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Art and Exile in
Rio de Janeiro

Artistic Networking during World War II

Cristiana Tejo and Daniela Kern

With Rio de Janeiro serving as an arrival city in the 1930s and 1940s, the impact of immigrant artists and art professionals on the Brazilian art scene has been immeasurable. During World War II, artists and other agents of the European art system headed to Brazil in order to escape conflict and Nazism/Fascism, thus initiating a new wave of immigration to the city. It is true that many fled to São Paulo, a city that coalesced industrialization and new opportunities, but it was Rio de Janeiro, the capital, that attracted the majority of immigrants. Most of them lived in other parts of the city, but locations like the Hotel Internacional, the Hotel Londres, the Pensão das Russas and the Pensão Mauá brought together artists from various cultural fields and origins and generated a social network (Ciclo de exposições sobre Arte no Rio de Janeiro 1986).

The presence of these artists and thinkers contributed not only to the dissemination of Modernist codes as well as to the circulation of Abstractionism and, as we would see later, Expressionism, but also to new models of professionalism in the Brazilian art world. These developments led to the creation of alternative art venues like Galeria Askanasy, informal art classes at studios and institutional art shows. When the seminal art critic Mário Pedrosa came back from his political exile in the United States in 1945, and when the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro opened its doors in 1948, Modernism had long become a substantial part of the daily discussion of local artists.

It is important to highlight that Rio de Janeiro had functioned as an arrival city for artists at least since the Portuguese Royal Family moved there as a result of Napoleon’s invasion of Portugal in 1807. The capital of Brazil since 1763, Rio had – for more than a century – acted as a center for all of the country’s major cultural and artistic institutions. Due to the arrival and permanent settlement of the Portuguese Royal Family, it was the only city among all Portuguese, Hispanic, British and French colonies to become a focal point for the kingdom. However, what interests us in this article is the Modernist period. The country had already
shown signs of avant-garde activity, embodied in exhibitions by artists like Lasar Segall (1913) and Anita Malfatti (1917), as well as the São Paulo Art Week in 1922, but these instances were isolated initiatives with no structural adherence to the Modernist exuberance of the time (Durand 1989). The economic, social, political and cultural determinants for the development of the Brazilian modern art world would occur only after World War II, a turning point in the cultural fabric of Brazil with the arrival of immigrants, mainly Italians, to the city of São Paulo (Bueno 2012).

The diaspora caused by World War II has had an enormous impact on art and culture globally: it has affected everything from the production to the circulation of ideas, lifestyles, artworks, people and images, and has laid the foundations for a globalized and de-territorialized society on a hitherto unprecedented scale (Bueno 2012, 80). At the same time, for a few years the war interrupted the Brazilian (and American) elite’s access to major European centers where they used to study, consume material and cultural goods and socialize. According to the sociologist José Carlos Durand,

the compulsory stay in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro of people who, without the crisis and the war would surely be in Europe, plus the expansion of the periodical press and the correlate professionalization of the journalists, drew attention to the art that was being created right here (Durand 1989, 99).

Despite the gradual transfer of economic importance to São Paulo from the beginning of the 20th century onwards and despite not being able to match the Art Week of 1922 in its avant-garde momentum until the 1840s, Rio de Janeiro gathered a lot of the country’s cultural intelligentsia, attracting young artists and intellectuals from all over Brazil who would actively participate in the construction of the modern Brazilian art scene. Until the late 1940s all the main cultural institutions, like the Ministry of Culture and the SPHAN (Secretary of National Historical and Artistic Heritage), were situated in Rio when it was still the capital city of the country. The diaspora caused by two world wars and Nazi persecution also had an impact on daily life in Rio with the arrival of dozens of intellectuals and artists who brought to the city not only their cultural capital but also their connections to an international network.

