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“Exhilarating Exile”: Four Latin American Women Exhibit in Paris

Michele Greet

- 1 In her essay “Art and the Conditions of Exile” Linda Nochlin proposes the notion of “exhilarating exile,” a heightened awareness of cultural difference that inspires creativity, as a framework for understanding the work of women artists living and exhibiting abroad (Nochlin, 1996: 318, 329). In Paris, far removed from the conservative Catholic society of their home countries and the traditional boundaries of feminine identity, women artists from Latin America experienced new freedoms that inspired novel approaches to art making. Funded by family money or government grants, a sojourn in Paris was not an involuntary exile embarked on to escape political or economic peril, but rather a deliberate distancing undertaken to gain further training, exposure to new ideas and colleagues, and career advancement. Paris provided infrastructure in the form of networks of dealers and critics, and exhibition opportunities that simply were not available elsewhere, and an environment that, while still marked by misogynistic assumptions, was much more accepting of women as serious artists. For these women, holding an individual exhibition in Paris was a rite of passage, a means to establish their reputation abroad in order to validate their work at home. Temporal and spatial distance from their country of origin allowed these artists to envision the world from a different perspective, and to develop diverse strategies to present, transform, or deny their cultural and gender identity for Parisian audiences. This essay will analyze the individual exhibitions of four Latin American women artists held in Paris between the two world wars: Brazilians Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti in 1926, Mexican Lola Velásquez Cueto in 1929, and Cuban Amelia Peláez in 1933.
- 2 The artists under consideration all encountered the Parisian art scene at a moment when notions of the decorative and the clean lines of purism were vying for supremacy. Writing in 1925 in an essay entitled *The Decorative Art of Today*, Le Corbusier asserted: “Previously, decorative objects were rare and costly. Today they are commonplace and cheap. Previously, plain objects were commonplace and cheap; today they are rare end

expensive...Today decorative objects flood the shelves of the department stores; they sell cheaply to shop girls" (Fer 1993: 155). The implication here is that the decorative, which had previously been associated with finely crafted luxury goods, had become tainted through mass production and its subsequent appeal to women and the popular masses. Thus, according to Le Corbusier, artists should employ the clean lines and pure geometric forms that stem from industrial design and machine aesthetics to counter the vulgarity of the decorative. This aesthetic assessment established a dichotomy between the arabesque and the straight line, the handcrafted and the industrial, and luxury and utility. Nevertheless, artists such as Matisse, who reveled in lavish ornamentation and all over surface patterning, resisted Le Corbusier's aesthetic hierarchy, embracing the decorative as an expression of modernism. Nor was the act of creating a decorative composition entirely opposed to the process proposed by Le Corbusier. Artists on both sides of the divide were concerned with the structure and organization of surface, the flatness of the picture plane, and the rhythm and placement of compositional elements. And critics often employed the term "decorative" broadly to describe any of these traits. Le Corbusier's (and others') association of the decorative with the feminine impacted the interpretation of women artists' work, however. Amaral's, Malfatti's, Velásquez Cueto's, and Peláez's stylistic and formal choices thus positioned them within the modernist aesthetic debate surrounding the decorative.

- 3 Use of bold color and decorative motifs also evoked stereotypes of the tropical and the exotic. Thus the embrace or rejection of these stylistic traits aligned the artist with either a national or a "universal" aesthetic. Whereas Amaral and Velásquez de Cueto directly acknowledged their national identity, playing into while subtly challenging Parisian expectations, Malfatti and Peláez chose to avoid explicitly national subject matter and instead to foreground stylistic experimentation in their Paris exhibitions. All four grappled with notions of the decorative in different ways, embracing or rejecting its popularity and associations with the feminine. Amaral and Malfatti, who both held exhibitions in Paris in 1926, seem to have deliberately adopted opposite pictorial strategies in a sort of rivalry and play for recognition in the Parisian environment. Three years later Velásquez Cueto exhibited tapestries inspired by Mexico's indigenous craft tradition, whereas Peláez took the lessons of cubism and an emerging constructivism as a point of departure. The diversity of these exhibitions suggests that attempting to identify an overriding feminine or Latin American aesthetic is a futile endeavor. Rather, what united these women was their common experience of "exhilarating exile."

Tarsila do Amaral

- 4 In June of 1926 Brazilian artist Tarsila do Amaral held her first solo exhibition at the Galerie Percier on the famous rue de la Boétie.¹ In addition to receiving significant critical acclaim, it was one of the first exhibitions in a prominent right bank gallery to foreground national identity without falling into conventions of the picturesque.² What differentiated Amaral from many of her Latin American contemporaries was her ability to combine modernist aesthetics with local subject matter. Moreover, it was the first solo exhibition by a Latin American woman artist to be considered by many critics as avant-garde. Not only did Amaral parlay national identity into avant-garde status, her

choice of style also served to challenge common assumptions about the aesthetic properties of women's paintings and their inferior status as draftsmen.

- 5 Amaral's 1926 exhibition was a long time in coming. Amaral had lived in Paris at various intervals during the 1920s, studying first at the Académie Julian and later with André Lhote and Fernand Léger, who had a major impact on her work.³ For several years she maintained a studio in Montmartre that became a gathering place for Brazilian intelligentsia and the European avant-garde alike. By the fall of 1924 she was eager to show her work and began to explore possible exhibition venues. She considered exhibiting in the galleries run by the journal *Paris-Midi*, but her friend and mentor, Swiss novelist and poet Blaise Cendrars insisted on the importance of strategic self presentation and discouraged her from exhibiting there:
- 6 Me, I advise you not to exhibit right now. Take your time. Good things take time. You must have a good dozen paintings, in addition to *Shantytown Hill*, before considering an exhibition. But if you are absolutely in a hurry, do it now; but not in the galleries of the *Journal* where no one but the nouveau riches attachés of the embassies—amateurs exhibit. Proceed carefully, into the middle of the gallery sector, on the rue la Boétie. Everyone will take care of you, you won't need a protector, you will be surrounded by friends (A. Amaral, 2003: 185).
- 7 In a letter to Oswald de Andrade, Amaral's partner, Cendrars elaborated further:

If for whatever reason she must absolutely exhibit right away, she should exhibit in any gallery on the rue de la Boétie, Galerie Percier, for example, and she should have Rosenberg organize her exhibition and Léger write the preface to the catalogue. But be careful not to run into trouble like Chagall. You could talk to Picasso, Cocteau who all can be useful to her if she does an exhibition right away (A. Amaral, 2003: 186).
- 8 Cendrars' suggestions indicate the importance of artistic contacts as well as a gallery's reputation and location in furthering an artist's career. The wrong venue could institute entirely undesirable perceptions of an artist's work. Amaral decided to take Cendrars' advice and wait until she could secure an exhibition at a gallery on the rue de la Boétie.
- 9 Cendrars' knowledge of the artistic milieu in Paris as well as his intellectual engagement with notions of the modernist primitive had a major impact on Amaral. The two first met in May of 1923, and Cendrars introduced Amaral and her partner Oswald de Andrade to many of the most prominent members of the Parisian avant-garde, including Picasso, Léger, Brancusi, Delaunay, Chagall, and writers Vollard, Cocteau, Supervielle, Larbaud, and Romain. Before his acquaintance with the fashionable Brazilian couple, Cendrars had already demonstrated a fascination with non-European cultures, publishing *L'anthologie nègre*, a collection of African stories, in 1921. His friendship with Amaral and Andrade motivated him to explore new destinations and he travelled with them to Brazil in February of 1924.⁴ For Cendrars, procuring an exhibition for Amaral served the dual purpose of highlighting his own connections to Brazil and situating the country as a rich source of primitivist modernism.
- 10 In 1926 Amaral finally secured an individual exhibition at a venue recommended by Cendrars, the Galerie Percier. Amaral recalled:
- 11 I first had to take an exam. In spite of Cendrars' introduction, M. Level, the director of the gallery, could not commit himself to showing the work of an unknown artist. The

excuse was that he had no space. He would, however, go to my studio to see my work. When I showed him *Shantytown Hill*—black people, black children, animals, clothes drying in the sun, among tropical colors, a painting that today belongs to Francisco da Silva Teles—he asked me: "When would you like to exhibit?" I had passed. I was going to be shown on Paris' street of avant-garde art. (T. Amaral, 'Pau-Brasil,' 2009: 31)

