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**São Paulo Biennial**



Antonio Maluf, 1a Bienal de São Paulo poster, 1951

**Fundação Bienal de São Paulo**

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The São Paulo Biennial was a daring enterprise modelled on the Venice Biennial that took place for the first time in 1951 in Brazil due to a series of sociocultural and political factors, including a booming industrial sector looking to assert itself socially within Brazilian society. The São Paulo Biennial, the first of its kind in Latin America, looked at propagating Brazil’s image internationally in both the art scene and in the political and economical contexts. Its first instance in 1951 was led by the industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, better known as Ciccillo Matarazzo (1898-1977), who had also spearheaded the founding of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP) half a decade earlier. The biennials above all promoted the circulation of artists, artworks and cultural agents, which was key in the exchange of information, tendencies, and tastes. At a time when the number of art magazines published in Brazil was reduced and travelling abroad was not easy, the São Paulo Biennials connected Brazilians with international contemporary production through the organisation of vast retrospectives of modern pioneers such as **Paul Klee**, **Mondrian**, and **Picasso** in 1953, **Léger** in 1955, and **Pollock** in 1957.

In an article published in the press in Rio de Janeiro immediately after the inauguration of the first São Paulo Biennial, in 1951, the critic Mário Pedrosa highlighted three aspects that, according to him, justified the importance of having such a great exhibition in Brazil: the modernisation of Brazilian arts, the international recognition of the country, and its boldness in comparison to the Venice Biennial. Brazil was, during the 1940s and 1950s, going through great economic growth, led by the new urban and industrial economic elites. Important cultural institutions were created a few years earlier under the initiative of members of this elite, such as the *Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP)*, in 1947, the *Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo,* in 1948,the *Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro*, in 1949, the *Teatro Brasileiro da Comédia (TBC)*, in 1948, the *Tupi* TV channel, the first television chain in Latin America, and the *Companhia Cinematográfica Vera Cruz.*

The famous statement by Lourival Gomes Machado, director of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, at the time, and organiser of the first São Paulo Biennial, calls attention to the collective meaning and great reach of this enterprise: “by definition, the Biennial should perform two main tasks: placing Brazilian modern art in direct confrontation, side by side, and in touch with the arts in the rest of the world; and try to make São Paulo the art center of the world”. Under this perspective, we must highlight the importance of the Biennials in the 1950s, their importance in the promotion of the abstract arts in Brazil and Latin America. Supporter of the abstract tendencies, Mário Pedrosa stated, correctly, that “we can see, in the very first biennials, the victory of abstractionism over the old figurative art all over the country, despite some regional resistance here and there”. We must not forget that abstractionism was regarded with reservation and resistance in Brazil right before the *I Bienal de São Paulo*; both by politicised artists and members of the modernist generation, because it was believed that only figurative art could have a legitimate social purpose and be accessible to all.

Another function of the São Paulo Biennials was to trigger interest in large international exhibitions in other Latin American countries. In the 1960s, a variety of art biennials were created in several countries in the continent, many of which were moved by the desire to become a starting point to promoting Latin American art internationally. We can mention, for example, the Mexican Biennial*,* the CórdobaBiennial*,* in Argentina, the Medellin Biennialand the American Biennial of graphic arts of Cali*,* in Colombia.

Many of these initiatives had ephemeral lives; this has not been the case with the São Paulo Biennial, which has been taking place under the tutelage of the *Bienal de São Paulo Foundation* since 1962. Its most prominent crisis was in the 1970s, due to the political situation in the country. In 1969, its tenth edition, better known as *Bienal do boicote* (the boycott biennial) took place without the presence of the artistic communities from many countries, who were protesting against repressive actions from the Brazilian military government, which had promulgated, months earlier, the *Ato Institucional 5*. This decree conferred to the Brazilian President the power to close Congress, intervene in the states and municipal districts, to revoke mandates and suspend political rights, as well as appointing public servants. It was the art historian Walter Zanini who brought the biennial back to its prestige in two anthological editions, which he organized in the early 1980s. In them, the traditional assembly by countries of origin was abolished in favor of an organisation of works based on artistic themes.

The role of São Paulo Biennial nowadays is questionable, when it is not the only privileged venue in Brazil where foreign art or contemporary art can be shown. However, despite the inherent problems seen in this model of exhibition, and despite several moments of instability, the São Paulo Biennial continues to be the most important artistic event in Brazil, arguably in South America; it remains a privileged space in which to promote artistic-cultural debates, and to reflect on the social role of the arts.

**Further Reading:**

see website http://www.bienal.org.br

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