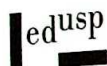




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REVISITING A COLLECTION IN TIMES OF FRACTURE

Ana Magalhães

The new long-term exhibition of the collection of the MAC USP borrows the title of the posthumously published collection of writings by historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012)¹. This exhibition draws its inspiration from Hobsbawm's 1996 conference at the Salzburg Festival in Austria, where he was invited to delve into the art and culture of the first half of the 20th century. Expanding upon his original essay, Hobsbawm's collection includes additional texts penned between 1964 and 2012, wherein the author eloquently examines the crisis of what he refers to as the "European bourgeois civilization²."

Fractured Times is preceded by two other collections organized by the author: *The New Century*, from 1999, and *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism*, published in 2007. In these works, Hobsbawm grapples with the identity of a man from a bygone era attempting to comprehend the complexities of the 21st century. Particularly noteworthy are the initial essays in *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism*, where the author discusses the emergence of a new form of warfare, one that has spread worldwide and often blurs the lines between traditional conflict and acts of terrorism. These writings eerily foretell "another century marked by armed conflicts and human calamities³." It is no coincidence that the Brazilian edition of the book features in its cover a photo by photographer Joel Meyerowitz, revealing the remnants of the south facade of the World Trade Center in New York amidst the rubble after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Hobsbawm was profoundly influenced by this tragedy, which, in many ways, set the stage for the unfolding of the 21st century and, perhaps, foreshadowed the tensions that would culminate in the global financial crisis of 2008. Within this same chain of events, the climate crisis, humanitarian crises, and the health crisis that unfolded in the second decade of the new century serve as confirmation of some of Hobsbawm's earlier predictions. While his work does not make use of the terminology or specific questions of postcolonial studies, his critique of the European civilizational model undoubtedly echoes the criticisms articulated by these emerging theories.

¹ In the curatorial program of MAC USP, the 7th and 6th floors of its headquarters are dedicated to an exhibition that showcases the museum's collection through the lens of updated issues and questions posed by the history, theory, and criticism of 20th and 21st-century art, refreshed every five years. The inaugural iteration of what we call the "long-term exhibition of the MAC USP collection" bore the title *Visions of Art in the Collection of MAC USP, 1900-2000*, and spanned six years due to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. See: <http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/expos/2016/visoes/home.htm>.

² Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *Tempos Iratados*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013, p. 11. The Salzburg Festival, known as *Salzburger Festspiele* in German, was founded on August 22, 1920. Celebrating music, opera, and theater, this illustrious festival emerged with the purpose of forging a renewed Austrian national identity following the demise of the Habsburg Empire at the conclusion of World War I in 1918, before Austria transitioned into a republic in 1919. See: <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/about-us#history>. Hobsbawm recalls that these historical events led to the fragmentation of territories in central and eastern Europe, fostering the rise of local nationalisms, and are at the base of the great conflicts and ruptures that would come with World War II, announcing the beginning of the end of the so-called Western civilization.

³ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *Globalização, democracia e terrorismo*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007, p. 46.

Hobsbawm's profound expertise in the analysis of that which preceded the 20th century made him a widely recognized figure as a public intellectual. As a university professor, he specialized in the Marxist perspective of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and his active participation in large-scale public events and conferences, often televised and broadcast on radio, showcased his dedication to debating history with non-specialized audiences. He had a keen interest in understanding how civilians experienced historical events and the consequential transformations they brought about. Hobsbawm viewed himself as an ordinary man in a century ruled by ordinary people. His Jewish heritage exposed him to the tumultuous backdrop of two world wars and the Holocaust, emblematic of the various instances of genocide and human diasporas of the past two centuries.

How can Hobsbawm's life and writings contribute to our understanding of a collection such as the one found at MAC USP? Firstly, dealing with a museum collection inherently means engaging with the traces of historical events, i.e., the works featured can be taken as documents or witnesses of history itself. As any historian would attest, the interpretation of history is a present-day endeavor. Similarly, an art collection can be updated through its reinterpretation in the present—a valuable exercise that may unveil new avenues for the collecting practice within the museum.

Secondly, in *Fractured Times*, Hobsbawm tackles the decline of the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century. According to him, these utopian projects were conceived within the structures of the European bourgeois civilization, which ultimately crumbled in the aftermath of World War II. Furthermore, these avant-garde forms were confronted with the emergence of mass culture and its modes of communication and imagery, which were much more effective in their dissemination among larger audiences. The advent of the internet in the 1990s and the subsequent rise of virtual social networks in the 2000s further amplified the influence of media, providing a platform for disseminating the voices of common individuals. This phenomenon has placed us in a paradoxical situation in the last decade, particularly in a world where historical events are often distorted and manipulated by the propagation of fake news.

