

Tupi or Not Tupi: Cultural Cannibalism in Brazilian Modern Art

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ART 192: Senior Seminar

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10 May 2010

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In 1922 Sao Paulo hosted a major event that established the beginning of the Brazilian Modern Art movement. The *Semana de Arte Moderna* (also referred to as the Week of Modern Art or the Week of '22) became the catalyst that helped to redefine *Brasilidade* (Brazilianness) in terms of art, language, architecture, and tradition. The Week also marked the centennial of Brazil's independence from Portugal. As Brazil experienced a wave of nationalism related to the centennial, the Brazilian people sought to define Brazilian culture in relation to its native traditions, its African culture and also its European influences. The (sometimes incomplete) incorporation of African culture, European influence and eventually of *Antropofagia* (Anthropophagy) from the "primitive" Brazilian Indian into the contemporaneous heritage of the developing Brazilian national identity directly led to the formation of the ideals of the Brazilian Modern Art movement that had its symbolic beginning in the Week of '22.

Since being colonized by Portugal in 1500 Europe's influence on Brazil's cultural, economic, and political development had been strong. Artistically, the eighteenth century was defined by a strong Baroque phase, dominated by the famed sculptor O Aleijadinho. Rococo followed and survived into the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1816 the French Artistic Mission in Brazil established the Academy of Fine Arts (later the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts). The dominion of the French style of academic art led Brazilian art throughout that century. By the early 1900's the majority of Brazilian artists were submerged in a tradition of imitation. Brazilian artists continued to follow Europe's lead into Neoclassicism and Romanticism until the early 1900's. During these times, Brazilian art was not its own. Artists such as Eliseu Visconti



Fig 1 *Gioventù*, Eliseu Visconti 1898, 65 x 49 cm

emblemized Brazilian mimicry of European styles and themes. In *Gioventù* (1900, Fig 1) Visconti carefully follows the Pre-Raphaelite trend in the figuration of the female body. Neither the young girl nor her surroundings reflect the artist's Brazilian identity. The painting expresses a devotion to European art that is little concerned with Brazil.

European modernism was a key building block for the formation of Brazilian modernism; to understand the formation of Brazilian modernism, one must understand European modernism. The origins of European modern art lie in 1860's France but what is most useful to the discussion of Brazilian modernism is the French School of Paris which began right at the turn of the 20th century and lasted until the outbreak of WWII. The School of Paris was comprised of a group of artists, almost all foreign to France, who relocated to live and work in Paris. Many lived in Montmartre and also in Montparnasse. The artists in this group include modern icons such as Picasso (Spanish), Modigliani (Italian), Brancusi (Romanian), Chagall (Russian), and Schiele (Austrian).¹ Developments in Surrealism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Expressionism all had their roots in the School of Paris. Brazilian artists would draw upon all of these styles for the formal aspects of their art; however, thematically Brazilian art was concerned with Brazil.

Though not the first public exhibition of European Modernist forms, the Week of Modern Art must be regarded as Brazil's first *collective* movement into a modern aesthetic both formally and thematically.² Brazilian Modernism was in no way a point of total separation from European artistic hegemony. The forms and styles remained European; from Cubism to Surrealism the

1 James Voorhies, "School of Paris," *Helibrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/scpa/hd_scpa.htm (accessed April 25, 2010).

2 Anita Malfatti had a 1917-1918 solo exhibition entitled "Exposição de Pintura Moderna Anita Malfatti" in Sao Paulo. The show consisted mainly of "fauvist" works. Her work was strongly criticized at the time since very little of European modernism had been seen in Brazil.

French and Germans dominated artistic language. What happened in Brazil starting in 1922 was a cannibalism of both European modern aesthetics and the culture of subaltern Brazilians moving towards the ideal of a fully integrated Brazilian national identity.