Fig. 1 Amaral, Tarsila do, *Shantytown Hill* [Morro de Favela], 1924

Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 76 cm

Hecilda e Sergio Fadel Collection, Rio de Janeiro

- 12 In recommending that Amaral feature *Shantytown Hill* (fig. 1) as a centerpiece of her Paris exhibition, Cendrars understood the appeal it would hold for Parisian audiences. While the title *Shantytown Hill* refers to the relatively recent construction of the shantytowns in the outskirts of São Paulo, the scene appears to be a quaint Afro-Brazilian village, complete with brightly colored houses and tropical vegetation. The houses are modest; there is no sign of poverty, overcrowding, crime, or pollution that later came to characterize shantytowns. Instead, Amaral used the houses and people as motifs, reducing each to its essential geometry and stacking these forms throughout the pictorial space. Eccentric bulbous plants are dispersed throughout the space and a smattering of small dark skinned figures—a couple and their two children, a woman in a doorway, and a child with a dog—occupy the landscape and create a dynamic pattern over the surface. This image offers no social critique—to be fair, social realism had not yet taken hold in the Americas and was not yet part of the modernist repertoire—rather it presents a new vision of Brazil, a population and landscape ignored by official culture, as valid subject matter for contemporary painting. It was Amaral's combination of modernist technique and new subject matter that enticed Level and led him to grant her an exhibition.

- 13 While Cendrars understood the appeal of *Shantytown Hill*, he was still concerned about the overall conceptualization of the show. He wrote to Andrade from Brazil about the exhibition: "Do a FRENCH, PARISIAN exhibition and not a South American demonstration. The danger to you is to be understood as official [representatives of Brazilian culture]... It is a matter of tact. This time use your Indian character and do not forget all that I already told you on this subject" (A. Amaral, 2003: 230). What Cendrars most likely meant by this comment was that national identity was in demand, but it had to be presented with savvy. Parisians did not want to see picturesque renditions of official culture, they wanted "Indian character." He may also be referring to audience here, suggesting that the invitees should be members of the avant-garde, not solely of from the South American diplomatic corps, which was often the case at exhibitions hosted by the Association de l'Amérique Latine. Being associated with official culture, which Amaral and Andrade denigrated but in which they nonetheless participated in Paris, was a deathblow to avant-garde status.
- 14 Amaral's 1926 exhibition ultimately included seventeen paintings as well as a selection of drawings and watercolors made on her trip to Minas Gerais in 1924. An illustrated catalogue with her self-portrait on the cover and reproductions of three paintings (a landscape, *São Paulo*, and *Angels*) and an excerpt from Cendrars' book of poems *Feuilles de route* within, accompanied the exhibition. The paintings exhibited fall into several broad categories. Whereas four paintings focused on Afro-Brazilian types (*Negress*, *Adoration*, *Fruit Vendor*, *Shantytown Hill*), other works represented religious piety (*Angels*, *Children in the Sanctuary*), tropical landscapes (three untitled landscapes, *Lagoa Santa*, *The Market*), a self-portrait, or pure fantasy (*The Boogeyman*) (fig. 2).⁵ A final group of paintings highlighted the modernity of São Paulo (*São Paulo*, *Level Crossing*, *Barra do Pirahy*, and *The Railway Station*).

Fig. 2 Amaral, Tarsila do, *The Boogeyman* [A Cuca], 1924

Oil on canvas, 60 x 72.5 cm
Musée de Grenoble

- 15 All of the paintings in the exhibition demonstrate a strong affinity with Léger's machine aesthetic, his crisp clean edges, bold use of color, and systematic organization of the pictorial space. Rather than simply emulating the style of an esteemed mentor, Amaral's co-opting of Léger's style was a strategic means of positioning herself as a serious artist. She deliberately avoided painting in a stereotypically feminine manner, and embraced those qualities in Léger's work often deemed masculine—boldness, clarity, hard edges, urban motifs.
- 16 But Amaral simultaneously challenged the primacy of this purist aesthetic by commissioning Pierre-Emile Legrain (1889-1929), a cutting-edge designer working in an Art Deco style, to make the highly decorative frames for her oil paintings in the exhibition. Legrain, who was known for his innovative work as a bookbinder and furniture designer, designed for two wealthy Parisian patrons, Jacques Ducet, a couturier, and Jeanne Tachard, a milliner, who both owned extensive collections of African objects that frequently inspired Legrain's creations (Legrain and National Museum of African Art, 1998: 5).⁶ The frames he made for Amaral's paintings, most of which are now lost, incorporated an eclectic range of unconventional materials including lizard skin, parchment paper, shards of mirrored glass, corrugated cardboard, and leather (A. Amaral, 2009: 63). Legrain's Art Deco frames, in their use of materials such as lizard skin, heightened the "exotic" content of the pictures, while their whimsy and materiality added an element of "decorative boldness" to the clean lines in the paintings ("Chronique de l'Amérique Latine" 1926: 3). Her choice of frames and attention to composition bridges the supposed gap between purism and the decorative.
- 17 At Cendrars' urging, Amaral included several paintings of Afro-Brazilians in the exhibition to appeal to Parisians' fascination with the exotic and the primitive. She was acutely aware that this vision of Brazil was exactly what her audience desired. Writing to her family in 1923 she proclaimed: "You should not assume that this Brazilian tendency in art is considered bad here. On the contrary, what we want here is that everyone brings a contribution from their own country. This explains the success of the Ballets Russes, Japanese prints, black music. Paris is tired of Parisian art" (A. Amaral, 2003: 20). Primitivism is what gave her legitimacy in Paris, but hers was a strategic primitivism that stemmed primarily from an exploration of such forms by the European avant-garde, such as Léger, Brancusi, Picasso and Rousseau, rather than some sort of lived or even intellectual connection to native cultures indigenous to Brazil (Herkenhoff, 2005: 24, 27). She nevertheless claimed (and critics willingly conceded) a certain privileged access to these cultures—despite her upper-class upbringing—because of her national identity, positioning herself as an authority on the subject.

Fig. 3 Amaral, Tarsila do, *The Negress*, 1923

Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo collection

- 18 Her 1923 painting *The Negress* (fig. 3) was her first attempt to tap into this enthrallment with the “other.” As has been mentioned by various scholars, *The Negress* exhibits a strong link to Brancusi’s *White Negress* made in the same year as Tarsila’s painting. In her reduction of form to essential elements, smoothness of texture, and condensation of “Africanness” to prominent lips and a single exaggerated breast—a symbol of sexuality, fertility, and a primitive libidinous nature—Amaral is clearly emulating Brancusi. Ironically, the now iconic painting was barely acknowledged in reviews of her 1926 exhibition. *The Journal des débats* referred to it in passing as “the derriere and the lips,” but that was essentially it (de Pawlowski, 1926: 3). No one was shocked or offended or even particularly interested in this exaggerated representation of the Afro-Brazilian woman. By the time it was exhibited in 1926, this construct of the African women, dating back to the display of the Hottentot Venus in 1815, had saturated Paris to such an extent that it did not even elicit comment.
- 19 Instead, *Adoration* a painting of a subdued Christianized black man was the first work to sell as well as the image Léonce Rosenberg chose to publish in his journal *Bulletin de l’Effort Moderne* a few months later (A. Amaral, 2003: 247). Whereas *The Negress* presents the Afro-Brazilian woman as a sort of primordial Amazon fertility figure, defined by her sexual attributes, the formidable primitivism of the African has been subdued in *Adoration*. Here, the praying figure appears simple, almost childlike. Christianity has tamed his savage instincts and made him non-threatening. As Amaral herself described, *Adoration* depicts a “thick-lipped black man with his hands pressed together before an image of the Holy Ghost, surrounded by blue, pink and white flowers, and a frame by Pierre Legrain. The colored wax pigeon, bought in a little town in the countryside, which Cendrars had given me as a present, served as a model” (T. Amaral, “Pau Brasil,”

2009: 31). Her description evokes an imagined simplicity of time and place, where craft was spontaneous and intuitive and religious devotion based on innocent mysticism. The painting depicts a bust length view of a dark skinned man in profile. His lips and facial features are exaggerated and distorted to reflect prevalent stereotypes of African peoples. Along the central axis of the composition his folded hands, which clasp three white flowers, direct the viewer's gaze to the white dove on a decorative pedestal. Through color Amaral sets up a dichotomy between the purity of the white dove, representative of the Holy Spirit, and the devout black man raised by religion from a state of darkness. Amaral has surrounded the scene with a decorative floral border reminiscent of colonial altarpieces, causing the eye to focus on surface detail rather than penetrate into deep space. It was this image, not *The Negress*, which presented a unique vision of the Afro-Brazilian to the Parisian audience.

