

The Museum of Modern Art
Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil
Audio tour, final

Stop List

- 286. Introduction/A Cuca, 1924
- 287. Study (Academy No. 2), 1923
- 288. A Negra, 1923
- 289. Carnival in Madureira, 1924
- 292. Abaporu, 1928
- 293. Anthropophagy, 1929
- 294. Postcard, 1929
- 295. Sleep, c. 1928
- 296. City (The Street), 1929
- 297. Composition (Lonely Figure), 1930
- 298. Workers, 1933

1. Introduction/A Cuca, 1924, cat. page 40

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: Welcome to Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil. My name is Luis Perez-Oramas, former curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition follows Tarsila as she moves back and forth between her native São Paulo, and Paris; and then travels throughout Brazil, exploring and discovering the poetic potential of her homeland. One of the most important painters in Brazilian history, Tarsila is widely known in Europe and in Latin America. This is the first show of her work in the U.S.

In this painting, Tarsila is bridging her training as a modern painter in Paris in the 1920s with [her] rediscovery of Brazil. "A Cuca," which means "critter," is a complete stylization of the natural exuberant landscape. In a letter to her daughter in 1924, Tarsila mentioned this painting.

KAREN GRIMSON AS TARSILA: I am doing some very Brazilian paintings that have been greatly appreciated. I just finished one called A Cuca. It is a strange animal in the forest with a frog, an armadillo, and an invented animal.

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: In this exhibition, you will accompany Tarsila from her early training as an avant-garde artist in Paris in the early 1920s, to her invention of a new form of figuration for Brazilian modern art.

2. Study (Academy No. 2), 1923, cat. page 17

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: Tarsila was part of a small community of artists and intellectuals from Brazil who were in constant relationship with avant-garde figures in Europe. Between 1920 and 1928, Tarsila went back and forth from Sao Paulo to Paris. She was briefly trained under Cubist painters Albert Gleizes, André Lhote, and Fernand Léger. Academy No. 2 clearly reflects Léger's influence. Leger's paintings at the time, like this one by Tarsila, were composed of distinctly separate shapes, simplified, rounded, and almost abstract.

But strictly speaking Tarsila was never a Cubist painter like her teachers. She filtered all the avant-garde lessons of Paris into her own signature style. This painting, with its full-bodied nude, its abstract shapes combined with lush nature, and its vivid color, is the beginning of that process.

3. A Negra, 1923, cat. page 20 (pickup – rerecord whole stop)

PICKUP: Brazil is a country with a large African-Brazilian population. This painting, *A Negra*, which means “The Black Woman,” is an iconic work. It represents Tarsila’s growing recognition of the richness and diversity of her native country.

A Negra evokes emancipation, racially and politically. The way this painting blends an international form of modern art with a black subject was a bold political position.

Brazil was one of the last countries to emancipate slaves, in the late 1800s, around the time Tarsila was born. This painting is most likely based on a photograph of a servant she knew as a child.

Notice how Tarsila exaggerates the woman’s features. We will see this distortion and exaggeration of the body in other major paintings from now on.

Tarsila renders the background of the painting in simple bands of color that evoke earth and sky, anticipating the language of Concrete Abstraction that will flourish in Brazil beginning in the 1940's. And at the right, she inserts a diagonal green shape—the abstracted leaf of a banana tree, found everywhere in the Brazilian landscape.

4. Carnival a Madureira, 1924, cat. page 33

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *In February 1924, Tarsila went alongside her husband, Oswald de Andrade, and her friend, the Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars, to Rio de Janeiro where they attended the festivities of Carnival. For that festivity, the people of Madureira (a neighborhood in the outskirts of Rio)] had built a reproduction of the Eiffel Tower, which Tarsila clearly depicts in this painting.*

On top of representing the local population in this scene of carnival, Tarsila gives us an abstract, carefully composed version of the landscape showing these hills and these weird stones. She is integrating elements of folk art into her signature modern language in the 1920s.

