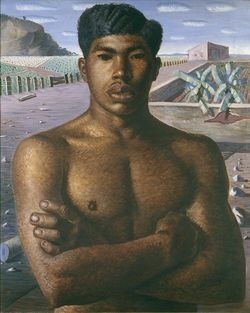
Contributor: Fabiana Serviddio

**Portinari, Candido**

Born: 1903 Brodowski, São Paulo, Brazil. Died: 1962, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Brazilian artist Candido Portinari always conceived artistic practice as a contribution in the creation of a national culture and as agent for social transformation. His figures are therefore inspired by Brazil, and yet at the same time are of universal concern. His stay in Paris during the interwar period - characterized as the “call to order” due to artists’ revaluation of art history and classical tradition - played a significant role in his aesthetic preferences for the plastic values of the past over vanguard experiences. By the 1930s he developed his signature style, strongly linked to the so-called *new realism*, interested in representing Brazil’s peculiarities influenced by constructivist repertoire. Nevertheless, attentive to Pablo Picasso’s artworks, the artist considered modern art as a non-dogmatic practise, one open to constant stylistic searches. Thus his art has always been controversial: he was criticised for his problematic adoption of modernism, which permanently shifted between new realism style and some sort of ‘neocubism’ or primitivism and widely praised for his commitment to the social and ethnic cause. His commitment to the working class labourers as well as the dramatic quality of his artworks– as the panels of the *Retirantes* series showcases– turned him into an influential representative of the social cause in Latin America.



Cándido Portinari, *Mestiço* (1934), oil on canvas, 81 cm x 65, 50 cm. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Image source: http://www.portinari.org.br/#/acervo/obra/2581

In 1928, Portinari won a trip prize to study in Europe. In 1932, immediately after coming back from Europe, the artist had a solo show at the Palace hotel, where he exhibited scenes with Brazilian inspiration for the first time. From the 1930s stand out his lively portraits of mulatto workers at the coffee and sugar plantations, like *Mestiço* (1934), or *Lavrador de café* [Coffee farm worker]also painted in 1934. Portinari pictured the figure of the worker, urban and rural, as true engine of the economic and cultural life in Brazil, and his questionings mainly pointed to the extraordinary social and economic inequalities among people in the country. In 1935, he received an Honor Mention at the *Carnegie International Exhibition* in Pittsburgh for his work *Café* [Coffee] - mention granted for the first time to a foreign artist -, and his work became widely recognized in the United States. His characters have a sculptural aspect, expressive deformation of hands and feet, and an overwhelming presence, that seems to exceed the limits of the canvas, over the landscape that appears behind them.

In the political and social context of the 1930s, the artistic debates shifted from aesthetic discussions towards examinations of national identities, and artists felt compelled to develop these topics. Inspired by the Mexican Muralists, Portinari’s interests focused more and more on ethnic and social issues in Brazil. The scenes developed against the background of his natal town Brodowski are an example. *Criança morta* [Dead child] (1944), from the *Retirantes* series, reveals the desolation of the landscape as an echo of the human drama for the populations of the Northeast, forced to leave their homes due to the droughts. This was a period of exploration and extreme eclecticism. In 1935, he developed four large panels to decorate the *Monumento Rodoviário* for the Rio- São Paulo highway. His scenes offered novel perspectives, through close-ups and diagonal approaches that decentred observation and broke the classical frontal view.

In 1939, Portinari worked on the mural paintings for the new building of the Education and Health Ministry. The iconography of the twelve fresco murals presented a representation of the economic cycles of Brazil as their main subject. The characters - painted either with perspective or through a synthetic expression – remind one of the Italian figures in Early Renaissance mural painting, having a geometric grid as compositional structure. Nevertheless, the cycles were not as bold in its experimental quality as the *Monumento Rodoviario*’s murals. In the Ministry’s frescoes Portinari built an epic interpretation of the workers’ role in modern society. The same year he was appointed to decorate the Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, an architectural project developed - like the Ministry building - by LucioCosta and Oscar Niemeyer and considered one of the most modern in design at the fair. In the three murals *Jangadas do Nordeste* [Boats from the Northeast], *Cena Gaúcha* [Creole dinner] and *Festa de São João* [Saint John’s Feast], Portinari focused on typical workers from different regions of Brazil. This year was also occasion of a large retrospective exhibition of his work at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Rio.

