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The Ministry Of Education And Health Building, Rio De Janeiro; Utopia or Agenda

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THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH BUILDING, RIO DE JANEIRO: UTOPIA OR AGENDA?

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

The former building of the Ministério da educação e saúde pública (MES)\(^1\) [Ministry of Education and Public Health], 1936-45, today’s Palácio Gustavo Capanema [Fig. 1], located in Rio de Janeiro, is an icon of modernist architecture. The first in a significant history of state-sponsored modernist buildings in Brazil, the MES building is typically addressed by scholars in terms of its canonic style and pioneerism. Designed by Le Corbusier and a team of leftist Brazilian architects led by Lúcio Costa (1902-1998), a notorious communist, the MES building embodied the architects’ belief in the revolutionary precepts of New Architecture.\(^2\) Concomitantly, however, the MES project played an important role in the conservative political agenda of the Estado novo [New State], the period between 1937 and 1945 when Brazil was under Getúlio Vargas’s regime of fascist inclinations. This thesis will explore the MES building and decorative program in terms of its aesthetic and ideological ambiguities. It will investigate the ways in which the project visually

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\(^1\) Created in 1930 as the Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP), it was renamed Ministry of Education and Health (MES) in the ministerial reform of 1937. Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 65.

\(^2\) Brazilian modernist architecture was, to a great extent, a reinterpretation of the ideas of Le Corbusier and, to a lesser extent, of those of Walter Gropius. Le Corbusier and Gropius longed for an architectural style based on industrial materials and techniques that would break with the architecture of the past based on artisanal practices. The New Architecture would diminish class and national differences creating a collective and democratic society. Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* [1937], (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1965) and Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* [1931], (New York: Dover Publications, 1986). French architecture had significant influence on the team of Brazilian architects responsible for the MES project, composed by Affonso Reidy (1909-1964), Carlos Leão (1906-1983), Jorge Moreira (1904-1992), Ernani Vasconcellos (1912-1989), and Oscar Niemeyer (b.1907). Besides the generalized influence of French culture in Brazilian society before World War II, three members of the MES team -Costa, Reidy, and Moreira- had been born and had had their basic training in France. The entire team had graduated, however, from the Brazilian National School of Fine Arts (ENBA) between 1930 and 1934. Lauro Cavalcanti, *Brasileiro e moderno: A história de uma nova arquitetura* (1930-60) (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 2006), 42. All members of the MES team were fluent in French, which was crucial to their encounter with the literature on modern architecture, with Le Corbusier in his first series of conferences in Brazil, as well as to their close exchange with the French-Swiss architect during the MES project.
embodies the complicated relationship between the team of architects and the government that produced it, as well as its implications for Brazilian modernism, specifically as a transitional moment between figuration and abstraction in Brazilian art.

In 1935, Gustavo Capanema (1900-1985), Minister of Education and Public Health and the political leader responsible for the cultural politics of Vargas’s regime, proposed a competition for the design of the new headquarters of the Ministry. Capanema, often compared to Mexico’s José Vasconcelos for his ability to gather avant-garde artists, to foster monumental artistic production under public tutelage, and to fight academicism without extinguishing neocolonial traditions, first awarded the prize to Archimedes Memória, but subsequently called on Lúcio Costa to draw up another plan for the Ministry. Costa accepted the commission in 1936 and formed a team of former students of the National School of Fine Arts, all admirers of the theories of Le Corbusier, to carry out the project with him. The agreement between Costa and Capanema included the decision to invite Le Corbusier to work as a consultant to the project. The MES commission triggered a paradigmatic change in Brazilian art and architecture, from the prevalent academicism of the early 1900s to the establishment of modernist art and architecture as the official, national, and dominant style.

State of the literature

While the MES project is a popular subject among architecture scholars and historians, the metamorphosis of Le Corbusier’s first sketch for the building into its final plan and the development of the building’s decorative program in terms of its
complicated socio-political context have not yet received in-depth attention. Scholars such as architect Lauro Cavalcanti, director of Rio de Janeiro's Paço Imperial Museum, and Daryle Williams, Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland, have written exceptional accounts on the socio-political history of the MES project and on its significance on the cultural politics of the Vargas regime. These accounts, however, do not address the ways in which this complex political/cultural agenda is visually expressed by the changes that the Brazilian architects made to Le Corbusier’s plan. Nor do they explain how the commissions for the project’s decorative program accommodated Vargas and Capanema’s agendas. Both of these approaches will be central to this investigation.

Architect and historian Roberto Segre and his co-authors, as well as architect Márcia David, have briefly analyzed some of the MES’s visual elements and their ambiguous relationship to the state. For example, Segre describes Bruno Giorgi’s sculpture, *Tribute to the Brazilian Youth*, 1944, as an intertwining of fascist, primitivist, and Corbusian stylistic investigations. The conflation of tendencies found in Giorgi’s work is not explored, however, in other elements of the MES decorative program or building. A thorough visual analysis of the modifications to Le Corbusier’s plan and of the principal components of the MES fine arts program will allow this thesis to explore the political tensions of the project through the contradictory relationship between the leftist artists and the conservative state that

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permeates one of the most important Brazilian architectural commissions of the pre-war years.

The scholarly work on the individual artists that contributed to the MES decorative program, like the 1974 seminal book on Cândido Portinari by Antonio Bento and the many books on Oscar Niemeyer (b.1907), such as Tributo a Niemeyer, organized by Segre, visually analyze the various commissions that make up the MES, but only a few incorporate social history and the evidence of primary documents into their investigations. An exception is Annateresa Fabris’s 1996 book on Cândido Portinari (1903-1962), a series of essays on Portinari’s Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil mural at the MES, 1938-1944. In her visual analysis, Fabris incorporates information from primary documents that reveals Capanema’s close direction of the commission. She studies Portinari and Capanema’s relationship in order to understand the place of the MES murals within the painter’s oeuvre and discusses the commission in terms of its distinction or connection to European art and architecture. Fabris’s investigation of the MES project sheds light on the paradoxical cultural-historical context of leftist artists serving the interests of a dictatorial regime.

However, Fabris’s analysis of Portinari’s murals is limited to one element of the MES decorative program; this thesis intends to elucidate, through the study of the changes in the initial plan for the building and of the development of the principal elements of its decorative program, the ambiguous cultural-political relationship that permeates the entire project and its implications for Brazilian modernism.

This thesis analyzes a vast amount of primary source material found at the
*Arquivo do Instituto do patrimônio histórico e artístico nacional* (IPHAN) [Archive of the Institute of the Historic and Artistic National Patrimony] and at the Arquivo Gustavo Capanema (Gustavo Capanema archive) in the *Centro de pesquisa e documentação de história contemporânea do Brasil da Fundação Getúlio Vargas* (CPDOC/FGV) [Research and Documentation Center of Brazilian Contemporary History at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation], both in Rio de Janeiro. Capanema’s exchanged correspondence with Vargas, with his staff, and with the architects and artists involved in the MES project provides the ability to create a precise timeline of the development of the building and decorative program. Documents expose the place of the MES within the *Estado novo*’s cultural politics and indicate that Capanema closely directed the decorative program of the MES. This thesis, therefore, examines primary documents and the literature, in concert with an in-depth visual analysis of the MES building and decorative program, in order to explore critically the paradoxical relationship between patron and artists that pervades the project and to assess its legacy for Brazilian modernism.

Furthermore, the literature dedicated to the MES building frequently raises questions about the originality of the project. Was the MES a mere application of Le Corbusier’s five points of New Architecture or did it represent an innovative

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7 Maurício Lissovsky and Paulo Sérgio Moraes de Sá have selected and transcribed a great amount of the documentation regarding the MES project present in the IPHAN and CPDOC/FGV archives, in Maurício Lissovsky and Paulo Sérgio Moraes de Sá, *Colunas da Educação: a construção do Ministério da Educação e Saúde (1935-1945)* (Rio de Janeiro: MINC, IPHAN; CPDOC/FGV), 1996.

8 In a December 7, 1942, a letter from Capanema to Portinari indicates, for example, that the minister gave specific guidelines to Portinari’s mural *Ciclo da vida econômica do Brasil* (Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil) commissioned for the MES’s main conference room. Lissovsky and Sá, 363-364.
Brazilian contribution to the history of art? Since Phillip Goodwin and G.E. Kidder Smith’s text for the Museum of Modern Art’s *Brazil Builds* exhibition catalogue (1943), the analysis of the technical and aesthetic characteristics of the building, mostly detached from the work’s specific social-political background, have been prevalent in the historiography of the project in order to establish (or counter) its originality. Studies have also exalted Brazilian modern architecture for its merging of traditional and modern tendencies, either to establish its originality in relation to Le Corbusier’s oeuvre, or to point out its deficiencies. Le Corbusier himself showed preoccupation with the originality/authorship of the MES project. In his *Oeuvre complète – 1934-1938*, the sketches for the MES building carry the caption, “according to Le Corbusier’s project adapted for construction.” Taking the socio-political reality of Brazil at the time into consideration, instead of concentrating solely on the technical, aesthetic, and stylistic discussions, this thesis explores the aesthetic and political implications of the MES project on Brazilian modernism and its role in the construction of a new national identity.

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9 The final plan for the MES included Le Corbusier’s famous five points for the New Architecture: the pilotis, the free plan, achieved through the load-bearing columns, the free façade, the continuous windows, and the roof garden. Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 231.


11 As happens in, for example, Goodwin and Smith, 1943.

12 Elizabeth Harris’ book on the links of Brazilian architecture to European architecture emphasizes the former’s dependence on the latter, in *Le Corbusier: riscos brasileiros* (São Paulo: Nobel, 1987).

In focusing on the MES’s ideological and aesthetic ambiguities, its eclecticism and hybridity, this investigation parts from previous studies of Latin American art which assess its significance through the lens of a European artistic canon instead of through a specific local context and system of artistic creation. While Costa explained the development of the MES as a miraculous event, this thesis will investigate the project’s evolution and decorative program as a rational and complex orchestration of art and politics.

**The 1930 Revolution: Triumph of the National**

Prior to the Revolução de 1930 [1930 Revolution], the federalism installed after the Proclamation of the Republic (1889) by the constitution of 1891 had made the country politically and socially fragmented. The gap between Brazil’s rural and scattered society and the industrialized nations of the northern hemisphere was growing bigger. The country’s governmental model had become unacceptable to the majority of the population causing several military and civilian movements to flourish throughout the 1920s. However, these movements were easily defeated or just ignored by the federal government due to their disorganization and minor local repercussion. To regenerate a republic abused and weakened in the hands of the oligarchies something had to be done from inside the central government.

Since the proclamation of the Republic, a political pact, known as Política do café com leite (Politics of Coffee with Milk)\(^{15}\) had been established to secure the alternation of state power between the elites of the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. In 1930, President Washington Luís (1869-1957) broke the pact by launching


\(^{15}\) This is in a reference to the powerful dairy cattle farms of the state of Minas Gerais and the coffee plantations of the state of São Paulo.
a second consecutive candidate from São Paulo to the presidency instead of supporting a candidate from Minas Gerais. When the *Política do Café com Leite* was challenged, a dissident group was formed, the *Aliança liberal* (Liberal Alliance). Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954), governor of the state of Rio Grande do Sul and the former Minister of the Treasury, was the 1930 presidential candidate of this dissidence.\(^\text{16}\) The *Aliança liberal* wanted the renewal of the Republican state, damaged by the oligarchic forces that had been protecting regional and personal interests. However, on March of 1930, Vargas was defeated in the ballots. Immediately after Vargas’s defeat, the *Aliancistas* began to articulate a political-military movement against the government that culminated in the 1930 Revolution.\(^\text{17}\)

On October 3, 1930, the revolution deposed President Luís, putting an end to what is today known as the *República velha* [Old Republic] and installed Vargas as president of a provisory government. The popular dissatisfaction with the Old Republic gave the revolution a sense of triumphant nationalism. It translated to the population as the salvation of the nation. It is within this context of a newfound and victorious state that the MES commission took place. The new regime had to reorganize and/or create the country’s public institutions. These new public organisms would be responsible for the conscious and proud citizen of the new Brazilian nation. The construction of public buildings was a central project intended to help the state physically reconfigure its infrastructure, but, above all, to represent visually and symbolically the revolution’s new way of understanding and organizing public service and administration, which had to differ from the Old Republic.

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\(^{16}\) Williams, 4.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Art and architecture assumed a crucial role in the diffusion of revolutionary ideals. As part of the process of the reconstruction of the state, in 1930 Vargas immediately appointed Francisco Campos (1891-1968) as Minister of Education and Public Health and placed new directors into the main institutions of culture and education in the country. Rodolfo Garcia (1873-1949) was appointed to the Museu histórico nacional (National Historic Museum), Luciano Gallet (1993-1931) took over the Instituto nacional de música (National Institute of Music) and Costa, later head of the MES project, became director of the Escola nacional de belas artes (The National School of Fine Arts) [ENBA]. In his autobiography, Costa remembers the day of his appointment in this way:

> With the 1930 Revolution, one of the first government acts was the appointment of new directors to the fields of culture and education. (…) Caught by surprise, I received in Correias [town in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro] the message that Rodrigo M. F. de Andrade [Chief of Staff to the Minister of Education Francisco Campos], who I still didn’t know, was asking my presence at the Ministry (…). I found myself, all of a sudden, facing the task of (re) organizing the instruction of the so-called Fine Arts in the country.¹⁸

Although Costa did not know the minister and his chief of staff before his appointment to the ENBA, after his placement and throughout his career as an architect he became acquainted with several intellectuals at the Ministry. These relationships would be fundamental to Costa’s later campaign for an official Brazilian architecture of Corbusian inspiration and for his selection as leader of the MES

¹⁸ Costa (1995), 16. There is, however, some controversy regarding the date and circumstances of Costa’s appointment to the ENBA. Contrary to Costa’s recollection of being called on by the new Minister, Maria Lucia Bressan Pinheiro’s research, based on the minutes of the ENBA sessions, points out that the architect stepped in as director at the suggestion of José Marianno Filho, his mentor, in September of 1930, before the revolution of October 3, 1930, in Maria Lúcia Bressan Pinheiro, “Lucio Costa e a Escola Nacional de Belas Artes,” 6º Seminario Docomomo Brasil –Niterói, RJ, November 16-19, 2005, on the website of the Internacional Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites, and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement (docomomo) <http://www.docomomo.org.br/seminario%206%20pdfs/Maria%20Lucia%20Bressan%20Pinheiro.pdf> [Accessed on October 15, 2011]. Even if Costa assumed the directorship of the ENBA before the coup, the maintenance of his appointment after October 3, 1930, by the revolutionary government was still a political decision and an approval of Costa by the new Minister of Education and Public Health.
comission in 1936.