- 20 In contrast to her paintings of Afro-Brazilians, Amaral's four city scenes included no people, but instead glorified modern technological advancements such as railway tracks, gas pumps, steel girders, lampposts, bridges, and billboards. In the face of constant demand for Brazilian themes, construed in the Parisian imagination as indigenous or primitive people and exotic landscapes, these paintings act as a counterpoint to the Afro-Brazilian works and the pristine tropical landscapes. They broadcast the modernity and progressive atmosphere of Brazil's major cities, suggesting that the country had more to offer than its native character, and that São Paulo was equal or perhaps even surpassed Paris in its modernity.

Fig. 5 Amaral, Tarsila do, *São Paulo*, 1924

Oil on canvas, 67 x 90 cm
Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

- 21 In *São Paulo* (fig. 5), for example, Amaral presents the city as a pristine modernist utopia. The entire cityscape has been reduced to basic geometries. The tree in the foreground with its perfectly circular foliage echoes the circular forms of the gasoline pump and electric lamp. A billboard with oversized numbers hangs on one of the buildings in the upper left, advertising the new age of information and science. The modern apartment buildings in the background all stand at right angles, and a railway bridge on steel girders and concrete supports bisects the center of the composition.

Even the grassy areas are perfectly manicured and tamed by the city's overriding geometry. The only indication of São Paulo's tropical location is the lone palm tree that divides the buildings in the background. While her original impetus to paint in this manner certainly stemmed from her training with Léger and knowledge of works such as, *Steam Boat*, 1923 (fig. 6), the choice to employ this aesthetic to represent the Brazilian city complicated expectations of primitivism from her Parisian audience. By refusing to subscribe fully to this reductive primitivism, Amaral highlights Brazil's "hybrid culture," its simultaneous modernity and ethnic difference.

Fig. 6 Léger, Fernand, *Steam Boat*, 1923.

Oil on canvas

Musée National Fernand Léger, Biot, France

- 22 The numerous reviews of the exhibition were exceedingly positive, treating Amaral as a trained and respected artist. A few, however, resorted to her feminine identity as a means of interpreting her paintings. The review in *Paris, Sud & Centre Amérique*, for example, called attention to her physical appearance: "Mrs. Tarsila is a painting herself: her hairstyle, her physiognomy, her general expression makes one think of her paintings, enigmatic and troubling." ("Exposition Tarsila (Galerie Percier)," 1926: 16). By equating her paintings with her "enigmatic and troubling" appearance, the reviewer suggests, by extension, that the country she represents must also embody these qualities.
- 23 In his article on Latin American art written for *La Renaissance*, Raymond Cogniat also described Amaral's interpretation of Léger's style in terms of gender. She is "very often influenced by Fernand Léger, but a more sensitive less cerebral Fernand Léger. It is not necessary to look long to discover in Miss Tarsila, under that stylization, an elegance, a very feminine delicacy. We can expect a lot from this artist" (Cogniat, 1926: 471). While Cogniat intended his assessment of Amaral as praise, the terms of comparison between the male and the female artist are inherently belittling. He never explains how being "less cerebral" and more "sensitive" actually manifests in her work; rather Cogniat's stereotypes of femininity color his review. I would argue, on the contrary, that it was the cerebral, logical quality of Léger's work, his hard edges and pure colors, that appealed to Amaral, and that by appropriating his style she was actually deliberately countering expectations that women's art be "delicate" and "elegant."

- 24 While some reviews were vaguely patronizing, calling her work "charming," "exotic," and full of "local color," others noted that her paintings transcended the picturesque and resisted "cheap exoticism" (de Pawlowski, 1926: 3). These reviewers praised Amaral for not attempting to capture ethnographic authenticity and instead finding creative inspiration in the Brazilian people and landscape. What mattered was the stimulus these original sources provided, the artist's interpretation of these sources, and the fact that the resulting paintings were highly innovative. As the critic for *Paris-Midi* proclaimed, Amaral "did not bother to put her easel on the bank of the Tamanduatchy River," but rather worked in a bright studio. ("Peinture Exotique," 1926). And Raynal noted, "Here are purely Brazilian scenes be they native or purely imaginary" (Raynal, 1926: 2). For these reviewers Amaral's constructed vision of Brazil struck just the right balance between fantasy and reality.
- 25 Many critics measured Amaral's work against their own biased expectations of Latin American art, an art they assumed would be unsophisticated and primitive, however. The critic for *Paris-Midi* asserted that her works were "much less naïve than one would expect," ("Peinture Exotique," 1926) and Charensol noted—incorrectly—that her paintings "owe more to popular imagery, such as that practiced by the naïve craftsmen of Brazil [than to French painters of the extreme-left]" (Charensol 1926: 477). While Maurice Raynal proclaimed that Amaral's exhibition "mark [ed] a moment of new autonomy in Brazilian art," an art that according to him, had been hampered by academicism and lack of personality, he argued that she achieved this effect by employing "international technique" to "discipline" the "primitive sensibility" that he associated with Brazil (Raynal 1926: 2). Raynal's language suggests a latent colonialist attitude. It was only through discipline and logic, products of European enlightenment philosophy, that the primitive can be subdued—the exact argument used to justify colonial expansion. For him, Amaral's paintings tamed an inherent primitive and presented it in an ordered manner acceptable to Parisian audiences.
- 26 For G. de Pawlowski, however, the process was reversed: the discipline came first and then "extravagance" followed. Amaral was not asserting control over an inherent primitive, but rather deploying acquired artistic training to deliberately construct a primitive world:
- 27 In the same way that we demand a licence to drive a car, we should demand a "fauve membership card" of all avant-garde painters, certifying that the artist has provided proof that he knows his medium, is authorized, from that point on, to give in to all eccentricities...I am grateful that Tarsila, in the exhibition she offers us, has slipped in a few small studies in pencil in a purely classical style, some reasonable sketches, to prove to us that she has the right to her "fauve membership card" and that her extravagances are voluntary and well thought out. (de Pawlowski, 1926: 3).
- 28 Pawlowski was among the few critics who accorded Amaral artistic agency, and for him that agency positioned her among the avant-garde.
- 29 Amaral's exhibition presented a new twist on the primitivism that had long since been a marker of avant-garde status in Paris. She co-opted the discipline of Léger's purism and used it to interpret in new ways Brazilian sources outside the realm of official culture. This combination had the effect of being readable to her Parisian audience as modernist, yet unique in its source material. Although Amaral perpetuated prevalent stereotypes in her rendering of Afro-Brazilians, her presentation of this source material moved Brazilian art in a new direction. Moreover, her inclusion of several

modernist cityscapes complicated perceptions of Brazilian culture as inherently primitive. During her time in Paris, Amaral learned to negotiate the specific demands of Parisian gallery culture, creating a vision that at once subscribed to those criteria, but also challenged biased expectations.