Hobsbawm prompts us to contemplate how the MAC USP collection can narrate human experience over the past 120 years, both from a subjective and collective perspective. Within the thematic groupings carefully curated by the collection's current exhibition team, notable narratives like *Unconscious (Not) Free* and *Portrait*, for instance, aim to explore facets of what is often referred to as 'imagery of the unconscious' and the themes of representation and self-portrayal, to convey subjective dimensions of human existence. *Cold War*, *Appropriation*, *Exodus*, *Violence* and *Resistance* intersect with the conflicts, authoritarian states, forced displacement of human groups, and social struggles that defined this period.

Furthermore, the initial core of the MAC USP collection had been formed in the context of the end of World War II. While officially established at the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1963, it inherits its foundation from the collections of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM SP). The first works in this collection were acquired between 1946 and 1947, thanks to a purchasing campaign undertaken by Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, who served as the chairman of the MAM SP board, and Yolanda Penteado, in Italy and France. Additionally, the collection received a significant boost from the donation of 12 works of modern art by the American tycoon Nelson Rockefeller, aimed at fostering the establishment of modern art museums in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro⁴. This collection was thus born from the ashes of war and genocide. World War II and its far-reaching consequences created the circumstances that led to the acquisition of works of art by renowned international modernist artists finding their home in Brazil.

4 On the initial core of the MAM SP collection, see Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, *Classicismo moderno. Margherita Sarfatti e a pintura italiana no acervo do MAC USP*. São Paulo: Alameda Editorial, 2016, pp. 23-57 (chapter 1).

At the University, the MAC USP collection has experienced extraordinary growth and continuous updates, incorporating new artistic practices and emerging media⁵. It also faced major challenges in its first two decades of existence, emerging as a crucial space for resistance and critical reflection during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985)⁶. The works showcased, along with those still being acquired today, position the Museum in a dynamic dialogue with the complexities of globalization, the advent of digital media, and the profound global events and transformations, all viewed through the unique lens of the Brazilian context.

The red thread of the reevaluation of the MAC USP collection for *Fractured Times* was centered on revisiting the artworks donated by Rockefeller to Brazil. Although the donation itself was widely known, little or nothing was said about the selection of works and artists that were part of it. Upon the completion of her master's thesis in 2015, researcher Carolina Rossetti de Toledo embarked on the pioneering endeavor of conducting an in-depth study of the selection and donation process⁷. In her analysis, Toledo proposed that the 13 donated works could be classified into two distinct sets which, in turn, reflected the exhibition policies of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) during the 1940s, shaped by the contributions of two of its curators: Dorothy Miller and Alfred Barr. In the case of the latter, this particular group directed its attention towards European avant-garde artists who had emigrated to the United States, effectively engaging in a mission to provide refuge for European artists and intellectuals in Nazi-occupied territories, particularly following the invasion of France in 1940⁸. These artists, some of the most renowned in their field, were the focal point of exhibitions at MAM SP during the 1950s and later at MAC USP: Max Ernst, André Masson, George Grosz, Marc Chagall, and Fernand Léger. Largely unrecognized and seldom exhibited since their arrival in Brazil were the artworks by American artists championed by curator Dorothy Miller through exhibitions at MoMA, such as Byron Brown, Robert Gwathmey, Jacob Lawrence, Everett Spruce, Morris Graves, and Arthur Osver.

Also included in the collection donated by Rockefeller was the *Yellow, Black, Red and White Mobile* by Alexander Calder, which stands as the only piece not featured in *Fractured Times*. The decision to exclude Calder's mobile stems from the fact that his presence would significantly influence the interpretation of the other donated works. Moreover, Calder's involvement, following his monographic exhibition at São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in 1948, contributed to the promotion of a progressive and linear narrative concerning the development of abstraction in Brazil. This narrative, however, contains more intricate complexities and conflicts than conventional art history would suggest⁹. The other works donated by Rockefeller were, therefore, fundamental to re-evaluate not only what history of art they could bring, but what questions they incited with reverberations in the contemporary context.

5 Cf. Ana Magalhães, "Expor e colecionar: a formação de acervos de arte moderna e contemporânea entre o MAM e o MAC USP" In: Felipe Chaimovich, Ana Magalhães and Helouise Costa (eds.). Cat. exp. *MAM 70: MAM e MAC USP*. São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2018, pp. 27-40.

6 In this regard, see the exhibitions *Entre Atos 1964/68* and *Um dia terá que ter terminado 1969-74*, held at MAC USP in 2010 and aimed to provide a reevaluation of the Brazilian art collection gathered by the Museum during the military dictatorship in the country (accessible at: <http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/expos/2010/entreatos/home.htm> and http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/expos/2010/Um_dia_1974_69/hotsite_1969_74_galeria_obras.htm).

