

## Tarsila and the 1920s

### *Carol Damian and Cristina Mehrtens*

*Tarsila do Amaral, one of the most important female painters of the twentieth century, played a critical role in Brazil's modernist movement. She was born to a life of wealth and privilege on a rural estate in Capivari, in São Paulo state, in 1886. Lydia Dias do Amaral and José Stanislaw do Amaral raised their four boys and two girls in the countryside, but they often visited the capital city and made long trips to Europe. Tarsila's family was typical of the rural aristocracy. Her father, the son of a pioneer planter, was a landowner and successful coffee grower. Tarsila's meals were served by maids on an immense table centered in a spacious colonial room lined with twelve Austrian rocking chairs arranged along opposite walls. The meals consisted mainly of simple rice and bean dishes accompanied by French wine, water, liqueurs, and Brazilian coffee. Tarsila learned to play the family Steinway piano, and was instructed by French-speaking tutors and black "nannies" (amas de leite). From these beginnings, she rose to be one of Brazil's famous painters, a unique interpreter of Brazil's non-European roots in spite of her own background in the landed elite. Few women could aspire to the kind of life she forged for herself, but she cared little about what others thought, and as a result, her life became exemplary of the independence that women, at least in the arts, could achieve.*

Born in 1886, Tarsila's first schooling took place on the plantation, where a young Belgian woman taught her to write, read, and embroider. Later (1898–1904), she received a Roman Catholic elementary education from nuns in schools in São Paulo and Barcelona. After a sheltered adolescence, it came time for her to marry. As explained by her father, this event followed the traditional "three F" rule: "*falado* (arranged), *feito* (done), and *fora* (out)." Tarsila wed her mother's cousin, André Teixeira Pinto, in 1906. They honeymooned in Argentina and Chile, and soon had a daughter, Dulce. The marriage did not last, however. Tarsila left her

husband and, in the mid-1920s, had the marriage annulled. Although it may seem that it has always been possible for the rich to annul a marriage, her separation from her husband was, by itself, considered shocking in her conservative social environment. In retrospect, Tarsila would explain that it happened due to "disenchantment and cultural distance," and that she coped by "writing sonnets, playing the piano, and aspiring to travel."

In 1913, when she was twenty-seven, Tarsila moved to the burgeoning city of São Paulo, where she took painting and drawing lessons. She also met the young painter Anita Malfatti, who had just returned from Europe and would have a tremendous impact on art in Brazil. Malfatti brought European avant-garde styles of abstraction to a country long dominated by rigid and conservative academic methods. Tarsila was anxious to explore the new trends in modern art. She studied sculpture with the famous Italian artist Mantovani, who had come to São Paulo to design the facade of the new Palace of Industry building. Her lessons brought her into the closed "social circuit" that was molding public spaces—stores, restaurants, cafés, theaters, and parks—and influencing new forms of public behavior.

By 1918, Tarsila was a mature woman who loved music, knew how to paint, and lived a discreet and comfortable life, but in an assertive and independent manner. She would, for instance, go out to the Jardim da Luz park to draw daily scenes. The park abutted the Luz train station, where people from all social classes paraded through on their way to work. Not only did she walk to the park, but she also painted in public, unusual for well brought up women of her day.

