How to build a World Art: The Strategic Universalism of Colour Reproductions and the UNESCO Prize (1953-1968)

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How to build a *World Art*: The Strategic Universalism of Colour Reproductions and the UNESCO Prize (1953-1968)

Chiara Vitali  
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**Abstract**

What role did UNESCO play in the art world of the post-war era? This article makes use of published and archival sources in order to clarify the utopia of a “World Art” that shaped UNESCO and led to the “Archives of Colour Reproductions of Works of Art”, a project of worldwide collect and diffusion of images of “masterworks” inspired by Malraux’s “Museum without walls”. This case study focuses on one particular aspect of the project, the “UNESCO Prize”, conceived by the Brazilian art critic and Marxist intellectual Mario Pedrosa for the 1953 São Paulo Biennial.

**Résumé**


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Introduction. Thinking Over the Artistic Impact of UNESCO from a Decentralised Perspective

When the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created in 1946, its officials had great ambitions for the role they could play in the "Art World."¹ In a world that was perceived as in the process of globalisation, but not yet globalised, UNESCO had an important edge over other cultural institutions of the time: its capacity of circulation. As an international organisation of worldwide reach, their ability to operate across borders was indeed an incredible asset, but how could it be used in the fine arts field? Since moving original works of art all around the world was too difficult, dangerous, and expensive in the post-war period, the answer was found in colour reproductions. Movable and light, reproductions could showcase modern art and the technical progress in colour reprography all around the world, meeting perfectly the utopian scope of UNESCO in its first decade: building a "One World" sharing the same universal values.²

This paper takes as a starting point and as historical and conceptual frame the works of the art historians Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, who have highlighted the art diversity of the post-war years and the polycentrism of this era, which saw the emergence of new art centres on a global scale. Taking a transnational, material and quantitative approach, they put into perspective the narrative of the "American Triumph" and of the exclusivity of the Paris-New York axe, vehiculated by much of today's historiography.³ Transnational historian Akira Iriye also claimed that post-war global history, and in particular the 1950s, has been misguided by an approach too focused on the Cold War and thus on the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴ Politically and artistically reduced to a binary transatlantic opposition, the complexity of post-war polycentric globalisation still needs to be investigated.⁵

This case study approaches circulation from a historical and materialistic perspective, joint with a transnational approach, as it already proved to be effective in producing new research perspectives along axes other than merely "Paris/New York" and "Western/non-Western".⁶ This perspective is the only one allowing to untangle two main contradictions in the UNESCO political and artistic position of the period: first, the one between UNESCO's multicultural goals and universal rhetoric on the one hand, and its deeply rooted eurocentrism on the other hand, especially when it came to art;⁷ secondly, the fact that despite its political orientations - Rachel E. Perry accurately pointed out the French interests in the Colour Reproductions project⁸ – UNESCO was also a "stage" for international visibility of the "Darker Nations".⁹ Indeed, focus on circulations and transnational mediators allows to dynamize the centre-periphery paradigm and show other mechanisms of mimeticism, rivalry and, above all, the agency of the "margins".

The focus on colour reproductions of paintings derives its meaning from this theoretical framework, following the idea that writing art history from a

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¹ This expression was commonly used by the officials of the "Arts and Letters Division", as we can see in UNESCO's internal correspondence: e.g. Internal memorandum of Peter Bellew, UNESCO supervisor of the Colour Reproductions project, August 27th 1955. UNESCO archives, AG13, 7A145.01 (41-4).
² Julian Huxley, the first Director General, was a biologist whose world view was mainly based on evolutionary theories. His father, Thomas Huxley, was a close friend of Darwin. His more famous brother was Aldous Huxley, the author of "Brave New World", the dystopian novel with eugenic sympathies published in 1932. Julian Huxley thought that humanity's progress towards a single, global and "enlightened" culture, a "One world", was a necessary and positive step in human evolution and that it was UNESCO's prerogative to accelerate this process. Glenda Sluga, "UNESCO and the [One] World of Julian Huxley," Journal of World History 21, no. 3 (2010): 393–418.
⁴ Akira Iriye, Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World, University of California Press (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002).
⁵ This premise is also that of Paula Barreiro López, ed., Atlántico Frío: Historias Transnacionales Del Arte y La Política En Los Tiempos Del Telón de Acero (Madrid: Brumaria, 2019).
⁶ A recent publication encourages the study of circulation in a transnational perspective in the art history discipline, traditionally more focused on the study of artistic "influences" and "diffusion": Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Circulations in the Global History of Art, Ashgate Publishing (Farnham and Burlington, 2015). For a different approach to circulations in art history, see also François Brunet, ed., Circulation (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2017).
global perspective implies taking into account all material object conveying images, texts and also ideologies and utopias. This object of study is an inherently transdisciplinary one, at the crossroads of art history, cultural studies, mass-media studies, and international relations. Already in 1989, Arjun Appadurai suggested that commodities, like people, had “social lives” and that studying their circulations implied recognising their political value. In a historical moment which saw the booming of easy-to-transport, reproducible exhibitions, designed for roaming, the “social life” of colour reproduction was deeply political, especially in the UNESCO Parisian headquarters.

This paper focuses on one component of the overall “Colour Reproductions” project: the creation of the UNESCO Prize in 1953 at the second São Paulo Biennial, later extended to the Venice Biennale and to the UNESCO Prize in 1953 at the second São Paulo Biennial, later extended to the Venice Biennale and to the “Hispano-American” biennial in Barcelona (1955). Finally, I will show how, once the prize and the travelling exhibitions had gained some international relevance, the project was hijacked by high-ranked officials for political, diplomatic, and geopolitical reasons.

