

Brazilian Graphic Design in the '20s and '30s: Modernism and Modernity

MARGOLIN, Victor / PhD / University of Illinois / Chicago

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Modern Art Week, which took place in Sao Paulo in 1922, was a starting point for Brazilian modernism. In graphic design, this meant avant-garde books and journals that exemplified formal innovation. These are compared to popular magazines and books of the same period that are modern without breaking new formal ground. The relation of modernism and modernity in graphic design is a dynamic that can still be discerned today.

1. Brazilian Modernism

In a statement for an anthology *99 Poets/1999*, the poet, critic, and translator Haroldo De Campos wrote:

Brazilian Modernism (Avant-Garde) started in 1922, the year of Eliot's *Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Vallejo's *Trilce* under the influence of both Italian Futurism and French Cubism.¹

If we are to recognize Do Campo's argument for modernism's arrival in Brazil, we should recognize that modernism for him was closely identified with a European definition of 'modern' that allied it with the creation of radical new aesthetic forms in art and literature. In characterizing Brazilian Modernism, De Campos followed the polemic of the poet Oswald de Andrade in his rejection of foreign influences and the assertion of a distinctly Brazilian aesthetic. If we accept Do Campo's designation of 1922 as the starting point for Brazilian modernism, we would inevitably identify it with the *Semana de Arte Moderna* or Modern Art Week that was held in São Paulo that year. The artists involved rejected a nostalgic nativist art by defining modernism with a Brazilian

character, not only in painting, sculpture, and applied art but in architecture, literature, and music as well. This intent was evident even in the design of the catalog cover by Emilia no Di Cavalcanti, one of the Modern Art Week organizers, which featured a loosely rendered ink drawing of a nude woman on a pedestal surrounded by foliage and decorative forms. The nude, of course, was a classic icon of European painting but Di Cavalcanti combined it with tropical plants and other forms that suggested Brazilian folk art.

Leading artists and theorists besides Di Cavalcanti who participated in the Modern Art Week included the poet and polemicist Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954), author of the manifesto *Pau-Brasil* (Brazil Wood) of 1924 and the *Manifesto Antropófago* or Cannibal Manifesto of 1928; poet, novelist, art historian, and critic, Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), a poet, novelist, critic and

musicologist who published the seminal novel *Macunaíma* in 1928; the painters Anita Malfatti (1889-1964), considered to be the first Brazilian artist to introduce modern pictorial ideas from abroad, and Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), and the poet and painter Paulo Menotti Del Picchia (1892 —1988). These artists formed the Group of Five, which remained central to the Brazilian modern movement in the 1920s. In his *Pau-Brasil* manifesto and the *Manifesto Antropófago*, Oswald de Andrade characterized Brazilian modernism by its ability to cannibalize European culture for its own ends. With this argument, he and others associated with the Brazilian modern movement were asserting simultaneously their desire to be modern and their refusal to adopt European precedents.

The art critic P.M. Bardi has noted that the new visual ideas which were introduced in the Modern Art Week exhibition soon began to penetrate the world of book and magazine publishing and consequently had a considerable effect on popular graphic styles. Following the event, some of the organizers including Mário de Andrade launched a cultural review, which they called *Klaxon* to signal their intent to noisily proclaim the advent of a new culture. The review, which lasted for only nine issues, radically introduced the visual rhetoric of the Russian avant-garde, particularly the design of the cover with its large A that ran the vertical length of the page. The way the cover design incorporates a single letter in multiple words recalls Russian designer El Lissitzky's idea of visual economy.

Klaxon published articles and poetry in various languages and brought numerous examples of European avant-garde writing to the attention of its Brazilian readers. However, the editors, among whom Mário de Andrade was a central figure, were adamant in separating themselves from any particular avant-garde movements. "Klaxon," they declared, "is klaxonist." The review's advertising was also innovative and even included a parody ad for a factory that produced sonnets, madrigals, ballads, and *quadrinhas*, a poetic form with four verses. Thus, the Constructivist rhetoric of the cover was mingled with a Dada spirit that was evident as well in the occasional page with an eclectic mix of types.

We might well compare *Klaxon* with other small literary magazines of the same era whose designers created novel visual formats that corresponded to the experimental literature they published. We can think of numerous European magazines such as *Der Dada* and *Dadaco* in Germany, *Literature* in France, and *Irradiador* in Mexico. *Klaxon* and several other avant-garde reviews that followed it, *Terra Roxa e Outras Terras*, which appeared in 1925, and Oswald de Andrade's *Revista de Antropofagia*, which came out in 1928, were the Brazilian publi-

1 "A few quick notes on Brazilian modernism," <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~bernstein/syllabi/.../Brazilian-modernism.pdf>

cations of the 1920s that best represented an interest in avant-garde typography. The first issue of the *Revista de Antropofagia* featured de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago*. In its initial phase the review lasted for ten issues after which it became a tabloid and was circulated for a brief period on a weekly basis by the newspaper, *Diário de São Paulo*. In this form, the editors also experimented with the typography, featuring isolated quotes in large bold type as well as a mix of typefaces within the orderly two-column layout.