Anita Malfatti

- 30 Amaral's compatriot Anita Malfatti employed a distinct artistic strategy to establish her reputation in Paris. While both Amaral and Malfatti came from upper class backgrounds, Malfatti had traveled more widely than Amaral, spending time in the United States and Germany with her family before arriving in Paris in 1923, but Amaral had more connections among the avant-garde and diplomatic community. The two most likely met at the inaugural exhibition at the Maison de l'Amérique Latine where they both exhibited in 1923 and where they both caught the attention of critics, but they did not frequent the same circles. While Amaral opted to return to Brazil nearly every year to explore her country's colonial and folk heritage, Malfatti traveled around Europe, taking a trip to Italy in the summer of 1924, and to Spain and the Pyrenees in the summer of 1926. Whereas Amaral embraced the Parisian penchant for the primitive and the national, Malfatti almost exclusively avoided it. And while both artists co-opted the styles of established French modernists, Léger and Matisse respectively, these artists arguably represent two ends of the formalist spectrum, with Léger emphasizing clarity and order and Matisse expressionist brushwork and decorative abundance. Moreover, both adopted different strategies to present themselves to the Parisian public; Malfatti used the salons as a proving ground and a means to gain critical attention, and Amaral avoided them almost entirely. The choices these two artists made could not have been more divergent, leading a rivalry between the two. Malfatti's negative reaction to Amaral's 1926 exhibition made explicit this rift and troubled their mutual friend Brazilian writer Mario de Andrade, who wrote to Malfatti on July 24, 1926: "it is a profound shame that you have not been able come to a friendly understanding after having diverged in your aesthetic orientation." (Gotlib, 1998: 132). Malfatti's Paris exhibition at the Galerie André on the left bank of the Seine, which took place only five months after Amaral's in November of 1926, reveals her aesthetic differentiation from her compatriot.
- 31 Prior her exhibition, Malfatti had already established her reputation as a modernist in Paris. She had exhibited every year since her arrival at the Salon d'Automne or the Salon des indépendants, and by the time of her individual exhibition at the Galerie André, she had gained a favorable reputation among French critics. Her exhibition was more extensive than Amaral's, and consisted of twenty-two oil paintings, fourteen watercolors, and eleven drawings. Many of the paintings in the show were made during her travels around Europe and included scenes of Italy (*The Small Canal* and *Church Interior*), Monaco (*Interior (Monaco)* and *Port of Monaco*), and the Pyrenees (*Pyrenees Landscapes*). Also exhibited were several still lifes (*Dolly*, *Lemons*, *Apples*) and nudes (*The Blue Room*, *Bather*, *Small Nude*) executed in the monumental style that dominated the School of Paris between the wars (Batista 2006: 345). One of the few, if only, paintings in the exhibition to reference her Brazilian identity was the oft-exhibited *Tropical* (fig. 7). Her decision to emphasize themes and landscapes immediately familiar to a European

audience, rather than Brazilian subjects, signifies that her strategy was the completely opposite to that of Amaral.

Fig. 7 Malfatti, Anita, *Tropical*, ca 1916

Oil on canvas, 77 x 102 cm

Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo

- 32 *Tropical* was the anomaly, the one picture that suggested difference. Since she had already exhibited *Tropical* twice in Paris, once in 1923 at the *Maison de l'Amérique latine* and again in 1925 at the Salon d'Automne, Malfatti knew the work had a receptive audience and would set her apart in the minds of critics. Her decision to take advantage of the painting's draw, while not repeating its motifs in any other compositions while in Paris indicates that she was struggling with how to negotiate between Parisian critics' expectations of nationalist modernism and her own desire to disavow these themes. In the end Malfatti chose to engage current trends emerging in Paris, rather than to construct a vision of Brazil for her Parisian audience.

Fig. 8 Malfatti, Anita, *Interior (Monaco)*, ca 1925

Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm
BM&F Collection, São Paulo

- 33 In Paris Malfatti took an interest in the highly decorative surfaces of Matisse, painting several works that took his approach in a new direction. She exhibited one of those paintings, *Interior (Monaco)* (fig. 8), in the 1926 Salon des indépendants, where it received significant positive feedback, and included it again in her individual exhibition at the Galerie André. The painting depicts an interior space: a dining room with an open doorway into an adjacent room. A figure, with short dark hair, can be seen through the door with her back to the viewer. The entire pictorial surface is animated with ornate patterns: a floral motif unites the tablecloth and doorway curtain, swirling leaves decorate the dining room wallpaper, a dot pattern adorns the wallpaper in the connecting room, and the floor is a checkerboard design. No one object or motif in the painting takes precedence over any other because of the overall imposition of ornament. The only rest for the eye is the bright white door in the center of the composition that leads the gaze toward the figure, who in contrast to everything around her, wears only a simple white wrap. Even the two portraits on the wall are more animated than the figure. The painting overwhelms the eye with its ebullient patterns and surfaces and subsumes the viewer into this overly decorative space. Malfatti heightened this effect further by eschewing traditional perspective, tilting the table and floor up to create more surface area to endow with pattern.

Fig. 9 Matisse, Henri, *Pianist and Checker Players*, 1924

Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 92.1 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.

- 34 This direct engagement with Matisse's approach presented interpretive challenges. On the one hand, emulating an older more established male artist could provide a point of entry for viewers of Malfatti's work, but, on the other hand, following him too closely could relegate her work to the derivative. Moreover, the decorative often signified differently for male and female artists. Whereas Matisse's application of bold vivacious color (that began during his fauve period), and extravagant patterning could be interpreted as an exaggeration required in the constant quest for the new that marked early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, a woman artist using these same techniques could easily be dismissed as insubstantial, and concerned only with the surface of things. Malfatti seems to have avoided these pitfalls by diverging from Matisse in several significant ways. While the painting shares quite a bit with works such as the *Pianist and Checker Players* by Matisse of 1924 (fig. 9), Malfatti evades Matisse's use of vibrant color, instead choosing a palette of browns and earth tones. Her choice to work in more drab colors may stem from a desire to avoid associations with the tropical that Amaral's work evoked. Whereas Matisse constructs an intimate family scene, whose elaborate patterning conjures the rhythm of piano music or the playfulness of leisure activity, Malfatti's room is oddly disconcerting. Who is the figure? What is she doing? Do the portraits on the wall depict family members? Or is she a visitor in this space? The title *Interior (Monaco)* suggests travel and time spent in hotels or guest apartments. This sense of alienation or disconcertedness most likely derived from occupying unfamiliar spaces, and the ever-present sense of not entirely belonging as a Brazilian woman abroad.
- 35 While reviewers immediately recognized Malfatti's exploration of Matisse, *Interior (Monaco)* was generally well-received. It was reproduced in conjunction with reviews of the Independent Salon in *Revue Moderne des arts et de la vie* and *Les Artistes d'Aujourd'hui* as well as in *Paris, Sud & Centre Amérique* as advertisement for her exhibition. M. Molé commented that the painting was "well composed" and more importantly that Malfatti

"remained true to herself in the originality she possessed." While Molé did not specifically mention Matisse, he does acknowledge Malfatti's familiarity with "all forms of modern art" and hence his proclamation of her originality suggests that she had achieved distinction without resorting to subject matter as a differentiating mechanism (Molé, 1926). The critic for the *Paris Times* remarked that while he could identify her sources, this influence quickly dissipated and Malfatti distinguished herself as a unique artist. He also noted, however, that she was "so French in skills and in temperament." ("L'Exposition des oeuvres de Mlle Annita Malfatti," 1926: 4). This comment equates skill and originality with French culture, and on the flipside, implies that these traits are not inherent to Latin American artists.

- 36 In an interview with Malfatti for his review of the 1926 Salon des indépendants André Warnod pondered the artist's national identity in relation to her artistic output. His assessment of her responses reveals the contradiction Malfatti confronted in Paris. While there is almost nothing in her work that reveals an interest in Brazilian folk culture, she felt compelled to suggest that her ultimate goal was to create local or Brazilian paintings. In Warnod's words:
- 37 We have been surprised to find in the discourse of most young American artists who have come to study painting in Paris, proof of a sincere patriotism... They are our guests, but they know that they will return home and will build a house made of materials acquired here. A young Brazilian, Miss Anita Malfatti who is showing at the Independent salon an interior and a portrait painted in a very delicate spectrum, told us how she had toured the United States and Germany before coming to France, without attaching herself to one master or another, but rather being enriched by everything she encountered, attempting to present as well as she could the French spirit, the French culture, in order to later create local paintings in Brazil and to benefit from folklore and the Brazilian picturesque. Is there not more elevated language here than the language that so many young women painters employ who are at present plagued by a demoralizing concern for "schemes" (Warnod, 1926).
- 38 For Warnod, women painters are easily distracted by "schemes" so focusing on the national was a way for an artist to "elevate" herself above the fray. But since Malfatti was not actually doing so yet, one has to wonder, therefore, if it were not Warnod who put those words in her mouth in an attempt to understand her almost complete lack of reference to Brazil in her work.