The initiative was led by one of the most influential Brazilian art critics of the 20th century, Mario Pedrosa. In post-war Brazil, he played an important role in bringing modern artists from Europe and the United States to Brazil and was one of the key figures of the local avant-garde. Aware of the potential of UNESCO as an international, rhetorical platform, he found a way to use it to promote Brazilian geometric abstraction and, more broadly, “geographically or politically disadvantaged” artists. Thus designed for “peripheral” artists, this prize was another element of his critical combat against the Informel aesthetics, that he considered a “mere international fashion”. The winner of the prize was awarded with a somewhat unusual, but at the time, quite valuable currency: worldwide circulation of an image of the artwork, in the form of colour reproductions.

Distributed from Paris, said reproductions were conceived as “an Ambassador in the circles and places where no original material exists”. As art historian Piotr Piotrowsky taught us, however, it’s from the margins that we can see that “the center is cracked”: despite its inherent Eurocentrism, the colour reproductions project wasn’t impervious to redirections and re-appropriations. A thorough analysis of these mechanisms can clarify the overall role of UNESCO in post-war period and of worldwide diffusion of the images of modern art.

To address this issue, I will first better define the project of the UNESCO Archives of Colour Reproductions (1948), to follow up with the invention of the UNESCO Prize at the second São Paulo Biennial (1953) and its later extension to the Venice biennial (1954) and to the “Hispano-American” biennial in Barcelona (1955). Finally, I will show how, once the prize and the travelling exhibitions had gained some international relevance, the project was hijacked by high-ranked officials for political, diplomatic, and geopolitical reasons.

This paper is based on a variety of sources, collected mainly at UNESCO’s archives in Paris and at the archives of the Venice biennial.

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12 Letter addressed from Malcolm Adisesh (General Director ad interim) to Paulo Francisco Martiano Sobrinho (President of the Third Biennial of the Modern Art Museum of Sao Paulo), May 10th 1955. UNESCO Archives, AG13, 7A145.01 (41–4).


17 UNESCO Archives, place de Fontenoy and rue Bonvin, Paris; Sections AG13 (archives of colour reproductions) and AG8 (secretary archives and archives); Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), via delle Industrie, Porto Marghera, Venezia, section ‘Arte Visiva’.
Collecting and Circulating the “World Art”: UNESCO Archives of Colour Reproductions

The UNESCO officials were part of a cosmopolitan elite, motivated by the idea that a universal culture shared by all the different peoples of the world was the only real long-term remedy to another World War. In their view, the organisation’s main mission was to help and encourage the evolution towards a globalised “One World”, sharing a common, democratic and scientifically advanced culture. This would hold true also for the arts – since there was no shared global art canon, already in 1946 UNESCO set itself the goal to create it. The lecture given by the charismatic André Malraux at the First General Conference in 1946 in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne made a strong impression on the audience. In this occasion Malraux introduced for the first time his idea of a Musée imaginaire. “Our Imaginary museum”, he claimed, “worldwide in its scope, will confront us, for the first time, with the plastic inheritance of all mankind.” In Malraux’s conception, photographic reproduction was at the same time the condition of possibility of art history, and a liberation from it, as photography freed the artwork of its local identity to make it an eternal presence. Benjamin had already suggested a similar analysis of the impact of photography on art, claiming that “with reproduction techniques, great works can no longer be regarded as the products of individuals, they have become a collective creation.”

Colour reproductions were at the same time perfectly adapted to UNESCO’s universal scope, easily movable and inexpensive, and after the conference officials felt encouraged to conceive UNESCO as a “Museum without walls”, spreading modern art masterpieces, and the universal values that they conveyed, all around the world.

A year later, at the 1947 General Conference in Mexico, a resolution marked the beginning of the setting up of the “Archives of Colour Reproductions of Works of Art”. A task-force was launched to study the last technical advancements in colour reproductions and to make a list of the reproductions of artworks already available. In 1948, UNESCO was gathering an astonishing amount of high-quality colour prints, in most cases of the exact same size as the original painting, in the UNESCO building. The idea, never fully implemented, was to create an open-access archive where people could come and flip through the most important artistic creations of Humanity, looking for a moment of serendipity and spiritual connection with the wonders of world art, otherwise unattainable. There were holes on top of each reproduction, so as to hang them on threads going from one wall to the other.

After this first step of collecting and centralisation, reproductions moved out of the immobility of archives and began to travel. The ICOM committee (International Council of Museum) was in charge of making a selection of the prints thus collected to sell them around the world, through the first Catalogue of Colour Reproductions of Paintings from 1869 to 1949. The 423 prints eventually selected had been chosen according to their status of “masterpieces of world art” and to the quality of the reproduction. The ICOM committee was composed of six prominent museum professionals, with international experience and political insight, probably well aware of the importance of circulations for the art canon. It was Jean Cassou, the director of the recently opened MNAM in Paris, René d’Harnoncourt,

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director of MoMA in New York, Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Paul Rainville, art critic and director of the Musée national des Beaux-arts du Québec, Francesco Pellati, sovrintendente in Florence and Georg Schmidt, art historian. The catalogues were distributed worldwide, reaching all member states and many other countries. In this catalogue one could find the list of the prints available for purchase, with a black and white illustration and information about the artist, the artwork (title, date, medium, provenance, dimensions) and the reproduction (technique, publisher, printer and price). To facilitate purchase, an international system of “UNESCO coupons” was set up. The project was pervaded by a democratic and populistic rhetoric, addressing the "common man" and those distant to art and museums - a category that “non-Western” countries would fall under, as well as a vague rurality and the working class.