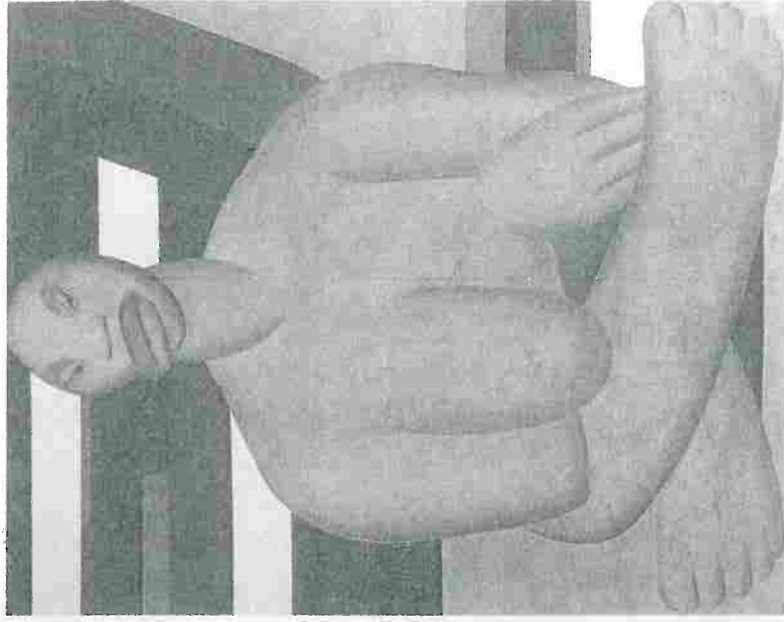
Tarsila passed from her "apprentice" phase in São Paulo in transition to delirious postwar Paris. In 1920, she journeyed to France to improve her painting, travel, and as her parents had done, provide her child with a European education. Dulce attended school in England, while Tarsila went to Paris to draw at the Académie Julien and paint with Émile Renard.

In 1922, one of Tarsila's paintings was accepted at the Salon Officiel des Artistes Français (Official Salon Exhibition of Art of France). Its conservative academic style of realism reflected European taste. She was not, at this time, following the avant-garde movements that were shaking the Paris art scene. Tarsila was one of three Brazilian artists admitted to the salon, and the only woman. After her painting's successful reception,

Tarsila changed its name from *Portrait to Passport*, claiming that it had admitted her to the world of art. More than just a name change, the event marked her acceptance by the artistic elite. On her return to Brazil later that year, Anita Malfatti introduced her to the young intellectual planners of the Modern Art Week, the event that marked Brazil's entry into the world of modern art. They formed the "Group of Five"—Tarsila, Malfatti, Menotti del Picchia, Mario de Andrade, and Oswald de Andrade—to defend the new modernist ideals while seeking to develop a "national identity." Tarsila thrived in the company of these intellectuals, and participated in the creation of a modernist language that included distinctly Brazilian and *paulista* themes, colors, and subjects. Her desire was to paint truly Brazilian art that would be of national and international significance.

Writer and poet Menotti del Picchia described Tarsila as a *paulista* painter who came from Paris and who "was one of the most beautiful, harmonious and elegant creatures he had ever seen." In September 1922, as part of Brazil's Independence Centennial held in the Palace of Industry, Tarsila presented her paintings to the public. At the same time, she began a romantic relationship with Oswald de Andrade, a poet and writer four years younger. In January 1923, they met again in Europe. Seeking new experiences, they traveled together to Portugal, Spain, and Italy. On their return to Paris, now very much a couple—Tarsiwald was the name they gave themselves—the two of them hobnobbed with Paris intellectuals. They became friends with Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars, who introduced them to Constantin Brancusi, Jean Cocteau, and Madame Apollinaire, among others. Brazilian Ambassador Sousa Dantas invited them to lunch with French and Brazilian artists. At one luncheon, Tarsila, the only woman present, was placed close to Cendrars to assist him in cutting the meat, since he had lost his right arm in the Great War. In the Europe of the day, only a woman could perform such a role.

Tarsila also took lessons at Fernand Léger's atelier, where she learned the basic tenets of cubism and painted *A Negra (Negro Woman)*. It was a work that made a strong impression on the famous painter and would be used as an illustration for Oswald de Andrade's writings. She continued with her interest in the avant-garde of Paris and her study of cubism. Socially, Tarsila had become an enchantress. Considered one of the most beautiful women in Paris, she had long, strong, thin black hair framing a