5. Abaporu, 1928, cat. page 43

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *"Abaporu," a word constituted by two Tupi-Guarani words meaning "the man who eats human flesh," was painted by Tarsila in 1928 in order to be given as a birthday gift to her husband, Oswald de Andrade.*

KAREN GRIMSON AS TARSILA: *I wanted to make a picture that would startle Oswald, something really out of the ordinary. The Abaporu was that monstrous figure, the little head, the skinny little arm supported by an elbow, those enormous long legs, and next to it a cactus that looked like a sun, as if it were a flower and the sun at the same time. So, when he saw the picture, Oswald was extremely startled and asked, "But what is this? What an extraordinary thing!"*

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *This painting actually became the signature illustration of the "Anthropophagic Manifesto" written by Oswald de Andrade. Anthropophagy, or cannibalistic practices, were documented among native Brazilians. In the 1920s avant-garde Paris, there was an obsession with cannibalistic practices from surrealist intellectuals and artists. Oswald took this motif of cannibalism to suggest symbolically ingesting artistic influences from both modern European art and traditional Brazilian culture. The aim was to produce a hybrid style that was distinctly new, and distinctly Brazilian.*

6. Anthropophagy, 1929, cat. page 61

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: In this large painting, Tarsila really stresses the exuberance of Brazilian tropical landscape. The representation of local natural species such as cactus and banana trees here are given as abstract forms.

You may recognize in this painting the monumental figure of "A Negra" paired with the figure from "Abaporu." She's brought these together in order to produce the third major painting.

Tarsila pushed the boundaries of Brazilian modern art with paintings like this. By ingesting and transforming sources, first from Europe and then from the culture of her own country, she made a radical statement unlike any Brazil had experienced before.

7. Postcard, 1929, cat. page 63

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *From its title, "Postcard," to its representation of exuberant nature through modern forms, this painting gives us the emblematic version of Tarsila's painting from the late 1920s. Early on while addressing Brazilian landscape she had written.*

KAREN GRIMSON AS TARSILA: *I am profoundly Brazilian and will study the taste and art of our caipiras, our countryside people. In the hinterlands, I hope to learn from those who have not yet been corrupted by the academies. Painting Brazilian landscapes and caboclos doesn't make one a Brazilian artist, just as one who paints machines realistically and distorts the human figure is not necessarily a modern artist.*

I want to be the painter of my country. I am so thankful to have spent the whole of my childhood in the fazenda. My memories of that time have grown precious to me.

8. O Sono, c. 1928, cat. page 53

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *O Sono* is a dreamlike representation of tropical landscape, with this major motif of her repetitive figure that disappears in the background.

This painting is an example of Tarsila's venture into surrealism. Elements such as repetition, random association, and dreamlike figures are typical of surrealism that we can see as main elements of this composition. She was never a truly surrealist painter, but she was totally aware of surrealism's legacy.

In this room, you can see other paintings that feature similar elements.

9. City (The Street), 1929, cat. page 59

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *A very special sense of humor makes Tarsila's venture into surrealism truly unique. This painting, which depicts an urban landscape with really strange characters, relates to an actual dream, on which Tarsila gave a testimony years later.*

KAREN GRIMSON AS TARSILA: *One day I had a dream. I remember well that on waking up I went to my easel to paint my dream. There were three black boots in the middle of the road with very high houses. This canvas was acquired by a friend, almost against my will because I wanted to keep it, as it was the only one that artistically translates into art images of a dream I had had.*

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *The perspective of "The Street" is framed by the compulsive repetition of squares and rectangles. In the middle of that stream of light, three red, weird, characters appear at the center of the painting. A sense of imbalance and vertigo brings us forth within the scene as if we were inside her dream.*

10. Composition (Lonely Figure), 1930, cat. page 62

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *"Lonely Figure" was the only painting made by Tarsila in 1930. After the economic crash of 1929, which brought to an end the coffee plantation economy, after the end of her marriage with Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila was alone. "Lonely Figure" is almost a self-portrait of that moment. She's alone, she dreams, and she looks at the future in this infinite landscape.*

The shapes in the painting seem almost like abstract sculptures. It's as if Tarsila wanted to see how much she could reduce her forms and still let us recognize them as a figure and trees. Like so many of her paintings, this one reflects her interest in reducing images down to their clearest essence.

11. Workers, 1933, cat. page 63

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *The largest painting Tarsila ever made, titled "Workers,"— Operarios— from 1933, marks a radical change in her work when she abandoned the formal exercise of modern art in order to become a politically, socially committed artist. She would marry Osorio César, an important Marxist intellectual, and would embrace social activism from then on.*

KAREN GRIMSON AS TARSILA: *My most important painting is Operarios. I drew my inspiration from Sao Paulo itself, from industrial society. I did everything based on photographs and on the visual memory of certain people I knew.*

LUIS PEREZ-ORAMAS: *The racial diversity depicted in this work truly stands as a representation of modern Brazilian society, a mestizo, racially mixed society. Behind these workers, smokestacks and buildings represent Sao Paulo's increasingly industrialized landscape.]*

Not until the 1960s was her country ready to accept the way Tarsila integrated all of these elements of Brazilian culture to produce a distinctly Brazilian artistic identity. At that time, a new generation of artists discovered both Anthropophagy and the power of Tarsila's art.