

Press release

Tarsila do Amaral

Painting Modern Brazil



February 21 – June 1, 2025

This exhibition is organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and le GrandPalaisRmn



Tarsila do Amaral
Painting Modern Brazil

- Organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and le GrandPalaisRmn
 - Curatorial team: Cecilia Braschi, leading curator and curator of the exhibition in Paris and Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães, curator at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
 - Dates: February 21 to June 1, 2025
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- Tarsila do Amaral takes us into a Brazilian modernity that she contributed to forging, revealing the complexity of this concept that raises identity and societal questions of great importance even today, both in Brazil and in Europe.
 - In the 1920s, as she became aware of the exotic fascination that Brazil exerted on her circle of Parisian friends, Cubism offered her a method of analysis and formal logic that allowed her to take ownership of her physical and mental landscape, leaving conventions and prejudices aside.
 - While travelling back and forth between São Paulo and Paris, Tarsila ferried between the avant-gardes of these two cultural capitals, accompanying the profound transformations of her cultural and social environment.
 - Over the years her work remained attuned to her time, always willing to reinvent itself, despite the unstable conditions of the different times and contexts that an independent woman artist had to face.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Tarsila do Amaral. Painting Modern Brazil*, an ambitious exhibition dedicated to an artist considered a key figure of Brazilian modernism. Divided into six thematic sections, the exhibition allows visitors to discover Tarsila do Amaral (or just Tarsila, her artistic name) as the creator of an original and evocative body of work, drawing on both indigenous and popular imagery and on modernizing forces of a rapidly-transforming country.

In the 1920s, moving between São Paulo and Paris, Tarsila ferried between the avant-gardes of these two cultural capitals and constructed a "Brazilian" iconographic world filtered through the lens of Cubism and Primitivism in vogue in the French capital at the time. Her painting then inspired the Pau-Brasil and Anthropophagic movements, whose search for an "authentic," multicultural, and multiracial Brazil aimed to refound the country's relationship with the European "centers" of colonization.

The activist dimension of Tarsila's paintings from the 1930s and their ability to accompany the profound transformations of her social and urban environment until the 1960s confirm the strength of an oeuvre attuned to her time, always willing to reinvent itself, despite the unstable conditions of the different times and contexts that an independent woman artist had to face.



With her invitation to delve into a Brazilian modernity that she contributed to forging even more than she painted it, Tarsila reveals in her production all the complexity of this concept always subject to debate, which raises identity and societal questions of great importance even today, both in Brazil and Europe.

TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

GALLERY 202

Paris/São Paulo: Passports for Modernism

Born into a refined family of landowners from the region of São Paulo, Tarsila took her first study trip to Paris in 1920 following the usual tour of academic Brazilian painters. While she was away, the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week), held in February 1922, gave a major boost to the São Paulo art scene where young writers, musicians, and painters stimulated an avant-garde free from imported models without denying their cosmopolitanism.

Upon her return to Brazil in June 1922, Tarsila participated in this modern renewal together with painter Anita Malfatti and writers Paulo Menotti del Picchia, Mário de Andrade, and Oswald de Andrade, with whom she formed *Grupo dos Cinco* (Group of Five).

She returned to Paris in 1923 with a completely renewed mentality. Energized by a project that claimed to be both national and modern, she sought direct confrontation with the European avant-gardes from that moment on. Frequenting the studios of André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Albert Gleizes, Tarsila conceived Cubism as a “school of invention,” which allowed her to depart from the conventional codes of representation and develop a truly free, signature style.

An example of this is *The Doll (A Boneca)*, created in 1928, several years after her Parisian training, which shows the persistence of Léger’s influence in Tarsila’s work and the artist’s highly personal interpretation of the theories of Gleizes, her main teacher. Following his example, she conceived her paintings as autonomous ‘organisms’ independent of any realist ambition, with less interest in the objects represented than in the system of relations between shapes and colors, and their rigorous balance in the circumscribed space of the canvas.

