

# The contribution of Italian immigrants to the iconography of Brazilian Modernism: building national identity through the depiction of food

*Claudia Mussi*

**[Abstract]** La fine del XIX secolo è stato un periodo di cambiamenti sociali ed economici in Brasile. Il paese cresceva grazie alla produzione di caffè e cercava una maggiore visibilità all'estero ricorrendo a rappresentazioni pittoriche che lo avvicinassero ai valori culturali europei. All'inizio del XX secolo, tuttavia, il *Modernismo* ascese sulla scena artistica, cambiando il modo in cui il paese era rappresentato. Il movimento intendeva costruire un'identità nazionale che riflettesse l'attuale società brasiliana, rompendo con i vecchi paradigmi e ampliando la rappresentazione pittorica. Nello stesso periodo, per sopperire alla carenza di forza lavoro, il Brasile si aprì all'immigrazione. Nel Nuovo Mondo arrivano immigrati tedeschi, portoghesi, spagnoli e, soprattutto, italiani. Questi, nell'ambito delle Belle Arti, nelle abitudini alimentari, nel commercio e nelle tecniche agricole, assunsero un ruolo importante e funzionale alla costruzione dell'identità brasiliana. Questo articolo descrive il contributo degli immigrati italiani e dei loro discendenti alla cultura brasiliana nel contesto del movimento modernista, attraverso la rappresentazione di elementi che compongono intrinsecamente l'alimentazione e la struttura economica e sociale del Brasile e dell'Italia, ovvero il caffè, il pane e l'ampia offerta alimentare dei mercati di strada.

**Parole chiave:** Immigrazione italiana; Brasile; Identità nazionale; Modernismo; Cibo.

El final del siglo XIX fue una época de cambios sociales y económicos en Brasil. El país creció gracias a la producción de café y buscó más presencia en el extranjero recurriendo a representaciones pictóricas que aproximarán el país a los valores culturales europeos. A principios del siglo XX, sin embargo, el Modernismo ascendió en la escena artística, cambiando la forma en que el país era representado. El movimiento pretendía construir una identidad nacional que reflejara la sociedad brasileña actual, rompiendo con los viejos paradigmas y ampliando la representación pictórica. Para suplir la escasez de mano de obra, el Brasil se abrió a la inmigración. Inmigrantes alemanes, portugueses, españoles y especialmente italianos llegaron al nuevo mundo. Ya sea en las Bellas Artes, como en los hábitos alimenticios, el comercio y las técnicas agrícolas, los inmigrantes italianos jugaron un papel importante en la construcción de la identidad brasileña. Este documento describe la contribución de los inmigrantes y descendientes italianos a la cultura brasileña en medio del movimiento de Modernismo a través de la representación de elementos que componen intrínsecamente la dieta y la formación económica y social de Brasil e Italia, a saber, el café, el pan y la amplia oferta de alimentos de los mercados callejeros.

**Palabras clave:** Inmigración italiana; Brasil; Identidad nacional; Modernismo, Alimentación.

The turn of the 19th century was a time of social and economic changes in Brazil. The country grew due to coffee production and searched for more presence abroad recurring to pictorial representations that would approximate the country with European cultural values. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, Modernism ascended in the arts scene, changing the way the country was represented. The movement intended to build a national identity that reflected the actual Brazilian society, breaking with old paradigms and broadening pictorial representation. To make up for the workforce shortage, Brazil opened itself to immigration. German, Portuguese, Spanish and, especially, Italian immigrants arrived in the new world. In Fine Arts, eating habits, trade and agricultural techniques, Italian immigrants played an important role in the building of Brazilian identity. This paper describes the contribution of Italian immigrants and descendants to Brazilian culture amidst the Modernism movement through the depiction of elements that intrinsically compound Brazil's and Italy's diet, economic and social formation, namely, coffee, bread and the wide range of food supply of street markets.

**Keywords:** Italian immigration; Brazil; National identity; Modernism; Food.

The turn of the 20th century was a period of social and economic turmoil in Brazil. A somewhat decadent monarchy was overturned by a newly-founded Republic, the economy experienced a fast growth as Brazil became a more active player in international trade and slavery was finally abolished, thereby opening space for free workers. The cultural and economic elite of the time, pervaded by ideals of “civilization” and “progress”, intended to eliminate traces of Latin American backwardness, symbolized by slavery and colonialism, in an attempt to bring Brazil closer to the industrialized and reformist European countries. To that purpose, an aristocratic effort contemplated erasing “primitive” traits and imposing Western cultural paradigms.

The Fine Arts were mostly a product of the academic guidelines produced by the National School of Fine Arts, systemized in rules, proportions, and colour pallets of European neoclassicism, expressing in their essence the aspiration towards making Brazil a mirror image of the Parisian Belle Époque, a paradigm of a superior culture. Such narrative, however, was an ocean away from local reality, which encompassed the presence of indigenous peoples, African descendants, European immigrants and a society mainly made up by illiterate people subject to a fragile social network amidst tropical landscapes. It was not long until a new generation of artists and intellectuals began to challenge such standards and strengthen the quest for a true national identity.