We must bear in mind the situation of immigrants to South America during World War II. Between 1942 and 1945, most harbours were shut down for passenger transport as transatlantic trips became very dangerous due to the war
at sea. In Brazil, the number of immigrant arrivals drastically decreased to 2,000 per year (Lesser 2015). This situation coincided with the national politics of the New State, i.e. the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas which lasted from 1937 to 1945 and which was influenced by fascist-leaning models and ideologies (including National Socialism and anti-semitism), economic centralism and the co-optation of workers. Vargas tried to remain neutral during the first years of World War II, but in fact gave some speeches favourable to the Third Reich; additionally, Germany was the major importer of national steel production. Brazilian immigration law had undergone a series of changes since 1938, all of them classified as confidential. According to the historian Izabela Maria Furtado Kestler, Brazil implemented a no political asylum policy during that time. “The European fugitives who have come here since 1933, of whom an estimated 90 per cent were of Jewish descent, were considered to be immigrants and not asylum-seekers” (Kestler 2003, 44). However, some people of Jewish origin found loopholes and were able to obtain entry visas as tourists, or as relatives or spouses of foreigners already legally resident in the country, offering credentials as scientists, artists or businessmen of value.

When the United States of America entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Vargas had to yield to American demands and eventually declared war on the Axis powers in 1942. This was a turning point in the lives of German-speaking exiles (Germans, Austrians, Jewish expatriates) and of the Japanese and Italian immigrants living in Brazil. It was no longer allowed to speak German, Japanese or Italian, and newspapers published in those languages were shut down. All ‘Germans’, ‘Japanese’ and ‘Italians’ started to be treated as enemies. As Kestler recalls, of the approximately 86,000 German refugees who came to Latin America between 1933 and 1945, 16,000 came to Brazil, most of them of Jewish descent. In Brazil, pseudo-scientific theories led to quota-based immigration policies aimed at creating a “Brazilian race”, “whiter” and “improved”. From 1937 on, “foreigners of Semitic ascendency” were increasingly prohibited from immigrating into Brazil.

Defying restricted transport routes to the Americas and Brazil as well as the unclear legal circumstances and entry requirements between 1937 and 1949, artists such as Axl Leskoschek (Austria), Laszlo Meitner (Hungary), Árpád Szenes (Hungary), Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (Portugal), Roger van Rogger (Belgium) and Tiziana Bonazzola (Italy) succeeded in settling in the country. The historian and art sociologist Hanna Levy (Germany), the journalist Miecio Askanasy (Poland) and the gallerist Irmgard Burchard (Switzerland) also immigrated to Rio. Their presence contributed to the expansion of the avant-garde repertoire of the local art world.
Life for these foreign artists was not easy, but most of them entered the art scene by presenting in salons, exhibiting at art shows and teaching. Due to the lack of private investment, the almost non-existent art market and the strong presence of state capital (and its bureaucracy), the art world of Rio de Janeiro relied heavily on official institutions that represented the academic art system and were willing to accentuate a ‘national identity’ through art. In the period encompassing the 1930s and 1940s, a modern art system with new divisions in art salons for Modernist experimentations started to flourish. It was then that discussions about the importance of modern art museums for Brazil took place. Stylistic disputes about conservative and modern trends were going on in the official art institutions and the immigrant artists were confronted with these disputes. In fact, it was alternative initiatives like free courses at artists’ studios, newly emerging universities and galleries that guaranteed some circulation of the ideas of this heterogeneous group: these newly developing contexts often enabled artists to make a living. We would like to highlight the importance of the art classes led by Árpád Szenes, Henrique Boese, Axl Leskoschek, August Zamoyski and Tiziana Bonazzola who taught a new generation of concrete, neo-concrete and neo-figurative artists.