Brazil had two main reasons for redefining itself as separate from Europe after such a long history of dependence both politically and culturally. A strong sense of nationalism arose in Brazil surrounding the year of the centennial (1922). From the army and navy rearmament to the organization of the League of National Defense, Brazil sought to protect its country's independence. Building upon the political independence established those hundred years earlier, the centennial aroused a desire for cultural independence as well. The other, perhaps stronger, reason for a marked separation from Europe was World War One. Brazil, like the rest of the world, had watched as the world's greatest symbol of Enlightenment ideals attacked itself from the inside. Before WWI the world had (perhaps) good reason to envy and emulate Europe. However war left Europe tainted and bloodstained and the glory of the Western "civilized" world was left strongly in question.

With the cultural esteem of Europe in question and the rise of national pride in Brazil, artists rose to the challenge of creating a new art to correspond with a new national cultural mentality. The Week of Modern Art brought together a group of artists, musicians and writers, who incorporated both European modern styles with Brazilian themes, imagery, and cultural heritage that resulted in an entirely shocking Brazilian Modern art. The Week of Modern Art evidenced the beginning of an art movement that was concerned with the diverse cultures of all of it's people. However, the representation of these cultures was more often than not viewed through the lens of the still Eurocentric Brazilian artists and writers, many of whom had studied

extensively in Europe. This fact presents somewhat of a double-edged sword. On one hand, many scholars take issue with the fact that most of the leaders of the modernist movement were of the cultural elite and had studied in Europe several times throughout their lives because of the belief that this would only lead to mimicry of European modernism with no real Brazilian relevance. In fact, this connection with Europe gave them an enhanced cultural awareness that gave them access to the repertoire of modern tradition. To effectively appropriate one must understand the discourse under which the appropriated object or style operates. Thus, because of their thorough understanding of both the artistic trends and contemporary discourse of Modernism in Europe, Brazilian artists' appropriation of styles such as Cubism, Fauvism, and Expressionism was legitimized. However, this undeniable Eurocentrism does raise important issues of whether or not African and native Indian cultures were appropriately represented and incorporated or if it was simply a projected image of the idea of the "Indian" and of the "African."

Early on the major players in the visual arts were painters Anita Malfatti, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, Lasar Segal, and Tarsila do Amaral. Writers also had a large part in both organizing the Week and in perpetuating the Modernist movement as it progressed to its Pau-Brazil period and finally into the Anthropophagic period.³ The most influential of these writers were Oswald de Andrade and Mario de Andrade (no relation). These artists and writers incorporated several different cultures into their redefinition of *brasilidade*. Oswald de Andrade later called this method of incorporation "cannibalism." Generally speaking, the formal elements Brazilian artists

³ Pau-Brazil refers to Brazilwood, one of the major exports of Brazil. Oswald Andrade wrote the Pau-Brazil manifesto that emphasized European culture as an import to Brazil. He also claimed that Modern Brazilian artists should export uniquely Brazilian art to the rest of the world.

used came directly from Europe. Biographically it is easy to see that Brazilian artists' training in Europe influenced them stylistically and that they brought these styles back with them to Brazil.

Anita Malfatti's early studies in Berlin with Lovis Corinth from 1911 to 1914 informed her work and she became well known for her expressionistic style of painting. After leaving Germany, Malfatti traveled to New York and then to Maine where she was further encouraged to paint with bright and expressive colors.⁴ The work shown in her 1917 exhibition shows this international influence. After this shocking exhibition she was highly anticipated at the *Semana de Arte Moderna*. Her work, especially her portraits, showed the marked influence of her European training. Two portraits in particular, *O Homem Amarelo* (Yellow Man 1915-1916) and *O Japonês* (Japanese Man 1915-1916) show the influence of both Cubism and of Expressionism with their bold paint strokes and geometric lines.