In the first decades of the 20th century, European modernist values were assimilated in Brazil with the result of breaking with obsolete traditions, building modern expressions, and designing a more realistic national Brazilian identity. The first wave of Brazilian Modernism, proclaimed by the *Week of Modern Art* of 1922, premiered a new generation of Brazilian artists pointing towards a social art, committed to social and political changes, and questioning art’s social function. This search of a national identity expanded to different cultural segments, arts, theatre, music, literature and even food. The creation of a national *culinary discourse* is accredited to the modernist movement, whereas the mixture of the three Brazilian founding races originated a common territory where all people ate the same way (Dória, 2009). Brazilian ingredients and eating habits were incorporated into modernist works of reference, of authors such as Mario de Andrade, Monteiro Lobato, Jorge Amado, Gilberto Freyre, Oswald de Andrade, Câmara Cascudo, among others, and the concept of *Anthropophagy* (Andrade, 1976) was the symbol of a manifesto that proposed the eating, swallowing, and assimilation of other cultures in order to create a unique national expression.

The biggest European immigration wave towards America occurred in the same period. Between 1887 and 1930, around 3.8 million foreigners entered Brazil (Fausto, 1998), most of them settling in the state of São Paulo<sup>1</sup>. Italian immigrants were at first taken to the countryside to work in coffee farms, but a natural move over time led immigrants and descendants to bigger cities, contributing to the expansion of commerce and services, and engaging in the local artistic scene. The state of São Paulo soon became Brazil’s most powerful economic and cultural centre, a position largely due to the presence of Italian immigrants, who brought cultural traits and traditions, including eating habits and ingredients uncommon to the Brazilian basic basket that were rapidly incorporated in the Brazilian way of life.

<sup>1</sup> Around 850.000 between 1901 and 1920 out of which the vast majority, around 570.000, was Italian. (Furtado, 1998).

“ From idiomatic elements  
such as the use of Tchou (Ciao) to farming techniques,  
eating habits are perhaps the most  
recognizable Italian trait in Brazilian culture. ”

This paper concentrates on Italian immigrants' and descendants' contribution to the construction of a modern Brazilian national identity and eating habits. It focuses on how Italian and Italian-Brazilian artists advanced the arts scene in the turn of the 19th to the 20th-century's Brazilian Modernism, elevating the representation of Brazilian society domestically and overseas through the depiction of food products and habits that have ultimately connected both countries. The research has been subdivided in three sections: *coffee*, to illustrate the consolidation of Brazilian industrialism and a change of mentality from the 19th century to the first generation of Brazilian Modernism; *bread*, to narrate how the product was introduced to Brazilian eating habits by the Italian community in São Paulo and, on another level, to analyse the passage to a second generation of Brazilian Modernism, when an already established movement turned itself to the assimilation of contemporary social and economic crisis and comprehension of human existence, reaching religion and sacred art. Finally *street markets*, to depict the interculturalism of a society made up by immigrants of different backgrounds and the changing mindset and architecture of a country immersed in urban transformations.

### Coffee and the upsurge of Modernism

The first report of coffee in Brazilian territory dates back to 1727, when Francisco de Melo Palheta, a Luso-Brazilian military, introduced a couple of coffee seeds in Pará, North of Brazil, through the Guyanas. A hundred years later, in 1830, coffee was the first item in the Brazilian trade balance, whose production had spread to the Southeastern and Southern regions. Due to the region's type of soil and a series of political measures, such as reducing transport costs and expanding train lines, São Paulo, a somewhat poor Brazilian state until the mid 19th century, became the world's biggest coffee producer (Fernandes et al., 2004) and the country's economic powerhouse. Coffee production was mostly carried out by landowners of the state's countryside benefitting from slave manpower. The decline of slavery and its consequent – although late – abolition in 1889 led farmers to search for an alternative workforce to handle farms' expansion as well as to bring Brazil closer to a coveted image of a European industrialized, democratic and white country.

Meanwhile, after having fought for over twenty years for its unification, Italy housed a rural and poor population struggling to survive. Overpopulation and a lack of farmable land caused a distortion in labour supply and demand ratio (Hutter, 1987) whereas Brazil, as well as Argentina and the USA, underwent opposite circumstances, with a surplus of land and a shortage of workers. This is how Italian immigration to the Americas began. In the period between 1860 and 1920, around seven million Italians fled the country in search of

opportunities. In constant need of workers, the state of São Paulo subsidized immigration, having received 56% of the total immigrants in Brazil between 1886 and 1934. Italians made up the largest portion of immigrants (44,7%). By 1920, São Paulo had received over a million Italian immigrants, and in 1934 immigrants and children of immigrants represented 50% of the state's population (Trento, 1989). In 1908, seven out of 10 coffee farm workers were Italian (Carone, 1978), but Italian immigrants did not limit themselves to shaping the rural workforce, having also long lastingly influenced the art scene in a period where all efforts were turned to devising a national identity. Immigrant artists showed interest in portraying Brazilian landscapes, a theme put aside, and considered weak by local artists who, basied themselves on the European standards upskilled in formal art academies. Italian painters, however, were «caught up by the city's corners and neighbourhoods, mesmerized by its humble nooks» (Tarasantchi, 1995, p. 101), ultimately contributing to Brazilian imagistic historiography.

