

Anita Malfatti and the female artist's recognition in the Brazilian Modernist Era.

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Abstract. When it comes to Brazilian Modernism, Anita Malfatti's artworks are not only of extreme importance to the development of the movement itself, but also one of the most prominent voices in the plastic arts of the time, heavily influenced by the European expressionist and fauvist movements. On the other hand, this artist's existence as a woman seemed to negatively impact her works' reception and recognition, especially when her paintings and herself were constantly compared and put against other women from the same time period in Brazil, such as Tarsila do Amaral. In this matter, the present article discusses Anita's trajectory and the female recognition in Brazilian Modernist Era, taking on account scrutiny faced and support obtained, alongside with her close friend and fellow Modernist Mario de Andrade's own behaviour towards both women. That being the case, it focuses on how Anita, Tarsila and other Modernist women lacked direct support for their art and weren't promoted for their own expertise and artistic skills without the involvement of their physical appearance and social involvement with society's biggest names in 20th century Brazil and internationally.

Keywords. Brazilian Modernism, Anita Malfatti, female artists, female recognition, vanguardist movements

1. Introduction

Argan¹ introduces, in his book about the Modern Art in Brazil, the Brazilian Modernist era, which began in the first decades of the 20th century, and gave a kickstart to one of Brazil's first movements entirely its own. From taking heavy inspiration out of colonial art and Portuguese influences to working together to build what "Brazilianism" should mean, the country's artists, encouraged by the European vanguardist movements such as cubism, fauvism, and futurism, got ready for its own step in action. Determined to claim Brazilian culture and reformulate what they call their own history and art, the Modernists employ foreign techniques and foreign teaching to not only make history inside their territory but introduce internationally the power of Brazilian art-making.

In this scenario, some of the biggest names are Oswald de Andrade, Mario de Andrade, Anita Malfatti, Tarsila do Amaral, Manuel Bandeira, Menotti Del Picchia, Oswaldo Goeldi, John Graz, Victor Brecheret and many more. Involved in establishing freedom and liberty to make art and

drawing closer to colloquial language and popular expressions, these artists made a name for themselves by approaching Modernism as a rule and relying on each other as a ruling group where no kind of support is big enough and exhibition spaces are made to be conquered and used thoroughly.²

As usual of a conservative time in history, they faced an enormous amount of criticism for their works as a group.³ Even before 1922, when the "Semana de Arte Moderna de 1922" or Modern Art Week of 1922 happened, a huge landmark exhibition in modernist history, where many of them reunited and exposed their works together, as a united front, these men had to face scrutiny from all sides of Brazilian society.⁴ The women artists of this period, although very rarely named in their rightful places of participants and revolutionaries, suffered even more from the barring of their works, a considerable lack of recognition, and in the cases of women such as Regina Graz,⁵ not even considered a part of the work being done, and the judgemental standards not applied to men in the same category, in this same field of revolution.

Especially in the arts world of the 20th century, any individual whose existence, in its racial, sexual and gender basis, does not conform to the standards established since, generically, the beginning of the foundation of most conservative values of worldly social relations, suffers from the exclusion of his work and the undeniable judgment of a great part of their actions under traditionalist and, above all, patriarchal lenses.⁶ The female artist, for whom the inferiorization of her experience being expanded to her art is a social consequence of centuries of oppression, ends up being, for a long time, subjugated to the “dark” territory of a more marginalised art-making practice, whose capacity and skill of the members certainly, despite the result of a lot of effort, would not dare be compared to that of the “Great Artists”.^{7,8} Within this context, the present article speaks on the art of Anita Malfatti, an artist, woman, Brazilian, of great impact on the modernist movement of the early 20th century, and how it was not only impacted by her gender, but also subjected to extreme comparisons and art “fights” against other women from the same circle, such as Tarsila do Amaral within the great fallacy that, “in a ‘kingdom’, there can only be one ‘queen’”.⁸

2. Research method

The methods of research used in the production of this article were based on the review and qualitative investigation of reference articles about the Modernist movement and the women involved in it, primarily in Brazilian Portuguese.

As a review paper, this article discusses the material obtained in terms of the women mentioned and their involvement in the movement, taking on account Brazilian schooling and undergraduate-level Art History education in the matter.

3. Discussion

Since the first exhibitions related to Brazilian Modernism, including her own, held in 1917, Anita Malfatti's work has been of great importance for the development of the artistic scene of the time,⁹ and also the target of immense and infamous criticism of what would be an international technical influence that escaped academicism and traditional rules of art.¹⁰ With a strong expressionist vein, as rightly pointed out by other favourable critics, such as Mário de Andrade,¹¹ renowned Brazilian author and close correspondent and supporter of Anita's works, her painting, for being one of those who proposed and proudly indicated the “breaking of glass roofs” occurring in world art, was recognized by her talent numerous times, in this exhibition and in future ones, but the feedback received from male critics and art history theorists debarred her name and possible opportunities within the Brazilian art circuit.

