Contributor: Vera Beatriz Siqueira

**Malfatti, Anita**

(Born: December 2, 1889, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; Died: November 6, 1964, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil)



*A boba* (The silly woman), 1915-16, oil on canvas, 61 x 50,5 cm. Museu de Arte Contemporânea, USP, São Paulo

Anita Malfatti (1889 – 1964) started her artistic formation with her mother Bety, an American amateur painting. In 1910, she went to Berlin to study with Fritz Bürger, Lovis Corinth and Ernst Bischoff-Culm. At the end of 1914, she travelled to New York to attend the Independent School of Art, coordinated by Homer Boss. After her return in 1916 to Brazil, Anita had a controversial solo exhibition in 1917, which was confronted by severe criticism from the writer Monteiro Lobato and passionate appreciation by modernist intellectuals, like **Oswald de Andrade** and **Mario de Andrade**. In 1922, she participated in the **Week of Modern Art** as the chief representative of modern painting in Brazil. The next year she received a fellowship to study in Paris, where she stayed for five years. Influenced by the classical ideals of the ***École de Paris***, during this time, Anita changed her vibrant and colourful style into a more serene and intellectual painting that was not received with much enthusiasm upon her return to Brazil in 1928. She lost the leading role in Brazilian modernism and decided to dedicate herself to depicting local figures and rural landscapes in a more traditional style. Anita Malfatti is considered a pioneer of Brazilian modernism.

Anita Malfatti’s father, Samuel Malfatti, was an Italian engineer, and her mother, Eleonora Elisabeth Krug, known as Bety, was a cultivated American bourgeois lady and an amateur painter, who participated in the National Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro in 1908. In 1892, Malfatti went with her parents to Italy, in an attempt to heal a congenital defect in her right hand and arm. After an operation, she returned to Brazil in 1894, but the atrophy continued. She graduated from Mackensie College, in 1906, five years after her father's death. She started her artistic formation at home, with her mother.

In 1910, sponsored by her uncle and godfather Jorge Krug, Anita went to Berlin, where she attended the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. Rumours of wars forced her return to Brazil in 1914, and travel, the next year, to the US, in order to continue her formation. In New York, she attended the Art Students League and the Independent School of Art. European exiled artists like **Maximo Gorki, Marcel Duchamp, Isadora Duncan,** Jean Crotti, among others, frequented the Independent School during the time Malfatti was there influencing her training. In the Independent School, under Boss, whose work celebrated the freedom of open-air paintings and the vibrant use of colours, Anita found the liberty and the encouragement she needed to create her own style. Most of the well-known paintings by Malfatti were done in the two-year period she stayed in New York, like *O homem amarelo* (The yellow man, 1915), *A boba* (The silly woman, 1915), and *A mulher de cabelos verdes* (The lady with green hair, 1915-16). She realized some illustration works to Vogue, Vanity Fair and other magazines.

In 1916, she returned to Brazil, where her works were not well received. Her godfather qualified her paintings as "Dantesque stuff". She tried to fit in São Paulo's artistic scenery, yielding to the pressures for the creation of a nationalist art. Paintings like *Índia* (Indian woman, 1916), and *Tropical* (1916-17) shows a new kind of image, conciliating modern and expressive freedom with the illustration of Brazilian reality.

At this time, Malfatti was the protagonist of one of the most important events at the beginning of Brazilian modernism. On December 12th, 1917 she opened the show "Modern Painting Exhibition – Anita Malfatti", in which she included a few works of her colleagues in New York. With no familiarity with modern painting, the audience of São Paulo oscillated between curiosity and doubts, until the publication of a very severe criticism by the Brazilian writer Monteiro Lobato.

Lobato condemned the modern movements coming from abroad and valued local modernism inside the boundaries of naturalism and nationalism. This article is considered one of the stimuli for the modernist movement in São Paulo, as it led intellectuals like Oswald de Andrade and Mario de Andrade to position in favour of modernity, and against traditional academic art. One year after the Week of Modern Art, Malfatti went to Paris with a fellowship from the government of São Paulo. For five years, she studied in free studios being influenced by artists like **Vlaminck, Matisse** and **Bonnard**. During the years she stayed in Paris, among the official duties of her fellowship (which included copies of traditional paintings and academic compositions she had to send back to Brazil), Malfatto participated in important exhibitions, such as the ***Salon d'Automne*** (Autumn Salon, 1924, 1925, 1927), **the *Salon des Independents*** (Independent Salon, 1926, 1927, 1928), the *Salon du Franc* (Franc Salon, 1926) and the *Salon des Tuileries* (Tuileries Salon, 1927). She had also a solo exhibition in 1926 at André Gallery, with positive reception by French critics.