In 1893, Italian painter Antonio Ferrigno (1863-1940) immigrated to Brazil. The landscape painter from Salerno soon became acclaimed for painting São Paulo urban scenes and was frequently commissioned by coffee farmers to paint landscapes of their properties. Ferrigno's works are notorious for the use of colour, in which comes across the painter's ability to depict Brazilian vegetation's green tones, different from the European's, as well as the correct manipulation of light and shadow (Zanini, 1995) and human elements. Most commissioned paintings were destined to decorate wealthy farmers' walls, but the Count of Serra Negra, coffee farmer Manuel Ernesto da Conceição, had different plans. After a year of overproduction leading to a crisis in the sector, the Count was determined to publicise Brazilian coffee in Europe in an attempt to boost the market. He commissioned Ferrigno to produce 12 paintings depicting various phases of São Paulo's coffee production that would be taken to Europe to enhance the image of Brazilian coffee production and to showcase a new facet of Brazilian society based on progress through industrialization. The artworks were exhibited in many European capitals, including in the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 in Paris, representing the portrait of life in a Brazilian modern countryside. A second series of six paintings by Ferrigno depicting the coffee-making processes at Santa Gertrudes Farm (Fig. 1) was exhibited at the *Louisiana Purchase Exhibition* of 1904.

These international expositions were meant to publicise the most modern aspects of nations: «The sections were clearly marked with some of the standard symbols through which an independent country proclaims its identity» (Stoklund, 1991, p. 38). «They would also be a display of «national culture and of national products» (Stoklund, p. 40).

In the late 1800s, Brazil was still attempting to showcase an image of a modern country, recently freed from slavery and of a newly-founded republic, a place of free men trailing its path to progress, allied with the «civilised Western nations» (Neves, 1986, p. 37).

The depiction of agricultural export products such as coffee harvested by free white people purportedly conveyed a good narrative to blur the image of an exotic, archaic and colonized country. The white, European-like image of Brazil, however, was eventually let go in the turn of the century, when European modernist values were assimilated in Brazilian art by names such as Tarsila do Amaral, Oswald de Andrade, Anita Malfatti and Mario de Andrade. Brazilian Modernism featured the uprising of artists against academic art circles that excluded those who did not carry formal Fine Arts schools' training and limited artistic creation to old academic doctrines. At the same time, society saw the first generation of Brazilian citizens born out of Italian immigrants.



Fig. 1 - Ferrigno, Antonio. *The harvest*. 1903. 100 x 150 cm. Oil on canvas. São Paulo, Museu do Ipiranga.



Fig. 2 - Malfatti, Anita. *Coffee roasting*. 1930. 90 x 116 cm. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Quirino Campofiorito (1902-1993), son of Italian architect Pietro Campofiorito, and a professor at the National School of Fine Arts was one of the first to advocate for a more modern way of teaching art. Coming from a rigorous academic education, Campofiorito found new possibilities for his art in a passage through Europe, where the painter was influenced by the *Return to Order*. From that point onwards, Campofiorito turned his interest to portraying life around him. In the 1930s, the painter joined *Núcleo Bernardelli*<sup>2</sup>, a group of modernist artists who proposed the non-conformity with the traditional artistic teaching of the National School of Fine Arts. A figurative artist, Campofiorito, as well as other dissidents of academic art, recurrently portrayed the average worker. At a time where coffee production entailed a substantial part of the working class and was so intrinsic in Brazilian society, the theme was not set aside by modernist artists. In the trypic *Café-Colheita*, *Café-Secagem*, *Café-Exportação* (1940), Campofiorito showcases different phases of coffee production.

Anita Malfatti (1889-1964), daughter of Italian immigrants and one of the main names of Brazilian Modernism, who mainly focused on portraits, also registered coffee in the canvas *Torrando Café (Roasting Coffee)* of 1930 (Fig. 2).

<sup>2</sup> The name Bernardelli pays homage to the Bernardelli brothers, sons of an Italian immigrant who lived between Brazil and Mexico.





Fig. 3 - Graciano, Clóvis. *Coffee harvest*. n.d.  
84 x 66 cm. Gouache on cardboard.  
Private collection.



Fig. 4 - Graciano, Clóvis.  
Detail of mural on Rubem Berta Avenue. 1969.  
350 x 1000 cm. Enamelled ceramic.  
São Paulo, Rubem Berta Avenue.

Clóvis Graciano (1907-1988), born in the São Paulo countryside, descendant of Italian immigrants, portrayed the coffee farms and workers as a landmark of the Brazilian society of the early 20th century. The self-taught painter was part of *Grupo Santa Helena*, a group of nine artists, seven of which were Italian or Italian-Brazilian, who convened to paint as a hobby, as most of them came from modest backgrounds and practised other paid activities. Critic Mário de Andrade denominated them the *Proletarian Artists* and considered the group as the most especially important formation of the São Paulo School (Andrade, 1941). Their paintings highlight a visual imaginary where proletarians are naturally embedded in the landscapes of a São Paulo that would soon be consumed by unrestrained vertical growth and gentrification. An especially gifted drawer, which gave his human elements distinction, Graciano painted a wide range of historical Brazilian farming activities, such as redwood (*pau-brasil*) extraction, sugar cane harvesting, livestock and, of course, coffee (Fig. 3), which was the theme of various works in gouache paint, oil on canvas and the cover page illustration of Brazilian writer Sergio Milliet's book *Roteiro do Café* (*The Coffee Itinerary*, 1946). Graciano is also historically acclaimed as one of São Paulo's greatest muralists. A highlight among Graciano's many contributions to São Paulo's public art, is a series of four murals dated from 1969 commissioned by mayor Faria Lima to celebrate the city's 415<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Each of them is 3,5 high and 10 meters long and depicts the historical development of the city. The first mural depicts colonisation and slavery, the second shows the explorers who expanded São Paulo's known territory, the third pays tribute to coffee, from its harvesting to exporting, and the fourth shows the modern city with skyscrapers and large avenues. Graciano placed coffee as the main economic engine of the city's development, a link between the early explorers and modernisation (Fig. 4).