**Definitions of Modern and National**

At the ENBA, before stepping up as director, Costa was a disciple of José Marianno Filho, the main advocate of the neocolonial movement, which represented the official architectural style of the state during the 1920s. The movement preached the preservation and repetition of forms of Brazil’s colonial past as an affirmation of what was indeed Brazilian. Marianno’s private home, the Solar de Monjope [Figs. 2.a and 2.b], built in 1923 and demolished in the 1970s, was the pinnacle of this style of architecture. The outdoor staircase, the wood grate enclosed balconies, the prolonged roof framing the entire construction, the azulejos (Portuguese tiles) covering the lower outer wall of the house and the bars on the ground floor windows simulating senzalas (slave quarters) were some of its clear neocolonial characteristics. However, at that moment, the neocolonial did not have a traditionalist character. Until 1930, the neocolonial was considered not only the national style, but also a representation of the Brazilian architectural avant-garde.\(^{19}\) Although the roots of the neocolonial movement were in the São Paulo elite of coffee planters, their biggest exponent, Marianno, was active in the capital, Rio de Janeiro, at the National School of Fine Arts.\(^{20}\) There, Marianno created the theoretical basis for the neocolonial movement and established it as the official national architecture. It was only later, in the mid-1930s, in the wake of the MES controversy, that international modernism based on geometric abstraction would supplant the neocolonial.

Meanwhile, ideas on modern architecture, such as the shift from artisanal to

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industrial materials and construction techniques and the belief in architecture as a tool in the design of more democratic societies, presented at the First International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in Switzerland, 1928, were slowly gaining support in Brazil. Architect Gregory Warchavchik (1896-1972), one of its main advocates in the country, wrote a series of articles, *Arquitetura do século X*, in the *Correio Paulistano* newspaper from August to December of 1928, in which he presented these new concepts. Warchavchik’s article of October 1928 presented urban planning and architecture as tools for contemporary and democratic societal organizations for the first time to the Brazilian public, as they had been presented at the congress organized by Le Corbusier. Architecture had traditionally been perceived and discussed as merely decorative and symbolic. Warchavchik’s exposure in the press of the characteristics of the new architecture triggered a broader interest in modernist methods of construction. The architect’s own modernist house, in São Paulo’s Rua Santa Cruz [Fig. 3.a and 3.b], 1927-1928, for example, piqued the interest of important Brazilian intellectuals such as Anísio Teixeira, which then led to their support of modernist architecture and helped to spread Corbusian ideas in

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21 Warchavchik was born in Odessa, 1896, then part of the Russian Empire. In 1923 he fled Ukraine and arrived in Brazil. He was naturalized a Brazilian in 1927.


23 Prominent intellectual Anísio Teixeira praises Warchavchik’s house in an interview published by the *Correio Paulistano* in November 30, 1929: “Warchavchik is Russian, but I had never had a stronger impression of the Brazilian house than when I visited his residence of straight and clear lines, built in cement, iron, and glass inside a frame of gigantic natural cacti. The work was Brazilian because it was a joint enterprise between the spirit of men and the characteristics of the land,” in Geraldo Ferraz, *Warchavchik e a introdução da nova arquitetura no Brasil* (São Paulo: MASP, 1965), 56. Teixeira’s understanding of modernist architecture as universal (a product of all men) and its unison with the specific characteristics of the Brazilian landscape as characteristics of a Brazilian Modernist architecture will be crucial in the development of the MES building and decorative program.
Brazil. This increased interest culminated in an invitation to Le Corbusier to give a series of lectures in Brazil in 1929. The French-Swiss architect’s passage through the country, from October to November of 1929, left a sense of uncertainty in the supporters of the neocolonial movement. By 1930, the year of the revolution, the conviction of what defined modern and national architecture had vanished. Was it the neocolonial nationalism of Marianno, which had been the avant-garde up until then, or was it the new architecture proposed by Le Corbusier and its local translator Warchavchik?

**Reform and the Revolutionary Salon, 1931**

As noted previously, in 1930 Costa became director of the ENBA. In the midst of the conflict between neocolonial and Corbusian ideas, his appointment brought serenity to neocolonial followers. Costa was, after all, one of Marianno’s most loyal disciples. Once in charge of the school, however, he went against his mentor’s expectations. Costa invested in a radical renovation of the ENBA’s educational model, especially in architecture. He stated on his autobiography:

> I believe that the architecture course needs a radical transformation. (…) The divergence between the architecture and the structure, the construction itself, has taken alarming proportions. The reform will give the school a technical-scientific education as close to perfect as possible and it will guide the artistic instruction toward a perfect harmony with the construction. The classics will be studied as a subject; the historical styles will be apparatus for critique and not for practical application.

Costa’s intention to give architecture a scientific spin led the school toward industrial techniques regarding construction and the theoretical ideas supported by Le Corbusier. A materialization of that tendency was Costa’s hiring of Warchavchik and

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24 Warchavchik’s project of straight lines, geometric repetition, rational use of space, and great attention to natural light and ventilation was in accordance to Le Corbusier’s ideals exposed by his articles in the *Correio Paulistano*.

Alexander Buddeus as architecture professors at the ENBA. More than his educational reform, however, which was soon aborted due to the pressure of the conservative academicism of the majority of the ENBA’s members, Costa’s principal contribution as director of the ENBA was the *Salão oficial da XXXVIII exposição geral de belas artes* [Official Salon of the XXXVIII General Exhibition of Fine Arts], 1931, renamed by the press as the *Salão revolucionário* [Revolutionary Salon]. The Salon, under Costa’s direction, brought the idea of a revolution to the field of the arts and made the architect himself a revolutionary.

Manuel Bandeira and Anita Malfatti, active participants at the *Semana de arte moderna de 1922* (Week of Modern Art of 1922), along with Celso Antônio and Portinari, helped Costa organize the Revolutionary Salon. Differently from the Week of 1922 in São Paulo, however, which had reached a fraction of the Brazilian elite in the 1920s, the Salon of 1931 was a show at the heart of the institution responsible for the artistic destiny of the country. It sprung from Costa’s wider project of redefining art education in Brazil and had the support of the revolutionary government. In September 11, 1931, the *O Jornal* newspaper affirmed:

> The revolution has invaded all spheres (…) Extremists exaggeratedly define it, in their condemnation of such a revolutionary environment in the noble rooms of academia, as an invasion of barbarians. (…) Initiated outside, the revolution ended up inside the School.  

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26 To teach painting, Costa hired another German, the painter Leo Putz. Costa also called the Brazilian Celso Antônio to teach sculpture, Costa (1995), 108.

27 Costa was forced to step down during the Revolutionary Salon of 1931 due to allegations of the conservatives of Costa’s infringement of federal university by-laws, Pinheiro (2005), 34.

28 The Week of Modern Art of 1922 was the first cultural movement in Brazil in favor of modern art and literature. It took place at the Teatro Municipal de São Paulo [São Paulo’s Municipal Theater] from February 13 to 18, 1922, exhibiting around 100 works of art and hosting three literary-musical sessions. The movement opposed the conservative academicism that had been predominant in the arts and letters since the 19th Century and shook the morals of the Brazilian art and literary worlds. It did not aim at or affect, however, the main political and artistic institutions in the country. Therefore, it did not lead to political and/or social innovations.

29 *O jornal* (Rio de Janeiro, RJ), Sep. 11, 1931.
Towards modern nationalism

In this context, Costa became as revolutionary as the articulators of the military revolution of 1930. By promoting a radical change in the official instruction of art in the country and by bringing new faculty to the school, Costa associated the modernization of the arts in Brazil with the modernization of government proposed by the revolution. The neocolonial, previously associated with the affirmation of the national and of modernity, suffered a metamorphosis after Costa’s leadership of the ENBA. The neocolonial now became associated with traditionalist ideals that looked to the past and that represented all that was contrary to an architecture representative of a new state to be constructed. However, in 1931, the conservative majority of the ENBA’s faculty was able to force the replacement of Costa as director. The position was passed on to architect Archimedes Memória (1893-1960), son-in-law of a member of the Câmara dos quarenta [Chamber of the Forty], an important branch of the conservative Partido integralista [Integralist Party], Vargas’s strongest political ally.30

Losing the directorship of the ENBA did not change the fact that Costa now represented the revolutionary political ideals of renewal in the fields of art and architecture. It is impossible to dissociate Costa’s changes at the ENBA from the political, military, and aesthetic movements that occurred during the 1920s and that culminated in the 1930 Revolution. There was the need for constructing a new national identity that did not translate into traditional European forms in art and architecture. It was an uneasy transition, however, both in terms of the political and aesthetic contexts and would last for an entire decade. The MES project, developed

30 Cavalcanti, 39.
from 1936 to 1945, embodies in many ways this transitional period and plays a fundamental role in defining Brazilian modern nationalism of the post-revolutionary period.
Chapter 2.

Background for the MES Building Commission

The 1930s was a politically unstable period for Brazil. Following the 1930 revolution, in 1932, the government suffered the Revolução constitucionalista [Constitutionalist Revolution], organized by members of the military unsatisfied with the new regime. The state suppressed the movement and in 1934 organized a new constitution, in an attempt to impose on the country. The constitutional document of 1934 re-established the country’s democracy. The constituent committee served as the Electoral College and turned Vargas from dictator into elected president. The new constitution established, however, the impossibility of re-election. Therefore, it became urgent to finalize the work initiated by the 1930 Revolution. Vargas had four years to complete his reconstruction of the state. New ministers were appointed with the intent to renew forces to complete what the provisory government had initiated. Capanema replaces Campos as the new Minister of Education and Public Health. One of the first measures taken by Capanema was the planning of a new building for his ministry.31

In his Manifesto à nação [Manifest to the nation], delivered in June of 1934, Vargas affirmed that the government had yet to address the fundamental problems that held the country’s progress back: basic sanitary conditions, education, and the population of the country’s territory. The first two issues were directly related to the MES. Vargas stated:

31 The MES used to function in the building of the Municipal Council of the City of Rio de Janeiro, but with the constitution’s reestablishment of municipal legislative powers, the Ministry had to be moved. Capanema ended up dispatching from rental offices in Rio de Janeiro’s central area. Jorge Czajkowski, Guia da arquitetura eclectica no Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, 2000), 35.
All considerable nations have reached a superior level of progress through the education of its people. I refer to education in the wide and social sense of the word: physical and moral, eugenic and civic, industrial and agricultural, having access to the basics of a primary instruction in the letters, in the technical and professional. (…) 

It was the MES’s task to “elevate” the level of the popular tiers of society through the development and diffusion of Brazilian “high culture”: its art, music, and letters. The Department of Propaganda, under the Ministry of Education and Public Health, was responsible for the pedagogical application of these goals and for the creation of the New Brazilian Man. Music, physical education, cinema, and radio programs in schools were created to forge the new citizen. Classical composer Heitor Villas-Lobos (1887-1959) conducted choruses of hundreds of people in schools, stadiums, and public squares, for example. The creation of the New Brazilian Man involved the homogenizing of regional differences through a strong centralizing power. In his June 1934 speech, Vargas also mentioned eugenic education. Theories widely spread at the time by official publications insisted that the delay in Brazil’s progress was due to the miscigenation of its people. The state believed in the need to diminish the country’s regional and racial differences too. Vargas’s regime of exalted nationalism, a centralized government under dictatorial power, suppression of opposition, elimination of congress, and racist beliefs in eugenic cleansing echoed European fascist regimes.

Although there had been talks between the previous minister, Washington Pires,
and architect Luiz Signorelli about the design of a new building for the MES.\textsuperscript{37} Capanema chose to run a contest, rather than to make an arbitrary appointment, a decision that suited the democratic atmosphere that reigned over in the capital in the months following the signing of the constitution of 1934. With the country back to legal normality (congress was reopened and the president was elected), an arbitrary selection of the MES’s architect seemed out of place. A public contest reflected the government’s desire to show a modern, rational, and efficient administration that contrasted with the administration of the Old Republic. The appearance was, however, far from reality. Although the MES contest would end up having a democratically chosen winner, its inadequacy for the state’s political agenda would result in the winner being arbitrarily disregarded for the commission.

\textbf{The Contest}

On April 23, 1935, the contest for the design of the MES building officially began. The guidelines stated that it would have two phases: first, projects from any architect legally able to work in Brazil would be admitted, and only a maximum of five projects would be considered by the jury to enter the second phase.\textsuperscript{38} After two meetings of the jury, thirty-three projects were eliminated from the contest, including

\textsuperscript{37} Washington Pires, the Minister of Education and Public Health before Capanema, had chosen the given lot to the MES’s new house. Pires had also invited Luiz Signorelli, an architect from the state of Minas Gerais, to draw the new project. Pires and Signorelli have been forgotten, however, in the historiography of the MES project, which today focuses on the “visionary” accomplishments of Capanema and the team of architects that turned modernist architecture into an hegemonic form of thinking about architectural space in Brazil. Capanema Archives, CPDOC/FGV, GC f 34 10 19 rolo 18, fot.170.

\textsuperscript{38} The jury had a representative of the \textit{Instituto dos arquitetos do Brasil} [The Institute of the Architects of Brazil], of the ENBA [The National School of Fine Arts], two civil engineers, one from the \textit{Escola politecnica da Universidade federal} [The Polytechnic School from the Federal University] and the other from the Renovation and Transports department of the MES. Capanema had the position of president of the jury and tiebreaker. Cavalcanti, 34-35.
all modernist projects. In the third meeting, the three finalists, under the pseudonyms of Pax, Minerva, and Alpha [Figs. 4.a to 4.c], were instructed to further develop their ideas for the final decision. The final meeting took place on October 1, 1935. The three final projects were opened and the identity of their authors was revealed to the jury. Pax, the project by Archimedes Memória [Fig. 4.a], which incorporated neoclassical forms and Marajoara ornamentation [Fig. 5], won the contest with two votes for first place, one for second and one for third place.

Memória was the director of the National School of Fine Arts at the time and closely related to one of Vargas’s strongest political ally. Capanema awarded the prize to Memória’s project, but soon after called on Costa to draw up another plan for the Ministry.