A “Young Caipira dressed by Poiret”

As a Brazilian woman artist in Paris, Tarsila had to endure a number of stereotypes if she were to succeed in a Eurocentric, male-dominated art system. Her physique and the way she dressed never went unheeded. The critics expected both her and her artwork to exhibit an “exotic freshness” and a “very feminine delicateness,” as seen in the reviews in the press after her first exhibitions in Paris.

Tarsila took advantage of her appearance to construct her persona at the time, one of a modern Brazilian artist who subverted the established canon in her self-portraits. For example, in *Self-Portrait I (Auto-retrato I, 1924)*, the artist crystallized her self-image very carefully—tight hair, heavy lipstick, long earrings



against a neutral background—styling her face into her 'brand'. As such, this portrait was chosen to illustrate the cover of almost every exhibition catalogue in Tarsila's lifetime and it even dictated the style of her later photographic portraits.

As a *Caipirinha vestida de Poiret* (Young Caipira dressed by Poiret)—the verses Oswald de Andrade dedicated to her—Tarsila became the icon of the “profound Brazil,” while remaining in perfect harmony with the Parisian taste and with that touch of eccentricity that supposedly made her a true avant-garde artist.

The Invention of the Brazilian Landscape

Her time away from Brazil offered Tarsila the chance to gain a new awareness of her origins. While she realized the exotic fascination that her tropical country aroused in her circle of friends in Paris, Cubism offered her a method of analysis and formal logic that allowed her to take ownership of her physical and mental landscape, leaving conventions and prejudices aside.

From 1924 on she set on “rediscovering” the ultra-dynamic city of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and its exuberant landscape, and the region of Minas Gerais, rich in colonial and baroque vestiges.

With her signature neat stroke that characterizes her drawing, Tarsila “dissects” these diverse landscapes with her pencil and ink, choosing the elements of an “authentic” Brazil and transcribing them in lines and geometric forms to bring her new visual vocabulary to life. Simple and modern, intelligible to the Brazilian and the international public, this language is expressed in paintings that present rigorous compositions, where motifs from very different sources coexist in harmony.

The train motif recurs often in Tarsila's work in the 1920s. Established in Brazil in 1855, E.F.C.B., the railway linking the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais, saw further expansion during the 20th century, and it continued to be the country's main mode of transport until the 1950s. Her painting *E.F.C.B. (Brazil Central Railway)* [*E.F.C.B. (Estrada de ferro central do Brasil)*, 1924], highlights the technological progress symbolized by railway bridges, power lines, and traffic lights. Nonetheless, the curved lines of the railway lead our view to the recognizable elements of a popular neighbourhood, which Tarsila integrated with the signs of progress evoked in the foreground of her composition.

Primitivism and Identity/identities

Even when depicting characters, Tarsila faced up to a dual challenge: to respond to the demand for exoticism from Paris and to participate in the construction of a modern, national imagery based on the combination of native, Portuguese, and African cultures that make up the people of Brazil.

The pre-colonial traditions were the focus of her research, while afro-descendent personages also appear in numerous paintings from 1924 and 1925, when Tarsila illustrated Oswald de Andrade's *Pau Brasil* collection of poems and joined the eponymous artistic movement. Idyllic scenes of favelas (shanty towns) and the Carnival, together with the lively colors that the artist called “popular,” illustrate the search for an indigenous primitivism that is idealized by a white, cosmopolitan intellectual like Tarsila. Devoid of any trace of social inequality and colonial violence, these paintings do not hide the ambiguity of these



appropriations or the complexity of the identitarian and racial issues of a Brazil that, one hundred years after its independence and thirty-seven years after the end of slavery, was far from reaching that ideal harmony that the artist expressed in her work.

