

Barbara Hepworth in Brazil

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Abstract

This short essay analyses the reception of Barbara Hepworth's oeuvre in Brazil, in the context of her participation at the V Bienal de São Paulo. Her presence in the British delegation of the 1959 edition of the exhibition resulted in the acquisition of an exceptional piece, *Cantate Domino*, which would be interpreted by Brazilian art historian Walter Zanini in the light of Herbert Read's book *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*.

Dame Barbara Hepworth's relationship to Brazil is here exemplified by her bronze sculpture, *Cantate Domino* (ed. no. 3/6), which was exhibited as a part of the British representation at the V Bienal de São Paulo in 1959 (fig. 1 and fig. 2).¹ Hepworth was awarded the "Grande Prêmio São Paulo" on this occasion, and her sculpture was acquired by the then São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM, founded in 1948), as one of the acquisition prizes for artists participating in the Bienal.² The work now belongs to the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP) that was founded on 8 April 1963, upon the dissolution of the MAM in December 1962.



Figure 1

Installation view, *V Bienal de São Paulo*, 1959.
 Digital image courtesy of Athayde de Barros,
 Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico
 Wanda Svevo.



Figure 2

Installation view, *V Bienal de São Paulo*, 1959.
 Digital image courtesy of Athayde de Barros,
 Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico
 Wanda Svevo.

The decision to select Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) to represent Great Britain at the V Bienal de São Paulo was taken very early on, even before the names of her fellow exhibitors, the painter Francis Bacon and the printmaker Stanley William Hayter, had been announced.³ A quick look through contemporary reviews of the V Bienal and the British participation in it reveals how much comment she received in the Brazilian press. She was consistently presented as the most celebrated British sculptor, “along with Henry Moore”.⁴ The binomial Hepworth/Moore seems to have furnished the basis for the Brazilian art critics’ interpretation of her work.

In addition to this, the Brazilian press also emphasized that she was a woman sculptor. Two articles published in the main local newspaper pinpointed elements of sophistication and delicacy in her work, by quoting from J. P. Hodin’s catalogue text.⁵ Hepworth was one of the international names invoked in connection with Brazilian women artists, such as the early modern women artists Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973) and Anita Malfatti (1889–1964), and her contemporary, the Concrete artist, Lygia Clark (1920–1988). Here Hepworth featured as “a rival to Henry Moore”, and Brazil was praised as a country where women artists had been accorded early recognition in their own right. However, on a number of occasions over the course of a long career, Hepworth herself went out of her way to deny that her work and practice had ever been driven by any such consideration.⁶

Still, local reviews insisted on her womanly traits. This was the case in a review on the British representation that appeared in *O Estado de São Paulo*, signed by the artist and critic, Lisetta Levi. Here, Levi creates some associations between Hepworth’s forms and femininity, by quoting the artist herself:

*Although her sculpture is abstract, from it flows life that lost terrestrial limitations, gaining cosmic traits Barbara Hepworth writes: “*Perhaps the sensation of being a woman*

gives another facet to the sculptural idea. In some aspects, it is a way of being, instead of observing, which in sculpture must allow its own emotional development of form."⁷

Levi ends up tracing Hepworth's output from her depictions of mother and son, linked to curved forms. She then quotes from Herbert Read, and the issue of the vital form.

Although the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins (1894–1973),⁸ was not mentioned in this context, it might be interesting to compare her work with that of Barbara Hepworth—not least, in view of the fact that she had been the winner of the main sculpture prize at the III Bienal in 1955.

Martins had been awarded the title of National Sculptor in 1955, and donated her work of 1954–55), *A Soma de Nossos Dias* (The Sum of our Days),⁹ to the former MAM (fig. 3). It took the form of the skeleton of a primitive animal, and for all the apparent differences, it bore certain resemblances to Hepworth's *Cantate Domino* (fig. 4), as well as other pieces exhibited at the Bienal.¹⁰ Both titles suggest the fragility of human life on earth and the tense relations with nature; both works also suggest a narrative dimension, in which the idea of time is integral to their poetics; and both were the fruits of the artists' experiments with new materials.¹¹



Figure 3

Maria Martins, *A Soma de Nossos Dias* (*The Sum of our Days*), 1954/55, sermolite and tin, 330.9 × 190.7 × 64.9 cm. Collection of Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo. Digital image courtesy of Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo.



Figure

Installation view, Barbara Hepworth's, *Cantate Domino*, 1958, exhibited at MAC USP, circa 1972. Collection of Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil. Digital image courtesy of Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil / Estate of Barbara Hepworth / © Bowness.