Capanema’s surprising decision to replace Memória’s project occurred after the architects of the modernist projects eliminated from the competition orchestrated a campaign to prove the value of their work to the commission. Soon after their exclusion in the first phase of the contest, due to “irregularities in relation to municipal guidelines,” an article with two modernist projects--one belonging to Affonso Reidy and the other to the team Ernani Vasconcellos and Jorge Moreira–was

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39 The first meeting took place on June 17, 1935 and was only a registration and legal triage of the contestants. On July 5, 1935, the jury chose, in their second meeting, three finalists. June 17, 1935, Minutes of the first and second meetings of the contest for the choosing of the project for the MES building. Archive of the Institute of the Historic and Artistic National Patrimony [IPHAN].
40 July 8, 1935, Minute of the third meeting of the contest for the choosing of the project for the MES building. Archive of the Institute of the Historic and Artistic National Patrimony [IPHAN].
41 October 1, 1935, Minute of the closing meeting of the contest for the choosing of the project for the MES building. Archive of the Institute of the Historic and Artistic National Patrimony [IPHAN].
42 Ibid.
43 Cavalcanti, 39.
published in the official Revista da diretoria de engenharia da prefeitura do distrito federal [The Magazine of the Mayor’s Office for Civil Engineering in the Federal District] exposing their innovative and economic construction techniques and revolutionary form.\textsuperscript{45} In the final meeting of the panel that decided the MES project winner, the representative of the Instituto central dos arquitetos [Central Institute of Architects], Salvador Batalha, vehemently criticized Memória’s triumphant project by stating that it looked like an exhibition pavilion and not a ministry.\textsuperscript{46} It was at the Ministry itself, however, that modernist architects found their strongest support. Notorious leftist intellectuals working at the Ministry, such as poets Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Mário de Andrade, were in favor of the replacement of Memória’s project.\textsuperscript{47}

Capanema knew that the MES building needed to mirror the modern national identity that Vargas wanted to build, the modern Brazil that the regime wished to signify. At stake in the competition was the aesthetic style that would embody this new concept. Memória’s project, which looked back to neocolonial and pre-Columbian forms, was a strategy antithetical to the future-oriented goals of the Ministry and of the state. On February of 1936, a month after the payment of the award to Memória, Costa accepted the commission offered by Capanema with Vargas’s authorization, and formed a team of former students of the School of Fine Arts, all admirers of the theories of Le Corbusier, to carry out the project with him.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} The Magazine was at the time managed by Carmen Portinho, a civil engineer married to Affonso Reidy. Cavalcanti, 38.
\textsuperscript{46} October 1st, 1935, Minute of the closing meeting of the contest for the choosing of the project for the MES building.
\textsuperscript{47} Lissovsky and Sá, 93.
\textsuperscript{48} On February 11, 1936, Capanema wrote to Vargas to express his dissatisfaction with the winning project and officially asks permission to give Costa the commission: “None of the awarded projects
The Minister’s arbitrary invitation exposes an often-overlooked close relationship between leftist intellectuals and the Vargas regime. To have appointed Costa leader of the MES is frequently seen as a visionary move by Capanema. However, Costa’s appointment as director of ENBA, in 1930, had been supported by Vargas’s revolutionary movement of that same year. Costa’s innovations at the school had made him a revolutionary himself. Therefore, to bring Costa back to the official limelight in 1936 can be seen, rather, as a calculated political strategy by Capanema. Costa’s name evoked the optimism of the first years after the 1930 Revolution, overshadowed by the turbulent events associated with Vargas’s first government, and which the state wanted to recover.49

Among the difficulties of Vargas’ early 1930s rule, was an important Communist uprising against the regime, which took place in November of 1935. Known as the Intentona comunista [Communist conspiracy], the movement was contained, but by 1936 Brazilian society had become polarized between those who resisted and those who supported the movement. The government reacted by persecuting Communist sympathizers, who were condemned to death, exile, or to a

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49 Clearly Costa had a connection with the Vargas regime since his early appointment as director of the ENBA. Cavalcanti reveals, however, that previous to the MES commission, Capanema had asked the Clube de engenharia [Civil Engineers’ Club], the Sindicato nacional dos engenheiros [Civil Engineers’ National Union], and the Instituto central dos arquitetos [Central Institute of Architects] to elaborate lists of people capable of executing the project of the Universidade do Brasil [The University of Brazil] in Rio de Janeiro and Costa figured on all of the three lists. Cavalcanti, 40.
clandestine life. In his reaction to Capanema’s dismissal of his project, Memória seized on the anti-communist fervor to express his outrage against Capanema’s dismissal of his work. In a letter addressed directly to Vargas, the architect expressed that his great concern was Costa’s relationship with Warchavchik, “a Russian Jew of suspicious activities” and Costa’s affiliation with the Club de arte moderna (Club of Modern Art), “a Communist cell that has as its main objective the agitation of the artistic field and the annulment of real values outside of its creed.”

Despite this anti-Communist scenario, modernist architects thought of architecture as an economic and political tool that could be used to improve society through the design of buildings and through urban planning. Conservatives in Brazil considered these ideas, promoted by Le Corbusier at the International Congress of Modern Architecture, “communistic, ugly, and highly unnational.” Although the principles of the modernist team clashed with the state’s anti-Communism, anti-internationalism, and other “threats” to the nation, the promise to break with old political systems of the 1930 revolution seemed, for both, a possibility for creating a new cultural identity different from neocolonial models supported by the Old Republic. The MES architects and Vargas’s fascist regime had divergent ideologies, but their desire to break with the past and their hopes for the future converged. The turn of events of the MES contest triggered a paradigmatic change in Brazilian architecture from the prevalent academicism of the early 1900s to the establishment of modernist architecture as the national, official, and dominant style.

Le Corbusier

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50 Lissovsky and Sá, 26.
51 Williams, 15.
The agreement between Costa and Capanema included the decision to invite Le Corbusier to work as a consultant to the project. In March of 1936, the Minister began to arrange Le Corbusier’s second visit to the country, now as a consultant to the MES and the Universidade do brasil [University of Brazil] projects, both in the capital. Although the winning proposal of the MES contest had been discarded, there were no guarantees that a modernist project presented by Costa’s team would be approved by the Minister. For that reason, Costa wanted Le Corbusier as a validation of his work. Costa recalled:

But it was not easy to have Le Corbusier’s visit, since in the year before Piacentini –Mussolini’s architect – had already been to the country, hired by the government to help with the implantation of the University – the minister did not feel he could ask for another hiring. But I insisted so much that we ended up in the Catete [Presidential Palace], and Dr. Getúlio, amused and perplexed by my stubbornness, ended up agreeing, as if giving in to a grandson’s whims.

Capanema’s hiring of both Le Corbusier and Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) within the same year illustrates the ideological ambiguity and the eclectic range of the art and architecture sponsored by his ministry. Piacentini was one of the most prominent architects of Mussolini’s fascist regime and a major exponent of fascist architecture. In 1935 he had been invited by Capanema to help with the plans for the University of Brazil. Although Costa counted on the support of modernist intellectuals in the federal government, this did not mean that the modernist architects would get all the commissions of the new state-sponsored buildings. Some battles, like the MES, were won, but the losses were initially a lot more. Le Corbusier’s project for the University of Brasil, for example, was rejected in favor of a project by

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52 Facsimile of the first letter sent by Alberto Monteiro de Carvalho, the minister’s correspondent with Le Corbusier, in Cecília Rodrigues Santos, Margareth Campos da Silva Pereira, Romão Veriano da Silva Pereira, and Vasco Caldeira da Silva, Le Corbusier e o Brasil (São Paulo: Tessela, Projeto editora, 1987), 134.

Piacentini. The commission for the Ministry of the Treasury, another example, had been awarded in a contest to a project of Corbusian inspirations only to be substituted by completely new guidelines given by Minister Artur de Souza Costa. The new building of the Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce was given to a neocolonial project without a contest. These projects were a display of the heterogeneous conceptions of “modern” in Brazil in the mid-1930s. The new buildings were representations of recent technological comforts (elevators, air-conditioning) and of rational and fast methods of construction, and they were all considered part of the “modern” nationalist aesthetic. The modernist canon had not yet been established. In 1936, a modern building did not necessarily mean a Corbusian building.

Within this context, Costa wrote a request to Le Corbusier before his arrival in Brazil:

Capanema seems inclined to accept the idea, in principle; he only fears a scandal in the press, the reaction of the public opinion, unprepared to accept so ‘inconvenient’ proposals without reacting. In these conditions, your trip to Rio seems providential to us. One of your tasks will be to give the minister your opinion about the project, which I am sending you pictures of. If it is not of your liking, please tell us bluntly, but please don’t tell it so straight-forwardly to Mr. Capanema: ‘It’s ugly... they didn’t understand me’ – or we would be lost without any cause for appeal, since the ‘others’ have already condemned it and that’s the reason we ask for your appraisal."

Capanema’s contact with Le Corbusier was arranged by Alberto Monteiro de Carvalho (1887-1969), who corresponded with the architect since his first visit to the country in 1929. Monteiro de Carvalho’s first letter to Le Corbusier informed the architect of the existence, in Rio, of a group of architects “a la Corbusier.”

54 Cavalcanti, 63.
55 Ibid., 76.
56 Lissovsky and Sá, 95.
57 Santos, 134.
importantly, however, the letter exposed the favorable moment for the development of Corbusian projects in Brazil, due to the resistance of Brazilian intellectuals to the ideas of Piacentini. According to Monteiro de Carvalho, the country “was not ‘too’ fascist,” it was open to international architecture, as it was against communism. Le Corbusier had worked for and sympathized with the Soviet regime. His Brazilian admirers were mostly Communists. Nevertheless, the French-Swiss architect continued his negotiations with the Brazilian government. Neither side of the correspondence made ever again any mention or comment on political ideologies.

Le Corbusier was interested in putting his ideas about architecture into practice. As embodied by a statement that the architect had made about Buenos Aires, but which could be applied to any South American city, Le Corbusier perceived that the American continent as disconnected from Europe. In America, art was unrooted from the European schools, according to Le Corbusier:

> Your city, more than Paris or any other city, suggests to me a thousand ideas. I explain to myself the motive: above all, Buenos Aires is in America. And America is separated by the silence of an ocean from Mr. Vignola’s Rome and from the Institute de France. America – the pampas or the virgin forest! You face gigantic problems. You must act fast; you are deprived of prejudices and will do things animated by the spirit of its time!

Perhaps Le Corbusier conveniently saw the political ideologies that were shaking Europe at the time as not pertaining to the American universe, in spite of Vargas’s clear fascist tendencies. Monteiro de Carvalho suggested that Le Corbusier take the new Hindenburg dirigible to arrive faster in Brazil. It is on board the famous German airship, a symbol of industrial innovation and of modernity at the time, that Le

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58 Ibid.
59 In a April 17, 1936, Le Corbusier wrote to Monteiro de Carvalho: “the profession of prophet begins to weigh on my shoulders and I need to make a living. (...) It is necessary that I build, in any way, or I’ll die as a theorist, what bothers me.” Ibid., 137.
Corbusier landed in Rio de Janeiro on June 12, 1936.

The Project

A month prior to Le Corbusier’s arrival, Costa had presented Capanema with his team’s first draft for the MES building [Fig. 6.a and 6.b]. Le Corbusier approved the Brazilian project\(^\text{61}\) in order to keep Costa’s team in the commission, as the architect had requested in his letter to the French-Swiss master. Once officially working as a consultant to the project, however, Le Corbusier began to criticize and modify the initial draft made by the Brazilian team. Instead of disapproving the project, Le Corbusier diplomatically stated that the Brazilian project was not appropriate for the location it had been given.\(^\text{62}\) The project had been assigned an internal block of the Esplanada do castelo [Castelo Esplanade] [Fig. 7.a and 7.b].\(^\text{63}\) Le Corbusier had a different location in mind, on the shore, overlooking Rio’s Baía de Guanabara [Guanabara Bay]. His first MES sketch is for this new proposed location [Fig. 8.a] at the Santa Luzia beach. Le Corbusier had condemned the symmetry of the Brazilian plan and the disconnect between the three blocks of its u-shaped design.\(^\text{64}\) For the ocean view terrain, the architect proposed one horizontal single block rather than three. The plan included the architect’s famous “five points”: the pilotis, the free plan (achieved through the load-bearing columns), the free façade, the continuous windows, and the roof garden [Fig. 8.b].\(^\text{65}\) The five points were

\(^{61}\) “This project can be considered, for its architectural value, one of the best ever made in the world,” stated Le Corbusier in 1937. Lissovsky and Sá, 109-110.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{63}\) The Esplanade was the result of a 1921 urban reform that, among other things, removed the Morro do castelo [Castelo Hill] from the central area of Rio leaving an open space never utilized. Several government buildings sponsored by the Vargas’s regime would be constructed at the Castelo Esplanade.

\(^{64}\) Lissovsky and Sá, 111.

\(^{65}\) Weber, 231.
combined with other principles of International Style architecture, such as the adoption of simple geometric forms, the integration of internal and external spaces, and the exploitation of natural ventilation and light. Le Corbusier’s sketch contains one of his first uses of the curtain wall (a top to bottom glass façade oriented towards the side least exposed to sun) and the brise-soleil, a concrete sun breaker that the architect had created three years earlier. Capanema denied Le Corbusier’s request to change the MES location. Additional drawings for its originally assigned location were then made by the French-Swiss architect [Fig. 9.a and 9.b]. Just before Le Corbusier’s return to France, on August 11, 1936, Capanema asked Costa’s team for the final modifications made to their original project under Le Corbusier’s consultancy. The French-Swiss master had, after all, regarded it as excellent. A couple of days later, the Brazilian team submitted drawings of what would be the bases for the “modified” version of their original project, now incorporating Le Corbusier’s contribution [Fig. 10.a]. From Le Corbusier’s drawings and from the experience gained by working with him, Costa’s team “re-elaborated” the project that they had presented in May of 1936.

Calling it a “variant” of the initial project, the architects avoided the scrutiny that the first plan had been through by official engineers, the press, and the public opinion. Submitted on January 5, 1937, the final plan for the MES building met the official construction guidelines disregarded in the first plan and answered

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66 Underwood, 24.
67 In Brazil, the brise-soleil had been used for the first time in the building of the Associação brasileira de imprensa (Brazilian Press Association), 1935, by architects Marcelo and Milton Roberto. Brillembourg, 13.
68 Lissovsky and Sá, 113.
69 Ibid., 131.
Capanema’s specific requests, such as the addition of a large gallery adjacent to a conference hall. The new project was not, however, a variant of the Brazilian team’s initial plan, but a completely different one.