A good example of this section is *A Cuca* (1924), a painting in which Tarsila stated she had brought together "a strange animal, a frog, an armadillo, and another invented animal." The *Cuca* is a fearsome bogeyman in Brazilian folklore and the characters that Tarsila says she invented are actually drawn from indigenous motifs that the artist studied in ethnological museums. The same sources inspired a costume project for a "Brazilian ballet" (never performed) with a libretto by Oswald de Andrade and music by Heitor Villa-Lobos, based on famous Russian and Swedish ballets. Another example is *Saci-Pererê*, a fantastic character born out of the syncretism between indigenous, African, and Portuguese cultures, illustrating the back cover of the catalogue of Tarsila's first solo exhibition, in June 1926 in Paris.

Carnival in Madureira (*Carnaval em Madureira*, 1924) depicts a trip Tarsila took that same year to Rio de Janeiro with her modernist friends during the Carnival. In Madureira, one of the city's working-class neighbourhoods, she discovered a wooden replica of the Eiffel tower, created as an homage to Brazilian aviator Alberto Santos Dumont, who had flown over Paris in an airship in 1906. While playing on this startling relocation of a Parisian symbol to the Brazilian suburbs, Tarsila also turned the theme of Carnival, which originates from popular culture, into a national matter. In Tarsila's work, this working-class neighbourhood embodied an ideal, romantic space where disparate and even conflicting elements can coexist peacefully.

ROOM 203

The Cannibalistic Brazil

In 1928, the figure of Abaporu ("man who eats [human flesh]," in the indigenous Tupi-Guarani language) gave rise to the Anthropophagic Movement. Referring to the indigenous practice of devouring others in order to assimilate their qualities, Anthropophagy describes metaphorically the way in which Brazilians appropriate foreign and colonizing cultures, reshaping them in a constructive manner.

From that moment on, Tarsila shuns the representation of popular themes and the geometries of Cubist origin in her work, choosing a syncretism that is more symbolic than narrative, in which a rich European and Brazilian repertoire is thereby "digested" and definitively transformed.

These paintings, which the artist described as "brutal and sincere," elude an unambiguous reading and conventional coding. The natural and architectural elements blend in suggestive and evocative landscapes that transport viewers to magical and dreamlike dimensions, while the drawings are populated by "figures with enormous feet, huge fleshy plants, and strange creatures that naturalists would be incapable of classifying."

In *Urutu*, 1928 (originally titled 'The Egg', when first exhibited in Paris in 1928) draws on a symbolism, widely exploited by modernists, which considered Brazil as the country of the 'large snake', a reference to the giant reptile that hides in the depths of rivers or lakes and embodies the spirit of the waters, according to



indigenous myth. Coiled around an egg that it is about to devour, it could here evoke a return to origins, or to the “golden age heralded by America” according to the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928), i.e. to a pre-colonial, pre-capitalist, pre-religious era. Through the acts of devouring and path-breaking, *Urutu* reflects the anthropophagic concept of digesting external influences and drawing on local sources to create a new Brazilian art.

During this phase Tarsila also interpreted several paintings as depictions of dreams, childhood reminiscences, or images from the unconscious that emerged in semi-lucid states; *Distance* (*Distância*, 1928) is an example. These enigmatic atmospheres are sometimes compared to the paintings of René Magritte or Giorgio de Chirico, some of whose works she owned in her personal collection. While not affiliating themselves with Surrealism, metaphysics, or psychoanalysis, anthropophagists were well aware of all these matters, which certainly formed part of deep European and American culture.

Working Men and Women

After separating from Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila was deeply affected by the New York stock exchange crash in late 1929. Her properties were mortgaged, and she had to get used to a much more modest lifestyle than she previously enjoyed.

Together with Osório César, a young doctor and left-wing intellectual, she took an interest in the economic and social model of the Soviet government. Both her trip to the USSR and her political ideas—which led to her imprisonment in 1932 under the regime of Getúlio Vargas—influenced the content and style of her new paintings, which followed the precepts of Social Realism.

