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**Grupo Santa Helena**

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Francisco Rebolo Gonsales, Paisagem com figuras, 1942. óleo sobre papelão (oil on cardboard), 40 x 49,7 cm. Coleção MAC-USP.

[http://www.mac.usp.br](http://www.mac.usp.br/)

The Santa Helena Group, made up mostly of wall painters, artisans, and amateur easel painters, had its origins in the second half of the 1930s. This group, different from the Brazilian modernists of the 1920s, was made up of individuals with modest social backgrounds. Many were children of Spanish or Italian immigrants and studied in vocational courses such as *Liceu de Artes e Ofícios de São Paulo*, or the *Escola Profissional Masculina do Brás.* The Group began with the friendship between Rebolo and Mário Zanini. Both took a drawing night-course at the *Escola Paulista de Belas-Artes,* where they met **Alfredo Volpi**, Clóvis Graciano, and Manuel Martins. Fulvio Pennachhi, Mário Zanini, Aldo Bonadei, Humberto Rosa, and Rullo Rizzotti were also part of this group, albeit in different moments of its short-lived existence. The Santa Helena group never intended to be an avant-garde movement, to change the art milieu. They never wrote a manifesto or engaged in activities that challenged the artistic canon. Their priorities were repertoire (theme) and technique; they valued the artisan aspect of the painter’s work and did not intend to continue any vanguard principle from the first phase of the Brazilian modernist movement.

Although the artists involved took part in collective shows, they never organised an exhibition to show exclusively their own work. The influence of European painters and artistic tendencies– especially the post-impressionist Paul Cézanne and the Italian *Novecento* – was visible in their works. Different from the more affluent artists they did not have the opportunity to travel abroad, but engaged with the European movements by reading books and occasionally attending foreign art exhibitions organised in São Paulo. Its members would get together in a small office in the Palacete Santa Helena, a building located in Praça da Sé, in downtown São Paulo, a small office belonging to Francisco Rebolo Gonsales (1902-1980), contractor and artist/decorator, which served as an atelier for painting and drawing sessions, using live models. On Sundays, the group would paint landscapes in situ in the São Paulo suburbs. In 1936, the works of these artists got the attention of renowned and more experienced painters, such as Vittorio Gobis and Paulo Rossi Osir, who invited them to participate in some exhibitions and started to publicise their work.

The artworks and the trajectory of the movement shows that they looked for an art that strayed away from focus on virtuosity and plastic experimentation. This attitude seemed to be seen favorably by many critics of the time. Among these critics were **Mário de Andrade**, one of the mentors of modernist art in the country but who, by this moment in the 1930s, had taken a more conservative stance. The critics praised their works because they conformed to the most authentic painting traditions, and showed their desire to assert the problems in painting as technical and aesthetic. According to Paulo Mendes de Almeida, a great chronicler of that time, the artists in the Group asserted their “commendable belief in the indispensability of the *métier*, the investigation of the technical and formal elements in the art of painting”. In his opinion, this was because “rebellion was no longer accepted merely for the sake of rebellion. Above all, there was a search for the intrinsic quality of the plastic elements, and in this search all were imbued with the spirit of an artisan, and a noble craft”.

The diffusion of abstract art, which started with the *Bienais de São Paulo*, and the consequent creation of new artistic groups that were admittedly vanguard, resulted in the obscuring of the works of the Santa Helena group. One exception is the enduring impact of the work of **Alfredo Volpi** (1896 – 1988), even among the members of the Concrete Art in São Paulo.With the natural dissolution of the group, already noticeable in the beginning of the 1940s, the members began solo and uneven careers, many of them continuing into the 1960s.

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