Nothing like the u-shaped project that they claimed to have revised, the new project by the Brazilian architects was a one-plate structure, as suggested by Le Corbusier’s drawings for the MES [Fig. 10.a]. Costa’s group chose to turn, however, the direction of the building and to occupy the shorter length of the terrain, which made the length of the building shorter too. The Brazilian team raised the height of the pilotis considerably, to more than nine meters tall, about thirty feet high, twice the height suggested by Le Corbusier. The shorter length and the raised pilotis turned Le Corbusier’s horizontal plan into a vertical structure supported by colossal columns. The plan submitted to Capanema showed the building having ten floors. However, a scale model of the project featured as a symbol of the country’s innovation in the Novo Brasil: 1930-1938 [New Brazil: 1930-1938] exhibition, organized by the government in 1938, and showed the final version of the MES building with fifteen floors, which accentuated its verticality even more [Fig. 10.b]. The concrete brise-soleil were modified with the inclusion of a system of manually adjustable louvers created by the Brazilians, which was capable of maintaining solar protection irrespective to the sun angle and rendered the brise-soleil more appropriate for Rio’s warm climate [Fig 11]. The new louvers system also showcased the Brazilians’ ingenuity and awareness of their local climate requirements. Moreover, Le Corbusier had suggested offices only on one side of the building, but Costa’s team incorporated

70 Ibid., 130.
71 Brillembourg, 13.
offices on the both sides of the corridors on some of the floors [Fig. 12]. This change allowed the building to have more balance, now that the pilotis had been raised. The new row of offices also responded better to the building’s bureaucratic purpose as well as to Vargas’s reorganization of the government. The MES’s larger scale and more functional model mirrored the state’s broader physical transformation of the capital. The building was both a part of the reorganization of the government and a palpable advertising of the prosperity and modernity of the Vargas administration.

**Modernization of Rio**

The government wanted to make industrial development and the modernization of the state visible. It turned mansions of the affluent south zone of Rio into skyscrapers, spread suburbs and factories alongside the newly built Avenida Brasil (1937) and, most importantly, converted the central area where the MES stood from a residential area into the business and administrative heart of the city. The opening of the widest avenue in the country, the Avenue Presidente Getúlio Vargas, which resulted in the destruction of many neocolonial buildings and churches [Fig. 13.a and 13.b] and enhanced the access to the Center of Rio. In August of 1936, on the block next to the one assigned to the MES, Agamenon Magalhães, Minister of Labor, Industry and Commerce, broke ground for the construction of his ministry’s new house. In December of that same year, Souza Costa, Minister of the Treasury, chose a winner for the contest that selected a project for his ministry’s new building. Capanema had been the first minister to propose the construction of a new ministerial

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73 Cavalcanti, 87-88.
74 Ibid.
building, but these later proponents put their plans into practice before the MES.

Why?

Until January of 1937, Capanema was undecided about what to build.\textsuperscript{75} This indecision had been expressed in a letter from Costa to Le Corbusier dated December 31, 1936, in which Costa states, in relation to Le Corbusier’s first sketch: “He [Capanema] did not understand all the exceptional beauty of your building.”\textsuperscript{76} Neither the Minister nor most of the nation understood Le Corbusier’s proposal. In spite of the enthusiasm of the intellectual elite toward Le Corbusier’s visit to the country, architecture had still an undefined, eclectic style in Brazil in the 1930s. The MES’s neighbor, the Ministerio da Fazenda (Ministry of the Treasury) [Fig. 14.a and 14.b], for example, is an illustration of this eclecticism. Although its architects had defined it as a neoclassical building,\textsuperscript{77} its entrance framed by a colossal Doric colonnade inspired by the Parthenon had the heavy volume and monumentality of fascist architecture. It recalled, for example, the midway between neo-classicism and rationalism of Piacentini’s monumental plan for the Esposizione Universal Romana (EUR) [Figs. 15.a to 15.d], completed in 1942 but which had been under construction since the early 1930s.\textsuperscript{78}

The significantly taller and bulkier columns of the MES bestowed the project with the monumentality of a classical colonnade. The colossal columns evoked

\textsuperscript{75} After Le Corbusier’s visit, Capanema would still consult with another architect of international prestige, August Perret, about the MES project. Passing through Rio on his way back to France from Buenos Aires, Perret gave his opinion on the project and his suggestions were to be incorporated into the project as well. Lissovsky and Sá, 125-126.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{77} Cavalcanti, 76.
\textsuperscript{78} John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfink, Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35-36. EUR was a monumental urban planning project, much like Vargas’ plan for the center of Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition never happened due to WWII.
antiquity and its Corbusian style followed the rational postulates of modernist architecture. The new plan for the building combined neo-classicism and rationalism, as did its neighbor. Through completely different approaches, the two state-sponsored buildings mirrored characteristics of fascist architecture. Although there is no evidence that the state had any say in the changes made by Costa’s team to Le Corbusier’s sketch for the Ministry, the new structure echoed the massive scale of Vargas’s ambitious re-urbanization of the capital and better illustrated its ideological tendencies.

David Underwood suggests that the changes in Le Corbusier’s plan “resulted in a more monumental, structurally lighter, and plastically richer work that was thoroughly Brazilian.” Underwood’s association of the project’s hybridity with a modern national identity is a key concept in understanding the relationship between the leftist ideology of Costa’s team and the conservative agenda of Vargas’s regime. The 1930 revolution that brought Vargas to power, for example, coincided with the year of Costa’s attempted reform at the National School of Fine Arts. The 1930 Revolution’s promise to break with old political systems seemed to Costa and his progressive group as the trigger for the establishment of a new Brazilian cultural identity. The rationalism of modernist architecture worked as an emancipatory tool, a clean slate. Although at opposite ends of the spectrum, leftist artists and Vargas’s conservative state aspired to build a modern Brazilian identity.80

In a study of the relationship between Brazilian intellectuals and the ruling classes from the 1920s to the 1940s, Sérgio Miceli suggests that it was the nationalist
ideal that allowed left-wing intellectuals to serve authoritarian states.\textsuperscript{81} In 1939, the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987), Capanema’s chief of staff and one of the most prominent left-wing intellectuals to accept a position in the Vargas’s government, explained that rather than being translators of an “official” art, the artists and intellectuals that had accepted state patronage were producing “Brazilian art.”\textsuperscript{82} Their project, according to Drummond de Andrade, was of modern nationalism, not state propaganda. Leftist intellectuals, such as Drummond de Andrade, Costa, and Niemeyer, used Vargas’s authoritarian regime to transform modernism into a national project, according to Drummond de Andrade. The nationalism of the state and of the Brazilian left entangled opposite ideologies and established a long relationship between leftist modernist architects and the government.\textsuperscript{83}

Two years after the opening of the MES contest, Capanema, unsure about the project for a long time, finally authorized its construction on January 5, 1937. In the two years of negotiations for the MES design, Brazilians had become dissatisfied with the lack of change and the elites feared another leftist upheaval. In November of 1937 Vargas shut down Congress and threw Brazil into the dictatorship known as the \textit{Estado novo}. Capanema approved the MES project in the beginning of 1937 aware of the fact that Vargas would have to step down in 1938, according to the constitution of 1934. Would he have approved it knowing that he had only one year to oversee the

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.\textsuperscript{82} Williams, 58.\textsuperscript{83} Brazilian intellectual Antonio Cândido makes a distinction between those who served and those who “sold out” to the Estado Novo, in his “Preface” to Miceli, 11. According to Cândido, “it is dangerous to mix, from the start of the reasoning, the instances of verification with those of evaluation” judging to quickly intellectuals that “belonged to the state machine, but in very low-level positions of superstructures.”
project? The launch of the project in 1937 suggests that Capanema knew of or foresaw the possibility of a coup.

In the historiography of the MES building design, Capanema is often seen as a visionary who changed the path of art and architecture in Brazil forever. His two years of indecision, negotiation, and caution regarding the MES project reveal, however, not a visionary but a skilled politician, whose actions were calculated to work around the socio-political context in which he acted as minister. The team of Brazilian architects that with Le Corbusier created the MES building plan is often portrayed as a group of men ahead of their time. Yet an analysis of the building’s design reveals the difficulties, compromises, and adaptations that these protagonists encountered as a result of the social-political context of the commission. The execution of a state-sponsored architectural project of Corbusian inspiration under Vargas’s fascist regime was possible not due to uncanny powers, but because of strategic compromises of both the leftist architects and the conservative government that created it.
Chapter 3.

The MES Decorative Program

Developed during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, the MES fine arts program reflects the political adjustments of Vargas’s regime from 1937 to 1945. Ready in 1937, the building could have been inaugurated about the same time as two other new ministries built that same year. However, the discussions around the works of art for the MES’s decorative program delayed its opening considerably. Capanema took advantage of the visibility that the project was having locally and abroad to mold carefully the *Estado novo*’s image in the seven years of the development of its decorative program. The world was a different place in 1945 than it was in 1937. Heavily criticized by the local press for the project’s delay, Capanema inaugurated the building under pressure on October 3, 1945, just a few months before Vargas’s deposition from power on October 29. The MES was inaugurated in the year that the *Estado Novo* and World War II ended. The development of its decorative program reflects a moment of transition in Brazilian art and architecture and its conclusion marked the end of an era and the beginning of another in Brazil and the world.

The MES’s decorative program helped to solidify modernist architecture as the official architecture of Brazil and to institute the architects responsible for the project as the official forgers of Brazil’s cultural identity. In 1930, Costa had argued for a break with the past, but not a complete dismissal of traditional Brazilian architecture. Costa was, after all, a disciple of Marianno, a major exponent of the neocolonial movement. Costa’s abandonment of the neocolonial movement and divergence from his mentor was ideological rather than formal. The architect’s drift to modernist
architecture had been, above all, due to his belief in a new societal organization and in Le Corbusier’s architecture “for new social and economic conditions.”84 In 1937, Costa stated:

I admire ancient architecture, particularly our ancient architecture more each time (…) It was Bahia and Recife, the old [colonial] cities of Minas that, little by little, opened my eyes and made me understand true architecture.85

In the article, Costa linked the structure of colonial traditional houses built over pillars to the visible concrete foundations of the MES in 1937.86 The Brazilian modernist architecture being developed by Costa and his team was articulated as a translation of traditional national architecture through the new techniques of New Architecture.

Costa’s argumentation of the new through a spirit of the past and a scientific vision of the future is crucial for the insertion of the modernist architects into the principal posts of cultural preservation and production in the country. The Serviço do patrimônio histórico e artístico nacional (SPHAN) [Historic and Artistic National Patrimony Service] was created days after the coup that instituted the Estado novo in 1937. It was meant to preserve the artistic patrimony of the country. Above all, however, the SPHAN was in charge of the construction of the Estado novo’s cultural legacy for the future, including all the state-sponsored edifices that comprised the regime’s re-urbanization of the capital and, eventually, of the country.

The encounter between sculpture and architecture at the MES reflected theories on the synthesis of the arts developed by theorists of modern architecture. In 1919, Gropius, for example, famously called for an integration of the arts in his program for

84 Le Corbusier, 63.
85 Cavalcanti, 48-49.
86 Ibid.
the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar:

Together let us design, conceive, and create the new structure for the future, which will embrace
architecture, sculpture, and painting in one unity (...)\(^{87}\)

The architect believed that “there was no distinction between monumental and
decorative art” and that collaboration between artists and architects would happen
naturally within the interdisciplinary environment of the Bauhaus.\(^{88}\) In Brazil, the
synthesis of the arts theme was present in architectural discussions since the 1930s. In
*Razões da Nova Arquitetura* [Reasons of New Architecture] (1934), for example,
Costa reflected on the importance of the arts to enhance architectural production. The
architect emphasized the importance of the function and the type of decoration that
should be involved in a dialogue with modernist architecture:

The ‘embellishment’ is, in a certain way, a reminiscent of the barbarian - it has nothing to do
with real art that can make use of it or ignore it. Industrial production has its own qualities: the
purity of forms, the sharpness of its contours, the perfection of its finishing. From this precise
information and through a rigorous process of selection, we’ll be able to reach, like the ancients,
- with symmetry’s help- the superior forms of expression, counting for such with the
indispensable collaboration of painting and sculpture – not in the regional and limited sense of
the ornate, but with a broader purpose. The large sheets of wall, so common in modern
architecture, are real invitations to pictorial expansion, to bas-relief, and to sculpture as pure
plastic expression.\(^{89}\)

Two years later in 1936, Le Corbusier presented to the Brazilian architects
responsible for the MES commission his text about the association of architecture
with other art forms, such as painting and sculpture.\(^{90}\) He stated that these other forms
of art should augment the qualities of his architecture: its economy of means
incremented by the value of space, light, and volume; qualities of architecture that

\(^{87}\) Gropius statement has been reprinted many times. See, for example, Harriet Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.
\(^{88}\) Ibid.
went beyond functionality. Costa and Le Corbusier believed that the insertion of fine arts in their architectural projects functioned as a tool to enhance the conceptual and formal characteristics of their architecture. At the MES, however, the integration of art and landscape with architecture would also serve a specific socio-political function. The articulation of the MES’s decorative program by the Brazilian architects and the government responsible for it accommodated expectations of left and right in relation to the project.

The MES’s integration of art, architecture, and landscape evoked precedents in traditional Brazilian architecture. In the Baroque city of Congonhas, for example, in the state of Minas Gerais, the eighteenth-century sculptures by Antônio Francisco Lisboa, known as Aleijadinho [little crippled one], inhabited the architectural and open aired courtyard in front of the church of Nosso Senhor do Bom Jesus de Matosinhos [Fig. 16.a to 16.c] Looking from above the hill where it stands, the sculptures frame the landscape that surrounds the church. Architecture, fine arts, and landscape are part of an ensemble. Congonhas is part of what Costa calls “the heroic period of Brazilian Architecture.”91 The proliferation of figurative sculptures at the MES—some placed internally, but most placed outdoors—reflected this colonial precursor. The evocation of traditional Brazilian models pleased the conservative Vargas regime. It also pushed for the insertion of Costa and his colleagues into the official institutions of artistic preservation created by the Estado novo. On the one hand, the translation of Brazilian colonial models through the vocabulary of New Architecture verified the nationalist spirit and thriving modernity of Vargas’s regime.