7 Cf. dissertação Carol Rossetti de Toledo, *As doações Nelson Rockefeller no acervo do Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo*, Interunit Program in Aesthetics and History of Art (PGEHA), 2015 (available at: <https://teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/93/93131/tde-29012016-105805/pt-br.php>). One of the enlightening findings from Toledo's research is the confirmation of a second donation by Rockefeller in 1949. It consisted of a collection of 28 etchings by artists celebrated as pioneers of the new American printmaking movement through their involvement with Atelier 17, led by the British artist Stanley William Hayter. For more details, see the exhibition *Atelier 17 and modern printmaking in the Americas* (2019) and its corresponding catalog, available at <https://www.livrosabertos.sibi.usp.br/portaldelivrosUSP/catalog/book/378>).

8 Consider the cases of artists Max Ernst and André Masson, for instance. Their escape from occupied French territory was facilitated through the dedicated efforts of journalist Varian Fry, with the support of the First Lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt. For an in-depth exploration of this initiative, see Rosemary Sullivan. *Villa Air-Bel, 1940. O refúgio da intelectualidade europeia durante a segunda guerra mundial*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2008 (1st edition in English, 2006). Recently, the streaming platform Netflix launched the seven-episode miniseries *Transatlantic* (2023), by Daniel Hendler and Anna Winger, inspired by these events.

9 Calder's mobile is the sole piece from the collection that was displayed in the *Do figurativismo ao abstracionismo* exhibition, which opened MAM SP to the public in March 1949. This further reinforced the hegemonic narrative as outlined in prominent modern art history manuals that leaned towards abstraction.

Based on the analysis of select works from the Rockefeller donation and some works acquired by Walter Zanini (first director of the Museum at the University), we proposed questions that helped us to reflect on the groupings of the exhibition of the MAC USP collection. We would like to present these reflections, starting with the works donated by Rockefeller, followed by a comparison with some acquisitions made by Matarazzo during the same era, and subsequently, addressing artworks incorporated during the initial phase of the Museum's activities at the University.

In the case of the Rockefeller donation, let us focus on the works of Jacob Lawrence and Robert Gwathmey, which serve as poignant reflections of the contradictions within mid-20th century American society, marked by pervasive racism. The history of their inclusion in exhibitions at MAM SP during its inaugural decade and later at MAC USP sheds light on the discomfort they undoubtedly stirred locally, in a nation where inequality and racism were rampant - though concurrently fostering, both nationally and internationally, the myth of racial democracy. Notably, Gwathmey's work has never been displayed at MAM SP or MAC USP. In contrast, Jacob Lawrence's artwork was featured in exhibitions four times prior to the transfer of MAM SP collections to USP and now takes center stage at MAC USP for the first time.

Created in the same year, Gwathmey's *The Standard Bearer* and Lawrence's *The Architecture Lesson* serve as documents of a politically divided nation. They bear witness to the persecution and attacks endured by the black communities in the Southern United States, alongside segregationist laws. These realities starkly contrasted with the international image of the United States as a 'melting pot' and the propagation of modernist trends linked to the black community in Harlem, New York.

Robert Gwathmey, a painter associated with US social realism in the 1930s, hailed from Virginia and was recognized for his numerous depictions of the rural working world, focusing on the lives of black individuals and the issue of racism, reflecting the context in which he lived. His *Standard Bearer*, as noted by Carolina Rossetti de Toledo, can be interpreted as an allegory of a typical politician representing the Southern states. The figure's distorted silhouette, which shows the pants held up by suspenders and the small head, is recurrent in other compositions by the artist. The tailcoat over the white shirt suggests the figure's anachronism, as he seems to be dressed in the manner of the early 20th century rather than his own time. The flag held in hand features the symbol of justice, pierced by a hanging rope—an unmistakable symbol of the gruesome practice of lynching of black individuals in the Southern states during that era¹⁰. The crow perched atop the banner alludes to the Jim Crow state laws (a derogatory term referring to black people), applied in the southern United States between 1877 and 1964, which enforced racial segregation in public spaces, institutions, and facilities. It appears that Gwathmey's motivation for this work stemmed from a decision by the US Supreme Court in 1946, which declared unconstitutional the state of Virginia's legal code pertaining to racial segregation in interstate bus travel. *The Standard Bearer* reflects the paradoxical nature of the law, where democracy and equality coexist, yet racial equality remains elusive¹¹. In the context of Brazil's political landscape, transitioning from the Estado Novo and on the cusp of Getúlio Vargas' potential re-election as President of the Republic, it was likely not in MAM SP's interest to exhibit Robert Gwathmey's work, as it could well serve to read and expose the racism and segregationism among local elites. This ran counter to the prevailing promotion of the myth of racial democracy and miscegenation.