The “world masterpieces” on sale largely corresponded to the protagonists of the Parisian paradigm of modern art. It mostly included works by the first generation of modernists (Monet, Cézanne, Seurat, Rodin, Toulouse-Lautrec, etc.) and the second (Matisse, Braque, Derain, Picasso, Delaunay, Chagall, Léger, etc.). Other younger artists, such as Soulages, De Staël, Dubuffet, or Manessier, were absent of it. In 1952, a year before the invention of the UNESCO Prize, 56% of the works offered in the catalogue were by French artists (of origin or adoption, such as Picasso). Renoir prevailed, with 50 on the 566 prints for sale in his name. More generally, 88% of the works selected in 1952 were realised by European artists; among 10% remaining (2% were “unknown”) half of the artists were American (i.e. 5% of the total) and a quarter Mexican. This ideal museum of modern art, brought together by the means of technical reproduction, was to become the musée chez soi, the museum of one’s own, for the world citizen. In 1952 catalogue’s introduction Lionello Venturi stated that it was necessary to “get into the factory, the public buildings, the private homes, in the city and in the countryside”. Like in the “Society for distribution of perceptible reality" imagined by Paul Valéry in 1928, the consummation of images was to become as accessible and widespread as running water.

Along with the catalogue, the first Travelling Exhibition of Colour Reproductions, “from Impressionism till Today” began its world trip. Fifty masterpieces by forty artists having "made a significant contribution to world art since 1860" were selected. After a first exhibition in the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (Fig. 1), the prints were sent abroad in four, quite heavy crates (800kg). Crates also contained glasses, frames and thousands of copies of a short exhibition catalogue written by René Huyghe, main curator of the paintings and drawings department of the Louvre Museum. In the text, the French curator chronologically described all modern revolutions that had shaken up the art field since the 19th century, reaching as far as the Mexican muralists and American artists such as John Marin, Max Weber and John Sloan. The main plot of this heroic modern art story was simple yet effective: “centred mainly in France and in Paris, which one might properly call its capital, modern art has radiated over the whole

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27 Such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, South Africa, China, Korea … For an accurate mapping of the catalogues’ circulation, see Perry, “UNESCO’s Colour Reproductions Project: Bringing (French) Art to the World.”


world.”\textsuperscript{31} The French biases were confirmed and reinforced also in the choice of the artworks: of the fifty paintings selected, forty-one were by French artists or artists based in Paris. Most of the pictures were still life, such as \textit{Lemons on Pewter Plate} by Henri Matisse, landscapes, such as \textit{Fields near Auvers-sur-Oise} by Vincent Van Gogh and, to a lesser extent, portraits. Pablo Picasso’s \textit{Child with a Dove} was a rather symbolic choice, since this 1901 painting was reminiscent of the “Dove of Peace” drawn by Picasso for the 1949 World Peace Congress. The only abstract print was \textit{Painting 1936} realised by English artist Ben Nicholson. \textit{Mexican Village} by José Clemente Orozco and \textit{The Flower Vendor} by Diego Rivera also stand out as the only non-Western paintings and had been celebrated by the German Press, already acquainted with the French canon, as being the artistic novelty of the exhibition\textsuperscript{32} and perfect examples of “World Art”\textsuperscript{33}.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Map1.png}
\caption{Map 1}
\end{figure}

In spite of the geographical and artistic limitedness of UNESCO “world” art, the organization’s officials achieved an actual global itinerary for their exhibition (Map 1). Conceived as a ready-made, portable kit, the exhibition only required fifty square-meters to be displayed. This allowed a remarkable level of circulation, on a global scale (countries receiving one copy of the exhibition were supposed to pass it on to the next one, saving UNESCO quite a bit of expenses) and on a national scale. Suitable for every kind of infrastructures, the exhibition would sometimes make tens of stops in the same country and be displayed in very different locations. The UNESCO \textit{Travelling Exhibition} was displayed, among others, in railway stations, city halls, schools, institutional, cultural or religious centres, international or diplomatic institutions, libraries, as well as museums and galleries. In Haiti, the travelling exhibition was included in the 1949 world’s fair of Port-au-Prince;\textsuperscript{34} in Yugoslavia, the exhibitions

\textsuperscript{31} René Huyghe, “Forward”, in \textit{Travelling Print Exhibition. From Impressionism till Today}, 10.
\textsuperscript{32} Hildesheimer Allgemeine Zeitung, Hildesheimer, August 11th 1951.
\textsuperscript{33} Bremer Nachrichten, Bremen, January 27th 1951.
\textsuperscript{34} AG13, 7° 145.01 (729/73).
travelled the Adriatic Coast during the summer to be seen by workers spending their vacation there.\textsuperscript{35}

