

# SAMSON ALEXOR

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# BEYOND MODERN

Samson Flexor (1907-1971) is an artist whose career is closely linked to the history of MAM São Paulo and to the emergence of abstract art in Brazil. Recognized above all for his contribution to geometric abstraction throughout the 1950s, Flexor considered his late works, initially characterized by the lyrical fluidity of gesture and eventually arriving at a return to figuration, as an expression of the maximum potency of his art.

Born in the hinterlands of modern-day Moldova (formerly Russian Empire), he started his artistic career in Paris, where he settled in 1924. Prior to the occupation of France by the Germans in 1940, he actively participated in the Parisian cultural scene, holding numerous exhibitions, frequenting the studios of some of his masters, such as André Lhote, Fernand Léger and

Henri Matisse. Up until the outbreak of World War II, he continued to work assiduously on mural commissions on religious themes, and on numerous portraits combining remarkable technical mastery and psychological intuition. With the German invasion, he was doubly persecuted: for his Jewish origin and for his militancy in the Resistance.

He held his first exhibition in São Paulo in 1946. In that same year he became acquainted with Brazilian critics such as Sérgio Milliet, Luiz Martins and Lourival Gomes Machado. He relocated permanently to São Paulo in 1948, a time of unprecedented dynamism in the Brazilian artistic scene, in stark contrast with the devastated France of the post-war period. In 1949, he participated in MAM São Paulo's inaugural exhibition titled *Do figurativismo ao abstracionismo* [*From Figuration to Abstraction*], embracing the latter trend.

In 1951, the year in which the Bienal de São Paulo was inaugurated, he opened his Atelier Abstração [Abstraction

Studio], where he instructed a new generation of artists, including Jacques Douchez, Wega Nery, Norberto Nicola, Leyla Perrone and Anatol Wladyslaw. In the first half of the 1950s, Flexor's painting drew closer to the language of Concrete Art, in works that echoed the optimism of a period of industrial modernization and urban growth in São Paulo.

This is the first exhibition to focus on the development of Flexor's work from 1957 onwards, when he began to reject static forms in paintings in which gesture, opacity and transparency gradually predominate. The 1964 military coup, coupled with the diagnosis of a terminal illness, had a significant impact on the artist's work, marking his return to figuration. Themes related to the fragility of life and the critique of violence perpetuated by patriarchal power gave rise to the *Bípedes* [*Bipeds*], paintings depicting large, grotesque anthropomorphic figures, presented for the first time at the 9th Bienal de São Paulo, in 1967.



By bringing together a substantial number of works from Flexor's late phase, the exhibition attempts to cast light on a lesser-known period of his oeuvre, underscoring the work of an artist who faced the ethical and aesthetic challenges of his time, and whose legacy remains contemporary to this day.

# MODERN FLEXOR

Flexor arrived in São Paulo at a time when abstraction was being introduced into Brazilian art, and the artistic debate was marked by the controversy between figuration and abstraction. At the turn of the 1950s, events such as Calder's exhibition at the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, Max Bill's exhibition at the newly founded Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), and the foundation of the Museums of Modern Art in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro contributed to the dissemination of abstractionist trends in the country. Flexor stood on the side of abstraction, although he continued to accept commissions for distinctly figurative portraits.

In Flexor's late 1940s work, the figure was geometricized, in the style of synthetic Cubism. His paintings from this period are characterized by their

vibrant colours, the combination of orthogonal and curvilinear shapes, often featuring Brazilian themes. In paintings dating from the late 1940s, such as *Abstração barroca* [*Baroque Abstraction*] (1948), the figure becomes almost residual, in a composition structured by curves and lines, in which the artist works with complementary colours, evoking studies carried out in Paris and based on Delaunay. *Aos pés da cruz* [*At the Foot of the Cross*] (1948), a work with a religious theme, also nears total abstraction. The shape of the cross is merely suggested, and the faces of the figures emerge amidst an entanglement of overlapping lines and colours.

The compositions from the early 1950s became more synthetic, with reduced elements in the pictorial field and the use of flat colours. The stylized figures in works such as *Figuras femininas* [*Female Figures*] (1951) soon gave way to compositions of superimposed geometric shapes. Around the mid-1940s, Flexor intensified his experiments with geometric structures

in works characterized by extreme formal purity. In *Vai e vem diagonal em três quadrados* [*Diagonal Back and Forth in Three Squares*] (1954), Flexor explores crossing diagonal lines to create a motion effect accentuated by chromatic contrasts.

As noted by the art critic Sergio Milliet, Flexor once stated, “The ultimate decision in favour of abstraction does not result only from an intellectual process, but also from the daily contemplation of the spectacle offered by São Paulo’s frenetic development, where everything leans towards the future and professes contempt for its colonial past.”



LYRICAL

ABSTRACTION:

ÉLANS, METEORITES,

STONES AND

OPENINGS

In late 1956, Flexor travelled to New York, where he held an exhibition in January 1957 at the Roland de Aenlle Gallery. He visited the retrospective show of the recently deceased painter Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) at MoMA. Mesmerized by the city's artistic context, he shifted away from his belief in fixed structures. According to Alice Brill, "the experience and stimuli to which he was exposed in New York left a deep impression on the artist, changing his pictorial gaze, which then turned to a form of abstractionism that was still constructed, though now denoting greater permeability to lyrical and emotional traits."