¹⁰ The practice of lynching gained notoriety with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Images depicting this act of violence and the extermination of black individuals were widely disseminated through photography and postcards, continuing until at least the 1930s, and helped normalize and legitimize violence against the black population in the country. The recently enacted 'Emmett Till Antilynching Act' (or Emmett Till Federal Anti-lynching Act), signed by President Joe Biden, is the culmination of over a century of advocacy by black movements in the USA, and finally classifies lynching as a heinous crime (see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60679930>). The US Federal Law takes its name from Emmett Till, a teenager who was tragically murdered in 1955 by two white men in Mississippi at the age of 14 for being wrongfully accused of offending a white woman. This incident stirred nationwide outrage, as the perpetrators were acquitted.

¹¹ Under the "separate but equal" pretext, it was the Democratic representatives of the Southern United States who enacted legislation in support of segregation laws between the late 19th century and the early 20th century. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws.

Jacob Lawrence, the renowned African-American painter, had his artwork featured in at least four exhibitions within the MAM SP collection between 1949 and 1960. He is most acclaimed for his masterpiece, *The Great Migration*, exhibited at MoMA in New York in 1944. Lawrence was a prominent figure within the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that celebrated elements and values from black culture, particularly in music (such as jazz), literature, and the visual arts. The movement ran parallel to the political efforts to assert black identity in the Harlem neighborhood during the 1940s. In *The Architecture Lesson*, Lawrence depicts a Black professor teaching architecture to black students within a classroom setting by drawing and elucidating classical architectural elements to his students¹². This work was likely created during Lawrence's tenure as a teacher at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he was invited by Josef and Anni Albers. The context surrounding its creation has been largely omitted here. However, the composition poses a sharp contrast with Gwathmey's work, as, in Lawrence's case, the piece portrays black people who are fully emancipated¹³.

The works of Robert Gwathmey and Jacob Lawrence have opened new avenues for interpreting many other artworks within the MAC USP collection, which have been gathered under the grouping *Resistance*. In it, *The Architecture Lesson* is displayed alongside *Mill* by Heitor dos Prazeres. Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the composer, carnival artist, and samba dancer was awarded the Toddy do Brasil acquisition prize for this painting at the I São Paulo Biennial in 1951. The scene depicts two black workers in a rural setting, engaged in the sugarcane production cycle, which seems to place their characters in a timeless representation of their labor. Heitor dos Prazeres' recognition in 1951 catapulted him to international prominence, leading him to visit the United States and represent Brazil at the 1952 Venice Biennale. His work was often deemed 'primitive' or 'naive,' a characterization that warrants further examination within our art historiography¹⁴.

Another pivotal thematic grouping for our review of the MAC USP collection is *Exodus*. Within this context, *Bestiality marches on* by George Grosz, part of the Rockefeller donation, played a crucial role in framing other artworks related to this subject. It was part of several exhibitions at the Museum, which reviewed the European artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century, but it was in the last long-term exhibition that it appeared in another reading possibility, namely, the persecution of these same avant-gardes by the Nazi regime in Germany and the impact of the so-called *Degenerate Art* exhibition, held in Munich in 1937¹⁵. George Grosz, renowned for his association with Dada and the New Objectivity movement in Germany, produced critically skeptical works in the aftermath of World War I, particularly in the 1920s. His art often denounced the moral decay and social upheaval he witnessed in his homeland. Grosz emigrated to the United States in 1933, shortly before the ascent of Nazism. His activities in his new homeland were closely aligned with American social realism and the promotion of modern art, which was especially significant within the framework of support for artists under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration, facilitated through the Works Progress Administration. Within the realm of art, this support was channeled through the Federal Arts Project, aimed at fostering artistic creation and mitigating the impact of the economic depression on the artistic community during the 1930s. He worked on a few watercolors addressing subjects such as war and violence soon after his arrival in the USA. *Bestiality marches on* is a blunt metaphor for the events of that historical moment. A vehement anti-Nazi

12 Within the artwork, one can discern terms such as "dome" and "balustrade," which are characteristic elements of the architectural lexicon in the classical tradition.

13 For a more comprehensive analysis of this artwork, please refer to Renata Bittencourt's "Black History: Jacob Lawrence's Painting in the MAC USP Collection", available at: <https://estudosdecoloniais.mac.usp.br/en/palestras/renata-bittencourt/>.

14 For a deeper exploration of this subject, refer to the text by Dunia Roquetti Saroute, based on her doctoral thesis, developed in collaboration with Ca' Foscari University in Venice, which delves into what she labeled "antinomy of the 'primitive'." Cf. Dunia Roquetti Saroute, "Entre São Paulo e Veneza: Heitor dos Prazeres and the Antinomy of the 'Primitive'" is an upcoming essay set to be published in a volume that will bring together fresh interpretations of the MAC USP modern art collection, scheduled for release in 2024.