Fig. 10 Malfatti, Anita, *Dolly*, ca 1926

Oil on canvas, location unknown

- 39 Another work in Malfatti's exhibition that elicited special praise was a still life entitled *Dolly* (fig. 10). Since the painting was featured in the exhibition catalogue and Malfatti chose it as one of her two submissions to the Independent Salon the following year, it most likely held particular significance for her. The painting depicts an overtly feminine subject, a doll in an elaborate ruffled dress and crinolines. The doll sits in an ornate floral box with her bonnet removed to reveal blond hair and large expressive eyes. Like *Interior* (Monaco), every surface of the painting is highly decorated, with an emphasis on rhythm and pattern. Malfatti established a close vantage point, cropping out the surrounding room and creating an unusually intimate rendering of the doll. When it was exhibited at the Independent Salon one critic commented, "still life perhaps in theme, but alive, and such a beautiful life, because of the color and composition," ("L'Exposition des oeuvres de Mlle Annita Malfatti," 1926: 4) and another called it a "little fantasy doll." ("La vie artistique: Les artistes vus aux récentes expositions, Salon des indépendants: Mlle Annita Malfatti," 1927: 4) Ironically, this focus on *Dolly* did not earn Malfatti the designation as a "lady painter." Rather the critic for the *Paris Times*, in a review of her individual exhibition, remarked that there was "nothing feminine nothing insipid" about her work ("L'Exposition des oeuvres de Mlle Annita Malfatti," 1926: 4). For this critic, her compositions were logical and solidly composed, and revealed her skill as a colorist.
- 40 Although Malfatti's exhibition received significantly less attention in the press than Amaral's—perhaps because of its location on the left bank or perhaps because Malfatti did not do as much self promotion—reviews of the show were exceedingly positive. Critics considered her a serious modernist with special skill as a colorist and did not resort to interpreting her work in accordance with stereotypes of femininity. These reviews indicate that, through her exploration of the decorative, Malfatti had succeeded in positioning herself within current modernist debates, her affinity with Matisse a point of departure rather than crippling influence. Moreover, Malfatti made a conscious choice, in the face of critical acclaim for her painting *Tropical*, to avoid

cultural nationalism as a modernist strategy. She understood the reductive and often stereotypical responses that this type of painting evoked and chose instead to take a different path than Amaral.

Lola Velásquez Cueto

- 41 Three years later, in 1929, Mexican artist Lola Velásquez Cueto held an exhibition of forty-three tapestries at the prestigious right bank Galerie de la Renaissance. As a textile artist, Velásquez Cueto's medium immediately distinguished her from artists working in oil on canvas. The 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* had brought the decorative arts to the forefront of the public imagination, and throughout the 1920s various avant-garde artists, frequently women such as Sophie Tauber-Arp and Sonia Delaunay, employed the textile medium to create daring new designs. As a traditionally feminine endeavor embroidery also held cultural associations with indigenous craft traditions in Mexico. Velásquez Cueto's work as a textile artist thus bridged the gap between the traditional and modern; it drew on aspects of the local while simultaneously coinciding with an avant-garde sensibility and penchant for the primitive. Like Amaral, Velásquez Cueto took advantage of Parisians' taste for the primitive to launch her career in Paris and to open up new opportunities elsewhere.
- 42 Velásquez Cueto had arrived in Paris with her husband, artist Germán Cueto, and two children in 1927 where they rented an apartment in Montparnasse. As their daughter Mireya Cueto would later relate, a parade of Mexicans and Latin Americans passed through the Paris apartment, converting the house into "a sort of second Mexican Consulate" (Cueto, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, and Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 2009: 89). German's cousin Spanish painter María Blanchard introduced the couple to the artistic avant-garde of Paris including Juan Gris, Jacques Lipchitz, Julio González, and André Salmon. Thus, like Amaral, Velásquez Cueto gained inside access to Paris's avant-garde and ex-patriot community. The pair had brought with them to Paris a large quantity of Mexican crafts as well as fifty tapestries woven by Lola in Mexico. In Paris, she purchased "an excellent modern machine," to make more works for her 1929 exhibition (Salmon, 1929: 47). Salmon described his impression of her process: "Under the magical fingers of Mrs. Lola Velásquez Cueto, it is not really a machine, but rather a tool, that she operates and controls at will, according to her own science and whim, as if it were a paintbrush or a burin" (Salmon, 1929: 47, 54). Salmon's justification suggests that Velásquez Cueto was deliberately modernizing her process and in so doing challenging the belief that the use of a machine would adulterate the perceived purity of the craft process.
- 43 Almost immediately upon her arrival, the art critic for the Mexican journal *El Universal Ilustrado* began promoting Velásquez Cueto's "triumph" in Paris: "Soon we will applaud an exhibition in one of the most selective galleries of Paris and, surely, the global success of tapestries 'Made in Mexico,' because they don't care that they were made in Europe with European machines, if they are made by a Mexican" (Ortega, 1927: 62). Ortega points out a major paradox of exhibiting in Paris, that Parisians demanded an aura of authenticity or cultural difference, but were not going to look too closely to verify it.

Fig. 11 Velásquez Cueto, Lola, Exhibition View "Tapisseries Mexicaines de Lola Velásquez Cueto"

Galerie de la Renaissance, Paris, 1929, Photograph

- 44 Through her Paris connections Velásquez Cueto and her husband secured the luxurious Galerie de la Renaissance for a joint exhibition in 1929 (fig.11). The galleries encompassed several rooms and had plush leather couches and ample lighting. The exhibition featured sixty tapestries by Velásquez Cueto and a selection of sculptures and masks by Germán. Pre-Colombian, folkloric, and colonial motifs inspired some of Velásquez Cueto's tapestries and others replicated European and Mexican paintings. Diego Rivera had provided Velásquez Cueto with a cartoon for his mural *Corn Festival* that she converted into a tapestry for the show (Fig. 12), and she also replicated Henri Rousseau's *Scout Attacked by a Tiger*.

Fig. 12 Velásquez Cueto, Lola (after Diego Rivera), *Corn Festival*, ca. 1920-1927, Tapestry

Fig. 13 Velásquez Cueto, Lola, *Indian*, ca. 1920-1927

Tapestry

- 45 Her style varied greatly among the tapestries on display, from richly colored and illusionistic to flat and monochromatic. In *Indian* (Fig. 13), for example, Cueto depicts an indigenous woman in traditional dress holding a bowl in which she seems to be collecting a substance from the leaves of a plant. A black bird dives down to investigate, and below a small black dog rests among the flowers. The entire composition is rendered in rich browns and greens, the colors of the Mexican earth. While Cueto has flattened and stacked the forms in the pictorial space, there is still a clear sense of foreground—covered with abundant white flowers—and background—marked by the characteristic snow covered peaks of Mexico. She contrasts the undulating flowers with the vertical energy of the cacti in the middle ground. And the horizontal stripes on the woman's skirt add another motif the patterned surface.
- 46 Whereas *Indian* follows the compositional structure of a painting, woven entirely in black and ivory, *Patron Saint of Mexico* is flat and symmetrical. Surrounded by ivory floral patterns, the silhouette of the iconic Virgin of Guadalupe with her characteristic rays of light occupies the center of the tapestry; among the flowers birds emerge as black silhouettes. Other tapestries such as *Turkeys* adopt non-hierarchical orientation, one more aligned with traditional weaving techniques. And still others, such as *Tehuantepec* (fig. 16) straddle the fence between symmetrical patterning and illusionistic picture.

