

The Italian Art World and São Paulo Museum Collections in the Aftermath of World War II

Abstract

The present article analyzes the engagement of prominent Italian art world figures – Margherita Sarfatti and Pietro Maria Bardi, in primis – in the creation of the collections of the two most important museums of São Paulo: the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), and the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP). Our aim has been to analyze how these Italian art critics helped to shape Brazil's understanding of modern art at a time when this understanding was still controversial. The article seeks to emphasize the complementarity of these museums' collections and to highlight that both used the same network of agents to broker the acquisitions made on their behalf. How recent immigrants from the European art world were able to salvage their careers in South America at a significant historical moment when the international postwar situation had created the opportunity for new art markets to flourish, is also described. By 1945 there was a growing Allied-led effort to recover lost and/or confiscated artworks and return them to their rightful owners. This action ran parallel to the immediate efforts made to rebuild the art market through the organization of exhibitions and other para-diplomatic initiatives throughout Europe, in the United States, and in South America.

Beginning from provenance research, we have sought to rebuild the network of art agents that were involved in the acquisitions made for the two Brazilian art museums. In so doing it has been possible to highlight the active role the Brazilian art world played in the international art system, and to tackle the presence of foreign art collections from a different perspective: as an inherent part of the Brazilian art historical debate.