Murals representing economic and historic cycles were frequent throughout the 20th century in Brazil, which brings about a parallelism with Mexican muralism – although one was not a consequence of the other – as both show certain similarities in political ideology, conception and the influence of Italian primitives (Fabris, 1990). In Brazilian muralism, Clóvis

Graciano would have a place in what could be a version of *los tres grandes*<sup>3</sup> along with Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Candido Portinari, the later being, the painter whose depiction of coffee gained worldwide fame.

About Candido Portinari, his son stated that:

«Coffee has always been a recurring theme in his painting and literary work. It is a memory of the family's origin, Italian immigrants who arrived at the end of the 19th century to harvest coffee in the countryside of São Paulo.» (Revista Cafeicultura, 2020, s/p)

No one portrayed the Brazilian coffee farming as much and as notoriously as Candido Portinari (1903-1962), with over 200 artworks depicting the harvesting, the drying and the transporting of São Paulo's black gold. Son of Italian immigrants who worked in coffee harvesting, the painter was born at a coffee farm in the São Paulo countryside. Portinari ascended in the national arts scene immersed in the modernist movement. Evoking social and political change, Brazilian modernist movement was co-opted by the government to shape national culture, a recurrent phenomenon in the 1930s and 1940s authoritarian states. Getúlio Vargas, Brazilian president at the time, was pursuing a particular agenda regarding building national memory and identity and Portinari served his purposes well. Portinari was commissioned to decorate the new building of the Ministry of Education and Public Health, whose goal, according to Minister Gustavo Capanema, was to «prepare, shape and cherish Brazilian people» (Lissofsky et al., 2000, p. 50). Among Portinari's works, one big mural represents the Brazilian economic cycles of different Brazilian regions: redwood, sugar cane, livestock, mining, cotton, lemongrass, coffee, cocoa, iron, carnaúba (a native Brazilian plant) and rubber. Through Portinari, a new depiction of the Brazilian social archetype was consolidated domestically and reverberated internationally. The depiction of miscegenation and race diversity in Portinari's work represents a breakpoint in the representation of Brazilian society internationally, moving away from the first attempt to copy European paradigms, and converging to the depiction of a diverse, miscegenated people. Robert Chester Smith noticed that: «In the figures of his murals Portinari represented the three races of the Americas, the Indian, the Negro and the white man» (Smith, 1943, p. 11). Florence Horn, at the same period, stated that: «Portinari seems to be indicating that there is no race issue among the people themselves, or perhaps that the Brazilian is developing out a mixture of races» (Smith, p. 21). Portinari became the most internationally acclaimed Brazilian painter, whose international acknowledgement began in 1935 when the artist received an Mention of Honor at the *Carnegie Institute International Exhibition* in Pittsburgh for the canvas *Café (Coffee)*, 1935 (Fig. 5). In 1940, 35 Portinari artworks were exhibited at the *Latin American Exhibition of Fine Arts* in the Riverside Museum of New York. In that same year, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented *Portinari of Brazil*, an exhibition of 180 Portinari artworks, whose catalogue contains the following statement by Meyric Rogers: «Brazil is being rescued from obscurity by Portinari's *Coffee*, which is a satisfactory effort to say something with distinct flavour not based on Paris models» (quoted in Horn, 1940, p. 7). In 1942, Portinari was invited to paint four murals about Latin America's history in the Hispanic section of the Library of Congress in Washington and, in 1956, he painted the panel *War and Peace* to decorate the UN building in New York.

<sup>3</sup> "The big three" as became known Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco.



Fig. 5 - Portinari, Cândido. *Coffee*. 1935. 130 x 195 cm. Oil on canvas. Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes. Image: Projeto Portinari.

«It was through coffee that Brazil presented itself to the world» (Martins, 2012, s/p). Ana Luiza Martins refers to the commodity that propelled Brazilian exports in the late 19th and early 20th century, consolidating Brazil as a more prominent player in international trade. It would not be an overstatement, however, to transpose it to visual arts and the building of a Brazilian national identity, for coffee's role in Brazilian society cannot be reduced to a mere commodity, since it played a much integral part in building national identity through pictorial representation. Furthermore, coffee was the entrance door to an Italian community that fundamentally lifted the representation of such an intrinsic ingredient of Brazilian's identity, economy and drinking habit.

### **Bread and the Italian immigrants**

Whilst at coffee farms eating habits were restrained to ingredients common to Brazilian territory, and food supply was limited to familiar production, larger cities offered better living standards and a wider variety of food, some of them imported from Italy to cater to immigrants.

