

José Antonio da Silva

Stand S17

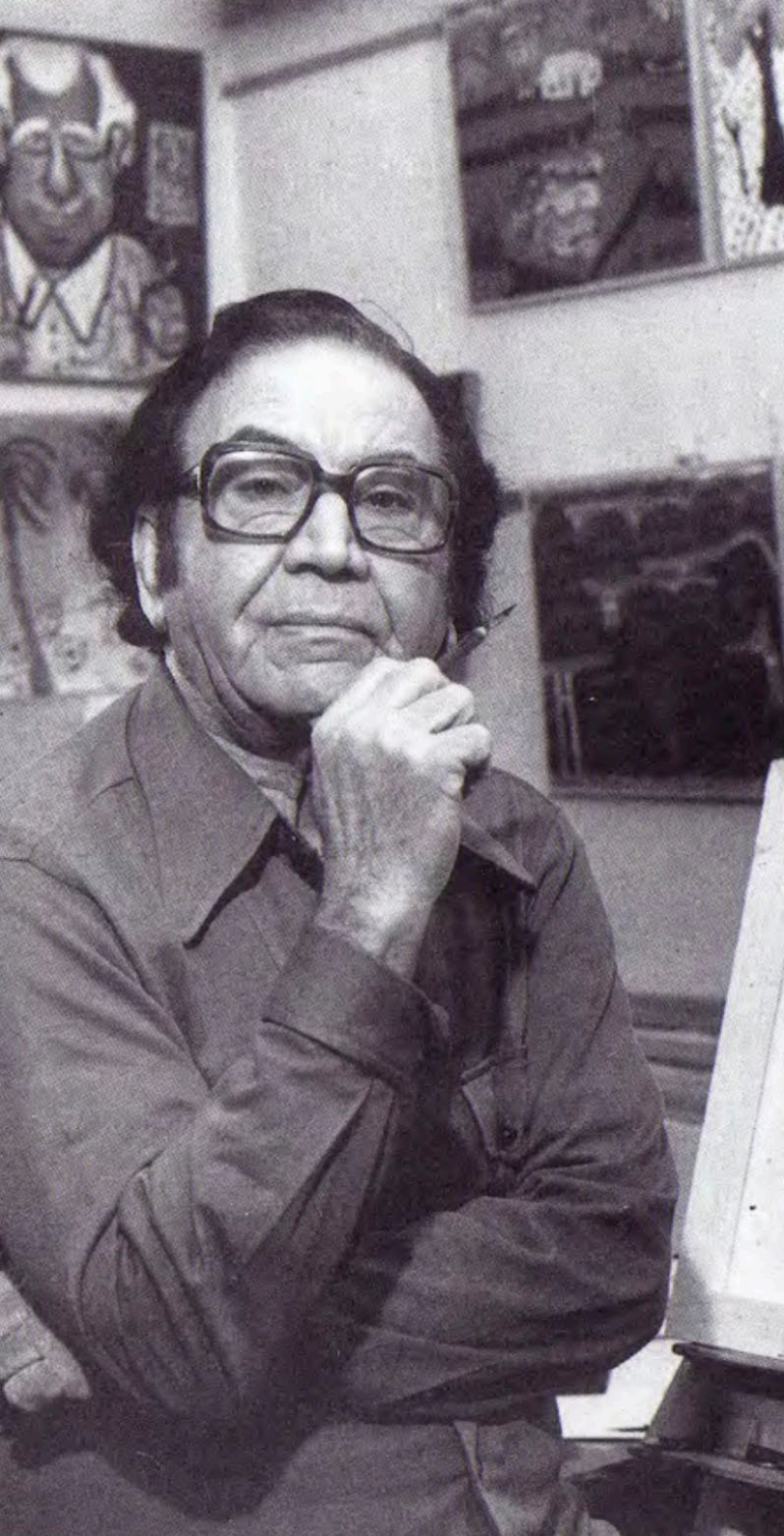
Spotlight, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver

Frieze Masters 2024



José Antonio da Silva, *Queimada [The Burning]*, 1971, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 101.5 x 4 cm (32 1/8 x 40 x 1 5/8 in)





## José Antonio da Silva

b. 1909, Sales Oliveira, São Paulo, Brazil

d. 1996, São Paulo, Brazil

An eccentric and charismatic figure with a distinct vision, José Antonio da Silva was the first self-taught artist from Brazil's rural, labouring classes to have a marked impact on the nation's modern artistic identity. Born in the São Paulo countryside to coffee farm workers, he began his career as an artist only at the age of 37, before this working as a labourer on cotton, sugar and coffee plantations and railroads. This way of life became the subject of his painting, as Silva embodied a Brazil beyond the wealth of the cities: one saturated with the colours of nature, of red soil and verdant fields, and rich in spirit.

Silva achieved great institutional success at home throughout his career, which spanned five decades. However, internationally, his position at the foundations of Brazilian modernism has long been understated.

At Frieze Masters, we are pleased to share a solo presentation of his work for the first time outside of Brazil ahead of his first international retrospective at Musée de Grenoble and Fundação Iberê Camargo, Porto Alegre in 2025.

As a child, Silva had drawn on the backs of coffee leaves, and as an adult he drew with pencil on cardboard to decorate his home. In 1946, he entered a painting competition at the Casa de Cultura in São José do Rio Preto; as he could not afford canvases, he submitted three paintings on flannel. His positive critical reception here launched his career: he held his first solo show in São Paulo two years later, where ten works were acquired by Pietro Maria Bardi for the collection of the newly founded Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), now Brazil's leading modern art institution.

Though his work was often branded 'primitive' or 'naif,' due to his social background and lack of artistic training, his consistent presence in the country's leading museums reflects his central position during the development of Brazil's modern artistic culture. Silva represented Brazil at the 1952 and 1966 Venice Biennales, and his influence on key players in Brazil's art world is known; the master painter Alfredo Volpi had Silva's work hanging in his studio, and the influential critic Theon Spanudis was one of his major collectors.

Silva's work is held in major Brazilian public collections including the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP), the Pinacoteca de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), as well as the Detroit Institute of Art in the US (gift of Henry Ford II). Silva has participated in significant international group exhibitions including *Histoires de Voir*, Cartier Foundation, Paris (2012), *Art in Latin America*, Hayward Gallery, London (1989) and the important exhibition of Brazilian modernism *Brasilianische Kunst der Gegenwart (Brazilian Art Today)* touring Europe and Brazil in 1959. His first solo exhibition outside Brazil, *Peintre du Brésil*, will take place at the Musée de Grenoble, France in 2025 before travelling to the Fundação Iberê Camargo, Porto Alegre.



The agricultural landscape prevails as Silva's most captivating subject, with his characteristic use of perspective and high horizon lines bringing focus to the earth, both a land of riches and one forever reshaped and exploited by industry.

*Queimada [The Burning]*, 1971, likely depicting a field cleared after harvesting, is a paragon of his landscape painting. It captures an ambivalence towards nature and Brazil's agricultural industry that is present in much of his work; the scorched ground and the solemn figures of the blackened trees give way to rich green fields in the distance. Silva understood the close dependence on the land and the precarity this brought for Brazil's rural populations – a land that could nurture extreme wealth for the nation, but one frequently plagued by forest fires, droughts or floods.

*Queimada* is painted in the colours of the Brazilian flag. Though in reality the flag's colours derive from the coat of arms of Brazil's former royal family, they are commonly said to symbolise the verdure of the land, rich in gold and other minerals.