15 In this regard and its repercussions in Brazil, see Helouise Costa and Daniel Rincón, cat. exp. *A "arte degenerada" de Lasar Segall: perseguição à arte moderna em tempos de guerra*. São Paulo: MAC USP/Museu Lasar Segall, 2018.

and a staunch pacifist, Grosz harnessed the fluidity of watercolors to project a visionary image, reflective of his experiences as a soldier on the frontlines during World War I between 1914 and 1918. The gigantic, boot-clad legs of a soldier trudging through a landscape of bloody mud and seemingly human remnants encapsulate the bestiality implied in the title—a nightmarish vision that Grosz conceived to convey the horrors of war. This prophetic masterpiece resonates with other works featured in the *Exodus* grouping. Another rendition of 'bestiality' emerges in the caricature *Dance of the Capital with Death* by Emiliano di Cavalcanti, an admirer of Grosz's work. The caricature portrays 'capital' through the corporeal, portly figure of a bourgeois individual with clawed hands reminiscent of a werewolf or vampire. He sports a top hat, a symbol of the banking world enshrined in 19th-century painting, and the dollar sign is prominently displayed alongside the Nazi swastika in his pocket. With a sinister smile, he embraces a skeletal figure representing death, complete with a hat adorned with an array of battle tanks.

Within the *Exodus* grouping, we feature Arthur Osver's masterpiece, *Forrest of Chimneys*, donated by Nelson Rockefeller. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Osver's upbringing occurred in the vibrant mosaic of European immigrants' neighborhoods in Chicago. Between 1936 and 1938, he embarked on a transformative journey through France and Italy. Upon his return to the United States, Osver made notable contributions to the Federal Arts Project and was widely known for his depiction of urban landscapes in the 1940s, with a particular affinity for alleys, vacant lots, and New York rooftops, the city in which he had taken up residence. The piece showcased at MAC USP is part of a larger series of urban landscapes crafted by the artist during this period. The imposing chimneys that dominate the composition cast such a formidable presence that the distant figure of a worker, seen smoking on the right, nearly fades from view. Therefore, the artwork encapsulates a sense of placelessness, a realm with metaphysical undertones reminiscent of the Italian metaphysical painting school. Within this canvas, the interplay between the person and setting makes ground for disconcerting dissonances. The atmospheric essence of *Forrest of Chimneys* bears a striking resemblance to Giorgio de Chirico's *Enigma of a Day* and Regina Silveira's *Paradox of the Saint*. Together, these three works deal with oppressive displacement and historical-political issues without overtly making them explicit. In Osver's case, the composition embodies the prevailing mood of despair and disillusionment during the American depression years. De Chirico, with his shadowy figure standing amidst cannonballs at his feet, alludes to Camillo Cavour, the hero of Italian unification, but within a bankrupt republic that did not live up to its promise. Regina Silveira, through her representation of Santiago Matamoros, draws parallels to the equestrian statue of Duque de Caxias, echoing the contradictions of a Brazilian republic still bearing colonialist remnants.

In the *Unconscious (Not) Free* grouping, we are fortunate to house what is arguably the most extensive set of artworks donated by Nelson Rockefeller. Among these treasures are pieces by renowned artists such as André Masson, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Morris Graves, and Everett Spruce. Masson, Chagall, and Ernst brought their works to life after finding refuge in the United States following their exile from their respective home countries. Graves and Spruce, on the other hand, represent artists championed through the Young American Artists exhibition program initiated by Dorothy Miller at MoMA. Moreover, these artists hailed from beyond the New York art scene, focusing on spiritual and nature-related aspects tied to the American landscape.

In the case of *Antelope Mountain*, Everett Spruce skillfully captures a rock formation in his home state of Texas. The earthy hues and textured brushwork within the painting aim to immerse the viewer in the very essence of this natural landscape. Spruce was associated with the artists of the 'American scene,' as he portrayed landscapes and everyday occurrences in the heartland of the United States. However, the topographic Antelope Mountain rises like a monumental presence amidst the arid desert surroundings. Its name seemingly pays homage to the Antelope Creek people; the indigenous groups that once inhabited the North American territory between the 13th and 15th centuries, primarily in states like Oklahoma and Texas. They were one of the countless indigenous nations