In 1900, Italian immigrants and families made up 31% of the city of São Paulo's population, totaling around 75.000 people. A new consumption market was forming and immigrants started to open small businesses that offered regional Italian food, such as bread and pasta. Brazilian eating habits were made up especially of products based on cassava and cassava flour instead of wheat-based derivatives. «It was only after the Italian settlement in urban spaces that bakeries started to inaugurate as bread wasn't part of the Brazilian daily diet» (Oliveira, 2006, s/p).

Italian communities settled in regions close to train rails. In the city of São Paulo, districts such as Brás, Bexiga, and Cambuci were essentially Italian settlements occupied by workers, people in transit, and residents. Bread and pasta fabrication in Brazil first started in these districts at family level. The work was conducted by the so-called *mammas* and *nonnas*<sup>4</sup> also serving immigrants and travelers. This is frequently referred to as the birth of the Italian

<sup>4</sup> A Brazilian neologism combining the Italian words mother and grandmother with the Portuguese plural in 's'.





Fig. 6 - Grosso, Guerino.  
*Still life*. 1982. 120 × 80 cm.  
Oil on canvas.  
Private collection.

*cantinas* in Brazil. Demand for bread grew within Italian districts and the bread once made for own consumption began to be sold to other households. It was common to see Italian street vendors with a big basket of bread on their heads for distribution (Collaço, 2009). In fact, eating bread, pasta, and polenta was so closely associated with Italian immigrants that terms such as *speak a macaronic language* and *polenteers* were used to pejoratively describe Italians living in Brazil.

Since the expansion of bread consumption in São Paulo and – to a certain measure – in Brazil was due to Italian immigration in the late 19th century, it's iconography was not expected to be found among Brazilian artists. Not surprisingly, some of the rare depictions of bread at that time appeared in the work of Italian-Brazilian artists. Aliberto Baroni (1911-1994), a pupil of Italian-Brazilian master Antonio Rocco, became notorious for painting workers and the urban progress of São Paulo. He also dedicated some canvas to the practice of composition in still natures, one of them depicting a traditional Italian bread known at the time as *pão de peito* (chest bread) due to its hard crust that needed to be pushed against the chest to break. Guerino Grosso (1907-1988), who studied at the National School of Fine Arts, used bread as the centerpiece of a still nature composed by the diversity of Brazilian food elements, which also represents the diversity of Brazilian society, such as papaya, pineapple, melon, plums, as well as cheese and wine (Fig. 6). Adolfo Fonzari (1880-1959) painted a classic still nature composition depicting a *panettone*, the traditional North Italian Christmas-time bread, which has been incorporated as a Christmas symbol in Brazil<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 7).

As traditional art schools aesthetic was challenged by Modernism and the search for a genuine Brazilian art gained space, it was rather questionable that bread would be incorporated by vanguardist artists in the same way that coffee was, and it is plausible to say that no other food element had such a position in Brazilian art. However, amidst the clash between academics and modernists, a third group entered the art scene: the immigrants, in particular Italian, who played a major role in adding the element of bread to Brazilian Modernism. Immigrants in bigger cities did not receive any type of support and artists had

<sup>5</sup> In 2017, *panettone* was consumed by 29 million Brazilian families during Christmas time. In São Paulo, 78% of families consumed *panettone* that same year (Kantar, 2018).



Fig. 7 - Fonzari, Antonio. *Still nature*.  
n.d. 85 x 78 cm. Oil on canvas.  
Private collection.

particularly difficult starts<sup>6</sup>. Many of them, graduates of Italian Art Schools, became craftsmen, artisans who worked under commission and shaped many of São Paulo's urban features through architectural projects, the building of monuments and advertising, usually bringing artistic references of the *Novecento* and the *Return to Order*. The *Proletarian Artists* soon became a constituent component of the second wave of Brazilian Modernism.

Galileo Emendabili (1898-1974), a sculptor born in Ancona, Italy, immigrated to Brazil as a political dissident, and settled in São Paulo, where he lived for the rest of his life. In a modernist São Paulo, Emendabili, together with other Italian sculptors brought back notions proper of European Classicism, still enjoyed by the most conservative part of the elite, and was commissioned to create a series of tumular sculptures for wealthy families. A highlight of Emendabili's work and the most emblematic tomb at the São Paulo Graveyard – where part of the city's aristocracy is buried – as well as one of the finest pieces of São Paulo's funerary art, is *Ausência* (*Absence*, 1944), commonly known as *Túmulo do Pão* (*Bread Grave*). Made in gray granite and bronze, the sculpture pictures a large table upon which lays a loaf of bread. A manly figure in prayer is sitting by the table; by his side, a child holds the head down and rests, his arms on the table. The mother is absent. The image depicts a family's dining ritual represented by bread, the essence of an Italian family's sustenance, and alludes to a discontinued family ritual. Emendabili's funerary work has been recognized within modernist canons and symbolizes the outreach of the movement into the field of sacred art. Analyzing *Absence*, critic Emílio Cordet stated that:

«The sculpture Emendabili created [...] is a monumental architectural and plastic solution, breaking the monotony of long ranks of tombs ravaged in these urban necropolises. [...] This creation is free from strict religious and traditional bonds and full of expressive sensitiveness.» (quoted in Borges, 2002, p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> An exception worth of mention is Enrico Bianco (1918-2013), who immigrated to Brazil as a teenager and rapidly became Portinari's main assistant, having also developed a prolific work famous for depicting in bright colors the variety of Brazilian food production, including livestock, fishing and the harvesting of oranges, coffee, sugarcane, and wheat.