José Antonio da Silva, *Queimada [The Burning]*, 1971, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 101.5 cm (32 1/8 x 40 in)







José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1972, oil on canvas, 74 x 104 cm (29 1/8 x 41 in)









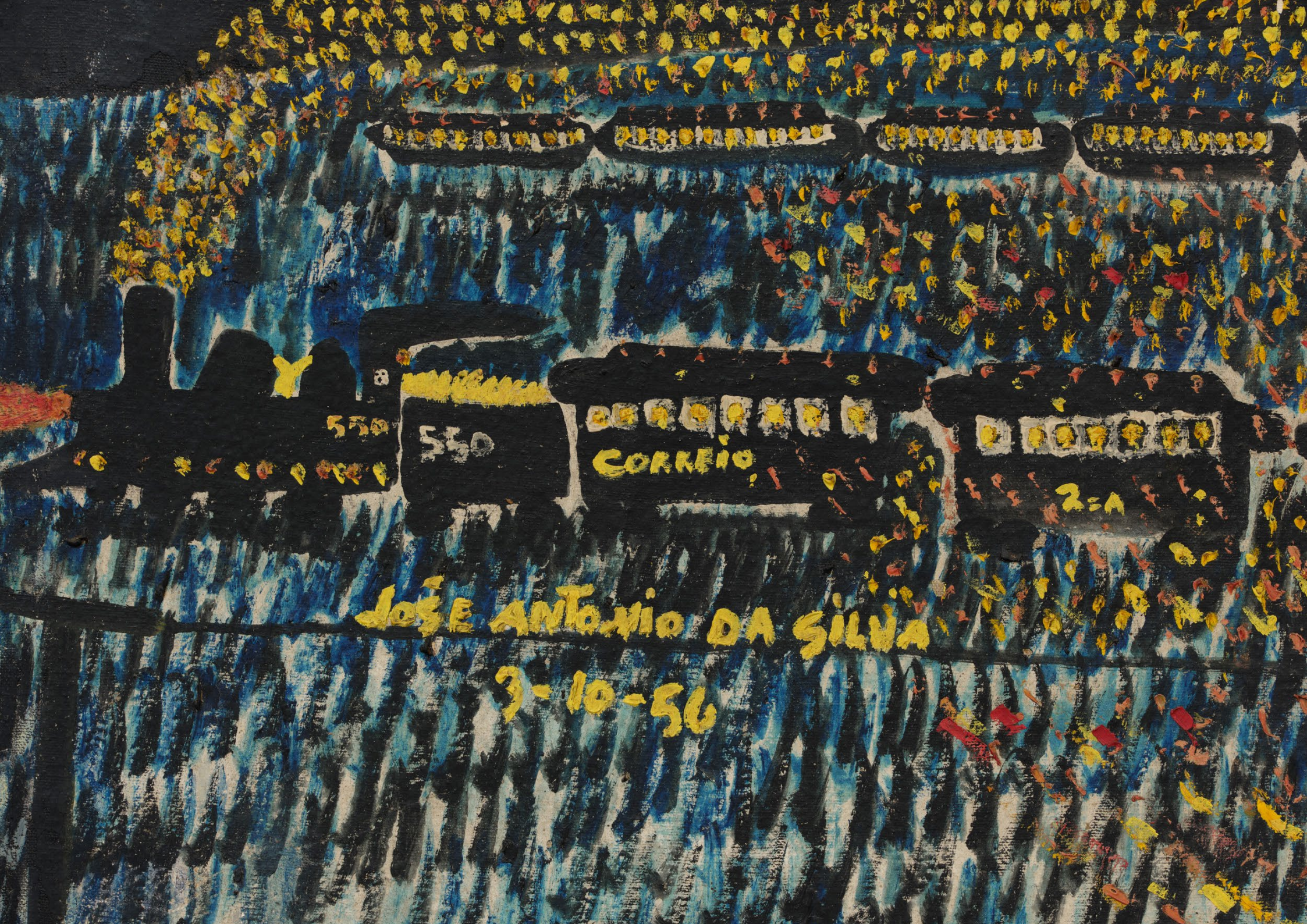
José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1956, oil on canvas, 52 x 72.5 cm (20 1/2 x 28 1/2 in)