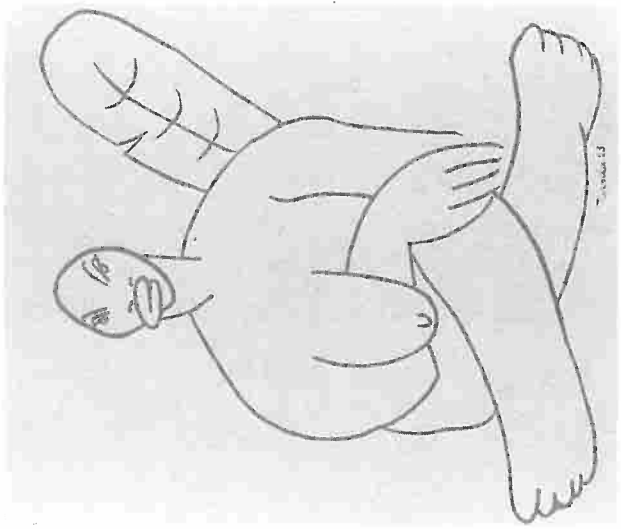
*A Negra (Negro Woman)*, oil on canvas from 1923 by Tarsila do Amaral. (*Guilherme Augusto do Amaral, São Paulo*)

lovely face adorned by long earrings that touched her tanned skin. She admired and played the music of Erik Satie, was Paul Poiret's customer, and bought Rosine's perfume, Perugia's shoes, and Martine's furniture. Well-known and influential people visited Tarsila's exciting studio at 9 Hiégésippe Moreau Street. The language Tarsila found to express Brazil to her foreign guests did not present any difficulty. She would offer *feijoadá*—a black bean dish—or *carijó*—a rice and chicken soup of rural origins (*caipira*). Such a menu was a metaphor for Tarsila's influences, so well reflected in paintings such as *A Negra* and *A Caipirinha (Little Country Girl)*, painted in 1923 and far more modern than her earlier academic works.

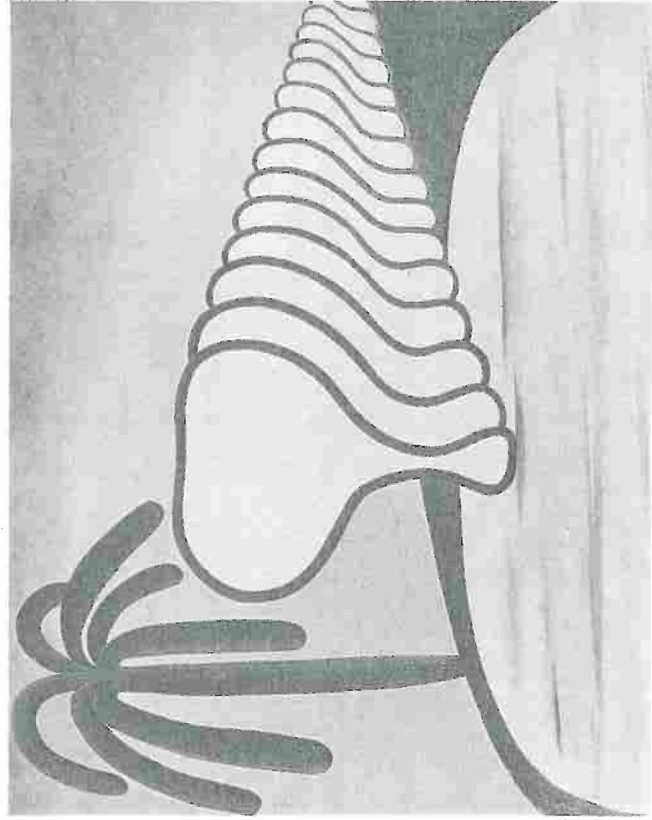
Tarsila took *paulista* modernism to European modernism, and vice versa, determined to create a new and unique Brazilian visual language