Brazilian critics recognized Emendabili's funerary sculptures as having intrinsic modernist art value. Critic Menotti del Picchia, describing a vault built for the Varam Keutenedjian family, considered it a monument:

«In this work, Emendabili runs away from baroque. Modern but readable, he sought in ecstasy the inner dynamism, thus anointing an impressive narrative from a transcendent atmosphere.» (quoted in Borges, p. 14).

After the economic crisis in 1929 and the outbreak of the Second World War, Brazil went through a period of economic instability and social uncertainty. While the first phase of Brazilian Modernism intended to broaden the perspective of a national identity, the art of the 1930s and 1940s became more introverted, changing themes, and focusing on the daily life in a tormented period. Themes entailed workers' ordinary lives, small celebrations, and religion as spiritual values and religious beliefs tended to rise in a period of affliction, in contrast with the first phase of Modernism that called for a complete rupture between art and religion<sup>7</sup>.

The spirit of camaraderie between immigrants, artists included, held people together when opportunities started to fade. Emendabili supported and made partnerships with other Italian-Brazilian artists, sharing funerary art and church decoration projects. One of his partners, Fulvio Pennacchi (1905-1992) was an Italian artist who immigrated to the city of São Paulo in 1929 and worked as a butcher and graphic artist for advertising pieces until joining, *Grupo Santa Helena* in 1936, where he gained notoriety.

Pennacchi is well-known in Brazilian art for his sacred artwork in the heyday of Modernism. Pennacchi's sacred art is consonant with the spirit of 20th-century religious work, in which humanized and terrain figures prevail. The painter used Renascentist values, in line with Giotto's work, exploring more human divine figures (Baptista, 2000). Among Pennacchi's greatest sacred artworks are the frescoes at *Nossa Senhora da Paz* church, a project in partnership with Galileo Emendabili and architect Leopoldo Pettini. The church was built in 1937 during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Italian Immigration in Brazil:

«When a third of São Paulo's population was made up by Italians and descendants, there was the idea of building a church where these immigrants could practice their faith according to their country's traditions.» (Freitas, 2013, p. 41).

Pennacchi executed frescoes in the whole interior of the church, depicting the lives of saints and biblical passages. One of the depicted saints, Saint Francis of Assisi, is shown giving bread to peasants. *The Final Judgement* fresco is particularly interesting, with its composition split into two halves. On the left side, the convicted ones who practiced evil and on the right side the ones who practiced good, the latter one showing three lines of saints. Each saint is represented by an object and the figure that resembles Saint Francis of Assisi is, again, holding a loaf of bread. In the same period, the Catholic church seemed to be torn between a group that opposed modern religious art and a second group that «demonstrated great optimism towards renewing sacred art in modern times» (Freitas, 2013, p. 168). Pennacchi's modernist

<sup>7</sup> Critic Mario de Andrade stated that the art of the São Paulo artistic family was areligious, materialistic and without God, endorsing the full separation between art and religion and sustaining religious beliefs should be limited to a private context.



**Fig. 8 - Pennacchi, Fúlvio. *Making bread*. c. 1940. 120x260 cm. Fresco. São Paulo, Galileo and Plínio Emendabili's Residence.**

Image: <https://fulviopennacchioficial.com/>

and yet religious work was acknowledged by Brazilian critics, in a sort of compromise according to which Brazilian sacred art and architecture could accommodate Modernism:

«Praiseworthy is the attitude of Father Milini who was not afraid to hand over to a modern painter [...] the construction and painting of his temple, which is truly an unprecedented achievement in the architecture of our churches.» (Bardi, 1980, p. 34).

The *Nossa Senhora da Paz* church was chosen by a national committee in 1950 to take part in the *International Sacred Art Exhibition of the Holy Year*, in Rome. It was also contemplated in an article published by the Vatican publication *Fede e Arte* in 1954.

Although sacred art was present in Pennacchi's works throughout his life, the artist frequently pictured the common man, achieving distinction in the representation of Brazilian society's simplicity in a way that few foreigners did. A strong trait of this work, however, is the depiction of a heavenly side of terrain life. «Pennacchi's work shows precisely the created aspect of the world [...] in simple day to day life, the divine in the reality around us» (Lauand, 2007, p. 30). Pennacchi's artworks «open us chromatically to this beginning of heaven, which is the contemplation of terrain reality» (Lauand, p. 31). In a prolific work of the common life, Pennacchi highlights human figures in daily activities: harvesting coffee, picking up grapes, celebrating, peregrinating, and baking bread. The works in which the artist portrays breadmaking have a Renaissance touch and evoke the past, perhaps in a nostalgic moment of life in Italy (Fig. 8).