José Antonio da Silva  
Untitled, 1956  
Oil on canvas, 52 x 72.5 cm  
20 1/2 x 28 1/2 in





JOSE ANTONIO DA SILVA

3-10-56

CORREIO

550

550

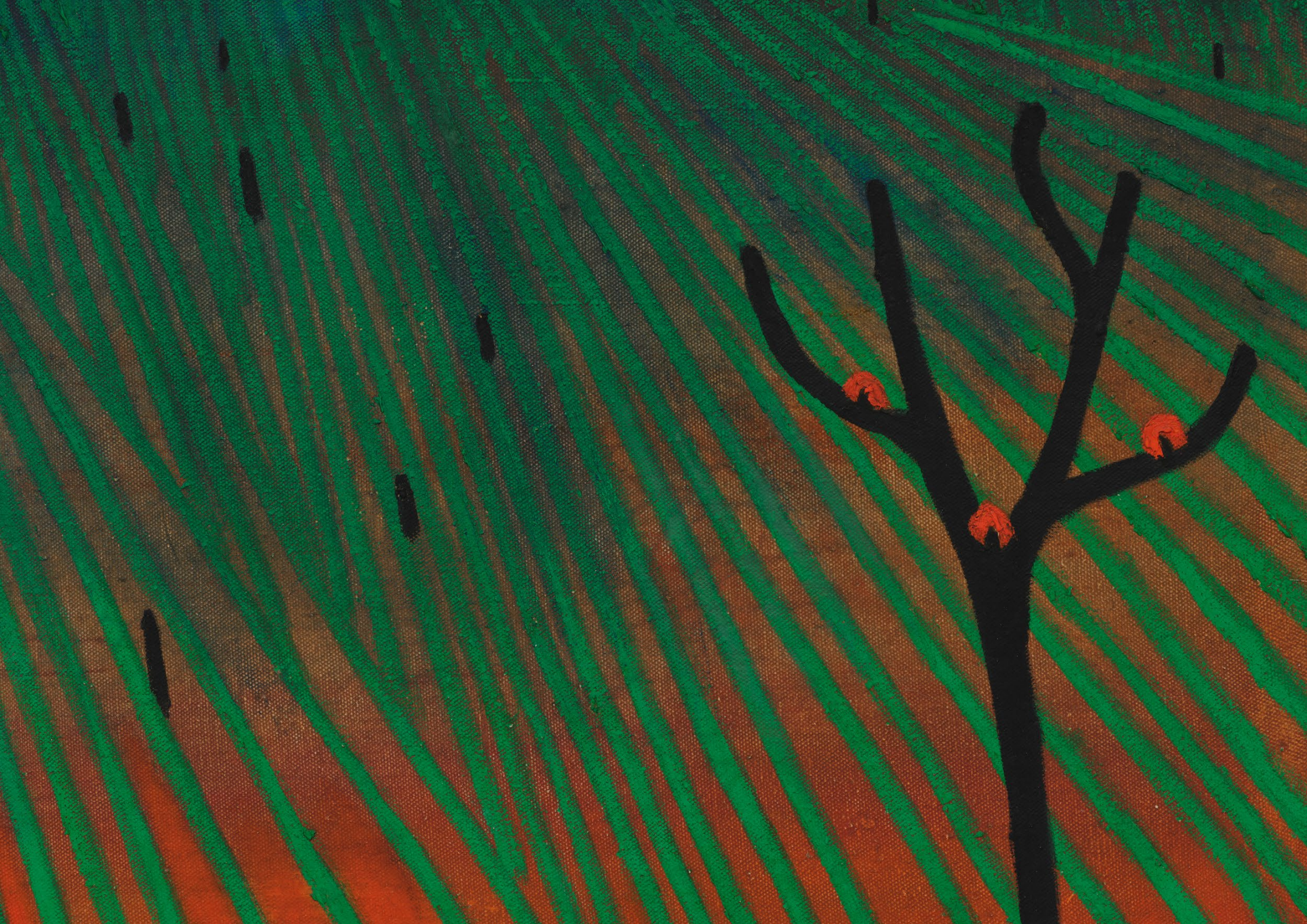
2-A





José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1970, oil on canvas, 73 x 102.5 cm (28 3/4 x 40 3/8 in)