It is worth noting that Hepworth was being presented in a very special edition of the Bienal de São Paulo, which took place at the height of the confrontation between geometric abstract practices and the new Art Informel. This conjunction of circumstances—and the presentation of the National Painting Award to Lygia Clark at the IV Bienal de São Paulo, two years previously—took place towards the very end of the decade and followed close on the heels of the National Exhibition of Concrete Art in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (1956–57). In 1959, the invitation to Lourival Gomes Machado (1917–1967) to become the artistic director of the V Bienal was taken

to mark a change of direction towards the more international trends of Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel, in the broader sense.¹² The V Bienal could thus be seen as the clash between this, which was then considered to be an “internationalist” fashion in the world of art, and the evolution of Concretist currents in Brazil. The vogue for the so-called Informel not only took hold of the Bienal de São Paulo, but was almost de rigueur for artists in the Venice Biennales of the 1950s. Revisionist historians of modernism have recently come to regard this as an expression of the internationalism of the art world conditioned by the politics of the Cold War; to be viewed on the US side as embodying the very essence of American culture, and by Europeans as the kind of art that was representative of European, or universal, values.¹³ In Brazil, Mário Pedrosa (1900–1981) acted as a major proponent of abstract geometric tendencies and spent these years campaigning for Brazilian Concretism and Neo-Concretism abroad, through the exhibitions he organized of some of its leading figures.¹⁴ Lygia Clark was, of course, one of these, and there could be no greater contrast than that between her *Plano em superfícies modulares no. 2* (Plain in modular surfaces no. 2; 1956, industrial paint, wood, and celotex) and Hepworth’s *Cantate Domino*.

Both Martins and Hepworth were mentioned in Herbert Read’s famous book, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (1961), to illustrate the notion of “vitality”, taken from a statement by Henry Moore.¹⁵ One might argue that Read was trying to build a synthesis of both the Informel and abstract, geometric currents in contemporary sculpture.¹⁶ The “vital image”, he would say, was the way by which some artists sought to deal with the elements of subjectivity, the form in motion, and the numinous. Martins’s and Hepworth’s works, along with that of other sculptors, were used to illustrate this idea of the “vital image”, though in Hepworth’s case, Read seems then to have departed from his original script, by going on to talk about her rounded, pierced sculptures, and their links to Brancusi.¹⁷ The only recent sculpture by Hepworth that Read included in later editions of his book was the *Single Form* that she created for the Plaza in front of the UN Secretariat in New York in 1964—connected to *Cantate Domino* and other works of 1956–57.

By the end of the 1950s, Herbert Read had established long-standing, close relations with the Brazilian artistic milieu, dating from at least as far back as the 1953 Bienal, when he had served both as the British commissioner and as a member of the jury for the International Awards. However, it is quite surprising to see that Walter Zanini (1926–2013), the first director of the MAC USP, borrowed from Read’s *Concise History of Modern Sculpture* for his own comments on Hepworth’s work, in the book on modern sculpture that he published a decade later.¹⁸ Like Read, Zanini based his interpretation of Hepworth’s work on her relations with Brancusi and the Abstract groups of the 1930s, though he structured his chapters in a different way from the British critic. This created quite a dissonant effect for the reader looking at his illustration of *Cantate Domino*, which showed the context in which the work was displayed in a gallery in his museum.¹⁹ In contrast to Read, Zanini examined Maria Martins’s works in the chapter devoted to Surrealist experimentation with sculpture, whereas Hepworth appeared in chapter 10, which dealt with abstract practices in sculpture.²⁰ Thus he ended up using *Cantate Domino* to exemplify Hepworth’s relationship to Brancusi and to illustrate the abstract tendencies in her sculpture. In the process, Zanini seems to have been trying to relate her work to current Concretist tendencies and to distance it from Art Informel.²¹

The genesis of Zanini’s book had its origins in the negotiations conducted between the MAC USP and the Tate Gallery, London, to exchange a bronze cast of Umberto Boccioni’s plaster of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* for a reclining figure by Henry Moore. The exchange was

made between 1970 and 1972. One year later, Ronald Alley, the Keeper of the Modern Collection at the Tate Gallery, made a fresh proposal, for an exchange of Boccioni's bronze, *Development of a Bottle in Space*, for a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth. Negotiations for this second exchange never really got off the ground, leaving Brazil in possession of what probably remains the most intimate and uncharacteristic of her works.