On the other hand, the radical innovation of the building’s materials, construction technique, and modernist version of the synthesis of the arts appeased the left.

In terms of style the sculptures themselves fluctuated between conservative and modernist. It was possible to understand each of the works both in terms associated with the leftist avant-garde and with fascist stylistic ideals. The incorporation and the modification of different European systems of art making, such as the return to classical forms and the interest in non-western artistic production, were infused with the local vernacular to make the MES’s architecture and decorative fine arts program function in their specific socio-political context. The works created in the process reflected the political ambiguity of the project and resulted in the creation of a local, original, and official Brazilian modernism.

**The Brazilian Man Commission**

Le Corbusier’s sketches for the MES included a seated colossus placed in front of the building [Fig. 8.a and 9.a]. Le Corbusier proposed the sculpture as a formal counterbalance to the mathematical precision of the building’s geometry. Capanema was at first thrilled with Le Corbusier’s sculpture, which the Minister envisioned as a representation of the *New Brazilian Man*. For example, Capanema wrote enthusiastically to Vargas stating that:

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92 Curator Luis Pérez-Oramas characterizes the geometric abstraction that sprung in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century as “alter-forms,” selective appropriations of certain shared global interests explored in terms of local political and aesthetic concerns, a system of art making that seems to be articulated also in the MES’s architectural project and decorative program. Luis Pérez-Oramas, “Caracas: A Constructive Stage” in Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, ed. *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 76.

93 Le Corbusier’s first sketch was for the Santa Luzia Beach, the architect’s chosen and preferred location, but rejected by Capanema, who kept the assigned terrain for the project at the *Esplanada do Castelo*. Lissovsky and Sá, 127.

94 One of the principal goals of the MES was to forge the *New Brazilian Man*, the proud, prepared, healthy, and included citizen of the new regime and reason why Capanema’s ministry was also nicknamed the “Ministry of Man.” Cavalcanti, 33.
The most important of them will be a statue of man, the Brazilian man. (...) The man will be seated on a stump. He will be nude, like Rodin’s *Penseur*, but his aspect will be that of calm, of domain, of affirmation. The statue will be circa eleven meters tall. (...) The concept, it seems to me, it grandiose. In the plans for the work, there is something of the Memon colossus, in Thebes, or of the statues of the temple of Amon in Karnack. (...) The statue will be placed in front of the building. The building and the statue will complete each other, in exact and necessary manner.

By citing Rodin, Capanema aligned the image of the Brazilian man with a European precedent. The evocation of ancient Egypt reflected the interest of the European avant-garde in non-western cultures, but also alluded to the birth of Western civilization, and included the Brazilian man in it. It is necessary to remember, however, that the totalitarian regimes of the time also frequently borrowed imagery from antiquity, such as the swastika and the *fascio*. The monumentality of Le Corbusier’s colossus, typical of totalitarian regimes, and its reference to ancient Egypt could, therefore, be equally interpreted in terms of the primitivist interests of the European avant-garde or of the classicizing sculpture of the Fascio/Nazi regimes. As art historian Romy Golan states in the book *Modernity and Nostalgia*, the “return to man” that erupted after the end of WWI brought visually closer the art supported by the most conservative sectors of society to that of the avant-garde.96

Celso Antônio (1996-1994), an old friend of Costa’s from the School of Fine Arts obtained the commission of the Brazilian man in 1937. Capanema was not pleased with the first sketch. Antônio’s Brazilian man had the features of the *sertanejo* [the outback’s man from the northeast region of Brazil], a mixed race and impoverished man [Fig. 17]. Its protuberant stomach did not exude the healthy and athletic characteristics of the MES’s ideal citizen. The dissatisfaction with Antônio’s

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95 Lissovsky and Sá, 225.
model made Capanema gather intellectuals and scientists to establish the criteria for the physical appearance of the new Brazilian man. The Minister presented the group with the following questions: "What will the body of the Brazilian man, the future Brazilian man, look like? Not the vulgar or inferior, but the best example of the race? What will be his height? His volume? His color? What will his head look like? The shape of his face? His likeness?" All the “experts” answered that the model Brazilian man should be white. Capanema sent his experts to inspect Antônio’s work, but the artist refused to have the group at his studio. Capanema reacted in a letter of December 14, 1937:

The Ministry cannot give up on its thorough manner of fiscalization. (...) If, therefore, the sculptor Celso Antônio refutes the submission of his work to the commission, (...) the Ministry of Education is obligated to declare without effect the agreement with the same sculptor, who will be able to continue his work in the atelier of federal property that he now occupies until it is finished, but in private character, that is, the work is turned now into the artist’s free creation, and of his exclusive property.

Capanema asked sculptor Victor Brecheret (1894-1955) for another proposal for the Brazilian man, but soon the minister lost interest in the project. Singling out a type to represent the Brazilian man proved to be a task too difficult and dangerous in a population defined by racial diversity. Capanema found himself between the leftist artists that surrounded him at the ministry, who advocated for a Luso-afro-native Brazilian man, and the racist theories of the right-wing supporters of the Vargas regime. A representation of the Brazilian man turned out to be more divisive than unifying and the political Capanema finally decided to let it go.

Antônio’s firm idealism and the rigid racism of Capanema and his experts prevented

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97 Lissovsky and Sá, 223.
98 Ibid., 226 and 229.
99 Ibid., 230.
100 Cavalcanti, 52.
the commission from being realized. In this instance, a compromise was not achieved. Although it did not result in a physical object, the discourse around the Brazilian man commission was an important chapter in the contemporary and fruitless search for an authentic Brazilian type.\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Monument to the Brazilian Youth}

In 1942, Capanema awarded Italian sculptor Bruno Giorgi (1905-1993) the commission for \textit{Monument to the Brazilian Youth} [Figs. 18.a to 18.c], a sculpture to be placed in the MES’s entry square where the Brazilian Man was meant to inhabit four years earlier. Giorgi had been trained in France and Italy and had been deported from Italy in 1935 for anti-Mussolini actions. In totalitarian regimes, left and right, the support and image of the nation’s youth represented the strength and the perpetuation of these systems. Vargas himself declared, “It is in the youth that I deposit all my hope, it is to our youth that I plead.”\textsuperscript{102} The Minister of Justice suggested the creation of a paramilitary youth organization, but Capanema and Eurico Gaspar Dutra (1973-1974), Minister of War, opposed to the idea.\textsuperscript{103} However, there had been great changes in the world in the four years since 1937, altering the criteria for the creation and evaluation of public sculpture. The U.S. had declared war against the Axis and Hitler seemed closer to losing the war. Although the concept of an enthusiastic youth had been recently used by totalitarian regimes [Figs. 19.a and 19.b], the intimate scale of Giorgi’s sculpture, as well as the figures’ stylized

\textsuperscript{101} Studies of the time, fictitious or not, such as those by Mário de Andrade (Macunaima, 1928) and Gilberto Freyre (Casa Grande e Senzala, 1933), tried to define the authentic Brazilian man. The government, the arts, as well as the literature of the time encouraged the search for a nationalist truth.
rendering do not mirror the naturalism of Social Realism or the heroic classicism of Nazi representations of the body. Giorgi’s figures of round and economic forms relate more to the modernist classicism of Picasso and Modigliani’s 1920s nudes, for example, in their dialogue with primitive sculpture and the path toward abstraction. [Figs. 20.a and 20.b]. Unlike Picasso’s 1920s nudes, however, which are static, monumental, and timeless, Giorgi’s figures are fluid and weightless.

The girl’s raised arm brings to mind a fascist salute [Fig. 21.a], but it was also a reference to Le Corbusier’s Modular Man [Fig. 21.b]. The Modular Man was a model that established mathematical proportions in the human body in order to help improve the function and appearance of architecture. Giorgi’s Monument evoked classical marble statuary. However, the local provenance of the material, light-colored granite found in the outskirts of Rio, as well as the primitivist style of the work, related it back to the contemporary search for the national. The multifold ideological interpretations of the work’s subject matter, its classicizing manner and primitivist style made it part of both a leftist and conservative artistic vocabulary. Giorgi’s Monument to the Brazilian Youth could serve the purposes of the Brazilian modernist left (their European and American counterparts), as well as the ideals and forms of the local and international nationalists.

“The Women”

The classical feminine nude was a theme frequently manipulated by dictatorial regimes of the first half of the twentieth century. In Mussolini’s Italy, depictions of

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women were based on a stereotype of beauty/health that signified the enlargement of families, of the regime, and of the white race. According to the Duce:

“The fascist woman needs to be physically fit to be able to breed healthy children (…) Skinny or manly images of women, which represent the sterile type of the decadent western civilization, must be eliminated.”  

The female nude was also a prevalent theme in the Brazilian vernacular. Artworks tackling the image of over-sexualized mulatas, the mixed race woman from Rio’s underprivileged neighborhoods, had become common since the 1920s. Defined by the paintings of Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, the mulata had become a symbol in the search for a national type. The mulata was the theme for many literary works and popular songs of the time. Mulatas were present also in sketches by Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Carlos Leão, for example.

Celso Antônio, the artist whose Brazilian Man commission had been rejected, ended up producing three nudes for the MES: a Mulher Reclinada (Reclined Woman), 1940, [Fig. 22.a to 22.c]., placed in the terrace adjacent to the Minister’s office; Mãe (Mother) [Fig. 23.a and 23.b], to inhabit the lobby above the stairs of the exhibition hall, and Mulher de Côcoras or Índia (Crouching Woman or Indian woman), for the office of the president of the Service of Historic and Artistic National Patrimony (SPHAN), Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade.

The voluptuousness of all feminine nudes by Antônio at the MES belonged both to the stereotypical representations of women of fascist statuary and to the local symbolic interest in the mulata. The simplified forms and the non-white facial

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107 The samba Mulata fuzarqueira [Fun Loving Mulata], 1931, by Noel Rosa, for example, was a popular carnival hit.
features of *Reclined Woman* and *Mother*, for example, also intertwined European primitivism with the local search for an authentic national type. Antônio’s infusion of primitivism with the local *mulata* vernacular signified the national. Simultaneously, the light colored granite used in the artist’s sculptures and the poses of the figures recalled the classical marble statuary of ideal bodies preferred by European totalitarian regimes. The youthful and healthy glow of Antônio’s nudes aligned with the depictions of women prescribed by Mussolini. His classicized *mulatas* merge the ideals of the leftist architects and artists involved with the MES and the conservative ideals of the government that produced it.

*Jovem de Pé* (*Standing Youth*) [Fig. 24], a sculpture by Bruno Giorgi that stood in the hall of the Minister’s private elevator, differed from the three nudes by Antônio. Giorgi used terracotta colored stone, as opposed to Antônio’s marble-like granite. Although the youthful and healthy aspect of Giorgi’s nude still recalled Antônio’s classicizing work, the color of *Standing Girl*’s material evoked clay or wood, materials often used in the statuary from non-western cultures. Although the figure stands in a classical *contrapposto*, her non-descriptive face and body in conjunction with the medium give it a modernist character. In spite of the differences between Giorgi and Antônio’s sculptures, however, all of the feminine nudes at the MES play into both avant-garde and conservative interpretations.

*Mulher Sentada* [Seated Woman] (Fig. 25.a and 25.b), 1937, by Adriana Janacópulos was associated with a tradition of naturalist figurative sculpture that contrasted with Antônio and Giorgi’s stylized rendering of the human figure. Janacópulos’s aesthetic was in dialogue with the sculptural work proposed by Ernesto
de Fiori, for example, a prominent sculptor in Brazil at the time who had emigrated from Italy to Brazil in 1936. In 1938, De Fiori wrote a letter to Mário de Andrade expressing his desire to create works for the MES building.109 Aware that Costa’s team of architects would make the final decision, De Fiori sent Costa the sketches of the work he intended for the MES.110 Costa rejected them all111 and later stated that de Fiori’s works did not truly integrate with the project because they did not possess the architectural sense of the project.112

Although a communist himself, Costa rejected the rigidity of De Fiori and Janacópulos’s work based on social-realism.113 The conservative, severe, and standardized aspects of Janacópulos’s Bolshevik style however, pleased the fascist tendencies of the Estado Novo. In a 1937 article, the allegorical representation of women’s sexual and fertile characteristics were emphasized as the admirable qualities of Janacópulos work:

In this monument there is no artifice, no embellishment, no lure. What results from it is the beauty of the form, the splendor of the material, a granite with a soul, a stone from which spring a serene, tranquil, full of juice, robust and healthy standard woman for the Ministry of Education and Health, without the refinements of the end of a race or the mannerisms of the mundane salons.114

All female nudes commissioned for the MES mentioned in this chapter illustrate and objectify women as an allegory of fertility. However, with the exception of Janacópulos’s work, the sculptures also resonate primitivist investigations of the European avant-garde while searching for the representation of a national type. The

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
lack of local/native/mulato physiognomic traits and the standardized features of
Janacópulos’s *Seated Woman* intersects with the Eugenic theories of the time. Her
work did not fully share the influence of the European avant-garde’s interest in
primitive forms in its creative process. Janacópulos’s *Seated Woman* represents a
compromise of Costa’s leftist ideals, necessary for the continuation of the relationship
between the conservative government that sponsored the MES project and the
creators of its building and decorative program. It is, however, the stylistic ambiguity
of most of the works that comprise the MES decorative program that allowed them to
occupy a place both within the avant-garde and the conservative ideals of the
government.

**Official National Modernism**

The fine arts program created by the Brazilian team for the MES under
Capanema’s supervision did not follow the model of integration between architecture
and sculpture proposed by Le Corbusier’s first sketch for the building. The French-
Swiss architect had suggested a single figurative sculptural element in tension with
the modernist architecture that surrounded it. This suggestion followed Mies van der
Rohe’s *Barcelona Pavilion* (1929), where a single sculpture, Georg Kolbe’s *Alba*
[Figs. 26.a and 26.b], also contrasted with the ascetic lines of the building’s modernist
structure.115 Instead of a single sculptural element, however, the MES’s decorative
program had encouraged multiple examples of figurative sculpture within its
modernist perimeters. The architects responsible for the program followed the model
of Brazilian colonial sights, such as Congonhas, which integrated numerous
sculptural works with architecture and landscape. However, the multiplication of

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sculpture was also a tendency of the authoritarian governments of the time, left and right. Effigies of Mussolini, Lenin, and Stalin sprung up across Italian and Russian soil. It is true that none of the sculptural work at the MES pictures Vargas in an imperial pose.\textsuperscript{116} Yet, neoclassicism was exploited here for political purposes too.

