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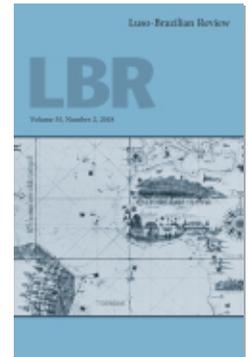
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*Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil* (review)

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*Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*. 11 Feb.–3 Jun. 2018. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

For historians of Latin American art it is almost inconceivable that Tarsila do Amaral, the grande dame of Brazilian Modernism, has only now received her first US retrospective. Tarsila, as she is affectionately called by her countrymen and the scholarly community alike, is famously quoted as saying, “I want to be the painter of my country”—an aim she largely achieved. It is impossible to construct either a national or continental history of Modernist painting without charting a path through Amaral’s production of the early 1920’s. And yet this year—exactly ninety years since the artist’s first retrospective in São Paulo—was the first time Amaral’s work had been gathered as a solo exhibition in US museums. Co-curated by Stephanie D’Alessandro and Luis Pérez-Oramas, of the The Art Institute of Chicago and The Museum of Modern Art, respectively, the show was an effective introduction of the early works of this vital artist to US audiences. However, it evaded the controversial aspects of Amaral’s production, thus sacrificing analytical depth for glossy allure.

Although long-overlooked for a retrospective, Amaral is no stranger to the US museum circuit. Her artworks have been featured in such polemical, landmark exhibitions as *Art of the Fantastic* (1989) and *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (1993)—both of which published her paintings on their catalog covers. Thus, Amaral’s art has long haunted the hallways of Modernist exhibitions without receiving full recognition for her contribution. Furthermore, her show at MoMA also fit into a larger trajectory of exhibitions of Brazilian artists held over the last five years: Lygia Clark received a retrospective at MoMA in 2014 and Lygia Pape’s solo show at the Met Breuer (2017) ran concurrently with *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* at the Whitney. All three of these artists worked together closely in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950’s, expanding on the cultural propositions put forth by Amaral and her colleagues in the first generation of Brazilian modern artists. Chronologically backwards, this embrace of the later generation before its ideological forebears, exemplifies US museums’ preference for geometric abstraction rooted in MoMA’s own curatorial legacy.

The recent show at MoMA was at once pleasantly intimate and distinctly problematic. Much smaller than those of her peers mentioned above, Amaral’s retrospective occupied just three small galleries on the museum’s second floor. Upon entering the space visitors were immediately met with a wall-sized photograph of Amaral in one of her famous Parisian dresses, standing alongside her canvas *Morro da favela*, included later in the show. The photograph captured Amaral’s signature style of deep red lips, pulled-back hair, and elaborate dress. Widely acknowledged in her time as a rare beauty, Amaral leveraged her exotic looks and ability to afford *au courant* ensembles to advertise her artwork. She often used her own self-portrait as the cover of exhibition pamphlets, a tactic paralleled in MoMA’s photographic entryway.

The curators note Amaral's knack for self-promotion in the show, but fail to link it with the exotic undercurrents that permeated her work. Thus, although they assembled the core works of Amaral's oeuvre—including her three most famous paintings, *A Negra* (1923), *Abaporu* (1928), and *Antropofagia* (1929), along with preparatory drawings for these and other works, urban scenes, travel sketches, and paintings from her surrealist and social realist periods—they largely shied away from critically engaging their selections. To an extent, such elisions are appropriate in a first retrospective of an under-studied artist, but amidst the current vortex of national and global social movements, the show's silence was deafening.