In the end this first Travelling Exhibition was a huge hit: the audience was numerous, the local press covered the event, and many countries were asking to have one copy of this (free) modern art exhibition. Multiple reasons explain this success. Many commented on its importance for the local artists and the local audience, while others focused on the quality of the reproductions or, more significantly, on the “encounter with all the pictorial power of Europe in a concentrated form, whose spiritual depth in such a small space is almost frightening.”\textsuperscript{36} However, no one was fooled by the apolitical and universal discourse surrounding this specimen of modern art. In New Zealand, for example, people were greatly satisfied to have been one of the first countries selected for “this Marshall Aid to the visual arts.”\textsuperscript{37} In West Germany, where the exhibitions made tens of stops, reproductions had been requested with great insistence by allied authorities (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{38} This comparison becomes even more accurate if we consider the evident parallel between the UNESCO project and the mobile exhibitions organised in Europe to promote the Marshall Plan (European Recovery Program ERP).\textsuperscript{39}

From the other side of the Indian Ocean, secretary of the Indian government respectfully pointed out the Eurocentrism of the project, saying he was 

\begin{quote}
... a little disappointed to see that the paintings enclosed do not include any specimen of Eastern 
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{35} AG13, 7A 145.01 (43-49).
\textsuperscript{36} Golkarsche Zeitung, Goslar, August 3\textsuperscript{rd} 1951.
\textsuperscript{37} New Zealand Listener, March 22nd 1951.
\textsuperscript{38} AG13 7A 145.01 (43-15).
\textsuperscript{39} Ascanio Cecco, “Mobilité et Reproducibilité Technique Au Service de La Propa-
\end{quote}
Jean Thomas, assistant of the General Director, answered by pointing out the existing gap in availability of high-quality colour reproductions between Western and non-Western artworks. Even though this certainly held true in 1949, UNESCO biases were still evident in subsequent Travelling Exhibitions. In 1953 UNESCO finally started to expand the geography of its “world” art (Tab. 1) but the Modernist narrative underlying the project remained unquestioned: even if the world got larger, “contemporaneity” and progress were still European prerogatives.

Decentralising the World Art, or UNESCO as an Arena for North-South Rivalry

This was the overall situation of the project when the Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa and his fellow citizen the scientist Paulo de Berrêdo Carneiro (1901-1982) first met at the second São Paulo Biennial in 1953. Paulo Carneiro was one of the founding members of UNESCO, where he held for many years the position of Permanent Delegate of Brazil. As a “humanist” with a prestigious scientific background (the first time he came to Paris was with a scholarship for a chemistry doctorate at the Institut Pasteur) and a positivist credo, Paulo Carneiro was perfectly in tune with the spirit of the organisation in its early years, animated by a strong belief in the progress brought about by science. Politically, Paulo Carneiro was the most influential representative of the “Southern States”: in 1947 in Mexico he expressed the need for UNESCO officials to go out of the Parisian headquarters to go everywhere in the world; two years later, he pleaded to the executive board for a regionalisation of the organization, following the model of the Pan-American Union and the Arab League. The fact that a few months later a UNESCO regional centre was inaugurated in Havana is a testament to his influential position. When the liberal and positivist Carneiro met the Marxist Pedrosa, they found that they shared the same universalistic perspective – even within very different theoretical frameworks, they both believed in UNESCO’s idea of a world culture – and that their goals could match: decentralizing UNESCO and the art canon, at the same time.

As for Mário Pedrosa, in 1953 he had already defended his doctorate dissertation in art history and was collaborating with the psychiatrist Nise da

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Tab. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Travelling Exhibition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Paintings from 1860 till Today</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Paintings prior to 1860</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Drawings by Leonardo da Vinci</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Japanese Woodcuts</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Two Thousand Years of Chinese Painting</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Persian Miniatures</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Eastern and western Art’s Water Colours</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Art Accuses War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>The Art of Writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>African Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Art of Oceania</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>The Arts of Latin America</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Contemporary Chinese Painting</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>The Art of Islam</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Slav Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Buddhist Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Celtic Art</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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40 Letter of Kirpal Esquire, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, to Jaime Torres Bodet, UNESCO, Director General, June 10th 1949. AG13, 7A 145.01 (54-56).
41 AG13, 7A 145.01 (54-56).
45 Pedrosa did not share the positivist, evolutionary approach of Huxley and Carneiro, but understood world culture more as an anthropological invariant, a form of spirituality and transcendence. This idea was shared by multiculturalist and humanist second UNESCO Director General, Jaime Torres Bodet.
As an art critic he gathered around him the Brazilian abstract artists of the Rio de Janeiro scene and stood out as one of the most influential members of the São Paulo biennial’s jury.68 His transatlantic network, built during his political exile abroad, reinforced his already central position. During the toughest period of the Vargas era, Marxist intellectuals and political activists were indeed no longer welcome in Brazil, and between 1937 and 1945 Pedrosa was spinning between Paris and the United States, creating strong political and artistic connections.69 Furthermore, he was one of the founding members of AICA (International Association of Art Critics, founded in 1950 in Paris in affiliation with UNESCO). So far, Mário Pedrosa was almost exclusively studied as the defender of the “Brazilian Constructivist project”50 for his support to geometric abstract art in 1950s Brazil. However, recent publications have adopted a transnational perspective and shed new light on the art critic’s work resulting in a much more complex portrait.51 His support for geometric art was not a dogmatic one and should be understood as the defence of what he perceived to be an autonomous, universal (and Brazilian, one might add) art, against the “Informel” art movement, in which he saw nothing more than a European trend. Kaira Cabañas describes Pedrosa’s stance as “strategic universalism”, which “disidentifies with a European model of universality to respond to the historical specificity of Brazil”.52 It was from this “strategic universalistic” standpoint that Mário Pedrosa conceived the UNESCO Prize with Paulo Carneiro. The original idea was to ask the biennial jury to choose between ten and twenty works to be reproduced in “the original format and using high level techniques”, to be disseminated worldwide thanks to the Catalogue. Over the years, a collection of the selected works would have been put together and would circulate in a dedicated travelling exhibition. The eventual version of the prize, which was set up the same year, was slightly different. Two works of “outstanding” artists “insufficiently known internationally” were selected by the international jury of the Brazilian biennial, following Pedrosa’s guidelines: the Brazilian Alfredo Volpi (1896-1988) and the Cuban Luiz Martinez Pedro (1910-1989). Self-taught, almost illiterate, an Italian immigrant, Volpi was according to Pedrosa the “Brazilian master of his times” and represented “Brazilian Painting’s cry for independence from international painting and the School of Paris.”54 Casas,55 the small oil on canvas selected, represented a provincial house façade, with wide and uniform flat areas of colour in a bi-dimensional geometry. Here (Fig. 3) we can see the reproduction of Volpi’s canvas in the UNESCO Catalogue. Espacio Azul,56 by Luis Martinez Pedro, was an abstract painting whose background, organized in orthogonal geometries, broken down in entangled geometric figures, in different shades of blue. These painters were part of Pedrosa’s circle, also representative of other artistic tendencies than rational, geometrical abstraction.