Fig. 15 Velásquez Cueto, Lola, *Turkeys*, ca. 1920-1927

Tapestry

Fig. 16 Velásquez Cueto, Lola, *Tehuantepec*, ca. 1920-1927

Tapestry

- ⁴⁷ In his review of the exhibition, André Salmon discussed Velásquez Cueto's work at length in relation to the notion of the decorative in modern art. For Salmon, the decorative can be "fatal" and does not allow for a "high level of invention." But he contends that "Mrs. Lola Velásquez Cueto disciplines it with rare tact, which makes her a great decorator, free from everything that modern art has taught us to detest of a certain 'decorative spirit'" (Salmon, 1929: 54). For Salmon, there is a difference between

the showy yet confining decorative, in which pattern supersedes design, and that which inspires invention. By drawing on her cultural tradition, source material that was unfamiliar to her Parisian audience, Velásquez Cueto rose above the restraints of mere ornament to create a new vision. According to Salmon, pre-Colombian art, which he situated as a direct precursor to Velásquez Cueto's tapestries, was "the last great hope for those who have tired of African Art" (Salmon, 1929: 47).⁷ Thus, one manifestation of the primitive replaced another in the constant quest for novelty in Paris.

- 48 This praise of Velásquez Cueto's ability to "discipline" the decorative parallels reviews of Amaral's show, which lauded her regulation, through her precise controlled style, the perceived "primitivism" of her subjects. Parisian audiences wanted access to the exotic, the folkloric, the primitive, yet they simultaneously feared that these imagined primal forces would explode forth in uncontrolled mayhem, or that the popular propensity for ornament would contaminate modern art. Those artists who could harness the essence of these sources, yet present them in a disciplined manner, were the ultimate modernists.
- 49 Like Amaral's exhibition, Velásquez Cueto's was widely reviewed, perhaps because of its comparable location in a right bank gallery and the artist's many art world connections. Having the support of André Salmon also certainly worked in her favor. Others who reviewed her show included Maurice Raynal, Arthur Rimbaud, and Jean Cassou (Cueto, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, and Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 2009: 163). Writing for the French art journal *L'Art vivant*, Jean Cassou embedded his discussion of Velásquez Cueto into a larger article entitled "La Renaissance de l'art mexicain." Cassou attributes Velásquez Cueto's success to sudden inspiration stemming from a Mexican "awakening" to "ancestral forces," rather than to learning an artistic pursuit: "We imagine that inspiration struck out of the blue and emerged in an immediate and direct way for a tapestry to surpass all the qualities of the highest, most accomplished work of art. The least bit of labor with which a Mexican artist applies his ingenuity becomes a pretext to release all the powers of art." (Cassou 1929: 758). In other words, a Mexican artist need only to apply him or herself in a minimal way as long as he or she is drawing on her inherent connection to the Mexican past.
- 50 Like Amaral and Malfatti, Velásquez Cueto experienced little comment or bias in regards to her gender. Even Salmon's discussion of the decorative did not revert to tropes of femininity, but rather exalted her ability to elevate the decorative to the realm of high art. What she did experience, however, like so many Latin American artists in Paris, was an alignment of her work with notions of the primitive. But her ability to combine local sources with modernist aesthetic principles won her critical acclaim. Paris thus provided Velásquez Cueto a vital opportunity to establish herself in the art world and to contribute, through her work, to the most current debates about the role of the decorative in modern art. After her Paris show Velásquez Cueto secured exhibitions in Barcelona and Rotterdam and her success abroad opened the door for several exhibition opportunities in Mexico upon her return home (Cueto, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, and Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 2009: 164-165).

Amelia Peláez

- 51 By the 1930s conditions had changed dramatically in Paris. The stock market crash severely impacted the art market and exhibition opportunities quickly dried up. Moreover, the increasing xenophobia spurred by the inundation of foreigners into France in the 1920s and the increasing Fascist presence in Spain, Italy, and Germany made Paris quite a different city than it had been in the previous decade. As Maurice Henry wrote in a letter to Peruvian artist Cesar Moro: "And I assure you that in France foreigners are getting really bad press—according to bourgeois journals, foreigners are responsible for everything and several thousand workers have been driven back to the borders—if they are foreigners, they are like the Jews in Germany or blacks in the USA" (Henry, 1934). While most Latin American artists left Paris by the early 1930s, a few stayed on as long as they could. Cuban artist Amelia Peláez was among those who remained in Paris, waiting out Gerardo Machado's dictatorship. Despite these difficult times, in 1933, after six years in Paris, Peláez held her first individual exhibition at the Galerie Zak on the left bank of the Seine.
- 52 The Galerie Zak was one of the most important and audacious galleries to support Latin American art. According to Cuban writer and art critic, Alejo Carpentier, "the Galerie Zak is one of the most famous of the progressive art galleries of Paris. Like the shops on the rue La Boétie, it maintains rigid criteria for acceptance of a painter; those who aim to hang paintings there must undergo careful examination by a house expert who determines whether or not they are liable to let down a selective clientele" (Carpentier, 1975: 112). While Carpentier may have exaggerated somewhat the gallery's selectivity in order to highlight the odds Cuban artists had overcome, his comment suggests that the Galerie Zak was at very least competitive with the high standards set by the rue de La Boétie galleries. The gallery was founded by the Russian artist of Polish descent, Eugène Zak on 16, rue de l'Abbaye in Saint Germain des Prés probably around 1923, and featured artists such as Chagall, Derain, Dufy, Modigliani, Utrillo, and Vlaminck as well as many other artists of Polish and Jewish heritage.⁸ Kandinsky's first one-man show in Paris was held there in 1929. After Zak died in 1926 his wife Jadwiga Kon took over management of the gallery and it was at this point that it began showcasing Latin American art, hosting individual exhibitions by Joaquín Torres-García (1928), Eduardo Abela (1928), Juan del Prete (1930), a joint show of works by José Cuneo and Barnabé Michelena (1930), and, also in 1930, a group exhibition of Latin American art organized by Torres-García, the "Première Exposition du Groupe Latino-Américain de Paris." Amelia Peláez's 1933 exhibition at the gallery thus followed a prestigious lineup of Latin American and European artists.
- 53 Peláez, like Malfatti, avoided almost entirely reference to her national identity in her work, focusing instead on painting still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. Still lifes, in particular, dominated her artistic production, with floral arrangements being a preferred motif because they her to explore the graphic possibilities and color combinations these bouquets inspired. Similar to the three artists discussed above Peláez paid close attention to the decorative arrangement of compositional elements. Her approach to design drew extensively on the theories of constructivism purported by Torres-García and his circle, which called for artists to abandon the imitation of nature and instead impose structure on the entire canvas. While there is no evidence that Peláez was directly involved with Torres-García's *Cercle et Carré* group, her teacher

and mentor, Alexandra Exter was (Cruz, 1994: 87). Moreover, her choice of exhibition venue, the Galerie Zak, suggests her knowledge of the recent exhibition organized there by Torres-García. Combining a constructivist approach with an emphasis on decorative motifs, Peláez, too, engaged directly with the most current aesthetic experiments of the day.

- 54 Peláez had arrived in Paris in 1927 on a grant from the Cuban government to study the operation of European museums and art schools. With her friend, poet and artist Lydia Cabrera and Cabrera's mother, Peláez took an apartment in Montmartre, far from the experimental art scene and wild nightlife in Montparnasse. In Paris Peláez took art history courses at L'Ecole du Louvre and painting at École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts as well as at the Académie de la Grand Chaumière. Unlike Velásquez Cueto and Amaral, Peláez did not bring a stockpile of paintings with her from Cuba for exhibition. Rather, like Malfatti, she created most if not all the works for her Paris show in Europe. Also, like Malfatti, she did not return to Cuba during her period abroad, but rather took the opportunity to travel extensively in Europe, visiting Spain, Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. This fact, alone, may explain these artists' differing emphasis or lack thereof on national content.