The artistic work of proletarians, such as Emendabili and Pennacchi, show how Italian artists contributed, to the gateway of Modernism in Brazilian religious art and the reform of Brazilian religious architecture, with the religious connotation of bread as a common point. After *Nossa Senhora da Paz*, a wide range of modernist religious temples were built in Brazil, namely, the *São Francisco da Pampulha* church (1943), designed by modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer with paintings by Candido Portinari, the *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* church (1958), also designed by Niemeyer, the *Via Crucis* sculpture (1946) by Italian-Brazilian modernist sculptor Victor Brecheret at the *Hospital das Clínicas* chapel, the *São Bonifácio* church (1965), by Hans Broos, and many others.





Fig. 9 - Norfini, Alfredo. *Fair*. 1913.  
26 x 25 cm. Watercolor. Private collection.



Fig. 10 - Gerardenghi, Bigio. *Street fair*. 1927.  
35 x 39 cm. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

### Street markets and the expression of the anonymous individual

As the 20th century unfolded, the city of São Paulo, a small village until the end of the 1800s, transformed into a vertical and industrialised metropolis. The city had more movement, lights, skyscrapers, while industries proliferated and the circulation of people revamped the city's landscapes. This rapid growth directly impacted the lives of local population and adjacent clusters around it. Small communities were engulfed by more complex social and economic systems of trade, interaction and multiculturalism. Food production, initially limited to family establishments, expanded to actual businesses that needed to find more effective ways to supply their kitchens and reach the final consumer.

Since the mid 19th century, it was a common practice of poorer and more rural populations living in São Paulo's surroundings to bring products for sale downtown. The so-called *caipiras* (hicks) travelled to the city in the morning in donkey wagons and put up improvised tents in free spaces close to Italian districts – a central area of the city – to convene, negotiate and sell. Others would sell their products door to door. Immigrants of all backgrounds, initially Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, and later Japanese, Lebanese, Turkish, Jews and Syrians also benefited from these marketing spaces. The multicultural aspect of these gatherings brought more interaction between communities of different nationalities and shook the city's notion of cultural identity.

In 1867, the *Mercado dos Caipiras* (Hicks Market) was built to organise a food trading area. Italian-Brazilian photographer Vincenzo Pastore (1865-1918) provided an unprecedented visual documentation of this informal marketing space, showing not only food products but the social interactions of a population already divided into social classes. In the arts such social interactions have been represented by immigrant artists with formal art training and influenced by Italian realism. This is the case of *Feira* (*Fair*, 1913) (Fig. 9), by Alfredo Norfini (1867-1944), an Italian immigrant painter who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts of Lucca, and depicted Brazilian urban landscapes through vivid and realistic compositions; *Feira-Livre* (*Street Fair*, 1927) and *Feira* (*Fair*, n.d.) (Fig. 10) by Bigio Gerardenghi (1876-1957), a Piemontese



artist who taught academic painting in Italy and moved to São Paulo in 1923; *Dia de Feira (Fair Day, 1952)* by Giuseppe Perissinotto, an Italian immigrant who studied art in Venice and Florence, among others.

By the mid 20th century, however, such simple facilities did not respond to the needs of a city that became the representation of the country's modernity, economic vigour and industrialisation. Not only was a better food distribution system needed, but also the street markets' hygienic and human profiles did not correspond to the expectations of São Paulo's elite. «Some compare the warehouses to waste dumps» (Alves, 2004, p. 58) and the non-European looks of the merchants were no longer wanted downtown: «(They live) in disgusting promiscuity composed of vagrant black people, of black women swollen by the usual drunkenness, of a half-breed vicious» (Santos, 2003, p. 97).

In line with the economic and industrial advancements, as well as the expectations of what the city should look like in architectonic and human terms, politicians decided to build a Municipal Market, a project by architects Ramos de Azevedo and Felisberto Ranzini. Inaugurated in 1933, the Municipal Market of São Paulo<sup>8</sup> represented a more effective way to distribute food, and also: «a collective construction of regional identity that affirmed the opulence of the state of São Paulo in relation to the other Brazilian geographic regions, and therefore of its elite as well, showing the sumptuousness and magnificence of the capital city» (Roim, 2016, p. 43). At the time of the building, immigrants from various backgrounds were an important part of the city's population<sup>9</sup> and the cultural diversity in food consumption was incorporated in the market's stands and consumers' baskets. Research carried out among proletarian families of the time reveal that the most consumed ingredients were rice, beans and pasta, pointing to eating habits that had started to merge, not only from immigrants conforming to Brazilian practices but from locals adhering to immigrants' habits as well (Belluzzo, 2008; Rodrigues, 2011). In the words of Jaime Rodrigues:

«Brazilians consumed sugar, rice and beans, less bread, potatoes and milk. Portuguese and Italians were close to Brazilians in the average consumption of most foods, but the former were more likely to consume potatoes, cod and wheat flour, while the latter bought more pasta, with little consumption of potatoes and fish. Spaniards, on the other hand, were known for their consumption of bread, fat, tomatoes, potatoes and milk, associated with little wheat flour, while Lithuanians were large consumers of beef, potatoes, fish, wheat flour, cheese and butter, with little consumption of rice, beans and pasta.» (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 535).