**Triangular Jealousies: The UNESCO Prize Goes to Venice**

It only made sense that the UNESCO Prize would start in São Paulo only at first, since Pedrosa’s and Carneiro’s focus was mostly on Brazilian avant-garde. In the following years, however, the prize was implemented in two other biennials, the Venice biennial and the Bienal Hispano-Americana de Arte.

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67 Cabañas, Learning from Madness. Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art. 79-83.
68 Pedrosa, Discours Aux Tupiniquins. 10.
69 Cabañas, Learning from Madness. Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art. 92.

50 Otília Arantes, Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico, Cosac Naify (São Paulo, 2004).
51 For a non-exhaustive list: Gloria Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff, Mario Pedrosa: Primary Documents, The Museum of Modern Art (New York, 2015); Mario Pedrosa: De La Naturaleza Afectiva de La Forma, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid, 2017); Claudia Café Cabiliñas, Francisco González Castro, and Lucy Quezada Yáñez, Mario Pedrosa y El CISAC: Configuraciones Afectivas, Artísticas y Políticas (Santiago de Chile: Metales Pesados, 2019).
52 Cabañas, Learning from Madness. Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art. 10.

55 AG13, 7A 145.01 (41-4).
56 Oil on Canvas, 55,9x28cm, Private Collection (New York).
The reason for this extension of the prize lies in the agency and perspicacity of Anton Schutz (1911-1977), founder of the publishing house *New York Graphic Society*. Schutz was a German immigrant who went to the United States with the dream of earning his living as an artist. Faced with the many difficulties of such an endeavour, during the Great Depression he decided to dedicate all his energy to the publishing house he founded. During the late thirties, Schutz made several trips to Europe to try and build a transatlantic network of printers and publishers centred around colour and fine art reproduction. Handmade black and white reproduction, he concluded, was a thing of the past; the fine art market was the new business. 57 During his European wanderings, Schutz also “visited UNESCO headquarters in Paris frequently” 58 and managed to become the main publisher of the Colour Reproduction project, most notably for the *World Art Series* 59. The New York Graphic Society was also in charge of reproducing the paintings selected by the UNESCO Prize.

Following his flair for business, Anton Schutz managed to convince UNESCO to turn its prize into a truly transnational and “inter-biennial” project. For the publisher it was a crucial opportunity to expand his business and also a personal investment. The link between circulation of colour reproductions and the work’s value was clear to him, who did everything he could to buy the works selected for the UNESCO Prize. 60 Art institutions also frequently contacted him to know which reproductions had been selected for the “UNESCO Art Popularization Series” “… as it may affect our purchasing programme.” 61 In February 1954, he wrote a letter to Peter Bellew (UNESCO’s main supervisor of the reproductions’ project), telling him that he “met the Secretary of the Venice Biennial [Rodolfo Pallucchini-ed.]” who “was quite a bit jealous about our doing some pictures in São Paulo, but I assured him that UNESCO was probably thinking of doing the same for Venice, so he is waiting for us eagerly.” 62 Playing on triangular jealousies going from one side of the Atlantic to the other, Anton Schutz thus

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58 Ibid., 128.

59 The World Art Series was started in 1954. It consisted in a series of volumes dedicated to non-Western (or to say with Anton Schutz’s terms, “unknown”) art masterpieces, to be distributed worldwide by the New York Graphic Society and UNESCO.

60 AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4). Only in 1958 Schutz stop buying selected works because the prices of the canvases became too high.

61 Letter from John Hulton (Deputy Director Fine Arts Departement, The British Council) to Anton Schutz (NYGS), November 29th 1955. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).

62 Letter from A. Schutz (NYGS) to P. Bellew (Arts and Letters Division), February 25th 1954. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
invented a new role for the UNESCO Prize: from the legitimisation of Latin American abstraction against Informal art, to a prize for peripherical artists following “modern” and recognizable trends. The official guidelines, however, only stated that the artworks should be made by living, outstanding artists, insufficiently known internationally and whose works were suitable for colour reproduction.