Painter Di Cavalcanti maintained the belief that art should reflect the cultural roots of its people. After the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, when studied in Paris from 1923-1925, he developed a strong relationship with Pablo Picasso. He also met with artists such as Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, Léger, Unamuno, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse and others.⁵ Though this friendship with Picasso flourished, Cavalcanti never fully embraced abstraction since he believed that it reflected the values and market desires of the elite. However, it is apparent that cubism still had an effect since many of his figures are strangely proportioned, especially emphasizing the curvaceousness of the women. For Cavalcanti, African imagery especially *mulatas*, and Carnaval

4 Kristin G. Cogington and Kara Kelley Hallmark, *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

5 E. Di Cavalcanti, <http://www.dicavalcanti.com.br/cronologia.htm> (accessed Nov. 20, 2009).

became common themes.⁶

Another important artist to Brazilian modernism who also expressed the formal importance of European styles is Lasar Segall. Born in Lithuania, Segall moved to Dresden at the age of 15 (in 1910) and continued to live predominantly in Germany for the next several years (though making progressively more frequent trips to Brazil starting in 1912). Segall's studies at



Fig 2 *Eternos Caminhantes*, Lasar Segall, 1919 oil on canvas, 138 x 184 cm

⁶ Claudia Calirman, *Emiliano Di Cavalcanti*, 2009, http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=4989345 (accessed April 25, 2010).

the Berlin Academy, his acquaintance with German artists such as Otto Dix, George Grosz, Kurt Schwitters and others, and his artistic reckoning of WWI each aided him in his development of European modernist styles, especially German Expressionism.⁷ While his earlier work deals explicitly with European forms and content (Fig. 2), Segall's later work shows the influence of Brazilian culture by a change in thematic representation. His work entitled *Encontro* or "Meeting" (Fig 3) most clearly illustrates the mixing of European styles with Brazilian themes. In it, Segall stands with his first wife, Margarete, hands held together and facing each other with buildings in the background. The most striking thing about this painting is that it is a self portrait of Segal with one major difference from reality: his skin color is not his true eastern European white, but tinted brown identifying him as a Brazilian mulatto. This form of self-identification with Brazil and specifically with Afro-Brazilians serves to confirm both his connections with Brazil culturally and artistically. His feelings of relationship with Brazilian culture translate directly into his art into what Mario Andrade identified as Segall's 1924-1928 "Brazilian Phase."⁸

These three artists, Anita Malfatti, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, and Lasar Segall each exemplify the ways in which many Brazilian artists used European modes of expression while emphasizing their concern with Brazil by using explicitly Brazilian themes. The formal qualities typically seen were Expressionism, Cubism, and even a Fauvist use of color. The themes explored by these and other artists can be categorized into two groups: the literal incorporation of the Afro-Brazilian and the ideological invention of the archetypal indigenous Tupi Indian.

7 Museu Lasar Segall, *Biographia*, <http://www.museusegall.org.br/mlsTexto.asp?sSume=11> (accessed May 6, 2010).

8 Ibid.



Fig 3 *Encontro*, Lasar Segall, 1924 oil on canvas, 66 x 54 cm

African imagery was popular at this time for modern artists all over the world, including Brazil. After a long history of slavery and scientific racism, African culture in Brazil had been actively repressed since the 1500's.⁹ By the late 1800's Brazil and Cuba were the only western countries to still allow slavery to continue and both were being pressured internationally toward abolition. Finally in 1888 Princess Isabel signed the Lei Aurea into law. *Modernistas* valued the incorporation of Afro-Brazilian culture into their ideal concept of a fully integrated nation. Whether or not this was successful in legitimizing the African influence on Brazilian culture has been widely debated. Though perhaps never truly intended to place Afro-Brazilians at the same cultural level as Euro-Brazilians, the effort did bring to the forefront the African contribution to the development and contemporary cultural situation of Brazil. Increased recognition began in Brazil after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and became a significant part of national identity by the late 1920's. Carnival became a national holiday, *feijoada* (traditional Afro-Brazilian slave food) became a national dish, and *cachaça* (sugar-cane liquor also associated with Afro-Brazilian slave culture) became the national drink.¹⁰ The visual arts followed suit with depictions like Tarsila do Amaral's *Operarios* (Fig. 4) which shows the wide variety of skin colors that manifested as a direct result of race mixing or *mestiçagem*.