The political purpose of the MES’s decorative program is confirmed by the grand occasions of their inaugurations. Imbedded with pomp and circumstance, these events served as official propaganda, as opportunities for Vargas to exalt his ideals and to gather new supporters.\textsuperscript{117} The stylistic ambiguity of the works mentioned in this chapter concomitantly absorbed and directed the ideological differences of the architects and of the government that sponsored it. The cloak of nationalism embraced left and right, allowing Vargas’s financing of modernist work to give his fascist regime a progressive image and Costa’s team to become leaders of an instituted Brazilian modernism.

\textsuperscript{116} With the exception of official busts made for particular offices, not considered here.
Chapter 4.

Cândido Portinari’s *Ciclo da vida econômica do brasil, 1938-1945*

Cândido Portinari (1903-1962)’s *Ciclo da vida econômica do brasil* [Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil] (1938-1945) is a mural commissioned for the MES’s main conference hall [Figs. 27.a and 27.b]. The cycle, composed of twelve individual panels, follows the nationalist figuration of the MES’s sculpture program. Executed between 1938 and 1944, the mural portrays the various products that are the backbone of Brazilian economy. It is a frieze on the upper part of three adjacent walls in the main conference room. Each of the twelve panels of the series depicts aspects of agricultural production in Brazil, which was still very much about manual labor at the time. From the top left to right, the panels represent *Pau-Brasil* (Brazil wood), *Cana de açúcar* (Sugarcane), *Gado Bovino* (Cattle), *Algodão* (Cotton), *erva-mate* (Maté), *Café* (Coffee), *Cacau* (Cacao), *Ouro* (Gold), and *Carnaúba* (Carnauba), *Ferro* (Iron), *Borracha* (Rubber), and *Tabaco* (Tobacco). There is the suggestion of cubist space in the fragmentation created by light, color, and volumes within each unit and in the overall grid created by all the units together.

In Ferro (Iron) [Fig. 28.a], for example, four men with heroic muscular bodies are depicted performing heavy manual labor. Three men stand in a repeated triangular poses, legs apart and arms centered, occupied carrying iron in front of their torsos. These triangles reverberate from foreground on the left to middle and to the center of the background. A fourth man bends over to pick up a box on the right hand side of the composition. It is a moment frozen in time. The figures’ hyper muscular bodies, repeated poses, and enlarged feet and hands, as well as Portinari’s use of pronounced
chiaroscuro modeling render the scene very stylized and artificial. The color of the men in the middle and background is washed out. They have the color of the walls and of the iron rods depicted in the unit. The men appear as though inanimate objects. Portinari’s figures are living bodies that occupy space and objects that construct the space at the same time.

In *Cana de Açucar* (*Sugarcane*)[Fig. 28.b], the background is composed of geometric color blocks that represent the stalks of sugarcane. This quilt-like geometric articulation of color is the backdrop for men carrying and cutting the sugarcane. There’s an indication of foreground and background in the different scale of the figures. However, Portinari makes the color of the bottom half of the men in the middle ground merge with the colors of the geometric background, making their distinction unclear. The color blocking of the backdrop and the figures on the foreground are then brought together by an undefined middle ground that flattens the entire scene. *Sugarcane*, like *Iron*, is defined by its figurative elements, yet it also suggests a geometric, cubist, two-dimensional panel.

Each section of the *Economic Cycle* series is a self-sufficient unit, but the statuesque rendering of the bodies, the unnatural light, the cubist composition (of the entire series and of each unit) and their unified color palette confer an overall unity to the cycle. The timelessness of the classicized bodies helps in the integration of the panels. Each scene evokes the suspension of time, the instant glimpse, and the frozen action of Renaissance art, as in, for example, Masaccio (1401 – 1428)’s frescos at *Cappella Brancacci* [Fig. 29.a], 1423-1428, and Piero della Francesca (1415-1492)’s *Flagellation of Christ* [Fig. 29.b], 1455-1460. Portinari had seen these works in his
trip to Italy in 1929. However, the stillness of Portinari’s classicized bodies contrasts with their unnatural settings. Portinari’s panels represent a midway point between figuration and abstraction. Its figurative elements embrace the avant-garde’s primitive classicism, while its heroic celebration of the body reflects the conservative tendency of the government sponsoring it.

The series continues the strategy used by the Brazilian modernist movements of the 1920s, which represented the national through a selective appropriation of international artistic interests. Portinari appropriated European artistic styles and modes (Cubism, Primitivism, Classicism, and Expressionism) and infused them with the local vernacular, regional types and activities that signified the vast interior, the authenticity of the country, in search of a representation of Brazilian cultural identity. Portinari’s cycle establishes, however, an important shift from previous systems of art making in Brazil. Instead of the subjective expressions of Brazilianness seen in the works of the aesthetic revolution of the 1920s, Portinari’s Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil has a social function. Unlike the individual suggestions of national identity seen in the articulations of the female nude of the MES’s sculpture program, Portinari’s mural had the strategic purpose of forging an official visual memory of Brazil, a historical and cultural legacy.

The pedagogical use of art in society had been a central theme in Brazilian art making and art criticism since 1931. Intellectuals such as Mário Pedrosa, Mário de Andrade, and Aníbal Machado, had written articles on the necessity of leaving the individual expressions of the modernist movement in favor of an art produced in
service of the social. In 1935, Machado curated the *Mostra de arte social* [Social Art Show], where only works dealing with socially engaged themes and concerns were shown. Machado believed that Portinari’s work engaged this sense of social art and stated:

> Portinari is already on his way to mural painting and into that path he’ll take his disciples [...]
> It is time for the government to give to the real artists of the country the decoration of the walls, so that the symbols and forms that awake the interest of the crowds might be inscribed on them, such as it is done in the Mexico of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Only in that way the artists will be able to give back to the masses what the masses award them in potential.\(^{119}\)

In his *Economic Cycle* mural Portinari visually merges the nationalist expressionism of the *Antropofagia* movement of the 1920s with the realism and classicism ubiquitous in the 1930s. Pedrosa defined Portinari’s style as “organic realism.”\(^{120}\)

Machado, Pedrosa, and Mário de Andrade, all leftist intellectuals, saw in Portinari’s art the essential elements needed for an art geared toward the construction and diffusion of a leftist social organization. However, it is the conservative Vargas regime that would sponsor, closely guide, and be represented by Portinari’s mural paintings. The painter’s leftist tendencies blended with the *Estado novo*’s fascist postulates and created the most emblematic example of the visual ambiguity that permeates the entire MES project.

Before the MES commission, Portinari had experimented with mural painting techniques as a professor of easel and mural painting at the *Instituto de arte da Universidade do distrito federal* [Art Institute of the University of the Federal District]. Founded in 1935 by educator and intellectual Anísio Teixeira, the institute

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\(^{118}\) Fabris (1996), 52 and 54.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 68.
closed in 1939, but Portinari’s interest in the confluence between mural painting and its pedagogical significance remained. This interest became explicit in a letter from the painter to Capanema attempting to convince the minister that a mural painting class should be taught at the National School of Fine Arts. In the letter Portinari explained:

For the conviction that I am doing a patriotic work is that I took the initiative to propose, to your intelligence, the creation, in the School of Fine Arts, of an atelier where the learning of mural painting can be administered.

This type of painting - for the possibility it offers of irradiation, of collective influence – has been utilized since the most remote times by the government of most countries as a precious element of education and propaganda. In all the schools it occupies a place of great importance, its necessity being pointed out, among other things, by the need that governments have of decorating their palaces.

In this manner, there are no reasons for Brazil – that has been keeping up with the progress of civilized countries in all other sectors of its activities, be it administrative, literary or scientific – not to have its mural painting course, inexistent, up until today, at the National School of Fine Arts.

Therefore, my proposal – which I reiterate to the honorable minister – is of utilizing in the institution my course on mural painting.

Although Capanema intended to create a mural painting class after his correspondence with Portinari, it was never realized; it was probably deemed inappropriate for the politically conservative climate of the ENBA. Nevertheless, Portinari’s statement of patriotic intentions and his advertisement of the pedagogical and propagandistic uses of the mural medium allowed him to establish a direct relationship with the government.

Capanema had been interested in Portinari’s work since his acquisition of Café (Coffee) [Fig. 30], in 1935, for the National Museum of Fine Arts. The painting shows one of the most important economic activities in the nineteenth to the early twentieth century in Brazil: the coffee crop. The expressionistic and enlarged hands

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121 Fabris (1996), 55.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 The minister acquired Coffee for the National Museum of Fine Arts in the same year that the work received a Honorable Mention at the Third Carnegie Internationals in Pittsburg, 1935. Ibid., 66.
and feet of the workers at the plantation show their connection to the land and to their work. The coffee trees are geometrically organized. The crop is clean, healthy, and the plantation goes on endlessly beyond the picture frame. Intense and incessant labor is mixed with organized monumentality. The coffee plantation, the principal national economic activity, is bestowed with an efficient, strong, organized, and monumental character. Portinari, the son of Italian immigrants who were workers in a coffee plantation, might have been trying to address issues pertaining to class and race struggles in rural Brazil. However, it was probably the painting’s nationalism, its theme, organization, and monumentality that attracted Capanema’s attention. The merging of the minister’s political interest with Portinari’s nationalist social concern resulted in the government awarding several mural commissions to the painter for the new MES building.

The mural’s overall exaltation of labor as a heroic and civic virtue and the themes of man, work, and the land all evoke social realism. Some soviet propaganda posters of the 1930s not only tackle the same themes, but also use similar graphic conventions to construct heroic bodies within abstract color blockings. As such, Portinari’s mural cycle and its negotiation of figuration and abstraction, classicism and constructivism recalls these Soviet precedents. Portinari uses the expressionist device of enlarged feet and hands to represent visually the close relationship between man and land (such as in the augmented feet of the central figures in the panel Tobacco [Fig. 31] and the colossal hands of the men in Carnauba [Fig. 32]. The same device had been used in the primitivized nationalist modernist paintings from Brazil in the 1920s. However, the deformation of feet and hands in classicized bodies to
state a man’s closeness to the motherland within a thematic of triumphalist nationalism had also been used in representations of the ideals of Mussolini’s fascist regime. In *Pastor* [Fig. 33], 1931, for example, a work by Italian painter Mario Sironi, an open supporter of Mussolini, the monumental body of the worker, which hardly fits its frame, is provided with large hands and feet to demonstrate not only his occupation, but also his place within the hierarchical order of fascist interclassist society. The land was used by the fascist regime to demonstrate the perpetual and invariable character of social relations, where peasant and owner were part of a static hierarchical order within a same class.¹²⁵

Architect Roberto Segres disputes the fascist interpretations of Portinari’s mural by suggesting that they are not ideologically committed as are, for example, Mario Radice’s murals in Como’s *Casa del Fascio* [Fig. 34.a], another International Style building built in 1936 [Fig. 34.b].¹²⁶ Radice’s abstract panels include effigies of Mussolini and are therefore explicitly committed to the fascist regime. To Segres, Portinari’s objectives were more “pictoric than ideological, more expressive than interpretative.”¹²⁷ Annateresa Fabris also suggests Portinari’s non-conformity with Vargas’s regime of fascist aspirations.¹²⁸ According to Fabris, the Brazilian elite had turned the social divide into a racial divide by accepting the theories of racial inferiority crafted by the *Comissão Central Brasileira de Eugenia* (Central Brazilian Comission of Eugenics) and the *Liga Brasileira de Higiene Mental* (Brazilian League

¹²⁷ Ibid.
¹²⁸ Fabris (1996), 82-83.
of Mental Hygiene). By portraying black men as the heroic pillars of the Brazilian economy, Fabris believes that Portinari confronts the race/class relationship present in a societal organization supported by conservative racial theories. Due to Portinari’s leftist inclination, it makes more sense to assume that the painter wanted to pay homage to the Afro-Brazilian worker. However, by placing only black men as the face of manual labor in Brazil, Portinari also excludes white men from the same tasks. Portinari’s Economic Cycle mural illustrates the race/class divide in Brazil, which can be interpreted as both the empowerment of the black worker or as the constriction of his place within Brazilian society. Yet Vargas’s embrace of this mural suggests its ability to be co-opted by the regime. The visual ambiguity of Portinari’s series epitomizes the complicated relationship between the conservative state and the leftist artist that created it.

The ideological connotations of Portinari’s Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil are difficult to pin down. Critics favorable to Portinari, such as Mário de Andrade, Antonio Bento, Roberto Segres, and Annateresa Fabris, emphasize Portinari’s artistic originality and look beyond the context of the commission and its sponsorship by the Vargas’s regime. However, Cycle of the Economic Life of Brazil belonged to the official cultural policies of the Estado novo. In December 7, 1942, Capanema writes to Portinari to give very specific guidelines on Portinari’s mural commission at the MES. The minister writes:

In the audience room, there will be twelve pictures of the cycle of our economic life or, better, of the fundamental aspects of our economic evolution. (...) In the waiting room, the subject will be the one already mentioned – the national energy represented by the expressions of our popular life. In the great panel there should figure the gaucho, the sertanejo (outback man),

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130 Ibid.
131 Lissovsky and Sá, 363-364.
and the jangadeiro (raft fisherman). You should read the third chapter of the second part of *Os Sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha. There you will find depicted in live manner the types of the gaucho and the sertanejo. I don’t know if the author has described the jangadeiro. Ask Manuel Bandeira.

The works were part of the state’s construction of an official representation of the nation, one that mixed what was then seen as Brazilian “authenticity” (popular scenes, regional types) with scenes of labor and production that represented the country’s strength and thriving economy under Vargas’s regime.¹³² The murals’ subject matter, state sponsorship, as well as their inclusion in the *Livro de Tombo*, the national patrimony archive, made them an intrinsic part of the official art of the *Estado novo*.