At the Venice Biennale of 1954 and 1956, the international jury followed UNESCO recommendations in selecting the following artists: Mordecai Ardon (1896-1992), Israeli; Antoni Clavé (1913-2005), Franco-Spanish; Justin Daraniyagala (1903-1967), Sri Lankan; Wolfgang Hutter (1928-2014), Austrian; Tadeusz Kulisiewicz (1899-1988), Polish; Miodrag B. Protic (1922-2014), Serbian. All the paintings were figurative, colourful – besides Kulisiewicz’s work, which was for this reason later excluded from the catalogue – very material painting, with visible brushstrokes and vivid contrasts. They also shared a general tendency towards a gentler form of abstraction, but with explicit titles and recognizable subjects. At the third São Paulo biennial, on the other hand, the artists chosen were Milton Dacosta (1915-1988), Roberto Matta (1911-2002) and Ivan Ferreira Serpa (1923-1973). Apart from Roberto Matta, Chilean artist associated with the international surrealist nebula with his biomorphic compositions, Dacosta and Serpa were two Brazilian artists committed to rationalist abstraction who would often gather in the late 1940s and 1950s, at Pedrosa’s home.

At the São Paulo Biennial, the artists chosen were all Latin American, sometimes of already “international” fame. Almost all the works can be linked back to the Brazilian avant-garde of the moment, supported by Mário Pedrosa. At the Venice Biennale, on the other hand, the selection often picked artists from the “peripheries”, not very well known internationally and sometimes isolated from the more recent debates on new pictorial innovations. This difference in trends tells us something about the way the UNESCO Prize was perceived, but also about the way the biennials perceived themselves, since the prize was awarded by the biennials’ international juries. In São Paulo, priority was given to reaffirming and assisting the country’s artists in their international careers, using UNESCO as a global platform and as a gateway to the international art circuits; at the Venice Biennale, on the other hand, the interest for the UNESCO Prize appeared to be milder. One of the consequences of this perception was a relative freedom for the international Venetian jury in assigning prizes, not having to conform to specific national or artistic interests.

The only exception to this pattern was the last-minute, unplanned choice of a fifth painting at the 1954 Venice biennial, realized by Karel Appel (1921-2006), the famous Amsterdam CoBrA artist. The initiative was Anton Schutz’s: since the Kulisiewicz was black and white, and thereby obviously unsuitable for colour reproduction, he innocently suggested a painting he had just bought, Wild Horses. After some reflections, Bellew opted for another of Karel Appel’s works, Sun Animal:

... a very happy gay picture ... it should be, in my opinion, of all is paintings, the most acceptable to the ordinary man in the street for, while he may not know what it is all about, it would give him a feeling of great gaiety. It would certainly be a most colourful thing to hang on a wall and most decorative.

Bellew was often frustrated by the selection of the biennials’ International juries. For once, he was happy to have the possibility to choose an artwork following his own parameters: colours!

65 A photograph from the early 1950s, when Pedrosa was the main art critic in Rio de Janeiro, shows one of the gathering at Pedrosa’s home. Rationalist abstract artists stand alongside artists advocating a more “intuitive” or “naive” approach: Barros, Abraham Palatnik, Lidia “Lidy” Prat, Tomás Maldonado, Almir Mavignier, and Serpa. Pedrosa was one of the main interlocutors for the artists of Grupo Frente: Serpa, Lygia Pape, Elisa Martins da Silveira, Hélio Oiticica. Cabanas, Learning from Madness. Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art, 87-88.

66 UNESCO’s officials complained several times to the secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini about the little importance given to the prize in the catalogue. ASAC/Arte Visivo. B.075/28. Letter of P. Bellew to R. Pallucchini, July 24th 1956. “We have received some comments from some personalities, in particular from the Italian Delegation to UNESCO, regarding the announcement of the Prize in the Biennale catalogue. It was felt that this announcement, coming last, following the prize from a restaurant in Venice, was not related either to the prestige of Unesco or to the importance of the prize itself […] the reproduction costs, in fact, several thousand dollars”.

67 Letter of A. Schutz to P. Bellew, November 10th 1954. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).

68 Oil on Canvas, 113x138,5cm, Private Collection, New York.

69 Letter from Peter Bellew to Anton Schutz, March 7th 1955. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
The Quarrel of the Biennial Hispano-americana de Arte: UNESCO Shows its Political Limits

After the Venetian and São Paulo editions, the UNESCO Prize was requested with particular insistence by the organizers of the Biennial Hispanoamericana de Arte. Needing political as well as artistic legitimation, they saw in the UNESCO Prize a way to obtain both. This biennial was an initiative of the Spanish government which, banished from international society, had begun to understand the diplomatic potential of international contemporary art events.68 After a first edition in Madrid in 1951,69 the second “Hispano-American” biennial was scheduled for 1954 in Cuba, as a nostalgic celebration of the (long lost) empire.70 Despite the fact that the unwavering geopolitical exclusion of Francoist Spain had ended between 1952 and 1953,71 when the director of the Centro Regional en el Hemisferio occidental de l’UNESCO of Havana72 wrote to the UNESCO’s responsible of the prize, his request was met with a cold reception. UNESCO’s Arts and Letters Division invested in the colour reproductions’ project and they believed in it: to them, taking part in Franco’s biennial meant risking the worldwide diffusion of a figurative, outdated crust, most likely celebrating “Hispanic culture”, with the UNESCO label on it. Moreover, to the director of the Havana centre’s own admission, the event faced some opposition from the local art scene.73 Finally, Michael Dard, head of the Division, objected to this collaboration on the ground of financial limitations. He also explained, somewhat beaten, that UNESCO did not offer the “publicity program” that the director of the Havana centre referred to in his letter.74 Apparently, outside of Paris, the Colour Reproductions project was sometimes perceived as a formidable means of advertisement.