*José Antonio da Silva has captured in his landscape paintings the infinity of arable lands, whether with coffee, cotton or sugar cane, the distant and endless perspectives and horizons, or the grandiosity of tropical rainforests with its lush colours, its felled tree trunks and the destruction of human labour... Perhaps these scenes were the most valuable landscaping in Brazil. They are high poetry, exalted and vibrant, with truly magical and magnetic charges.*

– Theon Spanudis, in Spanudis, Theon & Antonio Carlos Suster Abdalla, *O círculo de Theon Spanudis* (São Paulo: Cult Arte e Comunicação, 2018), p. 140



José Antonio da Silva, *Untitled*, 1970, oil on canvas, 73 x 102.5 cm (28 3/4 x 40 3/8 in)





José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1966, oil on canvas, 61 x 101 cm (24 x 39 3/4 in)





José Antonio da Silva  
Untitled, 1966  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 101 cm  
24 x 39 3/4 in





José Antonio da Silva, *Repouso [Rest]*, 1980, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 71.5 cm (20 1/4 x 28 1/8 in)

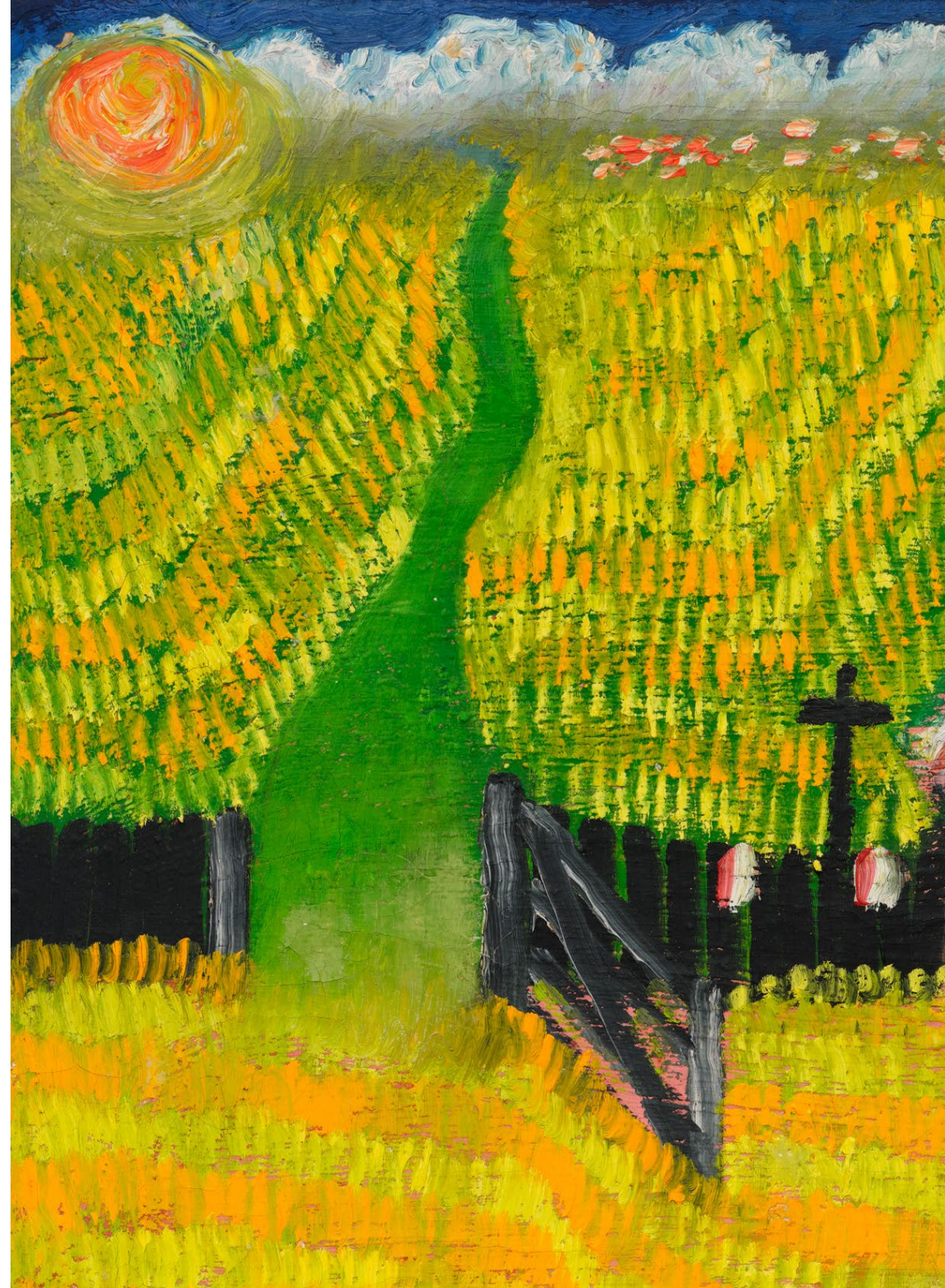


From early in his painting career, Silva achieved great institutional success in Brazil. His paintings were included in the first display of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), built to give a home to Latin American art that would rival the museums of Europe and North America. From 1948, his work was displayed here alongside that of Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso.

Though he never had any formal artistic training, through this institutional success he was able to position himself within the story of modern art. Silva was a man of great confidence, and very proud of his work and public recognition, with his ego and bold personality certainly contributing to his legacy in Brazil. His vanity is reflected in one portrait of three figures titled *Picasso, Van Gogh and I, the world's three most important painters*.