For his studio the Hungarian painter Szenes converted a room in the main building of the Hotel Internacional in Santa Teresa; here he received approximately 200 students, among them Frank Schaeffer, Almir Mavignier and Polly McDonnell. The German painter Boese also taught at his studio and had students such as Almir Mavignier, Djanira, Gerty Saruê and Eduardo Sued. The Austrian engraver and painter Leskoschek devoted himself to teaching at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, which was attended by the young Renina Katz, Fayga Ostrower, Edith Behring, Misabel Pedrosa and Ivan Serpa. The Polish sculptor Zamoyski’s Brazilian path led along a different route: the Minister of Education and Culture, Gustavo Capanema, invited him to be the tutor of a Free Course on Sculpture. In March 1941, the President, Getúlio Vargas, appointed him professor of the Art School in Rio de Janeiro. His disciples were, among others, Franz Weissmann, Bellá Paes Leme, Vera Mindlin and José Pedrosa. The Italian painter Bonazzola was a teacher at the famous Art School of Brazil, founded by the artist Augusto Rodrigues in 1948, where she taught Luiz Áquila and Gerson de Souza.

Other important meeting places and informal centers for the exchange of ideas were the small hotels where immigrants had settled. Almost 90 per cent of foreign artists lived in the Santa Teresa neighborhood or used to visit it. The already mentioned Hotel Internacional was home to Árpád Szenes, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Frank Schaeffer, Carlos Sciliar, Jacques van de Beuque, Djanira and Milton Dacosta. The studio of Maria Helena Vieira, for example, became a regular
meeting place for intellectuals and artists from Rio de Janeiro (Ciclo de exposições sobre Arte no Rio de Janeiro: Tempos de Guerra – Hotel Internacional 1986). Very often, the meetings and parties revolved around classical music. Frequent visitors were the poets Murilo Mendes and Cecília Meireles, the artist Athos Bulcão, the scenographer Eros Martim and the art critic Marc Berkovitz. Pensão Mauá, in turn, was home to Inimá de Paula, Flávio Tanaka, Tadashi Kaminagai (his framing business was situated in the basement of the house) and Manuel Bandeira. Kaminagai’s studio also served as a meeting place for the art critics Mário Pedrosa, Antonio Bento, Quirino Campofiorito and Frederico Barata and the artists Lasar Segall, Di Cavalcanti and Roger van Rogger. Others who lived in Santa Teresa were Emeric Marcier, Jean-Pierre Chabloz and Henrique Boese. Beyond this neighborhood, the exile artist’s geographies encompassed Flamengo – here the Pensão das Russas accommodated Jan Zach and, for some time, the Szenes/Vieira da Silva couple; Copacabana, where the Hotel Londres and the house of Laszlo Meitner were situated, and Ipanema, the area, where Roger van Rogger and Wilhelm Wöller lived, and Glória, where Axl Leskoscheck resided.

During World War II and its aftermath, very few of these artists succeeded in having solo shows at official institutions like the National Museum of Fine Arts. In fact, only Marcier and Vieira da Silva had solo shows, both in the same year: 1942. A lot of the artists instead exhibited at new venues like the Gallery of the Brazilian Press Association (ABI), the Institute of Brazilian Architects (IAB), the Institute Brazil – United States (IBEU) and the Galeria Askanasy.

It is important to highlight that the presence of foreign artists in Rio de Janeiro had an impact not only on the local art scene, but also on the artists’ own thinking and art practice. At Wilhelm Wöller’s New York show in 1957 the art critic Alfred Werner noted that the artist’s decision to flee Nazi-occupied Europe to tropical Brazil “would have been reinforced by a desire to find a less rational, logic and mechanized society” (Morais 1986, 23) – a romanticized view of Brazil, indeed. Still, according to Werner, Brazil’s flora and fauna and Afro-Brazilian culture had made a huge impression on Wöller.

Brazilian nature also greatly impacted on artist Jan Zach who said that intimate contact with nature during the 11 years he lived there had made him more aware of the interplay of shadow and light, an observation prompted by the brilliant radiance of light in Rio de Janeiro. In an interview with journalist Vera d’Horta Beccari published in the Folha de São Paulo newspaper in 1980, Henrique Boese said,

Brazils had an enormous influence on the way my art changed. The atmosphere and the colors of the country were a surprise to me. When we disembarked in Rio, in the middle of summer, in
the month of February, coming from the European winter, I was dizzy with the radical change of climate and color. The streets were full of flowering Flamboyants, it was all very beautiful. The foreigner who seeks to immerse himself in the Brazilian environment is influenced and transformed by it. The very foundations of art shift (Morais 1986, 23).