The industrialization and verticalization of the city was reflected in the work of various artists, especially among proletarians. As stated by Alice Brill:

<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, the Municipal Market stands as a cultural and touristic hotspot, where many of the visitors go to sample specialities such as the cod fish croquette, which combines cod fish and potatoes, two traditionally Iberian ingredients that entered Brazilian eating habits through Portuguese and Spanish immigrants, and the bologna sandwich, based on the Italian immigrant workers tradition to have a sausage sandwich at lunch.

<sup>9</sup> 33% Italian, 19% Portuguese, 17% Spanish, 14% Japanese, 3% German, 3% Syrian and 11% from other nationalities (Bassanezi, 2008).



Fig. 11 - Pellegatta, Omar. *Bananas salesman*. n.d. 60 x 80 cm. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

«In the case of the proletarians, to register daily life [...] has the characteristic of an intimistic journal [...] looking to document their own experience. It is the humble record, based on direct observation of the life of the people of their new homeland.» (Brill, 1984, pp. 48, 49).

In search of the simple, traditional life, some groups of Italian artists travelled to the city's surroundings and made brief visits to countryside villages and more agrarian Brazilian states. Omar Pellegatta (1925-2001), an Italian immigrant from Busto Arsizio depicted the street markets, colonial houses and sacred themes of the Brazilian countryside along with other members of *Grupo Tapir*, a group of artists made up mainly by proletarian painters of Italian origin. *Vendedor de Bananas* (*Bananas Salesman*, n.d., Fig. 11), *Vendedor de Melancia* (*Watermelon Salesman*, n.d.) and *Na Feira* (*At the Street Fair*, n.d.), all by Pellegatta, showcase small towns' street markets, agglomerations in the human element and personal interactions can be pinpointed, showing a common disposition of Italian proletarian painters to adapt classic values to modern contexts.

Other authors captured the changes of the city's urban areas in their paintings, especially from the 1950s. Whilst industrialization was a minor theme in the 1930s and 1940s, proletarian painters increasingly turned industrial landscapes into a focal point in the following decade. Around the same time a geometrization of shapes started to appear in the work of members of *Grupo Santa Helena* such as Aldo Bonadei (1906-1974), Francisco Rebolo (1902-1980) and Mario Zanini (1907-1971), the latter who painted industrial landscapes including the Municipal Market facade (1969) (Fig. 12) in which human elements are almost outsized by cars and the building itself.



Fig. 12 - Zanini, Mario. *Municipal Market*. 1969. 50 x 65 cm. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

The consequences of the industrialization of urban spaces in the 20th century had an effect on art, and it was a proletarian artist who, better than anyone else, captured the shift in São Paulo's urban scene as well as the advent of *Concretism* and abstractionist trends. Born in Lucca, Alfredo Volpi (1896-1988) migrated to São Paulo when he was two with a family that opened a wine and cheese shop in an Italian neighbourhood. Volpi studied at an Italian school in São Paulo and began a career as an artisan and a self-taught painter of *Grupo Santa Helena*, to then become one of the most acclaimed Brazilian modernists. Volpi's early artwork portrays a city in expansion, with its own pace and spontaneous dynamism where people are anonymous and whose movements are not personal, but rather part of an autonomous and endlessly transforming landscape. These elements come across in a bond between people and landscape that can be noticed in the canvases depicting street markets in Cambuci (Fig. 13). Volpi's human figures are not highlighted elements. Instead, both human and urban elements «share the same extract of thick brushstrokes» (Rosa, 2015, p.16), pointing to an indivisible bond between individuals and the city, people and landscape.

The changes in the city landscape, illustrated by the transition from street markets to the building of a Municipal Market, are representative of the economic progress triggered by the coffee economics of the State of São Paulo in a moment where debates about national identity dominated intellectual spaces. At the same time a national culinary starts to develop, as evidence of the fact that the diversity of Brazilian eating habits is a consequence of miscegenation and of a close interaction between different cultures. In the microuniverse of a market, it is feasible to singularize the modernist aspiration to assimilate cultural attributes of the Brazilian constituent races in a deglutition process that generates something of its own.

Between 1870 and 1920, more than one million Italian immigrants arrived in Brazil<sup>10</sup> bringing with themselves traditions that were then incorporated into the country's culture and ultimately became an intrinsic part of Brazilian society's contemporary identity. These immigrants were both being part of a workforce and of an intellectual elite that marked the country's architecture, religion, commerce, and iconography among others. From idiomatic

<sup>10</sup> Today, 15% of the Brazilian population is made up by Italian descendants, around 30 million people.



Fig. 13 - Volpi, Alfredo. *Fair in Cambuci*.  
c. 1920. 26 x 20 cm. Oil on canvas.  
Private collection.

elements such as the use of *Tchau* (Ciao) to farming techniques, eating habits are perhaps the most recognizable Italian trait in Brazilian culture, going far beyond the elements contemplated by this article, reaching wine, wheat derivatives such as pizza and pasta, *nhoqui* (gnocchi), cold meats and Mediterranean greeneries. The visual representation of such elements, especially in painting, trace a visual historiography that registers the mindset of colonial times through the representation of the contemporary, fragmented and anguished contemporary man, having been particularly relevant to the building of national identity in the vanguard of the modernist movement, the first and more representative subversive wave aiming at the conception of a true Brazilian identity. ■

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