Fig. 17 Peláez, Amelia, *The Hare*, 1929

Oil on canvas, 70 x 89 cm
Museo Nacional de Cuba

- 55 One of her earliest known Paris paintings, which she would later include in her 1933 exhibition, is *The Hare* (fig. 17) of 1929. In the manner of a seventeenth-century Dutch still life, Peláez rendered the prone body of a dead hare beside a simple dish and teacup. Rather than a display of lavish abundance, the scene conveys scarcity and simplicity. The body of the hare has been elongated beyond natural proportions and is

therefore too lean to have any nutritional value. Its ear and hind leg extend beyond the limits of the frame, slicing the composition in two with the arc of the body. The dish is a perfect circle as if rendered from above, whereas the cup presents a side view. The combination of vantage points, while reminiscent of cubism, is greatly simplified, with each form reduced to its essential attributes, more in line with the newer developments of purism and constructivism. The palette is drab, consisting of mostly variations of gray and brown, and the paint is applied in thick ridges. This roughness and lack of color suggest the poverty of a peasant table, where there is no room for superfluous detail. Peláez let the shapes of the objects determine the structure of the composition, manipulating each until it created a graphic pattern on the surface, but still retained a connection to its original form. While almost entirely devoid of ornament, Peláez's composition foregrounds rhythm and pattern as a means of "disciplining" the decorative.

Fig. 18 Peláez, Amelia, *Still Life in Ochre*, ca 1930

Oil on canvas

- 56 In *Still Life in Ochre* (fig. 18) Peláez further emphasizes geometry and structure. The central motif is a vase of flowers, which Peláez rendered in an extremely restricted palette. Only four leaves painted in dark and light shades of blue break up the entirely ochre color scheme. By limiting the range of color, Peláez is able to focus on form: the twists and turns of the stems as they emerge from the vase, the curious blooms that explore the pictorial space forming asymmetrical patterns, and the minimalist vase that contains them. The background is entirely abstract, made up of a series of rectangular shapes in variations of brown and ochre, which do not relate to any visual reality, but rather offset the colors and forms of the bouquet. This manipulation of color and form to create a decorative surface became Peláez's *modus operandi* in Paris.
- 57 Around 1931 she began to focus more intently on her artistic development, enrolling in Léger's Académie d'Art Contemporain where she took courses in set design and color dynamics with Russian artist Alexandra Exter.⁹ She continued to study with Exter, most likely at her teacher's private studio, until she returned to Cuba in 1934. Peláez's time with Exter was pivotal in her growth as an artist. According to Peláez: "Exter was a magnificent teacher, her specialty was set design and she had a weakness for

illuminated manuscripts...The Russian insisted on what one could call the multiplicity of teaching, that is to say, in learning, on the part of the student, from all the techniques and fields of design and visual arts, in such a way that at the end of one's studies, the graduate could manage any of these fields and apply the most convenient technique" (Seoane Gallo, 1987: 37). While Peláez had begun simplifying her forms prior to working with Exter, this inclination seems to have intensified under her tutelage.

Fig. 19 Peláez, Amelia, *Gundinga*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 73 x 61 cm
Museo Nacional de Cuba

Fig. 20 Exter, Alexandra, *Shadow Woman* (costume design), 1924

- 58 Painted in 1931, *Gundinga* (fig. 19) exemplifies the extremely pared down style Peláez developed under Exter, and bears considerable resemblance to works by her mentor such as *Shadow Woman* (fig. 20). *Gundinga* depicts a young woman in full frontal view, staring out at the viewer. Painted in dark brown, the background is entirely flat and uniform. Against this solid block of color, Peláez creates a subtle play of hue, painting the woman's hair a shade darker and her skin a shade lighter than the background, making her form appear to simultaneously emerge and recede. Her dress is a simple cream-colored shape that resembles a piece of cut paper, and is echoed by the white petals of the flower in her hair. Both her body and her facial features are reduced to the most basic geometric forms. This simplicity disavows individual resemblance, making the woman a type rather than a portrait. Whereas some scholars have assumed this painting to represent a mixed racial woman from Cuba (Peláez and Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture 1988: 25), "*Gundinga*" is actually the name of a small town in Nigeria. Nigeria had become a French colony in 1922, causing an influx of immigrants to France from the region. Since Peláez did not create any other paintings that referenced her Cuban identity during her Paris period, but did paint a portrait of a Hindu woman, which like *Gundinga* was shown in her 1933 exhibition, it seems likely that *Gundinga* does not represent a Cuban woman at all, but rather forms part of a general trend in Paris to paint foreign types (Elliott, 2010: 21).¹⁰ Malfatti, for example, painted a Japanese woman in traditional garb, as did many other artists of the period. For Peláez, the woman most likely served as a motif upon which to experiment with extreme simplicity and pictorial flatness, in a manner similar to her floral still lifes, rather than an assertion of her national identity.

Fig. 21 Peláez, Amelia, *Composition with Glasses*, 1933

Pencil and collage on paper, 50 x 36.5 cm
Peláez Collection, Havana

- 59 In June of 1932 Peláez's grant ran out, but she remained in Paris with financial support from her mother. She continued to study with Exter, with whom she explored aspects of the collage practice of synthetic cubism. Peláez did not, however, include these quasi-cubist experiments in her 1933 exhibition, which suggests that these compositions were most likely academic exercises, rather than ends in themselves. *Composition with Glasses* of 1933 (fig. 21) hints at her profound debt to Exter and the benefits of cross cultural exchange. Peláez pasted a clipping from a Cuban newspaper in the center of the composition, which announces the arrival of the first boat from Saint Petersburg in Havana. She also included a circular postmark from Havana, dated May 9, 1933, suggesting epistolary exchange. If *Gundinga* does indeed refer to a Nigerian woman, the inclusion these items within this cubist exercise is Peláez's only direct reference to Cuba in the work she completed in Paris. And significantly, she presents Cuba as the hub of transcultural exchange rather than an exotic locale offered up for the curious eyes of the Parisian public.
- 60 It was not until April of 1933, after six years in Paris, that Peláez had amassed enough work to hold an exhibition. The exhibition was extensive, comprising more than forty works. Still lifes dominated, but several portraits of women and landscapes were also exhibited (including *Gundinga*, *Hindu Woman*, *The Hare*, and possibly *Still Life in Ochre* discussed above).¹¹ French novelist Francis Miomandre wrote the preface to the exhibition catalogue. In the mid-1920s Miomandre had begun to take an interest in Latin American art and culture, reviewing exhibitions and translating the work of several important Latin American writers living in Paris, including Miguel Angel Asturias's *Légendes de Guatemala* in 1932 and Peláez's friend, Lydia Cabrera's *Contes cubains* in 1935. Miomandre, like so many other Parisian critics, attempted to connect the artist's work with his perception of her heritage. While he does not mention Peláez's national identity in his presentation of the artist, Miomandre links her choice of subject matter with the tropical and the exotic:
- 61 Isolated in their own dream, objects, flowers, landscapes, strange figures, at once powerfully natural and evanescent...Flowers petrified at the moment of their sunniest bloom; forests seen from the sky and reduced to green undulations; gardens of limbo, somnolent with heat and half hidden by the overabundance of vegetation...a closed, complete enigmatic world haunted by an enigmatic silence. (Galerie Zak, 1933 translated in Peláez and Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988: 27).
- 62 With his poetic language, Miomandre evokes a timeless dreamlike atmosphere, steamy and replete with overabundant vegetation. Even though most of Peláez's floral still lifes represent interior scenes, with cut flowers contained in simple geometric vases, Miomandre conjures an exotic Caribbean world, a mysterious tropical jungle, to satisfy the European imagination.
- 63 Taking their cue from Miomandre's preface, most of the reviews of Peláez's exhibition, while overwhelmingly positive, emphasized the exotic in Peláez's work. The critic for *Germinal*, for example, wrote of that her paintings were "heavy with dreams" like "an echo that comes to us from the depths of time" (Peláez and Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988: 27) and M. Gros, writing for the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, referred to her images as "closed," while labeling her use of color "violent" and tone "savage" (Peláez and Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988: 27). While the terms "violent" and "savage" could link her use of vibrant color to Fauvism, "savage" also suggests a certain primitivism and rawness. Interpreting her work slightly differently, the critic for *Le*

Rempart reads Peláez's compositions as an expression of her "sensuality" and of "a very unusual inner life" (Peláez and Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988: 27). While this psychoanalytic interpretation may, in part, suggest the recent influence of Freud on art criticism, this reference to sensuality posits a connection between the artist's gender and the manner in which she paints.