that would be widely appreciated. From birth, Tarsila had experienced both Brazilian and European culture. Perhaps that is why, in her formulation of a new Brazilian visual language, there was a serendipitous co-existence between the search for something authentically Brazilian and her social condition. She never criticized Brazil's sociopolitical situation; rather, she explored her country and appreciated its great diversity. Tarsila's quest for a truly Brazilian art took her back to Brazil to visit places she had never seen. In 1924, she toured Rio de Janeiro and Ouro Preto, where Carnival and Holy Week rituals exposed her to a new Brazil. Tarsila found in the beautiful mining towns of Minas Gerais the colors she loved when she was a child—the verdant green landscape, deep blue skies, and whitewashed churches with their gilded steeples shining in the bright sun. She painted a series of works inspired by these travels known as her "Pau-Brasil" phase after the first painting of 1925. The series is noted for subjects that include tropical flora, the *caboclo*, black people of the area and their daily activities, and the small towns of the interior. In 1925, she illustrated Oswald's *Pau-Brasil*, and painted more than ten new works celebrating the beauty of Brazil and its diverse landscapes. Palm trees, cactus plants, exotic creatures, and the glow of a lemon-slice sun are all characteristic images of the series that would continue to be recognizable elements of her work throughout her career.

In June 1926, Tarsila had her first solo exhibition at Galerie Percier in Paris, and she and Oswald were married in October. The exhibition was a success, described by the critics with such words as "fresh," "exotic," "naïve," and "cerebral." She sold her first painting—*Adoração (Adoration)*, also entitled *Le negre du Saint-Esprit (The Black Man of Saint Esprit)*, from 1925—to someone outside the family for 5,000 francs. She also sold her first painting in Brazil, *Angels (1925)*, to Julio Prestes (the president-elect in 1930 who would be deposed before taking office by Getúlio Vargas). The triumph of her Paris exhibition allowed Tarsila the possibility of financial independence, although she was secure with her family's wealth. The other significant event of the year, her remarriage, took place in São Paulo and was an important social occasion attended by such dignitaries as Brazil's new president, Washington Luís, Oswald's godfather. It brought Tarsila back to the semisecluded environment of the family plantation, which Oswald acquired from her father. The couple settled in the countryside, spending most of their time writing and painting. They traveled to Bahia to meet friends returning from a trip to



Black and charcoal study for *A Negra*, drawn in 1923, by Tarsila do Amaral. (Guilherme Augusto do Amaral, São Paulo)



*Sono (Sleep)*, an oil on canvas by Tarsila do Amaral from 1928. (Guilherme Augusto do Amaral, São Paulo)

Amazonas. It was fashionable for the wealthy to travel within the country, and explore what was previously inaccessible and of little interest. In this relaxing atmosphere, Tarsila painted a new series of works, including *Manacá (Tree)* in 1927 and *Sono (Sleep)* in 1928, works that treat the Brazilian landscape from a dreamy, surreal perspective. The paintings from this period are highly simplified and imaginative interpretations of her country's natural beauty.

In 1928, Tarsila's style embraced the modernist *anthropophagy* (cannibalistic) movement, named by Andrade and their avant-garde circle to reflect their obsession with the violent origins of colonial Brazil. Tarsila's first work in the series is entitled *Abaporu* (from the Tupi-Guarani language: *Aba* = man, *Poru* = who eats). The image of a huge, solitary figure with enormous feet sitting on a bright green patch of land was painted as a birthday gift for Oswald, and became the inspiration and symbol for the *anthropophagy* movement and its quest for Brazilian independence from European cultural domination. Tarsila became more involved in the legends of the land and increasingly aware of its rapid devastation. She realized she could use her art to voice her fears for nature and for the indigenous peoples who were rapidly being displaced by civilization. These were extraordinary concerns for a woman of the 1920s, a time of little sympathy for the causes that occupy activists worldwide today.

Tarsila continued to achieve success in Brazil's elite circles with exhibitions and modernist ventures. The modernists pursued their search for a national identity with a full social circuit of activities that may appear in strange contradiction to their aspirations to recognize the country's vast diversity in their art. They invited foreign personalities, including the surrealist poets Benjamin Péret and Blaise Cendrars, to Brazil and also gave accolades to popular Brazilian personalities like the circus clown Piolim. In their own way, they sought to identify with ordinary Brazilians. They promoted some of their cultural events in such locations as São Paulo's Mappin department store and the Municipal Theater.