The working classes, previously evoked through anonymous silhouettes in her paintings of the 1920s, now became the true protagonists of her social frescos, as lively colors gave way to more somber hues.

In this section it is worth mentioning her oil painting *Workers* (*Operários*, 1933), in which the models of Social Realism and Mexican muralism mark Tarsila’s most significant militant painting. The celebration of the ethnic diversity of the Brazilian people, already present in her works from the 1920s, takes on a truly social connotation in this tribute to the working class of São Paulo, represented by faces of all origins set against the background of an industrial landscape.

Although the dictatorship relegated women artists to traditional models and intimate themes, Tarsila continued to cast a critical and poetical gaze on the realm of work in rural, urban, and industrial contexts, and to concern herself with the situation of women in the workforce.

In *Seamstresses* (*Costureiras*), started in 1936 and completed in 1950, Tarsila evokes the place of women in the workforce, the group treatment taking precedence over the individual definition of each character, using a set of oblique lines to accentuate the integration of these workers into the surrounding space. In *Earth* (*Terra*, 1943), she may be alluding to worker protests against the concentration of land ownership, although Tarsila distanced herself from Social Realism, returning to the metaphysical atmospheres and dreamy gigantism that characterized her anthropophagic period.



New Landscapes

In the 1950s, Tarsila undertook many commissions and projects for illustrations while continuing to participate in group exhibitions, such as the first two São Paulo Biennials.

Taking a look at her work retrospectively, she revisited and updated the motifs present in her previous compositions, experimenting with different formal registers and varying the manner in which she structured the geometric and organic shapes that characterize her painting vocabulary.

Ever attentive to changes around her, Tarsila followed the rhythm of the transformations taking place in the urban landscape of Brazil, especially São Paulo with its blue-gray skyscrapers imposing their profiles over the older houses and the tropical vegetation of the city.

She was also receptive to the latest visual codes. Towards the end of the 1950s, Geometric Abstraction and Informal art were booming among young artists. Landscaper Roberto Burle Marx filled his multi-colored gardens with native plants while the great project of the construction of Brasília—Brazil's new capital—under the direction of Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa had only just begun.

The Brazilian landscape changed dramatically between 1920 and 1960, as did its representation. Following a new wave of internal migration, and under the effect of real estate pressure, skyscrapers soon moved out from the city centres into the suburbs. In *The Metropolis (A Metr pole, 1958)* depicts the tall buildings that now made up the city's silhouette with shades of gray, blue, and purple, in an almost abstract language that seems to approach the experimental geometries of the young artists with whom she shared the rooms of the São Paulo and Venice biennials in the 1950s and 1960s.

In *Quietud III (Calmaria III, undated)*, painted in the 1960s, Tarsila seems to want to experiment with the gestural and textural feel of the informal abstraction that prevailed at the 1959 São Paulo Biennial. Even when she revisited older motifs, as in this painting, in which she returned to her eponymous composition from 1929, the use of more or less minimal geometric forms gave rise to new landscapes that, unlike anthropophagic environments, are now more real than imaginary, materialized by visionary architects such as Oscar Niemeyer and landscape painters such as Roberto Burle-Marx.

DIDAKTIKA

The Museum designs educational spaces, digital content, and special activities to complement each exhibition as part of its Didaktika project, providing tools and resources to enhance the audience's appreciation of the works on display.

The educational space dedicated to Tarsila do Amaral includes a chronology highlighting key events in the artist's life and career, accompanied by an audiovisual piece with testimonies of experts about her artistic legacy.



Activities

Opening Talk (February 19)

Cecilia Braschi, Leading Curator and curator of the exhibition in Paris, and Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães, Curator at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, present a preview of the exhibition before it opens to the public.

Shared Reflections* (February and March)

In these guided tours, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao staff members offer different points of view on the exhibition.