At first, Flexor adopted the *sfumato* technique, softening the rigidity of the planes in the composition. The painting's material quality gradually acquired a structuring feature and greater density, while the colour palette became more concise, favouring the exploration of *chiaroscuro* effects and a luminosity that emanated from within the pictures.

In 1961, on the occasion of Samson Flexor's exhibition at MAM São Paulo, Mario Pedrosa wrote: "This is a novel abstract figuration that transpires from evidently organic inspiration, which evinces the struggle of the artist's spirit to ultimately descend into the materiality of the roots, of earthly things. Flexor's art makes contact with life."

In the early 1960s, paintings of *Élans* (impulses) and *Meteorites* emerged; characterized by the gesture, by thick brushstrokes and the suggestion of movement in the pictorial space. In the series of *Stones*, the vectorial gestures are condensed into mineral forms which, in turn, would give

rise to the *Openings* from the middle of the decade. During this period, Flexor carried out several studies in watercolour, a technique that allowed him to explore in depth the stains, the luminosities, and transparencies in works that are structured upon the act of painting. Regarding this period, Flexor declared, “I saw painting as an opening, to which there was always an obstacle.”

# HUMANIST WORK: THE RETURN TO FIGURATION

In 1964, the year in which Brazil suffered a military coup, Flexor was diagnosed with a terminal heart disease. Doubly impacted by the prospect of death and by the rise of a totalitarian regime in the country that had welcomed him, the artist turned to themes related to the fragility of life and to “the humanistic engagement that increasingly denounces the environment currently inflicted on us”.

In 1965, a major retrospective of his work was held at the Musée Rath, in Geneva. In the same year, paintings such as *Grande figura com uma abertura* [*Large Figure with One Opening*] and *Grande figura com três aberturas* [*Large Figure with Three Openings*], in which the pictorial field is dominated by a vertical image against an almost neutral



background, already hinted at a return to figuration. The female torso made the following year (*Torso [Torso]*) depicts a fragmented body, in which the openings around the breasts and belly — organs that denote the origin of life — appear as wounds or absences.

At the 9th Bienal de São Paulo (1967), Flexor presented five large format paintings and eight watercolours depicting anthropomorphic and grotesque creatures, which he called *Bipeds*, or *Pictanthropus*. When analysing this new development in Flexor's work, the philosopher Vilém Flusser likened the set of *Bipeds* to a “twentieth-century altar erected to Nothing.” These archetypal figures mark the passage from the amorphous to the anthropomorphic — monstrous, ancestral beings with no defined gender that express both the artist's angst in the face of a personal confrontation with his imminent death and the fear of the violence imposed by an oppressive State. According to the artist himself, this is the moment when his work reaches its maximum potency.

In 1968 Flexor held an expanded version of the Geneva retrospective at the MAM-RJ, where he showed a new group of five *Bipeds* under the general title *Homenagem ao Marquês de Sade* [*Homage to the Marquis de Sade*]. About this series of works, Flexor noted that “the first painting is the Primate, origin of paternalism. The second is the Abortion or Birth — a monster that opens itself up, and then falls. It is an indirect but vaguely human figure: for me, it indicates the youth of today. Then comes the victim: it’s Justine, the woman. But the victim is also our only hope, because it is the woman who carries on. Then comes the Gendarme — the one who assaults and is assaulted. And finally the Minotaur — huge bull’s head and small sex: cerebral sexuality, very typical of men today.”

With the enactment of Institutional Act Number 5 (also known as AI-5) that same year, and the consequent intensification of political repression, Flexor’s work took on a more openly humanistic character, questioning

the patriarchal structures of power. In the artist's own words, his *Bipeds* "matured in an imperious need for protest, in an atmosphere of nausea at the anachronistic survival of tyranny and paternalism with its frustrating taboos and its strength, both ever more brutal and impotent. In this sense, the 'Pictanthropi' are presented as a pictorial warning in a simultaneous expression of the aggressor who is nothing more than the victim. Faceless and gutless, it is at one and the same time a collective and individual being, ancestral and descendant, male and female, gendarme and prisoner, current and remote."



# MUTILATED BODY AND SEXUALITY

From the late 1960s onwards, Flexor produced a new series of *White Bipedes*, among which were female and male figures fused into a single being. The solidity of the preceding figures gave way to equally monumental beings, though now constructed from the internal fragmentation of their parts into organic masses in a process of apparent dissolution. During this same period, some zoomorphic *Bipedes* emerged, in which human and the non-human beings are combined.

Geometric solids reappear in Flexor's work from 1970 onwards, this time overlaying torsos formed by thick layers of white and red paint, and crossed by large fissures. As noted by Alice Brill, "Aware that his illness is progressing, Flexor goes back to the organic themes that contrast with the geometric form, symbolizing the separation of the mind



and the body: a torso with an opening is supported by two black and grey rectangles; the human form, hyper-diluted and diaphanous, detaching itself... or else it tries to cling to black rectangles shaped like an inverted T. Finally, the body disintegrates, and its members, now autonomous, form strange sets with the rectangles and squares — always respecting the good form of the composition.”

Among the last bodies to appear in Flexor’s work, the female nudes depicted in countless watercolours and some oil paintings stand out. In these pieces, the body is presented in its entirety, in sensual and diaphanous images that will be the last expression of the *vital élan* which strongly permeated the artist’s oeuvre. Flexor died on July 31, 1971, of a pulmonary edema.

**Kiki Mazzucchelli**  
curator