In 1955, the same issue came up at the third edition of the biennial, in Barcelona.75 Michel Dard had the same excuse ready, when he discovered that some higher-ranked official promised to the biennial’s organizers the UNESCO’s participation. Peter Bellew tried to object to the decision, convinced that the works chosen in Barcelona would only “ridicule UNESCO”, since he saw in the biennial “no real standing in the international art world”.76 Bellew was in Colombo at that time for the World Art Series and he seemed very concerned by the orientation that the administration was imposing upon the project: “so far touch wood we have avoided being ridiculed in the art world – Don’t let us abandon the little respect we have gained, Barcelona could well result in this –.”77 Important UNESCO officials, unfortunately, didn’t seem to think in terms of “art world”. The author of the promise to the Spanish institutions was later discovered: it was René Maheu, future General Director from 1961 to 1974. Maheu already had a prominent position in the organisation and decided that diplomatic issues with Spain should be avoided at all cost.78 The UNESCO Prize was finally awarded to Rafael Zabala (1907-1960) who, with his “Interior y paisaje”, which to Bellew was like a nightmare come true. To his relief, this third edition of the Biennial hispanoamericana was also the last.79

This moment marked a turning point in the history of the UNESCO Prize. The higher-ranked officials having finally understood the diplomatic value of

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68 For a broader view, see Paula Barreiro López, Avant-Garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).
70 Katia Figueredo Cabrera, “La Segunda Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte”, Espacio Latino, 3-4, 2015, p. 48-54; Miguel Cabalas Bravo, Artistas contra Franco. La oposición de los artistas mexicanos y españoles exiliados a las bienales hispanoamericanas de arte, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996.
72 This centre was one of the outcomes of the regionalist policy of Paulo Carneiro, and it later discovered: it was René Maheu, one of the UNESCO founders and over the years he managed to achieve an increasingly central position. During the direction of Torres Bodet, francophone, he became his closest collaborator and began to have important political responsibilities.
73 Letter from Guillermo Francovich (Director of the Regional Centre of Havana) to Michel Dard (Responsible of the Arts and Letters Division), January 12th 1954. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
74 Letter from P. Bellew to M. Curral. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
76 Internal memorandum, from P. Bellew to M. Curral. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
77 Letter from P. Bellew, September 15th 1955. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
78 René Maheu was one of the UNESCO founders and over the years he managed to achieve an increasingly central position. During the direction of Torres Bodet, francophone, he became his closest collaborator and began to have important political responsibilities.
79 The fourth biennial was supposed to be held in Caracas in 1958, but it was cancelled. This question is addressed in Paula Barreiro López, Jesús Carrillo, and Fabiola Martínez, Modernidad y Vanguardia: Rutas de Intercambio y Diálogo Entre España y Latinoamérica (1920-1970), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, 2015).
80 Michel Cabalas Bravo, Artistas Contra Franco. La Oposición de Los Artistas Mexicanos y Españoles Exiliados a Las Bienales Hispanoamericanas de Arte (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de méxico, 1996).
the award, the artists began to be chosen according to their nationality, to meet the geopolitical and diplomatic needs of the moment. An internal note from Michel Dard to Peter Bellew sent in 1958 exemplifies this shift. First, Dard reminded Bellew that it was now possible to negotiate the choice of the jury, since the prize had been removed from the international jury’s area of expertise – despite the fact that this configuration was a mark of prestige. From 1958 onwards, the prize was awarded by a special jury, both at Venice and São Paulo, composed of two members of AICA and ICOM. ICOM was unofficially appointed to the selection of the artists according to the diplomatic needs of the organisation, and the priority of 1958, for various reasons, was to counterbalance the focus on Latin-American artists with “Oriental” ones. In the same internal note, Dard reminded Bellew that this year “we must crown oriental works”.

In 1958 and 1959, at the Venice Biennial, the ICOM committee selected *Fans* (oil on canvas, 130x161cm, 1958) by Kenzo Okada and *Painting “E”* (oil on canvas, 58x71cm, 1959) by Yoshishige Saito, both Japanese artists. As for AICA, they selected *Painting* (oil on gesso, 81x100cm, 1958) of Antoni Tapies and *Sacco e Rosso* (coarse canvas and paint on wood, 150x130cm, 1958) by Alberto Burri. AICA was thus selecting artists associated to the “Informel” trend, firmly established at an international level – a quite ironic turn if we think that the award was conceived by the “Old Lion” Mário Pedrosa (that was the nickname that his friend, art critic Pierre Restany, gave him) as a tool in his battle against international Informal fashion (Fig. 4).