Carnival was also a popular theme of the Brazilian Modern movement. The association of Carnival with Africans, and the popularity of African culture at the time assured its appropriation by artists. Di Cavalcanti was one for whom Carnival was a recurring theme throughout his

9 Dain Borges, "The Recognition of Afro-Brazilian Symbols and Ideas, 1890-1940," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 32, no. 2 (1995): p 60-61

10 Styliane Philippou, "Modernism and National Identity in Brazil, or How to Brew a Brazilian Stew," *National Identities* 7, no. 3 (September 2005): p 253.



Fig 4 *Operarios*, Tarsila do Amaral, 1924 oil on canvas

oeuvre. Beginning in 1924 with the painting appropriately entitled *Carnaval* (Fig 5), Di Cavalcanti showed strong expressionist tendencies with Cubist undercurrents, similar to Malfatti. His palette was much closer to classic Expressionism because of its bright and varied color scheme. By 1954 Di Cavalcanti had pushed the theme further and had more fully incorporated the visual culture of the African. Di Cavalcanti's development mirrored the broader cultural development that continued in the visual and literary arts.

The third ingredient in the Modernist's development of identity was the "primitive"



Fig 5 *Carnaval*, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti 1924, oil on canvas

Brazilian Indian. Though very seldom was the image of the Indian literally represented, the ideals represented in Brazil's movement for independence were influenced by the stories of the indigenous Indians' historical refusal to be colonized and enslaved. The romanticized valorization of the fiercely independent Indian became the archetype of the modern Brazilian desire for Independence from Portugal. Also, the ideal of the pre-logical mind and of Cannibalism were direct appropriations from Indian culture. Mario de Andrade's novel

Macunaíma (1928) is exemplary of the literary incorporation of the culture and folklore of the indigenous Tupi Indians. Though published after Oswald de Andrade's Cannibalist Manifesto, *Macunaíma* was actually written shortly before the Manifesto. These two documents reflect the prevailing Modernist ideas on the cultural identity of the Brazilian people. According to Kimberle S. Lopez in her article in the *Luso-Brazilian Review*,

Macunaíma is widely recognized as a vital practical enactment of what Oswald de Andrade put forth in theoretical terms in his manifesto. [...] the entire project is anthropophagistic in that it consumes materials from a broad range of sources and incorporates them in a de-hierarchized whole, without categorically excluding any discourse, including that of the colonizer.¹¹

Macunaíma was the story of a man, born in the Brazilian jungle who traveled to São Paulo and then to Rio and back again. The story contains many references to traditional Indian folklore in the form of ceremonies, gods, and spirits who Macunaíma encounters during his travels.

Macunaíma goes through a rather remarkable physical transformation as well. As the novel progresses, the main character changes from an Indian to an Afro-Brazilian and finally to a white person. This transformation is not a hierarchical one, but one that suggests that the true Brazilian has in themselves each of these races which does not allow identification with any single "superior" race. In addition to appropriating Tupi folklore into Modern literary terms, Mario de Andrade also altered Portuguese grammar and vocabulary to include Tupi and African terms.

This incorporation determinedly separated post-colonial Brazilian Portuguese from the language of the colonial Portuguese.

¹¹ Kimberle S. Lopez, "Modernismo and the Ambivalence of the Postcolonial Experience: Cannibalism, Primitivism, and Exoticism in Mario de Andrade's "Macunaíma"," *Luso Brazilian Review* (University of Wisconsin Press) 35, no. 1 (1998): 28.