Avant-garde books produced by the Modern Art Week participants include Oswald de Andrade's 1925 book of poems *Pau-Brasil*, which was illustrated by Tarsila do Amaral who also designed the ironic cover that featured a vertical Brazilian flag with the name Pau-Brasil inside the flag's blue globe. A number of other notable book designs, particularly covers, were also created for writers associated with the Brazilian modernist movement, particularly Oswald and Mario de Andrade, the poet Raul Bopp, the critic and essayist Guilherme de Almeida, and Antônio de Alcântara Machado. One of the most intriguing of these was the cover and layout design that Antônio Paim Viera did for Machado's novel *Pathé-Baby* in 1926, perhaps the most original layout done during the 1920s. The title was taken from the name of a small home projector that was first marketed by Pathé Frères in 1922. It influenced the structure of the book, which was designed to recall the atmosphere of a movie theater. Paim Viera created a fold out cinematic sequence of drawings that humoristically depicted a musical quartet who disappeared progressively as they accompanied a silent film. With the coming to power of Getúlio Vargas in 1930, the climate for intellectual cosmopolitanism and political irreverence changed and the avant-garde impulse to create a modern expression of "Brasilidade" (Brazilianess) subsided.

I characterize the books and journals presented in the preceding section of this paper as examples of Brazilian modernism, which I distinguish from the term 'modernity'. The difference between the two is that 'modernism' denotes a particular formal quality associated with the new, while 'modernity' is a broader term that characterizes a sense of something that is of its time without necessarily possessing an innovative formal aesthetic. Following this distinction, one can agree with Haroldo Do Campos that Brazilian modernism in its first phase was associated with a particular group of literary, visual, and musical works of art and graphic design. We can therefore consider other works as examples of Brazilian modernity - works of art and design with characteristics that are widely recognized as modern without formal experimentation as a core element of what they are. In Brazil, visual modernity was especially evident in many popular magazines as well as in selected book covers, illustrations, and layouts.

Among magazines, the strongest design influences were French. This began in the 19th century with magazines such as the *Semana Illustrada* that Henrique Fleuiss published in São Paulo beginning in 1860 and the *Revista Illustrada*, which the Italian cartoonist Ângelo Agostini launched in Rio in 1876. The relation

to French graphic styles continued in a different form after the turn of the century when Art Nouveau decoration, particularly in lettering design, made a strong impact. Although Art Nouveau waned in Europe by about 1905, it continued to influence the look of some Brazilian publications, particularly book covers and layouts, for years to come.

The first illustrated magazines of the 20th century included *O Malho* (The Mallet), and *A Careta* (The Grimace). Rather than relying on fine artists, these magazines, which strove to depict modern urban life, counted heavily on a new generation of caricaturists who drew covers, illustrations, and cartoons. Prominent among them was J. Carlos, who served as the principal illustrator for *A Careta* from 1908 to 1921, when he left to become the art director as well as an illustrator for a company in Rio de Janeiro that published some of the major illustrated magazines of the time. Other major figures who drew for the popular magazines were Calixto Cordeiro, who signed his work K.Iixto and Raul Paranhos Pederneiras known simply as Raul. According to art historian Rafael Denis, these two and J. Carlos formed the "golden trio" of Brazilian caricature.

2. Modernity in magazine and book publishing

A new generation of magazines appeared in the 1920s. Some continued the style of the preceding period, while others adopted aspects of the Art Deco style, then popular in Paris and New York. Among them, *A Maçã* (The Apple), which first appeared in 1922, rapidly became Rio's most popular weekly. It was a satirical magazine whose popularity was due at least in part to its lively design, which was influenced by the French fashion publications but included original elements as well. The most impressive graphic quality of the magazine, however, was the lively page layouts, which ranged from line drawings that framed the columns of type to title pages that integrated the printed copy into symmetrical ornamental designs.

Modernity was also evident in book designs although not as extensively as it was in magazine publishing. At the end of World War I, the book trade in Brazil was still not well developed. In fact, some books by Brazilian authors were published in Europe and then distributed at home. There were few bookshops or other outlets for selling books and this made distribution difficult. Art Nouveau and occasionally the Arts and Crafts aesthetic of William Morris were strong influences on the design of book covers and some layouts. The man who is often credited with launching modern Brazilian publishing is José Bento Monteiro Lobato, an author and journalist, who was also a staunch nationalist. Monteiro Lobato began to develop a publishing enterprise, which he revolutionized in a number of ways. One was to focus more attention on the cover designs, which at the time were mainly reproductions of the books'

title pages on gray or yellow paper. He also modernized the layouts of his books, changing from crowded page designs to cleanly designed typographic spreads. Most of the artists, caricaturists,

and illustrators he commissioned to design his book covers were already known at the time as contributors to Brazil's popular magazines. They included Antônio Paim Viera, Mick Carnicelli and Benedito Carneiro Bastos Barreto, known as Belmonte.