The daughter of an elite, coffee-growing family, Amaral enjoyed a privileged upbringing and remarkable geographic mobility: even a rare and scandalous divorce did not materially damage her position amongst the ranks of the conservative Paulista coffee aristocracy. Leaving her young daughter on the family plantation, Amaral moved to the city to pursue her artistic career in São Paulo. After four years of study in Brazil, Amaral embarked for Europe in 1920. This was not her first trip: she had traveled abroad as a teen and would make several more trips back and forth between her homeland and the ateliers of Paris over the course of the next decade. The exhibition treaded lightly on Amaral's European training and her Cubist "military service." While this decision veiled her privilege to a degree, the choice was refreshing because it avoided casting her production as derivative or "influenced" by European avant-gardism. Instead the curators focused on creating stylistic and thematic connections to other Brazilian artists like Victor Brecheret and Candido Portinari, highlighting recurrent themes across (white, urban, elite) Brazilian modernism.

Amaral produced her most energetic scenes in the period directly following her return from Paris, and the part of the exhibition showcasing them was especially captivating. Canvases featuring busy train stations and Rio de Janeiro cityscapes hung alongside minimalist sketches of palm trees, *fazendas*, and colonial architecture. Most were created during or just after trips to Rio de Janeiro and the colonial towns of Minas Gerais. Amaral's travel journal, along with a computer terminal featuring digitized scans of its pages, helped to contextualize the artist's perambulations. Amaral's search for *Brasilidade* (Brazilianness) felt most authentic in these observational, landscape-driven works.

There is a more dubious side to Amaral's search for *Brasilidade* as well. In Paris the well-to-do Amaral experienced the sting of othering for the first time. This experience, she said, made her feel more "Brazilian" than she previously had and sent her on her cross-country exploration. The resultant paintings, including the above-mentioned *Antropofagia*, reveal Amaral's "discovery of *Brasilidade*" in the bodies of African-descended and native Brazilian peoples, which she distorted to emphasize their tropical primitivism. The curators argue that *Antropofagia* fought reductionist narratives of Brazil's cultural barbarity, but it remains unclear how Amaral's appropriations of native and Afro-Brazilian

bodies are any different from colonialist representations by her European peers. Amaral's use of people of color as symbols of Brazilian identity certainly complicated early twentieth-century dialogues surrounding race in the country, which foregrounded Brazilian racial and cultural "whiteness." However, Amaral does not seem to have had any interest in issues of racial diversity or social justice: rather, she was meeting the exotic expectations of European audiences. After all, her first solo show, which debuted the famously bare-breasted Afro-Brazilian figure of *A Negra*, was held in Paris.

While it is unfair to judge Amaral's racial preconceptions in accordance with twenty-first century standards, the pains with which the art historical community has skirted the subject, belie the rich dialogue surrounding Brazilian racial dynamics across other disciplines (especially history and sociology). The MoMA exhibition made some furtive passes at the subject of Brazilian racial hierarchies, but it largely avoided analyzing racial undercurrents in Amaral's work, focusing its efforts instead on situating Amaral within well-worn Modernist genealogies. Essays in the catalog claim to liberate Amaral from a "Eurocentric binary," but end up reinforcing it by repeatedly framing Amaral's work in comparison with European movements and theory. As a result, the treatment of Amaral's pre-1930's works seems conventional, while the last section of the exhibition "Beyond Anthropophagy" feels truncated. The painting *Operários* (1933) in particular, which exemplifies Amaral's turn toward social realism and demonstrates a much more nuanced attitude toward race and class than her previous allegorical work, merited greater attention. Hopefully the provisional feeling of MoMA's exhibition portends future scholarship on Amaral and her peers.

Much like the expertly self-fashioning artist herself, MoMA's introduction of Amaral to the American public was colorful and charming. Sadly, it did little to challenge Amaral's problematic depictions of non-white Brazilians, nor did it reflect the political and social radicality of her later years. The curators are to be commended for giving Amaral museological recognition in the United States, for translating important primary texts in their catalog, and for bringing together a rich selection of paintings, sketches, and supplementary materials from Brazilian collections. However, it is my hope that future exhibitions will play a little less safely with Amaral's artistic legacy. Amaral's reputation in the United States has suffered from national and ethnic biases, true, but even more forgotten are the nameless (and sometimes faceless) Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian subjects of her canvases. Amaral's work not only deserves recognition, but—in this moment of social upheaval—it demands reappraisal.

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