Perhaps the most significant document for Brazilian Modernist development into its Anthropophagic period was Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist Manifesto* (1928). This densely packed work depended greatly on Freudian theory, specifically as discussed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913).¹²

Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.

The world's single law. Disguised expression of all individualism, of all collectivism. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties.

Tupi or not tupi, that is the question. [...]

Down with all the importers of canned consciousness. The palpable existence of life. And the pre-logical mentality for Mr. Lévy-Bruhl to study. [...]

Heritage. Contact with the Carib side of Brazil. *Où Villegaignon print terre*.¹³ Montaigne. Natural man. Rousseau. From the French Revolution to Romanticism, to the Bolshevik Revolution, to the Surrealist Revolution and Keyserling's technicized barbarian. We push onward. [...]

We already had justice, the codification of vengeance. Science, the codification of Magic. Cannibalism. The permanent transformation of the Tabu into a Totem. (De Andrade 1928)¹⁴

In this excerpt from his manifesto, Oswald de Andrade asserts that the cannibalism of the Tupi is necessary for independence from the paternal "importers of canned consciousness." He mentions the transformation of "Tabu into Totem" which comes directly from Freud's analysis of cannibalistic patricide, which aids the movement from Nature to Culture.¹⁵ For Andrade,

12 Beth Joan Vinkler, "The Anthropophagic Mother/Other: Appropriated Identities in Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofago"," *Luso-Brazilian Review* (University of Wisconsin) 34, no. 1 (1997): 105-111.

13 In Montaigne's 1580 essay "Des cannibales, où Villegaignon print terre" is Antarctic France (the French mission in Brazil). Montaigne argues in this essay that ritual cannibalism is far less barbaric than many "civilized" European customs.

14 Oswald de Andrade and Leslie Bary, "Cannibalist Manifesto," *Latin American Literary Review* (Latin American Literary Review) 19, no. 38 (July-Dec 1991): 38-47.

15 Vinkler, "The Anthropophagic Mother/Other: Appropriated Identities in Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofago"



Fig 6 Theodore de Bry copper engravings from, *Le Voyage au Brésil de Jean de Léry 1556-1558*

the pre-logical mind was much more strongly connected with the Mother or the land of Brazil. The Father, the imposer of culture, language, and law was to be cannibalized in order to maintain connection to the land.¹⁶ The cannibal, thus, provided the basis for the Anthropophagic movement, led by Oswald de Andrade and Tarsila do Amaral. Whether or not the cannibal was ever a historical reality as portrayed by European writers of the time is doubtful. Copper engravings by Theodore de Bry, created as illustrations for de Léry's *Le Voyage au Brésil* (Fig 6),

¹⁶Vinkler, "The Anthropophagic Mother/Other: Appropriated Identities in Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofago" 107.

vividly portray the image of the Tupi created and supported by European visitors to Brazil. The power to define the Tupi as savage cannibals was meant to justify and legitimate European dominance over “primitive” and “uncivilized” peoples. The appropriation of the cannibal, though perhaps indulging the negative mythology created by Europeans, also reclaimed the power of the *idea* of the cannibal for Brazil’s own cultural purposes. The cannibal’s negative power became a positive force signaling both independence and the power to ingest European culture and to use it to strengthen the body of Brazil.

Tarsila do Amaral’s involvement in the development of *Antropofagia* cannot be understated. In 1928 Amaral gave a painting to Oswald de Andrade (to whom she was married) for his birthday. Andrade decided to call the untitled painting *Abaporu* or “man eater” in the traditional language of the Tupi Indian. The male figure sits beneath the orange slice-sun and beside a cactus plant (both common symbols of Brazil employed by do Amaral). The figure may be associated with the sciapod, a figure from classical mythology described as having one large foot used to shield itself from the sun and rain. It is also sometimes referred to as a cannibal.¹⁷ The figure is meant to show the link between human and nature. This painting directly inspired Andrade’s writing of the *Cannibalist Manifesto* later that year. Following the writing of the manifesto, do Amaral painted *Antropofagia* (Fig. 7), which merged *Abaporu* and *La Negra*, a painting from 1929. This painting represented the ideals of the Anthropophagic period. It successfully fused the African figure and the native Indian representing the Modernist aim of cannibalizing heritage to produce an authentically national art.