- Curatorial Tour with Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães, Museum Curator: February 21
- Key Concepts, with Luz Maguregui, Museum Education Coordinator, March 12

*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Tour with... Bina Daigeler (March 21)

For Tarsila do Amaral—dubbed by Oswald de Andrade as a “Young Caipira dressed by Poiret”—fashion was a visual extension of her modernism. Combining Parisian fashion with Brazilian taste, her signature style accentuated the character of her pictorial work through avant-garde colors and styles.

In this tour of the exhibition, fashion history expert and internationally recognized as a film costume designer Bina Daigeler analyzes how the designs of the period had an impact on Tarsila's life and work.

Screening of Tarsilinha (April 19 and 26)

This animated film is based on Tarsila do Amaral's work about memory and the search for identity. Directed by Kiko Mistrorigo in 2022, the film refers to key works by the artist, while the soundtrack composed by Zeca Baleiro pays tribute to the musical compositions of Heitor Villa-Lobos, another reference of the Brazilian modernist circle.

Museum Member Activities

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Members also have the opportunity to participate in additional tours and activities related to each exhibition.

Soirée, Matinée (February 18 and 19)

Members-only Tours with the exhibition curators prior to opening to the public. For International and Honor Members.

Lagunartean (February 27)

Guided Tour of the exhibition and subsequent lunch at the Bistró Guggenheim Bilbao.

Exclusive Tours (March 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 18, 21, 23)

Guided Group Tours to the exhibition.

In Depth Tours (March 5 and 12)



Talks in small groups to contextualize the exhibition followed by a guided tour.

360° Immersions (March 13)

Free Online Talks given by the Museum's Associate Director of Digital Education.

<https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/museum-members>

CATALOGUE

The exhibition will be accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue, where essays by Cecilia Braschi, Geanine-Gutiérrez Guimaraes, and Rafael Cardoso address different questions about Tarsila do Amaral's prolific production, deeply rooted in the culture of her time.

Cover work:

Tarsila do Amaral

Urutu, 1928

Oil on canvas

60.5 x 72.5 cm

Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Gilberto Chateaubriand MAM Rio de Janeiro / Romulo Fialdini et Valentino Fialdini

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Images for the use of the Press

Tarsila do Amaral. Painting Modern Brazil

Guggenheim Bilbao Museum

Online press image service

In the press section of the Museum's website (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.eus), registered users can download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you have not yet opened an account, you can register and download the required material.

If you are already a user, introduce your username and password and access the image downloading facility directly.

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For further information, the Press Department of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao can be contacted by phone (+34 944 359 008) or email (media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus).

Tarsila do Amaral

Self-portrait (Manteau Rouge) [Auto-retrato (Manteau Rouge)], 1923

Oil on canvas

73 x 60.5 cm

Museu Nacional de Belas Artes / Ibram, Rio de Janeiro

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Museu Nacional de Belas Artes/Ibram, Rio de Janeiro / Jaime Acioli



Tarsila do Amaral

Young Caipira (Caipirinha), 1923

Oil on canvas

64 x 81 cm

Luiz Harunari Goshima Collection

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Photo: ©Ding Musa



GUGGENHEIM BILBAO



Tarsila do Amaral

Self-portrait I (Auto-retrato I), 1924

Oil on cardboard on chipboard panel

41 x 37 cm

Acervo Artístico-Cultural dos Palácios do Governo do Estado de São Paulo,
São Paulo

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Artistic-Cultural Collection of the Governmental Palaces of the State
of São Paulo / Romulo Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

E.F.C.B. (Brazil Central Railway) [E.F.C.B. (Estrada de ferro central do Brasil)],
1924

Oil on canvas

142 x 126.8 cm

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Gift, Museu
de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, São Paulo

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Romulo Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

Carnival in Madureira (Carnaval em Madureira), 1924

Oil on canvas

76 x 63.5 cm

Fundação José e Paulina Nemirovsky, on loan to Pinacoteca do Estado de
São Paulo, São Paulo