of the American plains. The quarries along the Canadian River in Texas hold significance as archaeological sites shedding light on the history of these indigenous communities¹⁶. It is plausible that Spruce had these historical references in mind while crafting *Antelope Mountain*. The composition seems to convey the deep connection between humankind and nature, a hallmark of the cosmologies of Native American peoples, which Spruce deems spiritual. This perspective brings his artwork into proximity to his surrealist contemporaries, all of whom are intrigued by exploring the imagery of the unconscious mind. However, Spruce's art can also be linked to the *Appropriation* grouping, shared with other white artists like Victor Brecheret, who draws inspiration from the visual cultures of the indigenous peoples in their respective regions. A parallel can indeed be drawn between Spruce and Brecheret. The former endeavored to create compositions and landscapes to evoke the essence of the central-southern USA, a region perceived as remote, untamed, and primitive during the first half of the 20th century. The strokes and textural elements he uses in *Antelope Mountain* aim to immerse the viewer in the very substance of the painting, akin to the surface of bronze in works such as *The Indian and the Sussuapara* and *Kalapalo Indians Fight* by Brecheret. Here, the artist employs graphic incisions reminiscent of those found in Brazil's prehistoric cave paintings, by indigenists, archaeologists, and anthropologists then. Furthermore, in the mid-20th century, Texas and New Mexico in the USA held a comparable significance for modernist intellectuals and artists as the Brazilian midwest and the Xingu region, then deemed remote, unexplored territories rich with ancestral evidence and cultural traces, marked by a significant presence of indigenous populations¹⁷.

Another avenue to explore the concept of spirituality connected to the land and a sense of estrangement or displacement can be found in André Masson's *Germination*. This gouache on paper, set against a completely black background with fiery red and yellow shapes, belongs to a series referred to by the artist as "telluric paintings," created during his period of exile in the USA. Unlike Ernst and other émigré artists of the time, Masson chose to distance himself from the bustling urban environment of New York, taking refuge in New Preston, Connecticut, where he collaborated with Yves Tanguy and Alexander Calder. There, Masson drew inspiration from American nature and geography, including its fauna and flora, which led to the creation of these compositions. They are regarded as a significant evolution of Masson's automatism practice.

During the 1920s and 1930s, within the context of surrealism, Masson and fellow artists associated with André Breton's group sought to achieve spontaneous and gestural drawing to access the unconscious mind. This interest stemmed from their study of Freud's psychoanalytic writings, coinciding with their exploration of images and objects produced by patients in psychiatric institutions, as interpreted by 20th-century modernist critics. Hence the set of photographs that Alice Brill took in the early 1950s inside the Free School of Arts of the Juquery psychiatric hospital, in Franco da Rocha, a city on the outskirts of São Paulo, where the works of Aurora Cursino do Santos and many others can be seen¹⁸. Adjacent to this collection, the addition of *The fool* by Anita Malfatti seeks to stimulate fresh interpretations of this already canonical piece within Brazilian modernism. Unlike *Woman with Green Hair* and *Yellow man*, *The fool* was notably absent from the artist's renowned exhibition held in December 1917. The event prompted critic and writer Monteiro Lobato to pen his famous review titled "Paranoia or Mystification?, regarding Anita Malfatti's Exhibition," wherein he levied accusations of degeneration against the artist and drew

16 For additional information about the Antelope Creek people, see: <https://www.nps.gov/alfi/learn/historyculture/antelope-creek-culture.htm>.

17 This sentiment resonates when watching the documentary film *Aspectos do Alto Xingu* [Aspects of High Xingu] by engineer Manoel Rodrigues Ferreira, which is also featured in the *Appropriation* grouping. Initially screened at MAM SP in September 1949, the film captures the early encounters with indigenous groups along the Culuene River in the High Xingu, prior to the demarcation of this area as Brazil's first indigenous land. During this period, artists like Brecheret and others were undoubtedly influenced by the spirit of exploration that fueled the renowned Roncador-Xingu Expedition of the 1940s. Images depicting interactions between expedition members and indigenous communities filled the pages of Brazilian newspapers and illustrated magazines, including *O Cruzeiro*, and were documented by notable photographers like the Frenchman Jean Manzon and the Brazilian José de Medeiros, among others.

18 Historian Silvana Jeha recently published a monograph on the artist. Cf. Silvana Jeha. *Aurora: memórias e delírios de uma mulher da vida*. Rio de Janeiro: Veneta, 2022.

comparisons between her works and those of psychiatric patients. Interestingly, echoes of this contentious debate seemingly permeate *The fool*. The curved black lines beneath the character's eyes, her gazing upward and slightly to the side, seem to underscore a sense of contemplation and detachment.

As we delve into the *Cold War* grouping, we come across *Composition* by Fernand Léger, a piece with a unique origin among the Rockefeller donations, as it came directly from the donor's private collection. Léger crafted this gouache during his tenure as a guest at Yale University in 1938, a period that marked the beginning of his close relationship with the tycoon. His lectures at Yale revolved around the use of color in architecture, and it was through his connection with Wally Harrison, the architect of the Rockefeller Center, which was under construction at the time, that Léger and John D. Rockefeller Jr. first met. Harrison may have encouraged Rockefeller to commission a mural painting for the new Radio City building, a part of the Rockefeller conglomerate's initiatives. However, this project ultimately remained unrealized. Concurrently, it is reported that Rockefeller commissioned what Léger referred to as a "cinematic mural" for his apartment. It is conceivable that the gouache now residing in the MAC USP collection was part of a series of preparatory studies for the cinematic mural in Rockefeller's apartment. In this endeavor, Léger appears to have departed from the mechanistic forms characteristic of his "*esprit nouveau*" phase, opting to experiment with more organic forms, subtly alluding to plant elements. In this context, *Composition* shares affinities with *Expressive Forms*, by Jean Arp and *Stones no. 22* by Alberto Magnelli, which present an extraordinary exploration of abstract poetics of concretist nature, and it is worth noting that the three artists mentioned here were closely associated with the Abstraction Création group in France during the 1930s.