Árpád Szenes was also positively impacted on by his Brazilian experience. In an interview with Carlos Scliar, he affirmed that “[t]he war provoked a great rupture, and in Brazil I began to believe in mankind, in the world, in life, perhaps” (Morais 1986, 21). His wife Vieira da Silva, on the other hand, said, “In fact, in Brazil I was very marked and depressed by the events, so that I lived a little with the head in Europe, so I knew very little of Brazil.” And she added, “Everything felt very fragile. We lived like butterflies” (Morais 1986, 21).

One of the main contributions of this massive influx of European immigrants to Brazil, with their improvised galleries and small studios located in hotels, was the introduction of Expressionism to the Brazilian art scene. As evidence of this development, a search for the term ‘woodcut’ in the digital database of the National Library of Brazil throws up 16 occurrences during the 1920s, 39 during the 1930s, and 284 during the 1940s when German Expressionism was being written about in the Brazilian press. This makes it also much harder comprehensively to grasp the concept and technique of woodcutting.

Even before the 1940s there had been exhibitions of German art in Brazil. There were also printmakers of German or Austrian origin who had moved to Brazil after World War I. Theodor Heuberger (1898–1987), for example, was born in Munich and based in Brazil and promoted the First German Exhibition of art and decorative arts in Rio de Janeiro in 1924. In subsequent exhibitions organized by him the Modernist influence became more pronounced – the exhibitions in the 1930s, for instance, feature prints by Käthe Kollwitz, Max Beckmann and Otto Dix. Heuberger ran his own gallery in Rio Brnaco Avenua in Rio de Janeiro (Lacombe 2009, 481–482). In areas in southern Brazil where Germany had had colonial influence, such as in Rio Grande do Sul, Expressionist art prints had circulated relatively early on without ever really influencing the local art scene.

A watershed moment – and a sign of how new networks had developed and spread throughout the Brazilian art scene during World War II – was the opening of an exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Arts featuring six centuries of German engraving, and at least 700 original works. This was initiated by Osvaldo Teixeira (1905–1974), a critic and art historian, and director of the museum at the time. Teixeira claimed that his exhibition was the first of its kind to take place in
Brazil (Pastorino 1951, 4). Among the participating Modernist artists were Max Liebermann, Max Slevogt, Lovis Corinth, Käthe Kollwitz and Oskar Kokoschka.

The influx of immigrant artist and intellectuals into Brazil can be seen as a moment of monumental cultural change: their presence reinforced local voices demanding the advance of modern art and prompted the emergence of innovative networks that interconnected local artists and intellectuals with the newly arrived. A good example of this catalytic change is the Swiss artist and art dealer Irmgard Burchard, who had arrived in Brazil in 1941. In the same year, local newspapers began to publish articles about her which were based, it seems, on press releases prepared by Burchard herself. During her early years in Brazil she presented herself as Madame Koré, a promoter of modern art: “Madame Koré, the well-known organizer of modern art exhibitions, in contrast to the classic style” (“Uma exposição de arte aplicada” 1941, 1). She sought to call attention to her image as a stimulating patron of the arts: “In Switzerland, for example, she invited more traditional painters to exhibit their works together with those of young modernists.” (“Uma exposição de arte aplicada” 1941, 1) She also highlighted the exhibition of modern German art which she organized with Herbert Read in 1938 in London.