Architect Roberto Segres observes that the triumphal and utopian discourse of technology and science, seen in Diego Rivera’s U.S. murals, for example, had been avoided in Portinari’s series. Segres believes that Portinari’s distance from U.S. industrialism combined with his cubist semi-abstraction meant that the works were never really manipulated by any ideological demagogy, left or right. However, Portinari’s “peasant portraiture,” characterized by a primitivist style, rural scenes, and the mural medium that for Segres and Fabris represented the painter’s detachment from an agenda, actually corresponded to the state’s representation of the national through popular scenes and types.¹³³

**Jacques Lipchitz’s Prometheus, 1942-1945**

From 1938 to 1944, while Portinari executed his mural series, the world gradually tilted toward North American democratic ideals near the end of War World II. Capanema had been in close contact with Nelson Rockefeller and Alfred Barr,

¹³² Fabris (1996), 81.
¹³³ After the exchange of the U.S. with the Mexican muralist movement, rural and/or popular scenes became the main expression of art from across the border to make it into the U.S.
MoMA’s director at the time, since the late 1930s, and both men were avid promoters of Mexican muralism in the U.S.\(^\text{134}\) Portinari’s rural thematic fulfilled the expectations of international audiences in relation to the art from Latin America. By the late 1930s, the ties between Brazil and the U.S. had grown stronger and cultural exchange played a fundamental role in it. In 1939, Carmen Miranda started acting in Hollywood, Walt Disney and Orson Wells visited Brazil, and Costa and Niemeyer designed the successful Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World Fair.\(^\text{135}\) In 1940 Portinari had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1942 MoMA sent Phillip Goodwin to Brazil to gather material for an exhibition on Brazilian Architecture.\(^\text{136}\) That same year Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973), a Jewish artist who had emigrated from Paris to New York in 1941 after the German invasion, was awarded an important sculpture commission at the Ministry.\(^\text{137}\) It seems contradictory that the regime that had deported Olga Benário, Jewish wife to communist leader Prestes, to die in Hitler’s concentration camps commissioned a work from a foreign Jewish artist for its signature building. However, it should be considered part of the state’s construction of new ideological postulates, away from its previous fascist model and toward the United States. The idea of having Lipchitz, one of the more prominent sculptors of the School of Paris and an important player in the New York art scene represents not a contradiction, but a clever political move by Capanema, who was molding through cultural initiatives a new political identity for


\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) The exhibition and catalogue were called “Brazil Builds.” Goodwin and Smith, 1943.

Brazil.

Capanema suggested the theme of victory for Lipchitz’s sculpture, a modernist version of the *Victory of Samothrace*. The sculptor asked to exchange it for the subject of Prometheus, a recurrent theme in Lipchitz’s œuvre and a classical theme already present in U.S. public art, such as Paul Manship’s *Prometheus*, 1933, at Rockefeller Center. Lipchitz had sketches ready to send to Capanema when he accepted the commission. The Minister saw the studies and agreed with the artist’s suggestion that Prometheus’s fight against the vulture was a good metaphor for the fight of the republican man against Fascism.

Lipchitz’s sculpture is an entanglement of deconstructed elements that recall the fragmentation of cubism [Fig. 35]. There is great drama and tension in the work. The deformation of the bodies of Prometheus and of the bird, their unclear yet violent entanglement, and the conflict between the disclosure and concealment of forms by the bright natural light on the dark Bronze are very intense. The unclear forms of Lipchitz’s semi-abstract work point to Surrealism. Its Expressionistic curves confer a transcendent quality to the work. It is difficult to discern where the figures begin and end; the viewer becomes trapped inside the work’s sinuosity. However, Lipchitz’s *Prometheus* had a terribly unfavorable local reception. The local rejection of the work triggered a controversy in the press that culminated with an official protest by the Brazilian Society of Fine Arts against the employment of foreign artists by the state.

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140 Lissovsky and Sá, 64.
141 Williams, 57; Cavalcanti, 57, and Lissovsky and Sá, 71.
The protesters considered the hiring of Lipchitz as part of “an annihilation war against the Brazilian artist.”\(^{142}\) The conservative reaction of Brazilian society to Lipchitz’s *Prometheus* conflated anti-modernism with anti-Semitism, a repetition of Marianno’s rage against Costa after his modernist turn at the National School of Fine Arts. At the time, the neocolonialist stated that Costa and his group were “promoters of Jewish, communist architecture bent on destroying national traditions.”\(^{143}\) Beyond the prejudices of the Brazilian society, the popular distaste for Lipchitz’s work can also be attributed to its lack of the primitivist style established by the Brazilian modernist movements of the 1920s as the face of Brazilian art, to its lack of “tradition.”

Capanema must have been aware that in hiring Lipchitz he would have to face the conservativism and anti-Semitism of the Brazilian elite. It was the price to pay for a political move in the name of repositioning the Estado novo into the new world order. In 1944, a model of Lipchitz’s *Prometheus*, three times smaller than the work’s pre-established size, was sent to Rio to serve as the guideline for a final version. The political climate indicated that the end of the *Estado novo* was imminent.\(^{144}\) Capanema rushed to finish the MES’s decorative program in order to inaugurate the building before Vargas’s fall. A bronze version of Lipchitz’s model was hung onto the outer wall of the Ministry.\(^{145}\) Lipchitz was infuriated by Capanema’s hanging of

\(^{142}\) Lisovsky and Sá, 71.

\(^{143}\) Williams, 57.


the small model-sized bronze and denied the authorship of the work.\textsuperscript{146}

Lipchitz’s sculpture commission and Portinari’s *Economic Cycle* mural need to be understood within the specific historical moment of transition when the *Estado novo* and Brazilian artists and society adjusted to the implications of the fall of the axis. Both Lipchitz’s commission and Portinari’s mural series reflect the *Estado novo*’s cultural turn towards the U.S. While Portinari’s mural cycle critically engages with issues of class and race, it also easily accommodated U.S. perceptions of Latin American art according to the model of Mexican muralism in the United States, making it an effective diplomatic tool for the Brazilian state. The ideological and stylistic ambiguity of Portinari’s mural and Lipchitz’s status as a well-known avant-garde sculptor based in New York who made public sculptures made them attractive candidates for the decorative program of the MES. Portinari’s mural and Lipchitz’s commission represent the strategic negotiations of the *Estado Novo* within a new world order.

\textsuperscript{146} Mário Barata, “O Ressentimento de Lipchitz” in *Arte Hoje* nº 23, Ano 2, Rio de Janeiro, 1979, 32-34.
Chapter 5.

Portinari’s Azulejos murals

In addition to the murals Portinari made for the conference hall, the Minister’s office and waiting room, he also created a series of murals for the exterior of the building, his azulejo [tile] murals [Figs. 36.a and 36.b], 1938-1942. If classicism was the main foundation of the decorative program of the Ministry, Portinari followed a completely different direction in his tile murals.

Portinari designed two principal azulejo panels and four other smaller ones for the MES project. Paulo Rossi Osir (1890-1959), from Osirarte, a tile firm that had prominent artists such as Mário Zanini and Alfredo Volpi on its payroll, helped with the execution of Portinari’s designs. The first of the large murals by Portinari is situated on the wall of the former Staff Hall, a supporting block under the building that faces the internal space of the pilotis and the monumental columns. The other main panel by the painter covers the external part of this same lateral block and faces the street, the Rua Graça Aranha, today one of the busiest streets of central Rio. The external panel depicts sea horses and shells and the internal panel shows starfish and fish. Gigantic abstract amoebic forms embrace syncopated figurative elements and dominate both panels. Portinari’s azulejos reflect his new aesthetic interest in abstract art.

Structured around large biomorphic shapes, both compositions are like fishnets deepening into the water, which involve the repeated figurative elements of the panel.

while letting the viewer see through and around the net. Smaller organic sections of watery whites and blues create juxtaposing planes and the illusion of an open, deepening space. Portinari does not turn here to perspective or to Cubist devices to build space, as he had done in the *Economic Cycle* panels. Instead, the viewer is invited to dive into a transcendent whirlpool of lines and symbols that echo characteristics of Abstract Expressionism.\(^\text{148}\) The connecting lines between the tiles create a low-relief grid on the surface of the mural. The grid, the materiality of the surface, is in tension with the illusion of depth given by the mural’s design. However, the reflective nature of the enameled tiles and the marine motifs in contrast with the opaque granite of the architecture reinforce the liquid-like quality of the *azulejo* mural and strengthen the illusion of depth.

Introduced by the Portuguese in colonial times, the blue and white *azulejos* had, by the 1940s, become part of the visual culture of Rio de Janeiro. Costa suggests that Portinari’s *azulejos* are “a contemporary reading of a non-forgotten tradition.”\(^\text{149}\) The painter’s contemporary appropriation of a colonial aesthetic was also a subversion of colonialism, yet rooted in a familiar history. In the Baroque churches of Rio, the *azulejo* panels break the rigidity of the walls and carry symbolic value, such as the panels in the Church of Nossa Senhora do Outeiro da Glória [Fig. 37], less than a mile away from the Ministry. The water-like theme of Portinari’s murals also softens the density of the walls that support the Ministry’s building giving the impression that it stands only on the columns. The tile murals at the Ministry had a familiar effect on its public. Ordinary people crossing the MES’s open square, accustomed to church


\(^{149}\) Costa (1995), 147.
and residential *azulejos*, would find Portinari’s panels, although semi-abstract, still “readable” due to the familiarity of the medium. The evocation of the city’s cultural history in the *azulejos* and its familiarity gives a populist and traditionalist quality to the work that mirrors ideals of the *Estado Novo*.

Portinari’s shift from figuration to semi-abstraction in the tile murals reflects the artist’s new aesthetic interest, perhaps a result of the painter’s frequent visits to the United States in the early 1940s and his encounter with Abstract Expressionism, for example. However, Portinari’s semi-abstract style is also a nationalist assertion. Like the symbolism of church *azulejos*, Portinari’s marine motifs symbolize the coastal city of Rio and they also stand in for national identity by engaging the local tradition of *azulejos*. Significantly, with these tile murals Portinari does not reflect on societal organization such as he had done with the racial/labor statements of the *Economic Cycle* mural. Furthermore, whereas the *Economic Cycle* are placed where the regular citizen did not have access, in a more private location, the *azulejos*, on the other hand are located in the very public area of the plaza. Notably, Portinari chooses less politicized subject matter in this more public space. Stripped of Portinari’s previous social engagement, the abstraction of the tiles allows for a more ambiguous reading as to their content. Although the heroic bodies and nationalist theme of his *Economic Cycle* mural were also ideologically ambiguous, the even less-evident social engagement of the *azulejos* murals meant, if not conformity, a total lack of resistance to Vargas’s regime.

The dark-sinned men of his *Cycle of the Economic Life* mural were forgotten and replaced by an organic composition of marine motifs and sinuous lines. The
water-like form and content alluded to the extensive seashore of Rio\textsuperscript{150} and his use of the Portuguese blue and white \textit{azulejo} to the cultural history of the city. By evoking particularities of the local vernacular, Portinari sought to bestow the MES’s modernist project based on Corbusian ideals with a recognizable Brazilian identity. It was Le Corbusier who suggested the use of the blue-and white Portuguese \textit{azulejos},\textsuperscript{151} but the organicity and sinuousness of Portinari’s tile murals celebrated what the architect had previously condemned: the meandering curve. After his first visit to South America in 1929, Le Corbusier published a collection of his lectures in the continent in \textit{Précisions sur un état present de l’architecture et le urbanisme} (1930).\textsuperscript{152} The publication introduced the architect’s “Law of the Meander,” where he used the experience of flying over the vast confluence of rivers that compose the South American landscape to develop a philosophical theory that justified the application of his modernist architecture in the region. The French-Swiss architect wrote:

> Following the outline of the meander from above, I understood the difficulties met in human affairs, the dead ends in which we get stuck and the apparently miraculous solutions that suddenly resolve apparently inextricable situations (...) Suddenly, at the most desperate moment, there they are touching at the outermost point of their curves! Miracle! The river runs straight! Thus a pure idea has burst forth, a solution has appeared... Lengths of the old meander remain, inert, unused, marshy, stagnant.\textsuperscript{153}

> ...the new means of the machine age can undo the terrible rings of the meander.\textsuperscript{154}

The youthful ambition and nationalism of the architects and artists responsible for the MES also desired to claim the project’s authorship. The drastic modifications inflicted onto Le Corbusier’s sketch for the building, for example, were a reflection of

\textsuperscript{150} Although not on the shore, the MES building overlooked Rio’s Guanabara Bay at the time of its development. The construction over the years of other buildings around the MES’s internal lot took the ministry’s view away. It also made impossible for the viewer to have a wider, a complete view of the project, which is now restricted to the pilotis.

\textsuperscript{151} Costa (1995), 147.

\textsuperscript{152} Le Corbusier (1991).

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 4-5.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 154.
such a desire. While followers of the French-Master, Portinari, Costa and his team also challenged his ideas. Portinari’s tile murals infused and modified Le Corbusier’s modernist architecture with elements easily identifiable as Brazilian, such as themes related to nature and to a colonial past. The painter’s nationalist strategy served not only to establish the unique features of a modernist architecture that was thoroughly Brazilian in an avant-garde sense, but it also served the nationalist populism of Vargas’s regime.

**Burle Marx’s landscape design**

The same nationalist assertion can be perceived in the gardens designed by Roberto Burle Marx (1909–1994) for the MES building. As in Portinari’s azulejos, Burle Marx’s landscape designs signify the national. His use of wild plants from the rainforest and of the emblematic Pau-Brasil tree, rather than utilizing imported floral species traditionally seen in the public gardens of Rio, re-visited creative strategies of the modernist movements of the 1920s. In the Pau-Brasil Manifesto of 1924, for example, Oswald de Andrade proclaimed, “barbaric, but ours.” Since then, elements that were not urban or Westernized, that were exotic to the European were used to express the national in Brazilian art. Burle Marx’s use of bromeliads and other unusual plants for the gardens of his time reinforced the idea of the primitive as a sign of Brazilianness established some twenty years earlier.

Like the sinuous-quality of Portinari’s tile murals, the organicity of Burle Marx’s landscape design for the MES borrowed from a pre-established primitivized nationalism and stated the rejection of Corbusian rationalism in form and content.

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Ironically it was while he was studying in Berlin, in 1928, at the age of eighteen that Burle Marx discovered the Brazilian tropical fauna. He found plants that grew wild in Brazil were carefully cultivated and valued at the Berlin Botanical Gardens and began to sketch them. To Burle Marx and to many Brazilian artists of the early twentieth-century, Europe served as a channel for their discovery of Brazil. The major exponents of the modernist movements of the 1920s, such as Tarsila do Amaral, Mario and Oswald de Andrade, for example, were predisposed, after their contact with European artists in the old continent, to rediscover and value the favelas, the tropical landscape, and the Brazilian religious syncretism. Burle Marx’s primitivist strategy followed the modernists’ investigation the European interest in non-Western cultures, but through the eyes of the native informant to signify the national.