It is essential to acknowledge that the inclusion of the Italian painter Alberto Magnelli in the *Cold War* grouping serves a dual purpose. Magnelli's presence is not only a result of his distinct experiences in concretist abstraction but also due to his role as a mediator in the acquisition of other works that formed the initial collection of MAM SP, now part of the MAC USP collection. Magnelli, based in France, and the Italian art critic Margherita Sarfatti, exiled in Argentina, played pivotal roles in assisting Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho in procuring over 132 works for the establishment of Brazil's first modern art museum. Their efforts commenced months before Rockefeller's arrival in Brazil in November 1946. Acting as intermediaries between Paris and Rome/Milan, Magnelli and Sarfatti assembled an extraordinary collection of works by prominent international modernist artists of the era, while jeopardizing Rockefeller's initiatives in the Brazilian art world.

From the perspective of Magnelli's acquisitions, the *Cold War* grouping showcases some of his choices, including his own work, the relief by Jean Arp mentioned earlier, the relief by César Domela, and Wassily Kandinsky's *Light Composition*. In many ways, these works align with the avant-garde ideals projected by the works of European artists in exile, which were donated by Rockefeller. In summary, the grouping provides a multifaceted exploration of different approaches to the concepts of concrete art and abstraction. The inclusion of works by Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Waldemar Cordeiro, and Lygia Pape within this grouping sheds new light on them. Beyond promoting abstraction as a language reflecting the values of modern, democratic, and free society, the artists work with a strong kinetic component through their works, inviting associations with other realms. Sophie Taeuber-Arp's painting, for instance, bears clear influences from contemporary dance, as it incorporates open geometric elements that infuse rhythm into the surface. When placed in proximity to Kandinsky and Cordeiro, her work accentuates the rhythmic and kinetic aspects shared by these pieces. Incorporating Cordeiro, Pape, and Max Bil I within this grouping reveals contrasts and paradoxes: Cordeiro and Pape opt for traditional techniques in crafting their concrete compositions. Cordeiro utilizes tempera instead of automotive paint (later adopted by Brazilian concrete art groups) in his work *Movement*, while Pape employs the woodcut technique in her piece *Tecelar*, alluding to the

act of weaving. These choices stand in stark contrast to the sleek and industrial surface of Max Bill's *Tripartite Unity*, underscoring the contradictory realities of countries like Brazil, which was under pressure to modernize during those years¹⁹, compared to the more advanced industrialization and technological development consolidated in the USA and Europe²⁰.

The notable set of paintings acquired by Matarazzo in Italy, with Margherita Sarfatti acting as the key mediator, initially did not seem to contribute to the narrative of modern art in the same way. These works were associated with the promotion of Italian modern art as a representation of Italian national identity during the Fascist regime of the 1930s. Despite the relevance of the artists and their poetics to the modernist painters' group in São Paulo during the formation of MAM SP and of Matarazzo, they were initially perceived as conservative. However, we can offer a fresh perspective on this grouping by highlighting certain works that allow us to revisit this period in Italian art, lifting the weight of fascism that has long overshadowed them. While the set consists of 71 works, the concentration of five of them in the *Exodus* grouping offers a unique lens through which to view them. For instance, *The massacre* by Fausto Pirandello, the painter son of playwright Luigi Pirandello, uses thick and violent brushstrokes to allegorically transport us to the harrowing events at the end of World War II. It alludes to the tradition of history painting while updating it. It depicts the partisan struggle for the liberation of Italian territory from 1943 onwards, during the German occupation, where Nazi troops frequently carried out shootings in reprisal for the actions of anti-fascist militants. The victims were randomly selected men from villages, and their families and residents were forced to witness their executions.