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I would like to thank two individuals who have given me considerable assistance, both in relation to this essay and to extending my research on the work by Barbara Hepworth in our collections. Firstly, the artist's granddaughter, Sophie Bowness, for her kindness in helping to throw light on the genesis of MAC USP's piece; then to my MA student, Marina Barzon Silva, for her help in gathering the primary documentation on which this essay is based.

About the author

Ana Gonçalves Magalhães is an art historian, curator, and professor at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC USP) since 2008, where she is in charge of researching and curating the museum's Modern Art collection. In 2013, she curated the exhibition *Classicism, Realism, Avant-Garde: Italian Painting in between the Wars*, that took place together with the international seminar "Latin Modernity. The Italians and the Centers of South American Modernism", organized by her and two of her fellow colleagues. These events were the result of a Research Agreement between MAC USP and the Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy. The second part of the research was presented as her habilitation thesis in 2015, entitled "Modern Classicism: Margherita Sarfatti and Italian Painting at the Collection of MAC USP", now under preparation for publication in Portuguese.

The history of the Bienal de São Paulo and its relations with MAC USP collections has also been a major theme of her studies, first presented in exhibition format parallel to the 2012 Bienal de São Paulo. The exhibition *Another Collection of MAC USP: Acquisition Prizes of the Bienal de São Paulo, 1951–1963 *evaluated the making of MAC USP collection of modern art in the Bienal framework during the 1950s.

Footnotes

1. Hepworth always considered *Cantate Domino* to be a religious work and later had the idea that she might use it for her own grave. In the end, a cast of the related sculpture, *Ascending Form (Gloria)*, was placed at the entrance to Longstone Cemetery, St Ives, where she is buried. See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hepworth-cantate-domino-t00956/text-catalogue-entry>. Here it is also said that *Cantate Domino* was not Hepworth's own choice for her exhibition in São Paulo, but rather that of the British Council commissioner, Lilian Somerville, who also took part in the award jury of that edition of the Bienal de São Paulo.
2. See "Coube a Barbara Hepworth of Grande Prêmio da V Bienal; Mabe, Piza e Grassman os nacionais laureados", *O Estado de São Paulo*, 17 Sept. 1959, 9. The specific acquisition of *Cantate Domino* seems to have been decided later, to judge from the letter dated 22 Dec. 1959

- from the general secretary of the Bienal de São Paulo, Arturo Profili, to Warren Shaw: “The Director of the MAM is studying the possibility of acquiring Barbara Hepworth’s sculpture ‘Cantate Domino’. Since this is a work of great value, which is certainly beyond the reach of our normal budget for acquisitions, we would have to ask the artist to make an effort to reduce the price, to reflect the fact that the work was destined for a museum collection. *Considering that we believe this sculpture to be highly representative of her work*, we should be very pleased to see it go into our museum’s collection” (Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo; the emphasis is mine, as are all translations from the Portuguese). In the event, the artist offered the MAM a 10 percent reduction in the price.
3. See “Hepworth na V Bienal” [in the column, “Arte e Artistas”], *O Estado de São Paulo*, 11 Jan. 1959, 14. The article is illustrated with her *Orpheus*, which appears again in at least two other reviews of the British participation at the Bienal de São Paulo that year, but which was not eventually exhibited in her special room. See also the correspondence between Lilian Somerville and Arturo Profili, dated respectively 7 and 24 Nov. 1958, already mentioning the choice of Hepworth to represent Britain at the Bienal (Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo).
 4. See also “Ideias de Barbara Hepworth” [in the column, “Itinerário das Artes Plásticas”], *O Estado de São Paulo*, 28 June 1959, 8: “The sculptor Barbara Hepworth will be England’s big name for the V Bienal. Among British artists, *she is famous for her technique, which is only surpassed by that of Henry Moore*, who was awarded the Sculpture Prize at the II Bienal” (my emphasis).
 5. See Maria Lucia Nogueira, “A mulher na V Bienal de artes plásticas”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 21 Aug. 1959 (illustrated with Lygia Clark’s portrait). This article appeared in what seems to have been the women’s section of the newspaper, and the journalist had interviewed the legendary figure of Wanda Svevo, general secretary of the Bienal de São Paulo and founder of the Bienal archives. The quotation from Hodin’s text for the British catalogue reads: “the artist was thrown into the adventure of propounding twisting, open forms which express the pulsation of life rather than its order, the dynamic rather than the static, the stage at which *the fragrant shape of petals and flowers is discovered replacing the fruit and the body shapes, and at which a new material enters—metal*” (quoted in Nogueira; my emphasis). The same excerpt appeared in another article, also referring (as Hodin did) to her “calm, classical forms”. See “A mulher brasileira nas artes plásticas”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 25 Sept. 1959. For J. P. Hodin’s essay, see J. P. Hodin, “Barbara Hepworth” In: exh. cat. *Francis Bacon, S.W. Hayter, Barbara Hepworth. V Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo*. São Paulo/London: The British Council, 1959 (pages not numbered).
 6. See, for instance, the article in *The Guardian* about her forthcoming retrospective in Great Britain, referring to her avoidance of the patronizing approach to her work that was evident in British Pathé’s documentary of 1972:
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/13/barbara-hepworth-finally-gets-her-due>.
 7. See Lisetta Levi, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 10 Sept. 1959.
 8. Maria Martins had spent most of her career abroad, and was connected to the Surrealists in Paris and to Marcel Duchamp in the United States. Only recently has her reputation been revived in this country by a number of new publications about her work. See, for example, Charles Cosac, ed., *Maria* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2010).

9. Sorel (or oxychloric) cement is a magnesium-based cement, created by the French engineer Stanilas Sorel in 1867, for use in civil construction. This is clearly not a traditional material for sculpture.
10. For example, Hepworth's *Curved Form (Trevalgan)* (1956, bronze) and, especially, *Figure (Oread)* (1958, bronze).
11. When it came to the Bienal de São Paulo, the members of the Brazilian art scene were looking for new developments in the work of well-known artists, and elements of surprise in the work of young, or unfamiliar, artists. Thus, the use of new procedures and materials was seen as a sign of "contemporaneity" and novelty, and this left its mark on the formation of the MAM's collection. Despite the fact that Hepworth was using a traditional material such as bronze, this was her first attempt at experimenting with this medium. Besides, especially in the making of *Cantate Domino*, she had to create a new kind of armature with aluminum foils, to create the sleek, long shape she was anxious to achieve.
12. For a deeper analysis of the accompanying debate and Gomes Machado's art criticism, see Ana Cândida de Avelar, "O informalismo no Brasil: Lourival Gomes Machado e a 5a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo", at <http://www.unicamp.br/chaa/eha/atas/2011/Ana%20Candida%20F%20de%20Avelar.pdf>.
13. See, for instance, Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948–1964: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
14. See Mário Pedrosa, *Mundo, homem, arte em crise*, ed. Aracy Amaral (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1975), especially 11–48. Most quoted is his review of the V Bienal de São Paulo, "Do 'informal' e seus equívocos" [On the "informel" and attendant misunderstandings].
15. See Herbert Read, "The Vital Image", in *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1961), chapter 5. Maria Martins's *Rituel du rythm* (1958, bronze; Alvorada Palace, Brasília) was reproduced there and came even closer to becoming a drawing in space, just like *Cantate Domino*.
16. As he did in his volume on modern painting, published two years earlier. See Herbert Read, *Modern Painting: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1959).
17. Read also discusses the Concrete art group of the early 1930s in France, members of which Hepworth and her former husband, Ben Nicholson, had met in those very same years. This would be repeated by Brazilian reviewers and seemed to have been used to legitimate Hepworth's connections with abstract geometric practices in the 1950s.
18. See Walter Zanini, *Tendências da escultura moderna* (São Paulo: Editora Cultrix, 1972). Here Zanini attempted to fit the museum's sculpture collection into the narrative proposed by Read. Zanini had known the British critic since 1953, when, as a young journalist, he interviewed Read for a review of the II Bienal de São Paulo. See Walter Zanini, "Conversa com Herbert Read", *O Tempo*, 12 Dec. 1953. The influence of Read on Brazilian art criticism has yet to be fully investigated, though one can find numerous references to him in the relevant source materials of Brazilian art historiography.
19. See Zanini, *Tendências da escultura moderna*, 265.
20. Entitled "As posições construtivistas e abstratas" [Constructivist and Abstract Currents], where she would figure in the final extract, with the subtitle "Continuidade das tendências abstratas" [Continuity of abstract tendencies], alongside Max Bill and Robert Jacobsen (artists linked to Concrete art groups in their respective territories), and gestural/informal artists (who had previously appeared in Read's book on modern sculpture as illustrative of the "vital image", like Hepworth herself). His last chapter (chapter 14) was dedicated to Henry Moore.

21. Yet Zanini seemed to corroborate the notion of “vitalism” in Read’s line of thought.

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