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Pinacoteca de São Paulo / Isabella Matheus



Tarsila do Amaral

A Cuca, 1924

Oil on canvas

60.5 x 72.5 cm

Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris, on deposit at the
Musée de Grenoble, inv. FNAC 9459

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Photo: ©Ville de Grenoble - Musée de Grenoble / J.L. Lacroix



GUGGENHEIM BILBAO



Tarsila do Amaral

Fruit seller (O Vendedor de Frutas), 1925

Oil on canvas

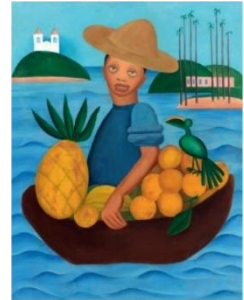
108 x 84.5 cm

Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro

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Photo: ©Gilberto Chateaubriand MAM Rio de Janeiro / Romulo Fialdini &

Valentino Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

The Papaya Tree (O Mamoeiro), 1925

Oil on canvas

65 x 70 cm

Coleção de Artes Visuais do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros - USP, São Paulo

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Romulo Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

The Doll (A Boneca), 1928

Oil on canvas

60 x 45 cm

Hecilda and Sergio Fadel Collection, Rio de Janeiro

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Romulo Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

Urutu, 1928

Oil on canvas

60.5 x 72.5 cm

Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro

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Photo: ©Gilberto Chateaubriand MAM Rio de Janeiro / Romulo Fialdini et

Valentino Fialdini



GUGGENHEIM BILBAO



Tarsila do Amaral

Distance (Distância), 1928

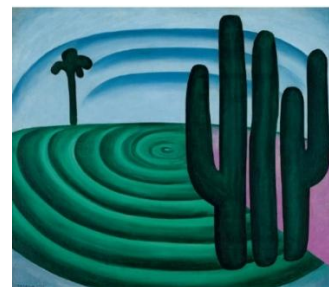
Oil on canvas

65.5 x 75 cm

Fundação José e Paulina Nemirovsky, on loan to Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo

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Photo: ©Pinacoteca de São Paulo / Isabella Matheus



Tarsila do Amaral

Workers (Operários), 1933

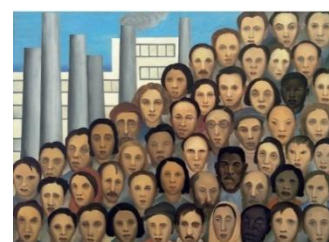
Oil on canvas

150 x 205 cm

Acervo Artístico-Cultural dos Palácios do Governo do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo

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Photo: ©Artistic-Cultural Collection of the Governmental Palaces of the State of São Paulo / Romulo Fialdini



Earth (Terra), 1943

Oil on canvas

61 x 81 cm

Zoé Noronha Chagas Freitas estate, Rio de Janeiro

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Marcio Rangel



Tarsila do Amaral

Seamstresses (Costureiras), 1950

Oil on canvas

73.3 x 100.2 cm

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, gifted by Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, inv. 1963.1.243

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Photo: ©Romulo Fialdini



GUGGENHEIM BILBAO



Tarsila do Amaral

Village with Bridge and Papaya Tree (Vilarejo com ponte e mamoeiro), 1953

Oil on canvas

41 x 52 cm

Private collection

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Romulo Fialdini



Tarsila do Amaral

The Metropolis (A Metr pole), 1958

Oil on canvas

88 x 109 cm

Colecc n Maria Bernadette Ortiz Nascimento, S o Paulo

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Marcelo Spatafora



Tarsila do Amaral

Quietude III (Calmaria III, n.d./1960s)

Oil on canvas

73 x 97 cm

Lucia and Luiz Roberto Sampaio

©Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamento e Empreendimentos S.A.

Photo: ©Ding Musa