17 Carol Damian, "Tarsila do Amaral: Art and Environment Concerns of a Brazilian Modernist," *Woman's Art Journal* (Woman's Art, Inc.) 20, no. 1 (1999): 3-7. See Carol Rose’s *Giants, Monsters, and Dragons* for more information on the sciapod.



Fig 7 *Antropofagia*, Tarsila do Amaral, 1929 oil on canvas

While some might say that Brazilian primitivism was a simple mimic of the popular European primitivist trend, in reality it was entirely different for the simple reason that the “primitive” Tupi Indian was a legitimate part of Brazilian heritage. While artists such as Gauguin traveled to Tahiti in search of man in the state of nature and Picasso borrowed heavily from “primitive” African masks, Brazilian modernists had no need for travel or cannibalism imported

from any other country. Their appropriation of Tupi cannibalism was reclamation of national identity. As Kenneth Jackson points out, “Although not indigenous or folkloric themselves, the artists find it natural to incorporate indigenous and folkloric themes into their works and to claim them as their own, as equally valid representations of Brazilian reality.”¹⁸

In the article “Avant-Garde in Brazil” Michael Korfmann asserts that the Brazilian avant-garde was similar to that of the European avant-garde in that it was “about the dissolution of organic representation-structures, but in another context and with other consequences.”¹⁹ Organic representation-structures such as two-point perspective, orthogonal lines, and modeling of figures were each methods of representation that were utilized and revered by the Academy. As Modernists, Brazilian artists were also concerned with dissolving these representation structures. However, this distinction made by Korfmann is important because it calls attention to the fact that Brazilian Modern art was not mimicry of European modernism since it had different aims, a different *modus operandi* and consequences relevant to Brazilian national identity.

The evolution of Brazilian Modern art during the 1920’s had several antecedents that have been mentioned. First, there was the nationalism that arose as a result of the centennial of Brazil’s independence from Portugal. In addition to this nationalistic sentiment there surfaced a desire to create a Brazilian art that acknowledged the multitudes of cultures that all belonged within the heritage of Brazil. Not only was Europe’s artistic hegemony difficult to escape, but there was also increasing recognition of African culture and native Indian traditions. These

18 Kenneth David Jackson, "Three Glad Races: Primitivism and Ethnicity in Brazilian Modernist Literature," *Modernism/modernity* (The Johns Hopkins University Press) 1, no. 2 (April 1994): 89-112.

19 Michael Korfmann and Marcelo Nogueira, "Avant-Garde in Brazil," *Dialectical Anthropology* (Kluwer Academic Publishers) 28 (2004): 133.

diverse ties led Brazilian artists of the time to attempt at an inclusive incorporation of all three cultures. Because of their position as cultural elites, the artists involved in the Modern art movement were not exploring personal identity, but national identity in their appropriation of European, African, and Indian elements. Additionally, their social position distanced them from a true realization of subaltern culture. Brazilian modernists utilized cultural traditions under the blanket of hegemonic interpretation. Through these layers of social interpretation and distance, modernists were still able to create a national Brazilian art that came far closer to an inclusive version of culture than Academic art had.

The beginning of the Brazilian Modern art movement had its roots in the *Semana de Arte Moderna* but progressed as artists and writers developed their ideas about cannibalism and about their national identity. From visual representations of carnival to admonitions by Oswald de Andrade to cannibalize culture, Anthropophagy became the adult child of nationalism and modernism. Following Modernism, Brazilian art continued to evolve with an eye ever fixed on Europe but with the awareness of its heritage that has allowed Brazil to maintain its separation from European artistic hegemony.

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