As a justification for her taking refuge in Brazil, we can read the following:

Madame Koré, being of Swiss nationality, is not properly a refugee, but with many of her friends dead or lost beyond the seas she felt willing to accompany a group that had the happiness of obtaining documents and tickets to Brazil. (“Uma exposição de arte aplicada” 1941, 1)

Burchard’s clear intention to promote modern art in Brazil is also evident in another passage on the same subject:

Here, with insufficient material to organize an exhibition of Modern European Art, she nevertheless founded an atelier with the practical purpose of producing objects such as lamps, shingles, vases, glasses, etc. It is the result of these works that is currently being exhibited at Christmas time. (“Uma exposição de arte aplicada” 1941, 1)

The local press would soon praise Burchard for this role, as we can read in an article from 1942:
Madame Koré is one of the most vigorous advocates of modern art. She has succeeded in converting the isolated attempts of modernist groups into a homogeneous and defined style that establishes clear boundaries between classical art and art that is inspired by today’s vertigo ("A exposição dos trabalhos de arte aplicada suíca de madame Koré" 1942, 9).

This text continues to be adapted for Burchard’s other exhibitions, such as the one at Galeria Askanasy ("Uma arte que é beleza e utilidade ao mesmo tempo" 1944, 7), the first gallery of modern art in Rio de Janeiro, founded by Miecio Askanasy, Bruno Kreitner, the Austrian journalist and writer Van Rogger, a Belgian painter of Polish origin, and perhaps other artists. We know from Burchard’s correspondence with her friends, the writers Clarice Lispector and Lúcio Cardoso, that Galeria Askanasy became an important meeting place. What all this enthusiasm hides, however, is how difficult it was to live in Brazil as an immigrant. Due to the lack of an established economic market for art, Burchard was not able to keep on working as a gallerist – instead, she started to paint, realizing a lifelong dream, as she recounted to one of the local newspapers ("Exposição de pintura de Irmgard Burchard" 1945, 1). Antonio Bento, an art critic who wrote a column in the Diário Carioca and who, incidentally, also did much for the promotion of modern art in Rio de Janeiro, analyzed Burchard’s paintings with a much darker attitude:

[t]he painter is one of the many castaways that the present war has launched on the back of our country. The affliction, the fear of mystery and of the unknown, which in recent times have seized so many thousands of Europeans, appear in many of their paintings, and even in still lifes of flowers, completely devoid of joy (Bento 1945, 6).

The hardships of immigrant life similarly affected Van Rogger, who also exhibited at the Galeria Askanasy, and who faced financial difficulties:

[w]e are glad to know him among us, and it is with affection that we accompany his struggles and disappointments and new illusions and enthusiasms that make him our compatriot, since he shares the same hopes, difficulties and misunderstandings that make up the true ‘environment’ through which the artists of Brazil move ("A pintura moderna" 1944, 210).
Like Burchard, Van Rogger supported art and Modernist values:

Rousseau, le douanier, can be classic because his work displays such purity. Braque, Bonnard, Matisse and Van Gogh for example, are classics because their works of art answer to a cosmic necessity. They are classic, they have class, they are the nectar of healthy, traditional thinking (Van Rogger 1944, 210).

Antifascism, too, is something that unites a good number of the members of these networks around Askanasy and Burchard, and it is not unlikely that Burchard assisted in the conception of the Exhibition of Art Condemned by the Third Reich, inaugurated on 10 April 1945 (“Exposições” 1945, 9) by Miecio Askanasy in his gallery. Askanasy himself was the author of articles and a book critical of Nazism, the latter written with Bruno Kreitner. Miecio and Kreitner were friends with Stefan Zweig, and it does not seem to be a coincidence that Ernst Feder, a German Democrat and a close friend of Zweig, had been invited to write for the exhibition catalogue and to give the opening address, entitled “Why the Nazis condemned authentic art”. Feder lived in the same house as the parents of Hanna Levy, a German and Jewish art historian who also contributed to the exhibition catalogue.