Another approach to allegory in painting can be observed in *Indian Ocean* by Scipione, originally titled *The Dreamers*. The words "Oceano Indiano", adopted as the title when the work arrived in Brazil, are painted in the background as if the caption of an imaginary island or peninsula. On the right side of the composition, an orangutan with a melancholic expression holds some fruit in its hands. On the left side, a parrot is perched near a net of sorts. The figure of the orangutan is anthropomorphized, due to its gray beard. Whether this character represents a figure from the era or if the artist plays with his own self-portrait remains open to interpretation. The painting possesses a somewhat caricatural quality and appears to refer to Italian colonial ambitions, particularly in Eritrea, the Italian colony in Africa that bordered the *Indian Ocean* (called *Oceano indiano*, in Italian). The colony had its territory expanded during the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. *The Dreamers* of the title suggests the artist's irony in response to the fascists' vision of Italy as a colonial empire.

Upon receiving the MAM SP collection at USP, Walter Zanini, as the first director of MAC USP, sought to both retrospectively and prospectively update it. In the *Appropriation* and *Violence* groupings, we can observe threads through which both ways of collecting intersect. The photographs documenting Marta Minujín's action in the 1977 exhibition *Poéticas visuais* are linked to a series of performances and actions by the Argentine artist known as "agricultural art." These works questioned the modes of capitalist production and large-scale exploitation of the earth. This piece serves as an entry point into the *Appropriation* grouping by addressing issues of territorial belonging and the identities oppressed over time. At the time of Minujín's action at MAC USP, not only Brazil but other Latin American countries were experiencing periods of great tension in rural areas, with repression against rural workers. This period also witnessed a wave of attacks against indigenous communities driven by developmental policies imposed by local dictatorships²¹.

19 The economic plan of Juscelino Kubitschek's government in 1955, often referred to as "50 years in 5", played a significant role in Brazil's modernization.

20 This allowed artists like Max Bill to collaborate with Swiss metallurgy to create works such as *Tripartite Unity*, an achievement that Brazil would later pursue, and in a very specific manner.

21 In the case of Brazil, the Trans-Amazonian Highway project, although never completed, caused considerable destruction of the Amazon rainforest, the world's largest biome, and led to the displacement and genocide of several indigenous communities.

The *Violence* grouping begins with João Câmara's work, *A confession*, acquired by the museum in 1972. João Câmara, from Paraíba (a northeastern state of Brazil), was a relatively unknown young painter who gained recognition at the time. He was introduced to the São Paulo art scene during the X São Paulo Biennial in 1969. His work was featured in the General Room of Brazil, which was accompanied by a Special Room dedicated to Magical, Fantastic, and Surrealist Art²². His compositions, although still working within the realm of traditional art through painting, resonate with elements of magical realism, akin to the style developed by prominent Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez. Additionally, Câmara's work often revisits aspects of local culture, including popular chapbooks. However, his work in the MAC USP collection takes a different direction. Here, Câmara depicts an allegorical representation featuring two figures with tense muscles. The figure on the left is half-man, half-machine, while the one on the right is attached to a wooden wheel with a horse's head, seemingly whipped by the figure on the left. The wheel and the small box held by the figure on the left, from which electricity wires emerge, suggest a scene of torture, a notion reinforced by the work's title. It is a terrifying vision that likely drew immediate reference from the practice of torture against political prisoners during the darkest years of the Brazilian military dictatorship. *A confession* can be seen as a contemporary exploration of subjects touched upon by artists like Grosz and Pirandello in the *Exodus* grouping, addressing the various forms of oppression experienced by humanity throughout the 20th century. It highlights the frail and perverse facets of modernity, a perspective that is now scrutinized by post-colonial theories and a decolonial agenda.

In the micro-histories woven by the works discussed here, we may find alternative ways to narrate the story of the MAC USP collection in its 60 years of existence. Through these exercises, we not only gained fresh insights and perspectives but also opened the door to many more, including new directions for collecting that can bridge the gaps that have emerged over time. This underscores the significance of two aspects of the new exhibition of the collection. Firstly, it commenced with a selection of 26 existing texts about some of the museum's works. These texts provide a glimpse into the layers of interpretation that have accumulated around the collection along the years. Over the course of the exhibition's five-year duration, there will be open calls for graduate students to contribute new texts on additional works in the collection. Finally, the groupings within the exhibition were intentionally designed openly, without enclosed rooms. This design empowers visitors to create their own connections and narratives that go beyond the placement of works within specific groupings. These fresh connections reflect the multifaceted readings made possible within this collection. This approach is witness to the collaborative efforts of the six curators who initially conceptualized the exhibition, as well as their ongoing dialogue with a curatorial advisory committee, which has deepened their understanding of the collection. The emergence of new connections and texts will contribute to constructing one of the many narratives about the MAC USP collection. As historian Eric Hobsbawm observed, the lesson of 20th-century history is that we must collectively confront the challenges of new times rather than attempting to do so individually. In this collective effort, we can navigate the complexities and nuances of this rich collection and continue to uncover its hidden stories.

²² Cf. Marc Berkowitz, "Brasil. Sala Geral" In: cat. exp. 10a. *Bienal de São Paulo*. São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1969, pp. 33-34.