The world economic crisis of 1929 and Brazil's complex political issues caused fissures in the modernist ranks. Tarsila's coffee plantation was foreclosed and she lost most of her inherited fortune. With a recommendation from São Paulo's governor, she took her first job as director of restoration at the State Museum. But Tarsila's world was built on patronage, and the 1930 Revolution abruptly put an end to her connections,

as well as her job. It also closed an era for a generation accustomed to material comforts and economic stability. As the modernists were forced to abandon their intellectual gatherings and quests for a Brazilian cultural language, Tarsila and Oswald's marriage also ended. The bleak colors of her single painting completed in 1930, *Composição (Composition)*, mirrored a moment of melancholy for Tarsila and her friends. It was a year of reflection and, while her painting production endured this brief hiatus, Tarsila continued to explore new subjects as an expression of this new Brazilian reality of social change, determined to resume her career alone.

In 1931, Tarsila began to use social themes of international significance in her paintings to bring attention to the plight of struggling people everywhere. She had visited the Soviet Union to arrange an exhibition in Moscow and completed a series of paintings of faceless people enduring the hopelessness of the crowded cities. She returned to Brazil in 1932 in time for the São Paulo Constitutional Revolt. After it failed, she spent a month in jail as a political activist and communist sympathizer. She had descended from the top of her social class to the depths of social humiliation. Not discouraged, she entered the final phase of her career (1933–1972) with a renewed effort to paint the people and landscapes of Brazil, and participate in cultural activities. Now displaying a mastery of technique that combined modernist aesthetics of abstract simplification with accurate draftsmanship and bold tropical colors, she created lyrical paintings that projected a synthesis of Brazilian elements ranging from the folkloric to the mythical, and that now included more of people's daily activities.

Tarsila's modernist quest for a truly Brazilian form of expression had been an appeal for reflection, tolerance, and enjoyment of the changing social scene of the 1920s. Long recognized as "the most Brazilian of modern painters," she applied the new European aesthetic language to the themes and subjects of her own land. She worked with a sincerity of purpose and unique style to create the image of an ideal, exotic world that would be seen as quintessentially Brazilian. Between 1923 and 1972, she produced over 230 paintings, hundreds of drawings, studies, illustrations and prints, and five sculptures, and was honored with exhibitions throughout the world. Tarsila's accomplishments and experiences show that identity is not always about choice. Living through transitional and conflictive situations, her identity and choices intermingled in com-

plex ways. Working with sincerity and dedication, Tarsila exemplified a unique elite role in generating a shared Brazilian identity that crossed class boundaries and transcended the artistic definitions of the past. Tarsila do Amaral stopped painting in 1972; she died in 1973 at the age of eighty-nine.

## The Integral Woman

### *Província de Guanabara*

*In the mid-1930s, the Ação Integralista Brasileira—patterned after the fascist movements in Portugal, Spain, and Italy—set out to organize Brazilian men and women, and to foster social progress. They followed the corporatist model, emphasizing hierarchy, morality, discipline, and Roman Catholic spirituality. In the large cities, their women's auxiliaries, dubbed "Green Blouses" after the evergreen color of their uniforms, offered instruction to poor women in vocational skills and hygiene. The excerpt below appeared in the Integralist newspaper, Província de Guanabara.*

In earlier times, women were classified in three categories: essential, agreeable, or spiritual. The essential woman was one who limited herself to the home, to her domestic obligations, and to the responsibilities of that position. Agreeable women flourished in society through their feminine charms, grace, and sociability. Spiritual women cultivated themselves through reading, and lived in a world of thought and intelligence. As we realize, none of these three categories for Green Blouse women is sufficient, because each is too narrow. No woman possesses only one of these traits; rather, her goal should be to blend them harmoniously. This results in what we call the "Integral Woman."

This does not mean that the Integral Woman is one of these modern feminist types who demand civil equality in a spirit of vindictiveness; the feminist who hates men and who seeks to establish matriarchal rule. In no way.

The Integral Woman is the docile daughter, the solicitous sister, the affectionate wife, the heroic mother, the loyal companion, the precursor to a new, regenerative ethical standard, the conscientious inspirer, far from those who lower themselves to the state of savagery, with their animalistic vices.