The exhibition, which mostly featured engravings by modern German masters, was a success, but it is worth remembering that Brazil had already been prepared in favour of modern art and against the idea that it was degenerate. This becomes evident in an article entitled “Lasar Segall and the degenerate art”, written by the art critic Nicanor Miranda and published in Diário Carioca in 1944, in which he recounts his experience of visiting the degenerate art exhibition in Munich in 1937 – Lasar Segall’s work was part of the exhibition – and in which he mounts a strong defence of modern art which is worth reading in its entirety:

But “degenerate” why? Because he painted deformed human figures? Because the artist wanted to realize himself using his own expression? But cannot the painter free himself from academic and rancid formulas to surrender to the transcendence of a vision of nature and life? Is the deformation not also an expression of medium? And is the expression not fundamentally the essence of painting and other arts? Why can the artist not be transported to the work of art by printing out his aversions, his tendencies, his desires, his passions? Is this degeneracy? But have other painters of the past not been behaving in the same way? In the same Germany? (Miranda 1944, 1).
A defence of “degenerate art”, similar in spirit to this, would be published later in the newspaper section of the *Exposition of Art Condemned by the Third Reich*:

Let us see what they painted. The Exhibition of Art Condemned by the Third Reich is not something phantasmagoric that induces fear or shiver. This art is only ‘degenerate’ to the enemies of culture, the burners of books, those who fear that great free men will speak to their fellow men in a language of freedom and human respect. Going to the gallery Askanasy, we will see pictures of women, atmospheres of circuses, visions of cities that perhaps no longer exist, [...], beautiful women, forests. At times, a cry of revolt appears: Ferdinand Learen fixes victims under rubble, bombers, the striking sight of Guernica. We will also see boyfriends, bridges, trees, dunes, gardens, still lifes, forgotten landscapes (*Exposição de Arte Condenada* 1945, 3).

The closing remarks of the *Exhibition of Art Condemned by the Third Reich*, “World and Art”, were delivered on 15 May 1945 (“‘Mundo e Arte’” 1945, 5) by Tomás Santa Rosa, an artist and catalyst of the artistic scene of Rio de Janeiro, as well as a communist. Santa Rosa moved with ease among the emigrés and cooperated with them in countless artistic projects. Santa Rosa in his speech highlights the antifascist character of the exhibition:

This is an exhibition that showcases works of art, composed by famous artists, that offer in their artistic totality a deafening and persistent struggle against one of the most destructive enemy forces of culture. (”‘Mundo e Arte’” 1945, 5)

Nor does he fail to recognize the emergence of social inequalities in the tragic events of World War II:

The twentieth century, which had the key to extraordinary scientific progress, has also brought forth a tremendous amount of social inequalities. And the fatal result, the outbreak of so much conflict, was bringing this avalanche of ineptitude down on life, mankind, and culture. (”‘Mundo e Arte’” 1945, 5)
In her future publications Hanna Levy would articulate similar social critiques. She and Santa Rosa had in common not only friends like Portinari and Axl Leskoscheck, an Austrian artist who played an important role in the Brazilian art scene, but also the fact that they were both communists. Communism would become an important connecting piece within and throughout the artistic networks of Rio de Janeiro, especially among those who promoted modern German art in general and Expressionism in particular.

Hanna and Santa Rosa, involved in the *Exhibition of Art Condemned by the Third Reich*, would also be at the nucleus of an event that was decisive for Brazil’s art world: the graphic arts seminars at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation. These courses in 1946 were offered to both Brazilian and foreign art students and familiarized them with Expressionism, the consequences of which would be felt for decades, for example in the works of former students like Fayga Ostrower and Danúbio Gonçalves.

Connections and exchanges among local and foreign artists without doubt helped to build the very foundations of Modern Art in 1940s Brazil. While it is true that Brazil could not offer them an established artistic environment, European artists and intellectuals instead created alternative spaces by mobilizing their communities and by initiating local partnerships: they taught courses, ran workshops, prepared exhibitions, created galleries. They also confronted local artists with international artistic movements such as Expressionism. What it is also pertinent to note here, however, is that the immense mobility and sheer fluidity of these artistic environments is also the reason why such networks were not able to take root – and have been, until now, almost completely omitted from Brazilian art history.

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