Although Malfatto seemed well integrated to the new tendencies of European artistic modernism during the 1920s – period known as the "return to order", in which modern artistic movements were submitted to classical ideals of order and beauty –, the artist was no longer the protagonist of Brazilian modern painting.

Since her return to São Paulo, in 1928, she participated in some important events and shows, but with no leading role. Critics who praised her first works in 1917 did not understand the artistic changes they saw in year work in 1929. Mario de Andrade wrote that she had lost her expressionist force and defined her role in the modernist movement as a historical one. Most of the Brazilian critics followed him, limiting the cultural interest to her first works (from 1915 to 1917), and condemning all her future paintings to a kind of respectful silence.

This silence was very significant for Malfatti's artistic developments. She decided to be the interpreter or portraitist of "Brazilian soul", depicting popular themes and rural landscapes, in an approach combining the realism of travelling painting with some impressionist touches. The artist abandoned expressionist poetic – the colourful and vibrant one she learned in the US, or the classical and refined one she developed in Paris – in favour of more realistic representations and poetic transfigurations of local scenes.

From that time onwards, Malfatti worked on illustrations and as a teacher in schools or in her own studio. During the 1940s, her public activities were concentrated in the Fine Artists Union, where she organized and participated in some of the annual shows. In 1957, Anita experienced with abstract art. But soon she returned to popular themes, traditional painting, and her simple life in the small country house in Diadema (state of Minas Gerais), in which she spent most of her time after her mother's death in 1952. One year before Malfatti’s death, the artist had a solo exhibition and a Special Room at the 7th **Biennial of São Paulo** (1963), where her historical position as a precursor and pioneer of Brazilian modernism was celebrated. Anita Malfatti died in São Paulo in 1964.

**Further reading:**

ANDRADE, M. (1942) *O movimento modernista*. Rio de Janeiro: Casa do Estudante do Brasil.

BATISTA, M. R. (2006) *Anita Malfatti no tempo e no espaço*. São Paulo: Editora 34: Edusp.

BRAGA-TORRES, A. (2002) *Anita Malfatti* (Mestres das Artes no Brasil). São Paulo: Moderna.

BRITO, M. da S. (1964) *História do Modernismo Brasileiro 1*: Antecendentes da Semana de Arte Moderna. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.

CHIARELLI, T. (1995) *Um jeca nos vernissages*. São Paulo: Edusp.

**List of works:**

*A Floresta, Treseburg* (The Forest, Treseburg), 1912, oil on canvas on carton, 20 x 20 cm. Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection/ Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro.

*A estudante russa* (The Russian student), 1915, oil on canvas, 76 x 61 cm. Mário de Andrade collection / Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, USP, São Paulo.

*O farol* (The Lightning House), 1915, oil on canvas, 46,5 x 61 cm. Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection/ Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro.

*A boba* (The silly woman), 1915-16, oil on canvas, 61 x 50,5 cm. Museu de Arte Contemporânea, USP, São Paulo.

*O homem amarelo* (The yellow man), 1915-16, oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm. Mário de Andrade collection / Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, USP, São Paulo.

*Tropical*, c.1916, oil on canvas, 77 x 102 cm. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

*Retrato de Mário de Andrade I* (Portrait of Mário de Andrade I), 1921-22, oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm. Mário de Andrade collection / Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, USP, São Paulo.

*Veneza, Canaletto* (Venice, Canaletto), 1924, oil on canvas, 51,3 x 63 cm. Museu de Arte Brasileira, FAAP, São Paulo.

*Mulher do Pará* (Woman from Pará), c. 1927, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Jenner Augusto da Silveira Collection, Salvador, Bahia.

*Itanhaém*, 1948-49, oil on canvas, 72 x 92 cm. Manuel Alceu Affonso Ferreira Collection, São Paulo.