The design and printing of Brazilian books had reached a low ebb by the end of the 1920s with the exception of Monteiro Lobato's publishing venture. Among the few other publishers who appreciated Monteiro Lobato's commitment to design was José Olympio, who published a wide range of political and literary works in the 1930s and 1940s. The reputation of his press for handsome books was due to Tomás Santa Rosa.

An aspiring artist, Santa Rosa had moved to Rio de Janeiro from northeast Brazil and began designing books to earn a living. His first book designs were for Ariel Editora. Two were for novels by Jorge Amado, who was also from the northeast. For Amado's novel *Cacáú*, Santa Rosa created a cover that integrated the bold expressive lettering of the title with a lively illustration and the author's name underneath. He also designed the layout, which revealed his attention to the total integration of typography, margins, line spacing, and the placement of illustrations. While Monteiro Lobato also had a sense of the relation between a publication's cover and its interior, Santa Rosa brought a more coherent sensibility to book design, one that made his designs distinct.

In 1935, Santa Rosa began to work for José Olympio, where he demonstrated how a designer could create a visual identity for a publisher. He developed distinctive visual identities for the various Olympio series, which then contributed to the publisher's overall identity. For the cover of Graciliano Ramos' seminal novel, *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives), which chronicled the poverty of northeastern Brazil, Santa Rosa featured a black and white illustration of a peasant sitting against a stark backdrop with a bare tree and a mountain range. The illustration was placed on a reddish brown surface, perhaps to represent the parched earth. Beneath it was the title in large italic letters. The format was part of a series whose covers featured comparable illustrations with text underneath.

Besides the few publishers in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo who understood the value of well-designed books and covers, there were several in other parts of Brazil who also believed in the value of design. Prominent among them was Livraria do Globo in Porto Alegre, a city located in the southern province of Rio Grande do Sul, where many Germans immigrants settled. Though founded in 1883, Livraria do Globo only began an active book-publishing program in the late 1920s. In 1929, the firm also started to publish a magazine, *Revista do Globo*, whose cover designers often adopted an Art Deco style similar to other Brazilian magazines of the period.

The firm's major designer was Ernst Zeuner (1895-1967), a German who immigrated to Brazil in 1922. As a student in Germany, he attended the Leipzig Academy of Graphic Arts and Book Design, where he preceded the young Jan Tschichold by several

years. Besides beginning to study in Leipzig, Zeuner worked there as a calligrapher and illustrator and was exposed to the latest developments in printing technology.

When he arrived at Livraria do Globo, Zeuner found a traditional approach to book design that he was able to modernize. With his multiple talents in illustration, layout, and typography, he created book covers and illustrations for novels as well as vignettes and other graphic elements. To handle the broad range of graphic design projects that Livraria do Globo was becoming engaged with, management created a Design Department and put Zeuner in charge. Few Brazilian artists were trained in the range of activities that the Department undertook and Zeuner served as a mentor to numerous young designers. By the end of the 1930s, the quality of work the Design Department produced was of a high level. Under Zeuner's guidance the book covers of Livraria do Globo always displayed an appropriate balance of expressive lettering and striking illustrations.

3. Conclusion

The interplay between modernism and modernity in Brazil was not as evident in the 1920s and 1930s as it was in parts of Europe. In Germany, for example, Jan Tschichold drew heavily on the Russian, German, and Dutch avant-gardes to formulate the principles of his "new typography," which strongly influenced the design of books, magazines, and posters. In Brazil, however, some of the artists and illustrators who designed experimental modernist publications also worked for the popular magazines and presses. Thus, the distinction between modernism and modernity was not strictly adhered to. Brazil was one of the few countries in Latin America during the interwar period where there was any significant response to the avant-garde activity in Europe. The combination of new aesthetic forms with a firm stance to adopt them for a new expression of Brazilian identity, most likely reduced the motivation to seek connections with like-minded artists in other parts of Latin America such as Manuel Maples Arce in Mexico or Juan Torres-García in Mexico. The result, however, was a robust engagement in all forms of visual communication within Brazil that continued in the ensuing years in the Brazilian concrete poetry movement starting in the 1950s, the pioneering corporate identity work of Aloiso Magalhães, the Ulm-influenced posters of Alexander Wollner, and the energetic and colorful range of graphic materials that many Brazilian graphic designers are producing today.

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About the author(s)

Victor Margolin is Professor Emeritus of Design History at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Books he has written, edited, or co-edited include *The Struggle for Utopia*, *Design Discourse*, *Discovering Design*, *The Idea of Design*, *The Politics of the Artificial* and *The Designed World*. He is currently completing a three-volume World History of Design to be published by Berg. <victor@uic.edu>