One of Burle Marx’s first commissions upon his return to Brazil, in 1932, was the garden of Alfredo Schwartz’s house in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, a modernist project by Costa and Warchavchik. Burle Marx’s landscape project mimicked the rigid cubic structure of the house by surrounding the architecture with a series of beds of repeated geometric patterns (Fig. 38) Burle Marx then received a three-year appointment in Recife, northeast of Brazil, to oversee the refurbishing of the city’s neglected parks and squares. During the period in which the MES contest and project were taking place, Burle Marx was living in Recife. In 1938, upon his return, Costa invited Burle Marx to work as an assistant to Portinari on the murals for

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157 Ibid.
158 Roberto Burle Marx, 143.
159 Ibid.
160 Recife is the capital of the state of Pernambuco on the shore of the Northeast region of Brazil.
the ministry’s office.161 Costa’s invitation implied that he saw Burle Marx as a painter as much as a gardener. It was during that period, in 1938, that Costa approached Burle Marx about the MES landscape project.162 Although Le Corbusier had sketched a row of imperial palms for the Ministry’s plaza, Costa decided to replace his geometric organization of rectilinear imperial palms with Burle Marx’s radical use of wild plants from the rainforest, or for “the barbaric” that meant truly Brazilian.

The content as well as the form of Burle Marx’s landscape design was a nationalist claim to a building “designed to project an image of Brazil’s modernity to the rest of the world.”163 A lifelong socialist, Burle Marx believed in the didactic qualities of his gardens as much as Portinari espoused the social themes of his murals. “From a garden one can teach many lessons, and encourage people to live better,”164 said Burle Marx. It is not by chance then that Burle Marx chooses the sinuous curves of the wetland topography to make up the design of all three areas he had to work on at the ministry.

The garden beds of the street level plaza, part shaded and part outdoors, have a liquid-like form that seem like a continuation of Portinari’s marine tiles. Burle Marx’s pools of tropical plants have organic shapes that imply movement and impermanence that also echo Portinari’s murals. The pool of plants entering beneath the building gives the impression that the MES’s columns stand on water (Fig. 39.a). The effect turns the high technology of the building’s modernist architecture into a tilt house, the

162 Ibid.
163 Underwood, 27, and Bruand, 81-82.
precarious architecture found over the tropical wetlands of the Amazon (Fig. 39.b).
The columns can be seen also as the colossal tree trunks of the wetland jungle. Burle Marx included in his gardens at the MES plaza the iconic *Pau brasil* tree (Brazil wood). The content and form of Burle Marx’s gardens at the plaza level claimed cultural autonomy, but its outright nationalism also served the agenda of the *Estado Novo*.

Burle Marx laid out three raised organically shaped beds of wild plants on the rooftop of the main building, between the rooftop dining room and the towers that housed the lifts and water tanks (Fig. 39.c). His landscape intervention on the roof of the exhibition hall is, however, his iconic landscape design for the MES project (Fig. 40.a and 40.b) The landscape of the suspended rectangular garden on top of the MES’s exhibition hall began as a painted plan, an aerial view of the finished project (Fig. 41.a). It looked like an abstract painting of meandering curves and amoebic shapes that also recalled an aerial photograph of a segment of tropical wetland (Fig. 41.b), a rectangular cut into a design that goes beyond the constraints of the frame. The lighter areas, the paved areas, could be seen as the water flowing and the darker sections as areas of soil and vegetation. Burle Marx did not go to the Amazon until 1950 and had no firsthand knowledge of the rainforest at that time. Art Historian Valerie Fraser suggests that Burle Marx’s design may have had Le Corbusier’s description of the aerial view of South America as his guide:

> The water is thrown to the left, it digs into the bank; from there by reaction it is thrown back to the right. Then the straight line disappears. To the left, to the right, always deeper, the water bites, hollows, cuts away.

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165 Fraser, 189.
166 Ibid. and Le Corbusier, 142.
Although there’s no evidence that Burle Marx had read Le Corbusier’s *Precisions*, the artist’s organic design did challenge the architect’s disdainful representation of the meandering curves of the continent’s rivers by celebrating these same uncivilized forms. Burle Marx’s garden beds that mimicked the tropical wetland represented the national in their opposition to the purity and rationality of Le Corbusier’s modernist lines, through their Otherness. Paradoxically, the organicity of Burle Marx’s gardens and of Portinari’s tiles sought to invent a Brazilian modernist identity in their opposition to the international avant-garde, which they longed to be part of.

While Portinari’s *Economic Cycle* murals were meant to imprint in the Brazilian collective unconscious a national identity, it was the combination of Portinari’s *azulejos* and Burle Marx’s gardens with the colossal columns of the MES that had the project’s largest popular impact. The *Economic Cycle* murals were not accessible to the average citizen. Located in the high offices of the Ministry, they could not fulfill their didactical purpose, could not fuel a debate on national and cultural identity, much less imprint one. The connection of the population with the project was and still is articulated by the combination of Portinari’s *azulejos*, Burle Marx’s gardens, and Costa’s imposing columns. In search of the characteristics of a Brazilian modernism, Burle Marx, Portinari, and the architects of the MES crystallized the visual ambiguity of the entire project in the building’s pilotis. The MES plaza mirrored the collapse of left and right under the umbrella of nationalism, seen in the entire project. The visual ambiguity of the MES allowed modernist architecture to become the country’s dominant and official style from the early 1940s.
on. It illustrated the nationalist desire of the Brazilian elite, left and right, to visually construct modernity before the modernization of the country itself.\footnote{Néstor Garcia Canclini suggests that in Latin America “Modernity tends to be seen as a mask, a simulacrum of the elite and of state machinery, especially that concerned with the arts and culture, which by this very characteristic is rendered unrepresentative and incongruent.” Néstor Garcia Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity,” in Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Criticism from Latin America, Gerardo Mosquera, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 21.}
Conclusion.

On that occasion [MES], the Brazilian architectural movement, led by our dear master Lúcio Costa, still had a number of deficiencies and limitations, which [Le Corbusier’s] presence allowed to clarify and eliminate, giving it the liberty and the creative force it needed.168

Niemeyer’s quote points out Le Corbusier’s crucial impact on Brazilian modernist architecture. His verification of the quality of the Brazilian team’s first project for the MES building was a paradigmatic event in the architecture of the country. It resulted in the unprecedented utilization of architecture of Corbusian inspiration in a public commission. Le Corbusier’s consultancy also gave the project international worth and the stamp of the avant-garde. After the MES commission, modernist architecture became the dominant and official style of the architecture from Brazil. Once made official, the Brazilian elite’s earlier condemnation of modernist architecture as an anti-national style was forgotten. It now assumed, for this section of society, the connotation of a new Brazilian modern identity. Concomitantly, the project’s great repercussion abroad allowed the left to transcend their negative association with Vargas’s conservative dictatorship since it coincided with the Brazilian intellectual elite’s long desired inclusion into the international avant-garde.169 The visual ambiguity of the MES building and decorative program collapsed

168 Alberto Xavier, Arquitetura moderna brasileira: depoimento de uma geração (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2003), 330.
169 Philip Goodwin states in 1943 that “Rio de Janeiro has the most beautiful governmental building of the western hemisphere;” in New York Sun (New York, NY), 15 Jan. 1943; On January 13, 1943, a New York Times article on the Brazil Builds exhibition at MoMA prints a photo of the MES with the following caption: “The Building of the Ministry of Education and Public Health in Rio de Janeiro, considered the most advanced architectural structure in the world.” About the Pedregulho complex divulged through the CIAM, Max Bill said, for example, that he himself would like to live in one of Pedregulho's apartments and Walter Gropius, according to his wife's notes, was "in love" with the building and said that it is "a model not only for Brazil but for the world. Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and Sabine von Fischer, “How to Read Two Monoliths”, Cabinet, Issue 6/Horticulture, Spring 2002. <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/6/monoliths.php> [accessed on March 3, 2012]
ideologies of the progressive left and of the totalitarian right with the intent to improve the population through the transformation of their environment.

Modernist architecture became official and projects by architects of the MES team proliferated in Brazil. While the negotiations for the MES’s decorative program were taking place, Niemeyer designed the *Igreja da pampulha complex* (Pampulha Church Complex) [Fig. 42.a to 42.c], 1942-1945, another ensemble of modernist architecture with *azulejo* panels by Portinari and landscape design by Burle Marx. Portinari also painted the tile murals for the walls of the school block of Reidy’s *Conjunto habitacional mendes de moraes* (Mendes de Moraes Residential Complex) [Figs. 43.a to 43.c], 1947, known as *pedregulho* (The boulder), a massive residential unity in Rio de Janeiro by yet another member of the MES team. These projects and many others, however, differed from the rectilinear restraint of the MES. They were looser explorations of modernist design. The rhythmic curves of the Pampulha complex and the sinuosity of Reidy’s *Pedregulho* building, for example, came to define the temporal geometry of Brazilian modernist architecture. As opposed to Le Corbusier’s belief in the purity of the straight line, the “cannibalizing” Brazilians infused modernist architecture with curves and slopes that echoed the country’s landscape. This hybrid and monumental Brazilian architecture was epitomized by the construction of a new capital, Brasília [Figs. 44, 45.a and 45.b], designed by Costa and Niemeyer, 1956-1960.

The articulation of a decorative program to these later public commissions of Brazilian modernist architecture was a nationalist device, such as in the use of *azulejos* and tropical flora at the MES. It also reflected the goal of the government
agency that commissioned most of these works. The SPHAN, National Historical and Artistic Patrimony Service, was responsible for the preservation and construction of the country’s material culture. While the MES project was taking place, Costa, Niemeyer, and Carlos Leão, three of the architects involved in the project, assumed the leadership of the architectural section of the SPHAN. Dominated by modernists, the government agency, in charge of the construction of “symbolic national capital,” became crucial in facilitating the execution of modernist buildings. Because the organization looked back and forth into the cultural history of the country, the azulejos and the integration of landscape and sculpture with architecture came into dialogue with traditional models of construction and established a relationship between the agency’s preoccupation with the past and the future.

Besides responding to the SPHAN’s purposes, the MES’s decorative program also illustrated a transitional period between figuration and abstraction in Brazilian art. Artists that collaborated with the project’s fine arts program, like Portinari, were beginning to venture into non-figurative art. The colorful cubist planes that comprise Portinari’s *Economic Cycle* murals are an indication of such a tendency, as well as the organic abstraction of his tiles. In the late 1940s, Alfredo Volpi, an Italian born artist working in São Paulo had also begun a series of paintings of façades, roofs, and landscapes which resulted in semi-abstract and geometric works [Fig. 46]. Volpi’s most abstract work, his *Bandeirinhas* (little June festival flags) series [Fig. 47], emerged in the 1950s from his façades. Along with fellow immigrant Italian artists such as Rossi Osir, from Osirarte, and Zanini, Volpi was part of the *Família artística paulista* (Artistic Family of São Paulo), one of the many art associations created in

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São Paulo during the 1940s. Portinari, although not born in Italy, belonged to the same Italian proletariat of Volpi, Zanini, and Rossi Osir. The juxtaposition of geometric abstraction and figuration in Portinari’s murals for the MES and in Volpi’s *Façades* Series signaled a broader aesthetic shift taking place in the Brazilian art world of the 1940s which lead to its complete reevaluation in the 1950s.

In 1952, the *Ruptura* [Rupture] exhibition in São Paulo officially launched the Concrete Art movement in Brazil. The movement rejected all figuration, but also "hedonistic non-figurativism, the product of gratuitous taste, that seeks the mere excitation of pleasure or displeasure."¹⁷¹ The rejection of informal abstraction, such as those of Portinari’s murals and Volpi’s *Bandeirinhas*, was unprecedented. The group defended autonomy of research on the basis of clear and universal principles capable of inserting art into industrial society. Concrete art aspired to the same industrial and scientific premises of modernist architecture. For a concrete artist, the artistic object was the concretization of an intelligible idea, with no place assigned to individual expression in the artistic process [Fig. 48]. Much like the execution of an architectural plan, the art in early Concrete Art happened before the realization of the project, in its planning. Brazilian art had been moving toward an organic geometricism since the 1940s, as seen in Volpi and Portinari’s work. However, the anachronic constructivism of Concrete Art, not born in a cultural vacuum, must also have been triggered by the rationalist postulates of modernist architecture, which after the MES became the definition of Brazilian modern cultural identity. Although Costa, Niemeyer, and the

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artists involved with the MES project created a uniquely exotic modernism with curved lines, they still abided to and believed in the application of Le Corbusier’s rationalism to improve society.

The adoption of these extremely rationalist postulates for art and architecture reveal the anxiety of overcoming the underdeveloped economy characteristic of Brazilian reality. In 1945, the war ended and the MES building was inaugurated. The population demanded free elections, representing the end of the Estado novo. In the two decades that followed, Brazilian society would see architecture as the symbol of a twenty-year period of nationalistic optimism, left and right, that lasted from the end of WWII until the military coup of 1964. The government, the architects, and the artists involved with the MES project believed that in changing art and architecture they would be able to construct modernity. They were not interested, however, in exposing social antagonisms, as seen in the dilution of clear political positions within the entire project. Instead, the project’s ambiguities strived to level them with the banner of a constructed holistic national identity. The MES and the modernist architecture that thrived as a result of its success were meant to be social interventions that represented to the outside world the contemporary direction of Brazil’s social reform. Today, the visual decay of these modernist carcasses, neglected by the government, mistreated or abandoned by its tenants and isolated from the urban thread of the city, is an emblem of the superficial and unrealized dream of modernity.\(^{172}\) The contemporary incongruity of these modernist monuments and the

\(^{172}\) Carmen Portinho, Affonso Reidy’s wife and head of the government’s Department of Popular Housing defended the construction of exemplar, monumental, paradigmatic buildings as a justification for their own existence, for example. About Reidy’s Pedregulho she said that it was built “to call the
exposure of the brutalities of the *Estado novo* make it difficult to cope sympathetically with the compromise of the artists working under Vargas’s sponsorship. It is important to remember, nonetheless, that the MES’s synthesis of art and architecture to improve society was seen as a material possibility, by both the left and right, making it a clear example of the socially transformative and utopian/dystopian agendas of modernist architecture of the 1930s/40s.

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