In 1940, Portinari represented his country with 37 artworks in the *Latin American Exhibition of Fine and Applied Art* at the Riverside Museum in Manhattan. Shortly after the end of the New York World Fair he was offered a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “Portinari from Brazil” was the second exhibit for a Latin American artist at the museum since its inception. This show also circulated through some of the main art institutions of the country. Having the Pan-American propaganda activities as political background, Portinari was appointed in 1941 to paint murals at the Hispanic Room of the Library of Congress in Washington DC –the largest repository of Latin American culture in the U.S. He developed the murals according to the subject proposed – America’s colonization, but focusing on episodes culturally linked to the particular colonial history of Brazil. These murals synthesize his eclectic formal character: each of them reveals the different stylistic paths followed by the artist. The emphasis given to the working classes as history’s engine is the common attribute among them, similar to the majority of his earlier paintings.

Portinari’ s social concerns led him to run as Congressional candidate for the Brazilian Communist Party in 1945, and for national senator in 1947. The political persecution he suffered in Brazil led him to voluntary exile in Uruguay along with his family, where he stayed approximately one year. In 1949 he painted the tempera panel *Tiradentes* for the patio at the Cataguases high school in Minas Gerais, picturing the story of the national hero that pursued Brazil’s Independence from Portuguese economical and political exploitation. Between 1952 and 1956, Portinari executed the two murals *War and Peace* to decorate one of the interior halls of the new United Nations building in New York. He won the National Guggenheim scholarship and the Gold Medal given by the International Fine Arts Council to the artist of the year (1955). In 1959 he had a retrospective exhibition of his work at the V São Paulo Biennale. He died in 1962 due to intoxication with heavy metals contained in the dyes he used for his paintings.

**Further Reading:**

Do Prado Valladares, Clarival (1975) *Análise Iconográfica da Pintura Monumental de Portinari nos Estados Unidos.* Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional de Belas-Artes.

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Giunta, Andrea (Comp.) (2005) *Cándido Portinari y el sentido social del arte*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.

Pedrosa, Mario. (1981) *Dos murais de Portinari aos espaços de Brasilia*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.

Zilio, Carlos. (1982) *A querela do Brasil. A questao da identidade na arte brasileira: a obra de Tarsila, Di Cavalcanti e Portinari, 1922-1945.* Rio de Janeiro: Funarte.

**List of works:**

Cándido Portinari, *Mestiço* (1934), oil on canvas, 81 cm x 65, 50 cm. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

Cándido Portinari, *Lavrador de café* [Coffee farm worker](1934), oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm***.*** Museo de Arte de Sao Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP).

Cándido Portinari, *Café* [Coffee] (1935), oil on canvas, 130 cm x 195 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Rio de Janeiro.

Cándido Portinari, *Descobrimento [Discovery of the Land],* tempera painting on mural, 316 cm x 316 cm. *Desbravamento da mata [Entry into the forest],* tempera painting on mural, 316 cm x 431 cm. *Catequese [Teaching of the Indians],* tempera painting on mural, 494 cm x 463 cm (irregular). *Descoberta do Ouro [Discovery of Gold]* tempera painting on mural, 494 cm x 463 cm (irregular). (1941) Vestibule Walls, Hispanic Reading Room, the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Cándido Portinari, *Criança morta* [Dead child] (1944) *Retirantes* Series. Oil on canvas, 180 x 190 cm. Museo de Arte de Sao Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP)