

Hybridity in Brazilian Modernist Anita Malfatti

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Conflict with an academic professor caused Anita Malfatti to seek out a more modern, yet somewhat misunderstood professor known for letting his students “paint at will”.¹ Born in Brazil at the end of the 19th century, Malfatti began studying art and traveling at a young age. The artist found herself in the Independent School of Art in New York where she would produce some of her most interesting images containing powerful form and captivating color. Upon her return to Brazil, she exhibited these new modern works and ignited controversy in 1917 that would be the key to turn the engine of Brazilian Modernism. However, the negative reception received was equally loud and impacted her career in a serious way, causing contemporaries and historians to consider her the “artistic martyr” of modernism.² She left an *oeuvre* composed primarily of portraits and landscapes, and the majority of critics and scholars have been dedicated to recognizing interactions the artist had in Germany and New York. I sense that there is more complexity to her art, especially in pieces in 1915–1917, and they consequently merit more study. While the work of Anita Malfatti is typically explained as a reflection of these interactions with Expressionists and Fauvists, I will argue her unique hybridity in Brazilian Modernism through Bhabha’s postcolonial theory as she integrated influences of her Italian heritage in an appreciation for classical form along with style and subject matter of her native Brazil, as seen in paintings, drawings and texts.

A 20th-century career means the study of Malfatti is a fairly young endeavor for professors and students alike. This also leads to the lack of critical analysis on her art. Rossetti Batista, a student at the University of São Paulo (USP) in the College of Architecture and Urbanism, began studying Malfatti under the direction of Flávio Motta. The desire to create a true connection to the artist for future students and historians became a lifelong endeavor for Batista. The only existing biography was born out of her 1986 masters thesis and later book, *Anita Malfatti no espaço e no tempo*. Later revised and published for commercial access, the text was the culmination of over 40 years of work and is an essential reference in this paper. Batista’s extensive research was only possible in connection with the Institute of Brazilian Studies IEB at USP where Malfatti’s personal collection is maintained in their archives.

In regard to my application of critical theory, the book, *The Location of Culture*, by Harvard professor Homi K. Bhabha is essential. Beginning in the 1990s, Bhabha has contributed significantly to the field of postcolonial studies. Building off of Derrida and others, he challenges many aspects of postcolonial theory that were heavily influenced by

1 Marta Rossetti Batista, *Anita Malfatti no tempo e no espaço*, (São Paulo: Edusp/Editora 34, 2006), 112. This is my translation of the original Portuguese “pintar a vontade”.

2 Paulo Mendes de Almeida, *De Anita ao Museu*, (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976), 18.

Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*.³ Therefore, before addressing Bhabha it is necessary to present a brief summary of Said's theory of orientalism.

Orientalism refers to the peculiar perspective on the East of scholars of the Orient representing the old colonial powers. Dr. Said is among the classical orientalist viewing from the "centre to the periphery; a view that saw the East as other, the foil and the prey of the triumphant and civilizing West".⁴

Bhabha demands discussion about the very language of postcolonial theory and what hegemonic roles it reinforces. In a collection of essays titled *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues against Said's idea that all the power and discourse lies in the hands of the colonizer, asserting that the "efforts of orientalizing must always fail".⁵ The efforts are unsuccessful because the process of creating the colonized subject is not even or straightforward but incomplete and divided thus rendering "him or her the site of both fixity and fantasy".⁶ His definition of hybridity is not simply joining two cultures together but actually more so an act of hybridization, or that hybridity is an ongoing process. In *Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism*, he has a similar idea of space to Derrida. Due to the spaces that exist between the originary influence and the preexisting individual, there is the capacity to create hybridity or new cultural forms. Indispensable to my study of Malfatti, his exploration tries to understand these bridges between defined culture, spaces where the process of forming identity is constantly continuing.

Malfatti's personal hybridity began when she was born at the end of the 19th century to an immigrant family in São Paulo. Malfatti grew up with her family in Campinas and São Paulo and began thinking about becoming an artist at a very young age. Her mother was a North American teacher born of German parents and her father was an Italian engineer. Born with a serious defect in her right arm, the family sought surgery and returned to Italy during Malfatti's childhood. The surgeries were unsuccessful and the artist learned to use her non-dominant left hand. Life in Brazil would inspire her and impact her style and use of color. At only thirteen she was very concerned about whether she had any talent for poetry or painting. The artist later shared an experience that cemented her decision to pursue painting. Young Malfatti went to a nearby train station and laid herself on the ground in between the tracks. As the terribly loud and fast train passed overhead, Malfatti desired to permanently save the colorful image in her eye.⁷ This life-threatening experience was marking; it fueled her fascination with color that was at the heart of her desire to paint. Later in life and visible in her defined individual style, color would still be one of the key elements in her art.

She began practicing as seen in her first oil painting, then later sought training, and began traveling (see Fig. 1). Through the generosity of her uncle Jorge Krug, the opportunity to study art outside of Brazil became a possibility. Malfatti studied abroad multiple times in her life, including New York and Paris. The first trip, though, was in 1910 to the land of her maternal ancestors in Germany.⁸ It was certainly a fortuitous time to be in the country, both during the steady development of German Expressionism and prior to the conflicts of war that enveloped the country later in the century.

3 Antony Easthope, "Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity, or Derrida Versus Lacan," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 4, no. 1/2, Theory and Criticism [Part 1] (1998): 145.

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 222.

5 Easthope, "Homi Bhabha," 145.

6 Homi K. Bhabha, "Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983), 204.

7 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 40.

8 *Ibid.*, 44.

Exposed to art of many masters in the great museums of Berlin, Malfatti's interaction with art during this time proved to be one of her most influential experiences. Her professors, Lovis Corinth and Fritz Burger, both known for being contemporary portraitists, were particularly powerful in helping Malfatti continue to hone her skill in portraits.⁹ Early oil paintings, like *My brother Alexander* (see Fig. 2) and *A Professor* (see Fig. 3), already demonstrate enduring qualities of Malfatti. Heavily painted with an obvious focus on the psyche, these studio portraits show the promise of talent in the young artist.

While attending the Academy of Independent Artists in New York, Malfatti was able to, and encouraged to paint freely, which was no luxury she had in Brazil. Working under and around modernists, such as Walter Arensberg, Marcel Duchamp, and Homer Boss, opened her eyes to the progress that was taking place in art.¹⁰ She thrived in this environment of open minds and fresh innovations in art and later fondly recalled her time in the United States stating, "There began the wonderful time of my life.... The greatest progress I've made in my life was on that island and in that time of very special environments. I was delighted with life and painting."¹¹ Portraits were still a favorite genre of the artist and, in combination with stylistic influences gained from expressionism, she would generate some of her most well-known images, including *Yellow Man* (see Fig. 4) and *Woman with Green Hair* (see Fig. 5), while in New York City in 1915–1916. The culture of freedom of expression that Malfatti lived in while in New York contributed to the cultural mixing that manifests itself in her and her art. Bhabha argues that it is at these "interstitial passages between fixed identifications that the possibility of cultural hybridity opens up".¹² The artist does not present purely Brazilian, German, or American qualities, but a truly unique aesthetic, a result of hybridization. Hybridization was unfamiliar ground for the artist and her contemporaries.

Due to the lack of scholarship, finding access to images of pieces Malfatti painted before going to Germany is difficult. There are records and writings, however, that give evidence of Italian influences early in her life. As stated previously, her father was an immigrant from Italy and her mother was a teacher and painter. Further research may show that her mother taught her and encouraged her to value Italian aesthetics. Her first attempted landscape is a close look at two groups of trees with a small river running between them similar to other Italian 19th-century landscapes.¹³ Aside from landscape, since antiquity Romans and other civilizations of the Italian Peninsula have cherished the human body and tirelessly pursued recreating its form. When the artist studied in New York, learning the human form was a clear priority of hers. She sought out the professor Homer Boss, a well-known teacher of anatomy.¹⁴ Her catalogue of works contains a numerous amount of nude studies and paintings that imply she was fascinated with the material while in New York and throughout her life. Many of these nudes were most likely never exhibited during her life, but were intriguingly discovered rolled up stored away, only found in her house after her death.¹⁵ Figures 6 and 7 illustrate just two of the many

9 Ibid., 60.

10 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 161.

11 Ibid., 101. Full original quote in Portuguese: "aí começa o tempo maravilhoso da minha vida. ... O maior progresso que realizei na minha vida foi nesta ilha e nesta época de ambientes muito especiais. Eu vivia encantada com a vida e com a pintura."

12 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

13 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 20.

14 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 150. Boss was also acting director of the Academy of Independent Artists for many years, though he became more widely recognized as being a professor of anatomy.

15 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 42.

nudes she created while concurrently demonstrating various modern styles. Playing with planar elements of cubism and the contrast of line and shading, Malfatti creatively represents the classic female nude. The human body is an apparent recurring point of significance for her, emphasizing her prevalent interest in human form and anatomy. This interest in the human form heralds back to her Italian roots and the importance of anatomy in classical art.

In a more nationalist work like *Tropical* (see Fig. 8) she again highlights the anatomy of the subject as key in her depiction. Scholars are correct to suggest that various Malfatti portraiture influences are derived from her interactions with German expressionists. However, works like *Tropical* show a distinct care for anatomy that does not exist in prominent expressionists, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The contrast of anatomy in *Tropical* with the deliberate lack of attention to anatomy in Kirchner's *Marcella* (1910) is glaring (see Fig. 9). Kirchner's woman presents only the basic elements of a human body: head, torso, and limbs. The diametrically unique woman in *Tropical* is strong and exhibits colossal form in her biceps, forearms, face, and well-delineated collar bone. Whether it is in studio sketches, experimental pieces, or oil paintings, Malfatti's engagement with anatomy is unmistakable.

A Exposição de Pintura Moderna Anita Malfatti, now commonly known as the *Exposição de 1917-18*, it was the first done by a Brazilian who had studied outside of the country and returned to present European and American forms. Her 1917 exhibition was primarily a solo show as she presented her completed works and also some select drawings of colleagues from New York.¹⁶ This became a defining exhibition because of its impact on her personal career and overall modernism in Brazil. As the exhibition opened, she received a lot of positive attention. Barely one week after opening though, Monteiro Lobato, a lead academic critic, published an article that dramatically changed Malfatti's reception.¹⁷ He compared her to the madness of a person in a mental health hospital and also defined two groups of artists: "One [group] composed of those who normally see things.... The other species is formed by those who see nature abnormally and interpret it in the light of ephemeral theories, under the hint of rebellious schools arising here and there like boils of excessive culture."¹⁸ Having grouped Malfatti with the artists who interpret light according to ephemeral theories and rebellious abstract ideas, he clearly did not accept her expression. Paintings that were bought were returned, exhibition attendance dropped, and additional contrary articles all followed. This level of rejection in her own country surely caused the artist to feel a new experience of otherness and according to Bhabha her recognition of otherness would displace the artist to an unhomely space.¹⁹ He questions whether that "unhomely perplexity" can lead to an international theme.²⁰ In regards to Malfatti, it contributed, at least in part, to the theme of modernism that Malfatti inspired in Brazil.

In response to Lobato's opposition, many of the future modernists rallied around Malfatti in support. Important members of the movement, Mario de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, among others, worked with the artist to continue developing modernism. Though the exhibition was a key factor in instigating modernism, Lobato's critique was so

13 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 20.

14 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 150. Boss was also acting director of the Academy of Independent Artists for many years, though he became more widely recognized as being a professor of anatomy.

15 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 42.

16 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 196.

17 Marta Rossetti Batista, *Escritos sobre arte e modernismo brasileiro*, (São Paulo: Prata Design, 2013), 144.

18 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 204.

19 Bhabha, *Location*, 13.

20 Bhabha, *Location*, 17.

damaging to Malfatti that many scholars argue her art never evolved afterwards. She still painted and produced a large number of works, but it was more to support, rather than express, herself.

During the same year, intellectuals were searching for and trying to define nationalism in Brazil.²¹ Brazilian nationalism was a troublesome discourse that began in the 1820's when the country declared independence from Portugal. Almost one hundred years later, the country's people were still aching to formulate and solidify national identity. The complexity of Brazilian culture at the time was being wrestled with among academics and writers, and, was surprisingly not highly influenced by the aesthetics of primitivism.²² In an effort to contribute to the new idea of nationalism, Malfatti painted works like *Tropical* (see Fig. 8). In a number of ways this piece embodies elements of what it means to be Brazilian. Primarily, the piece depicts a lower-class working woman selling fruits native to the country. The plants that serve as the background are also common. Brazil is one of the world's largest producers of fruit. Her profession is an extremely common field of work due to the abundant nature of the land. Many millions of women could relate to the image, not only because of trade, but also because of her interracial identity.²³

Showing rural life and daily experiences, Malfatti also incorporated a fresh color palette in her works. Malfatti was not the first artist to be impacted by the vibrant colors that naturally decorate the country. In the late 19th century, academic history paintings like those of Victor Meirelles (see Fig. 10) pronounced the lush green foliage as a dominant characteristic of the landscape. Varying shades of green originate in the distant palms, the undergrowth of plants in the foreground, and the large leaves on the tree. Other samples of the Brazilian palette can be found in the blue sky, as well as the pinkish red hues and distinct blues that appear in the headdresses made by the natives. Artists of other genres of painting, like that of naturalism, were also attempting to recreate the colors of Brazil. Marianne North studied plant life and created images, like *Flowers And Fruit Of The Maricojas Passion Flower* (see Fig. 11), in which the exciting blossoms of the passion fruit are pink, blue, and purple. Tangling green vines provide the barrier between the blue sky and also allow a ripening yellow passion fruit to peek out through the leaves. The green, blues, pinks, purples, and yellow of the scenery, plant life, and people establish what Brazilian color is and the color palette that inspired Malfatti. Very similar colors and plant life can be seen in *Man of Seven Colors* (see Fig. 12). Identical large leaves found in the *Tropical* (see Fig. 8) sway across the background of the work. The musculature of this man is even more prevalent, like the previous nudes, and she goes above and beyond to enhance the form as she energizes it with color. With a spectrum of greens, blues, and yellows reflective of her lush country, the artist has fused colors of Brazil with her personal heritage and study abroad.

Malfatti continued to depict Brazilian life and color later in her career while also teaching art history. Her notebooks of lectures still exist, though unpublished, and contain manuscripts for conferences on modern art and lectures that she gave regarding color, form, and the arrival of modern art in Brazil. They are also essential in the research and understanding of Malfatti's hybridity. Through direct contact with the source material during the summer of 2016, I had

17 Marta Rossetti Batista, *Escritos sobre arte e modernismo brasileiro*, (São Paulo: Prata Design, 2013), 144.

18 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 204.

19 Bhabha, *Location*, 13.

20 Bhabha, *Location*, 17.

21 Batista, *Escritos*, 144.

22 Saulo Gouveia. *The Triumph of Brazilian Modernism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 23.

23 Due to the diverse population of Brazil the term *mulato*, meaning a person of mixed black and white ancestry, has been widely used since the 19th century.

the opportunity to travel to São Paulo and analyze the texts. I read, transcribed, and photographed all her remaining notes regarding her teaching of art history. My analyses of several texts revealed that she taught a disproportionate number of lectures of great detail on Italy. Additionally, some words, such as *porcellana* (porcelain), *belleza* (beauty), and *annos* (years), were not written in Portuguese but in Italian.²⁴ Malfatti's mother was a teacher of many languages, including Italian. This fact in conjunction with her father's heritage and the number of Italian art lectures makes her interest in Italy quite self-evident.

The question of Malfatti's place in Brazilian art creates the need for more scholarship as she is unique to Brazilian Modernists.²⁵ As recorded by Batista, Malfatti reflected on her time in New York: "It was in this period that I achieved my true expression of art."²⁶ I agree that the height of her hybridization is found in her works done during 1915–1917 when she most truthfully expressed herself.

Though unstated by the artist, it is clear that both Malfatti's social and familial heritage as a dominant influence in her hybridization. Experiences as an "other" while studying in foreign countries and then being ostracized as "other" when she returned home, she appears to be unable to identify a cultural superiority, an idea that Bhabha strongly undermines. She equally embraces modern formal elements from abroad and environmental elements in expressing herself. Malfatti as a Brazilian, woman, daughter of immigrants, and well-traveled artist was unique to modernists of the global south. Her colorful art filled with engaging form sparked the movement of modernism in Brazil and correspondingly demonstrated a rich and complex hybridity.

24 IEB/USP. *Anita Malfatti Collection*: Caderno 06 - código de referência: AM:05.06.0000. Accessed June–August 2016. And IEB/USP. *Anita Malfatti Collection*: Caderno 07 - código de referência: AM:05.07.0000. Accessed June–August 2016.

25 Gouveia, *Triumph*, 232. Consider the work of other modernists such as Tarsila do Amaral and Oswald de Andrade.

26 Batista, *Malfatti no tempo*, 385.

Figures



Figure 1. Anita Malfatti, *Donkey Running*, 1909.



Figure 2. Anita Malfatti, *My brother Alexander*, 1914.



Figure 3. Anita Malfatti, *A Professor*, 1912–13.



Figure 4. Anita Malfatti, *Yellow Man*, 1915/16.



Figure 5. Anita Malfatti, *Woman with Green Hair*. 1915/16.



Figure 6. Anita Malfatti, *Cubist Nude*, 1915-16.



Figure 7. Anita Malfatti, *Female Nude Sitting*, 1916.



Figure 8. Anita Malfatti, *Tropical*, 1917



Figure 9. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Marcella*, 1910.



Figure 10. Victor Meirelles, *First Mass in Brazil*, 1861.



Figure 11. Marianne North, *Flowers And Fruit Of The Maricojas Passion Flower*, 1873.

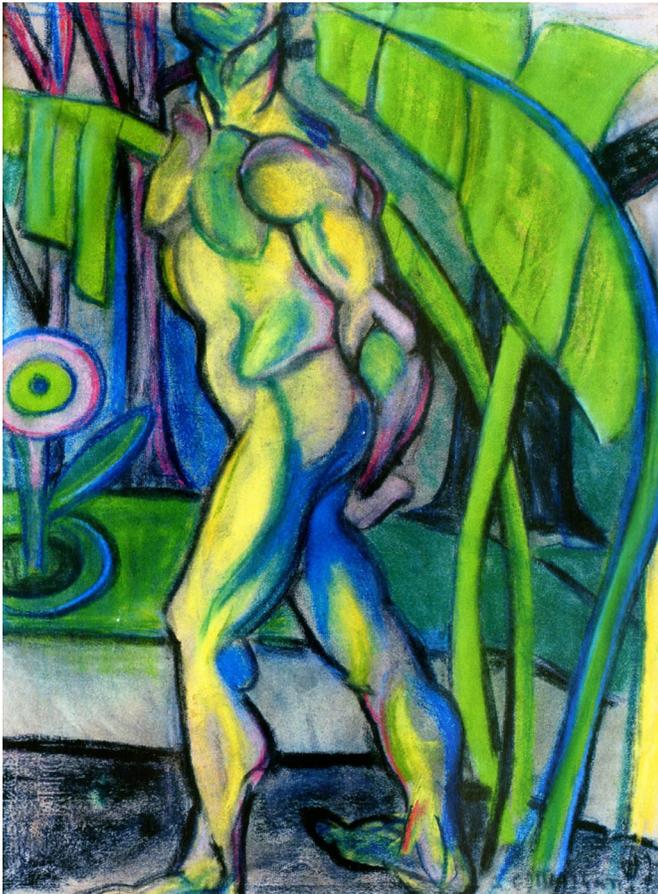


Figure 12. Anita Malfatti, *Man of Seven Colors*, 1916.

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