Strong critics, such as Monteiro Lobato, a great author at the time, made it a point to scrutinise the constitution of her work and her references,¹² doubting the genius of the vanguardist movement in itself and her participation in it. Lobato's comments then set the tone for the assessments of Anita's works before the Modern Art Week of 1922, and showed very publicly how a woman's work could be disqualified and criticised by a powerful man, and also saved from the negative consequences after joined by another group of men, including Oswald and Mario de Andrade, who “organised” a movement she was already part of and acted as her “critical-conscience”, rationalising her “radical pursuits”.¹³



Fig. 1 - Brazilian Modernist men and prominent figures of the time.



Fig. 2 - Modernist artists of 1922, including Mário de Andrade (first on the top left corner), and an unidentified woman.

As shown in Fig.1 and Fig. 2, emblematic images from the Modernist era, the mostly widely represented image from the entire group of revolutionaries was that of several men, poised

beside each other in a serious manner, and, in the sole case of Fig. 2, a single woman, whose existence is not even named in the reference consulted for this article. Even more so due to the scarcity of photos from that time, these images ended up depicting the Modernist scenario for years and representing the people involved as predominantly male.

After the support and friendship of influential people like Mário, Anita Malfatti found not only a modernist group to which she joined after the disaster of Monteiro Lobato's criticism, but also the chance to move to Paris with financial support and develop better her art in that country,¹⁴ taking in the influence from vanguardists movements already occurring in the french artistic scenario. However, due to the very nature of female participation in the artistic circuit already being permeated by a constant judgement on the decisions and directions taken, it can be said that, due to the deviations in her practice during and after this trip, Anita ended up losing a little support of the great friend mentioned, for her physical and theoretical distance from Brazil,¹⁵ and was also the target of comparisons with Tarsila do Amaral in what permeated her physical appearance and social involvement,¹⁶ associations that are certainly irrelevant to her intention and work as a revolutionnaire.

Even after surpassing numerous boundaries in Brazil, joining in Modern Art Week and gathering numerous fans, Anita saw her support crumble from things inherently out of her reach, from the sole existence of another woman whose works weren't necessarily similar, but whose trajectory seemed to clash with hers in filling up the quota for women in public art spaces. Tarsila, with her wealth, good looks, social appraisals and the right kind of friendships in high places, crowned with a relationship with Oswald de Andrade himself,¹⁷ although deserving of her fame through her work, walked on the fast lane to a success made possible by her privileges, and Anita was barely given the same opportunities, albeit frequenting similar places.

From a sociological point of view¹⁸, it is completely intelligible to associate the work of a person, whether any type of human being, within the social environment where he lives and promotes himself, after all a certain involvement is necessary to generate engagement and expand their horizons. On top of that, especially when it comes to contemporary works of art, the socio-political stance of an artist plays an important part in their works, even more so when the entire Modernist movement supports itself strongly on defying Brazilian culture and customs through art.¹⁹ In this matter, with full awareness of the force of physical attractiveness in human relationships, the impulse and support given to certain individuals for meeting particular standards of beauty and fitting into the aesthetic archetypes of the artistic ruling class that finances and exhibits art is comparatively massive when seeing how appreciative of Tarsila do Amaral's

beauty her supporters inevitably became while viewing her art. What crosses the line in this type of relationship is the use of phenotypic characteristics to judge not only a work, but an entire production and career in the field of art, applied to female artistic situations, as in the case of Anita. When compared to the beautiful and wealthy Tarsila do Amaral, whose physical, financial and, in a way, social differences were apparently exorbitant, Malfatti suffered the embarrassment, even quite current, of not being understood as sufficient due to the negative appeal of her image and the lack of financial resources she sported at the time.²⁰

4. Conclusion

In that sense, as postulated by Linda Nochlin in "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,"* it isn't truly about their inexistence, but the lack of support and recognition these women received throughout their careers, that made it impossible not only for their constant improvement through outside sources, such as art academies, courses, mentorships and fellowships with other great artists, but also society's general incapability of acknowledging and retaining memory of their brilliance as something above commonplace. The phenomenon of rivalry also, especially because it is hardly ever applied to men in the same position of art-makers, diminishes women's possibilities of becoming Great Artists by turning their mere existences into unjust fights of beauty, social-economic status and privilege.²¹

Therefore, it is possible to reflect on some events related to Anita Malfatti's trajectory within the understanding of her existence as a woman artist and the history of this type of profession, for the female population, in terms of inferiorization and patriarchal relationships, not only in art, but also with the aesthetic standards of society, which directly influence any type of action performed, any work involved, intentionally or not. Like the art of Regina Graz, Camille Claudel and other artists whose strength of expression and field of exposure were limited by their association with male artists, the art of Anita Malfatti, as a modernist woman in a predominantly conservative society that valued, above all, the white man from the northern hemisphere, was highly analysed through the lens that such comparison proposes, and, above all, had its participation repressed from judgments of value for its appearance. Her deviation from a necessarily "feminine" art placed her at the forefront of the modernist stage, in a place of such vulnerability, where being a woman, above all, contributed even more to the scrutiny of her work.

It is important, thus, to point out that, even though both women, Anita and Tarsila were constantly put against each other in the voices of men around them, In more recent works, and through constant reformulation of our definition of the Modernist

movement, the names of these women are continuously mentioned and appraised by Brazilian scholars and artists, but even so, this recognition is delayed by decades and still needs considerably more work done.

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