*Repouso [Rest]*, 1980 is an example of Silva's infrequent use of a pointillist technique which he called Pontilhado, perhaps in reference to the Post-Impressionist works he saw at MASP alongside his own.

José Antonio da Silva, *Repouso [Rest]*, 1980, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 71.5 cm (20 1/4 x 28 1/8 in)







José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1972, oil on canvas, 48 x 65 cm (18 7/8 x 25 5/8 in)



Silva's career began in tandem with a period of richly diverse and collaborative artistic production in Brazil, with the fusion of US-imported abstraction and local visual languages advancing a distinctly Brazilian pathway within modern art. The contribution of self-taught artists to Brazilian modernism has not received the same international critical attention as the movements focused amongst those educated at Rio and São Paulo's art institutions. Silva's position speaks to a wider discourse surrounding the need to recentre self-taught artists, whose particular sensibilities and undiluted vision have contributed indelibly to the diversity of artistic movements across the globe.

At the time he started painting, Brazil was also undergoing great social change, and Silva witnessed rapid industrialisation and changing labour laws throughout his early adulthood in São Paulo state, the centre of the coffee trade. Working alongside artist groups centred around Rio and São Paulo's institutions, Silva contributed a unique perspective, maintaining his idiosyncratic style and foregrounding labourers and scenes of celebration and leisure in the countryside.