From 1960 till 1968 the Prize was only awarded at the Venice biennial, following the same trend: ICOM would select the artists on a diplomatic base, following the instructions of high ranked officials like René Maheu, and AICA would follow their own aesthetic prerogatives. AICA art critics turned away from the “Informel” in 1964, following the aesthetic line dictated by the “Convegno” in Rimini in 1963. For this reason, in 1964 and 1966 AICA selected for the

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80 Internal note from M. Dard to P. Bellew, 1958. AG13 7A 145.01 (41-4).
UNESCO Prize were two figurative painters, Roger Hilton (1911-1975) and Horst Antes (1936). The triumph of “Informel” at the UNESCO lasted from 1958 to 1964, celebrated as the language of peace, universal and without borders. The UNESCO price was suddenly interrupted in 1968, for three main reasons. The first is internal to the organization: UNESCO, following the new geopolitics of decolonisation and globalisation, was making an important transition from the “pursuit of a World culture” to the defence of “cultural identities.” Second, 1968 was the last edition of the “old” Venice Biennial, before reformations and new statutes. Finally, the social lives of colour reproductions had changed. The post-war period really was a “golden decade” for travelling exhibitions of photographic reproductions and several institutions built their artistic strategy on them. UNESCO, MoMA and many other museum institutions, “Western” or otherwise, thus became “Museums without walls” for a while. Links with political propaganda, exemplified by the contemporary mobile exhibitions of the Marshall Plans, were not considered a problem. As Olivier Lugon synthetizes:

If modern art was meant to play a central role in a humanistic and democratic post-war culture, the more strongly you claimed to spread the taste for it – even using methods coming from advertising or political persuasion – the more you could claim to serve the highest values of civilization.

In the 1960s, however, colour reproductions were sentenced to obsolescence, eclipsed by the simultaneity of television broadcasts and the new accessibility of transoceanic transports. From this point forward reproductions were ranked among the kitsch objects produced by consumer society, only included in museums’ policies when they could be sold in souvenir shops.

Conclusion

This case study sheds new light on the role of international organizations such as UNESCO and on the “social life” of colour reproductions, in a period between World War II and the many upheavals of the 1960s, such as the generalisation of air transport and the consumer society. Malraux’s Imaginary Museum was indeed “inherently Eurocentric” as was the UNESCO project. However, our analysis of circulations shows us that the “Eurocentric universalism” of colour reproductions could be turned into a “strategic universalism”. This was not only the case for Mario Pedrosa and his UNESCO price, but also for the several actual Imaginary Museums that were built with UNESCO reproductions. Already in 1951, the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos had established a Museo de Reproducciones Pictóricas, thanks to donations from MoMA and UNESCO. In 1957 the first Musée imaginaire of the world was proudly inaugurated in Beirut, with 664 colour reproductions of masterworks “from the West and the East” provided by UNESCO. In 1958, Mário Pedrosa conceived and suggested to Oscar Niemeyer a museum of copies for Brasilia, which would “allow for the presentation of all of

83 ASAC (b. 162, 127, 144).
86 Museum magazine dedicates an issue to this subject in 1950: “Interesting examples: Canada has long used reproductions for small exhibitions; in France, les Amis de l’Art have set sent reproductions of art to small centres in the provinces and North Africa, and the Musée des beaux-arts at Rheims has organized exhibitions of reproductions for schools of the region; in Pakistan the Northwest Frontier Province Museum of Peshawar sends replicas of its archaeological exhibits to towns in the provinces; the Tel Aviv Museum in Israel has in use 70 exhibitions of reproductions on various subjects and periods of art history which travel, often accompanied by a lecturer; to the villages, settlements, schools, army camps and military hospitals where they are always in demand … Italy’s new educational service and the National Museum of Mexico’s circulating exhibitions to museums outside the capital both employ reproductions …” Grace L. McCann Morley, “Foreword,” Museum 3, no. 4 (1950), 266.

88 In the 1940s-1950s, on the other hand, reproductions and art books were rare. In Paris, La Hune was one of the few bookshops rich in art books, but there was only one shelf dedicated to modern art. Dossin, The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s. A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds, 127. Jean Cassou, who complained at the opening of the MNAM about the lack of colour reproductions, was rather happy in the late 1950s to see that reproductions of paintings were now available everywhere, even in “provincial or foreign cities where modern production does not penetrate”, Jean Cassou, “Pour un musée chez soi,” in Le musée chez soi (Mulhouse: Les Éditions Braun & Co. Undated [1958]). Perry, UNESCO’s Colour Reproductions Project: Bringing (French) Art to the World.
91 Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, 2010.
For the utopian city built out of nowhere, the only possible museum was a utopian, universal, global and radically inclusive one. Many other countries had bought UNESCO *Travelling Exhibition* to display it permanently in the country. Colour reproductions can thus be included in the renewal of the "kit" of the modern metropolis and the modern country, as the low-cost version of the modern art museum.

Finally, the *Colour Reproductions* project and the UNESCO Prize give a better picture of the chronology of UNESCO's actions and ambitions in the "art world". Since its foundation, the organisation was not a harmonious gathering of peoples but an arena supporting artistic rivalries, crossed with political revindications from the "South" - in particular, Latin American geometric abstraction - against the "North" - notably, international abstract and informal art trends, as much as the French version of the modern art canon. During the organization's first years, promoting "World Art" equalled to diffusing the French canon all around the world; in 1953, the organization timidly opened up to other geographies and artistic movements, notably with the UNESCO Prize. It is only in 1958 that UNESCO becomes an important institution of promotion of lyrical abstraction as an international language, as is shown by the aesthetic turning point of the UNESCO Prize and also new building inaugurated the same year. Wandering in the new, modernist UNESCO headquarters, one could easily notice that non-geometrical abstraction was largely predominant among the artworks commissioned.

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93 For instance, in Egypt, Nasser purchased two UNESCO Travelling exhibition, to show them around the country and eventually to exhibit them permanently in a museum. Schutz, *My Share of Wine; the Memoirs of Anton Schutz*, 126. In Japan, the reproductions of the Travelling Exhibition: *Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* were acquired by the Komaba Museum of Tokyo University and exhibited many times since. Interview with Yoshiko Kurosawa, December 21st 2019.