bellezza: Mensile dell’alta moda e di vita italiana (that also used to depict in its covers some female figures in the household environment, made by artists), and Rivista Civiltà and Aria d’Italia, whose drawings by artists are commented by Severini in 1940.

23 According to consultation on the catalog of the exhibition III Quadriennale d’arte nazionale (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Feb.–Jul. 1939. Rome: Editoriale Donus), some artworks exhibited in the III Quadriennale di Roma (1939), in which this subject appears, can be mentioned: Ragazza con lo specchio, by Franco Dani (Figure XXIV); Figura, by Nino Bertoletti (Figure V); Ritratto, by Alberto Chiancone (Figure VII); Ragazza in celeste, by Giorgio Settala (Figure X); Donna allo specchio, by Giovanni Brancaccio (Figure XVII); La Sorella del Pittore, by Emanuele Rambaldi (Figure XXII).

24 As an example, the artwork Harlequin with Guitar (1917, Georges Pompidou Collection, France) can be mentioned.

25 FONTI, Daniela (org.), op. cit., p. 585.

26 Cf. BOCK, Catherine C., “Woman before an Aquarium and Woman on a Rose Divan: Matisse in The Helen Birch Barlett Memorial Collection”, In: Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies. Vol. 12, nº 12, The Helen Birch Barlett Memorial Collection, 1986, pp. 200-221, during the Nice period, Matisse initially works, in the first half, with the thoughtful woman subject, whereas the odalisque subject is more strongly explored from the second half onwards.

senses spontaneity that from now on is dominated by the spirit.” 28. In the following year, when the artist was living in Paris again, he had another personal show, this time at Galerie Billiet-Caputo, Severini Oeuvres Anciennes et Récents, when he also received a positive review, which can be seen in the text written by Courthion 29, in which he affirms: “After a long period filled up with decorative artworks ... Severini is now opened to new worries of the painting. The thing that impresses me, above all, is the youth without artifices of these associations of forms and colors.” 30

According to two important Severini’s critics, Daniela Fonti e Maurizio Dell’Arco, the 1940s were, in short, a period of great productivity for Severini, when the artist found again his creative fervor, recovering the fantasy and the dear subjects of his youth; a period in which the color was multiplied, even when he used the shades of Picasso or Matisse, or his own. 31 Thus, in that decade his work gets a warm welcome again in France and Italy, once the recovery of his “youth vein” was extremely valued by the time he was producing and also in Italian art history treatises published later. 32

Therefore, it makes sense if we think about the acquisition of the three artworks precisely from that decade for the former MAM Collection, at the same time it is perfectly comprehensible the acquisition of Natura Morta con Piccioni, since this artwork represents Severini’s artistic and ideological slopes very well during the 1930s, also a period in which his work was greatly valued in Italy under the auspices of the Fascist regime.

It is still important to reflect about the kind of reception that Severini’s production was getting by the Brazilian artistic environment during the years in which the Italian artworks were bought by Matarazzo’s couple to be part of the former MAM’s Collection, and in the following years, when they were displayed at Matarazzo’s metallurgical industry and in the shows held by the former MAM. Therefore, the texts by the critics Mário Pedrosa and Sergio Milliet written between 1940 and 1950 were the fundamental means of research; through them one can notice that a different and curious kind of comprehension of Severini’s production comes up, once precisely the four artworks from the former MAM are not mentioned, whereas his futurists or cubists creations are enhanced.

On the other hand, Severini’s theoretical publications written between the 1930s and the 1940s are broadly known and mentioned by both critics, but not the artistic artworks developed during that period. It is known, that the two critics had a key role in developing a modernist discourse in the country, assuming important positions such as the board of the former MAM and the same in some Bienal de São Paulo’s editions, and therefore, completely aware of what was being collected during those years. Thus, despite the mismatch...
regarding the artist comprehension, the fact is that the critics were making a reading of Severini which could fit and could be aligned to their own discourses. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that in that moment they valued more the artistic solution linked to the one proposed by the early 20th-century artistic avant-gardes rather than Severini´s production during the interwar period; such positioning is absolutely comprehensible if we think about the greatest movement of adding value to the avant-gardes movements in that moment done, for example, by the Biennale di Venezia from 1948 onwards, and in Brazil carried out by the Bienal de São Paulo, which embraced Venice´s event as its model, and which in its second edition, in 1953, presented a room entirely dedicated to futurism, where there were five works by Severini.

Bearing this scenario in mind, it is not casual the fact that Severini´s futurist production is generally more well-known among us (if not his only one), adding the fact that the art history treatises that circulate in our country end up reinforcing this situation, once most of them mention Severini in the scope of this movement. However, it can be affirmed that the four artworks by Severini at MAC USP, chosen in order to contribute with the development of a determined art history narrative proposed by the former MAM´s collection, bear witness of the diverse production of the artist, whereas they are an important record of time in which he lived and his fruitful transit France-Italy.

**Reference List**


Fig. 1  Gino Severini, Natureza Morta com Pombas, c. 1938, oil on cardboard, 29,4 x 40,5 cm. Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho Collection – Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brasil. Photo credit: Rômulo Fialdini. AUTVIS, Brasil, 2015.

Fig. 2  Gino Severini, Figura com Página de Música, c. 1942, oil on canvas, 65,1 x 49,9 cm. Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho Collection – Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brasil. Photo credit: Rômulo Fialdini. AUTVIS, Brasil, 2015.
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Fig. 3  Gino Severini, 
Flores e Livros, c. 1942, 
oil on canvas, 61 x 45,8 
cm. Francisco Matarazzo 
Sobrinho Collection – Museu 
de Arte Contemporânea da 
Universidade de São Paulo, 
Brasil. Photo credit: Rômulo 
Fialdini. AUTVIS, Brasil, 
2015.

Fig. 4  Gino Severini, A 
Mulher e o Arlequim, 1946, 
oil on canvas, 61 x 50,2 
cm. Francisco Matarazzo 
Sobrinho Collection – Museu 
de Arte Contemporânea da 
Universidade de São Paulo, 
Brasil. Photo credit: Rômulo 
Fialdini. AUTVIS, Brasil, 
2015.