José Antonio da Silva, *Trem* [Train], 1977, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 71.5 cm (20 1/4 x 28 1/8 in)





José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1979, oil on canvas, 55.3 x 100 cm (21 3/4 x 39 3/8 in)





José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1979, oil on canvas, 52 x 72.2 cm (20 1/2 x 28 3/8 in)





JA SILVA 79





José Antonio da Silva, Untitled, 1966, oil on canvas, 67 x 102.5 cm (26 3/8 x 40 3/8 in)





JOYÉ  
ANTÔNIO DA SILVA 66



*Who doesn't know Silva? Silva is me. Silva is the rural life. Silva is the country life. Silva is the beauty of these green fields ... This is my painting! This is my religion! This is God! Nature is God! This is the wonder that nature itself has created, to enrich, to give joy, wisdom, feeling, reason to those who are the true artists. To those who are poets, to rhyme their art, for their art to speak, for their art to sing, for their painting to smile. Nature is with me and I am with nature. Nature is my god and I am Silva.*

- José Antonio da Silva in *Who Doesn't Know Silva?* Documentary, produced by Carlos Augusto Calil, 1979







José Antonio da Silva

1909-1996

Born in Sales Oliveira, São Paulo, Brazil

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2025-6 *José Antonio da Silva: Peintre du Brésil/Um Pintor do Brasil*, curated by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Musée de Grenoble, France; Fundação Iberê Camargo, Porto Alegre, Brazil (forthcoming)
- 2018 *José Antonio da Silva: 'Nasci errado e estou certo,'* Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- 2013 *José Antonio da Silva: em dois tempos*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 2009 *José Antonio da Silva: Homenagem ao centenário de nascimento*, Associação Paulista de Medicina, São Paulo
- 1998 *Silva: Pinturas 1947-1995*, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1992 *José Antonio da Silva: 5 décadas de arte brasileira*, Paço das Artes, São Paulo; Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 1978 *José Antonio da Silva*, Centro Cultural Brasil Estados Unidos, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1976 *José Antonio da Silva: retrospectiva*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1958 *José Antonio da Silva*, Centro Cultural Brasil-Estados Unidos, Ribeirão Preto, Brazil
- 1958 *José Antonio da Silva*, Escola de Belas Artes de Araraquara, São Paulo, Brazil

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2024 *Cotidiano, imaginação e paisagem: Galeria Estação, 20 anos*, Insituto Çarê, São Paulo, Brazil
- 2017 *Histórias da sexualidade*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 2012 *Histoires de Voir*, Cartier Foundation, Paris, France
- 2004 *Cinquenta 50*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1996 *Figura e paisagem no acervo do MAM: homenagem a Volpi*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1990 *Brasil - Japão Arte Contemporânea*, Japan, multiple venues



- 1989 *Art in Latin America*, Hayward Gallery, London, UK
- 1983 *Bienal Hispanoamerica de Arte*, El autorretrato, Mexico City, Mexico
- 1983 *Três artistas na Coleção Theon Spanudis: Volpi, Arnaldo Ferrari e José Antonio da Silva*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1980 *Ochenta años de arte brasileño*, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 1978 *Construtivistas e Figurativos da Coleção Theon Spanudis*, Centro de Artes Porto Seguro, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1976 *Popular Painters and Sculptors of Brazil*, Washington, USA
- 1966 *33rd Biennale di Venezia* (dedicated room), Venice, Italy
- 1963 *7ª Bienal de São Paulo*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1961 *6ª Bienal de São Paulo*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1959 *Exposição da Associação Brasileira de Críticos de Arte*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo
- 1959 *Brasilianische Kunst der Gegenwart/Brazilian Art Today*, MAM Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; London, UK; Paris, France; Munich, Germany; Vienna, Austria; Leverkusen, Germany
- 1958 *José Antonio da Silva, Alfredo Volpi e Egídio de Souza*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1956 *50 anos de paisagem brasileira: de 1900 aos nossos dias*, organized by Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM SP), Palácio dos Estados, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1955 *Carnegie Institute International Exhibition*, Pittsburgh, United States
- 1952 *Venice Biennale*, Venice, Italy
- 1951 *I São Paulo Bienal*, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1946 *Concurso de pintura (painting competition)*, Casa de Cultura de São José do Rio Preto, Brazil

#### Selected Public Collections

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC-USP), São Paulo, Brazil

Museu Nacional de Belas Artes do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil

Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil

Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, USA