Fig. 22 Peláez, Amelia, *Boat in Mallorca*, ca. 1933

Oil on canvas

- 64 The only review to diverge from this tendency to interpret Peláez's work as inherently tropical, exotic, and dreamlike was an extensive feature article on the artist published in *Mobilier et décoration* by Simon Lissim. The article reproduced eight paintings from the show, including works such as *Boats in Mallorca* (fig. 22), which evidences a pared down color palette and exploration of geometry, texture, and composition similar to *Still Life in Ochre*. Although Lissim does refer to her "mystical soul," his emphasis is on technique:
- 65 The subject is of no importance—they [her pictures] are forms, volumes, they are colors, and harmonies, it is rather the immaterial souls of the objects that attracts one...her ocean scenes where the water and the sky are but one, where the yellow, red and orange islands seem to be there only for decorative effect (Lissim, 1933: 336).
- 66 Lissim does not employ the term decorative to mean ornate, but rather to refer to the process of constructing a harmonious composition with color and form. By shifting the reading of her work from mysterious and otherworldly to a deliberately constructed decorative effect, Lissim locates Peláez within the central debates about the constructive and the decorative taking place in Paris, rather than attributing her compositions to some sort of mystical inspiration.
- 67 Although her exhibition at the Galerie Zak was a critical success—according to Lydia Cabrera nearly four hundred people attended the opening and the show was widely reviewed—Peláez sold few works, bringing most of them back to Cuba with her the following year. The positive reviews of the show encouraged her to participate in other artistic forums in Paris, however. She submitted works to the Salon des Tuileries in

1933 and to the Salon des indépendants in 1934 and contributed illustrations to a group exhibition at of *Livres Manuscrits* at the Galerie Myrbor in 1934. But ultimately, the overthrow of Cuban president Gerardo Machado and the persistence of a difficult economic and political climate in Paris caused her to return home that year.

Conclusion

- 68 At a moment when debates surrounding notions of the decorative and the constructive were colliding in Paris, four women artists from Latin American held major individual exhibitions in important Paris galleries. During periods of "exhilarating exile" all four of these artists entered the vibrant artistic environment in Paris and strategically positioned themselves, via their artistic choices, within this world. Entering the modern art milieu involved decisions about subject matter and technique, about whether to portray national themes or avoid them, and how to negotiate the gendered implications of style.
- 69 While certain biases against the artists' gender crept into reviews of their exhibitions, for the most part, these women were highly regarded and treated as serious artists. The freedom and vitality of Paris allowed them to assume new professional roles that would have been limited by the traditional boundaries of feminine identity in their home country. Their work, too, challenged conventions of femininity by establishing a specifically modernist take on the decorative. Amaral and Peláez eschewed excessive ornamentation, instead employing the clean lines of purism and constructivism, thereby disavowing the derogatory associations of the decorative with the cheap and vulgar, and by extension the feminine. Malfatti and Velásquez Cueto, on the contrary, embraced arabesques and elaborate surface patterns, but were consistently aware of underlying structure. Malfatti employed color strategically to distance herself from Matisse and notions of the tropical, and Velásquez Cueto drew on such a myriad of sources that she never fell into the mundane and repetitive.
- 70 Expectations of primitivism and exoticism significantly influenced critics' perceptions of their work. Whereas Amaral and Velásquez Cueto embraced national themes, Malfatti and Amaral deliberately eschewed them. Amaral and Velásquez Cueto did not simply acquiesce to Parisians' fascination with the exotic and the tropical, however. Amaral deployed her purist aesthetic to present a new vision of Brazil, one that countered official culture with her depiction of Afro-Brazilians and shantytowns, and simultaneously presented Brazil's cities as the ultimate modernist destination. Velásquez Cueto took her inspiration from Mexico's textile tradition and folk culture to create a unique interpretation of the decorative. While her tapestries appealed to Parisians desire for new sources of primitivism, her visual language contributed to modernist explorations of form and structure. Malfatti and Peláez chose a different tack for engaging with the modern without resorting to the national, instead focusing exclusively on technique. All four made strategic choices as to the image they wanted to convey to their Parisian audience, and created their own unique visual languages that contributed to the modernist discourse in Paris.

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NOTES

1. The Galerie Percier was owned by André Level, a colleague of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Other artists who exhibited at the Galerie Percier included Naum Gabo, Joaquín Torres-García and Alexander Calder.
2. The only other exception might be Vicente do Rego Monteiro's 1925 exhibition at the Galerie Fabre.
3. Amaral was in Paris from June 1920-June 1922; February-December 1923; September 1924-March 1925; December 1925-August 1926; March-July 1928; 1931. Oswald de Andrade was also in Paris for an extended stay in 1923 and in 1925-1926
4. Andrade introduced him to the modern artists and writers of São Paulo. The group then embarked on a trip to Brazil's historic colonial towns in the state of Minas Gerais. Cendrars was enchanted with Brazil, and according to Amaral, constantly referred to the exoticism of the country's tropical landscape, virgin forests and wildlife. His time in Brazil inspired the poems in *Feuilles de route I, le formose*, which he published in Paris in September of that year with a cover illustration by Amaral. (A. Amaral, 2008: 155).
5. Amaral would later choose A Cuca, to donate to the Musée de Grenoble, one of the first art museums in Paris to collect contemporary art.
6. It was perhaps through her connection to the fashion industry that Amaral came in contact with Legrain and asked him to collaborate on her exhibitions.

7. Whereas all things African had been the rage since before World War I, the first major exhibition of pre-Colombian art in Paris did not take place until 1928 at the Musée des arts Décoratifs.
 8. Unfortunately, gallery records were lost during World War II when Jadwiga and her son were taken to Auschwitz where they died.
 9. In 1924 Léger, with Ozenfant, founded the Académie de l'Art Moderne at Léger's studio at 86, Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs in Montparnasse. Othon Friesz was the third member of the original teaching staff; later Alexandra Exter and Marie Laurencin joined the faculty. Ozenfant left the school in 1929, but Léger continued as its Director until 1939. He renamed it the Académie d'Art Contemporain in 1929.
 10. Elliott suggests that, perhaps inspired by Lydia Cabrera, Peláez was mocking the European tendency to simplify African cultures in their vision of the primitive.
 11. Most of the still lifes were listed in the catalogue simply as "Still Life," so it is virtually impossible to pin down exactly which painting were exhibited.
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ABSTRACTS

This essay will analyze the individual exhibitions of four Latin American women artists held in Paris between the two world wars: Brazilians Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti in 1926, Mexican Lola Velásquez Cueto in 1929, and Cuban Amelia Peláez in 1933. Entering the modern art milieu involved decisions about subject matter and technique, about whether to portray national themes or avoid them, and how to negotiate the gendered implications of style. During periods of "exhilarating exile" all four of these artists entered the vibrant artistic environment in Paris and strategically positioned themselves, via their artistic choices, in relation to aesthetic debates about the role of decorative in modern art.

Este ensayo analiza cuatro exposiciones individuales de mujeres artistas de América Latina celebradas en París entre las dos guerras mundiales: las brasileñas Tarsila do Amaral y Anita Malfatti en 1926, la mexicana Lola Velásquez Cueto en 1929, y la cubana Amelia Peláez en 1933. La inserción de estas en el medio ambiente del arte moderno exigió decisiones sobre materia y técnica, sobre la conveniencia de presentar temas nacionales o evitarlos, y sobre la forma de negociar las asociaciones del estilo con el género. Durante estos períodos de "exilio emocionante" las cuatro artistas se introdujeron en el entorno artístico vibrante de París y se posicionaron estratégicamente, a través de sus elecciones artísticas, en relación con los debates estéticos sobre el papel del Arte Decorativo en el entorno del Arte Moderno.

INDEX

Keywords: modernism, decorative (the), art and gender, exile-expatriate, Paris, women artists, Latin American art, Tarsila do Amaral, Malfatti (Anita), Velásquez Cueto (Lola), Peláez (Amelia)

Palabras claves: modernismo, decorativo (el), arte y género, exiliado-expatriado, París, mujeres artistas, arte latinoamericano, Tarsila do Amaral, Malfatti (Anita), Velásquez Cueto (Lola), Peláez (Amelia)

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