

Athos Bulcão

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It is always with heartfelt emotion that I refer to this great artist and wonderful human being, my dear friend Athos Bulcão.

Over the last forty years in which we have been working jointly in several projects, I have never tired admiring his creative genius, his impeccable command of coloring, and the spirited, intelligent, and accurate manner in which he interferes in architecture by incorporating his works into buildings and the urban space, just as Fernand Léger preached. Strictly speaking, Bulcão reaches far beyond Léger's proposals, because his works are all so tightly integrated into and anchored on architecture itself, that it would be impossible to picture them dissociated from their respective buildings, or vice-versa.

How to picture, for example, the National Theater of Brasilia designed by Oscar Niemeyer, without the reliefs that clad the two lateral outside walls of the building, or yet the magnificent environment of the main salon of the Itamaraty building, also by Niemeyer, without its color latticework?

Oscar Niemeyer himself readily spotted Bulcão's talent on a Sunday afternoon, back in the forties, when he caught the artist painting a gouache at Roberto Burle-Marx's studio. Niemeyer immediately invited Bulcão to study the lateral outside walls of the Municipal Theater of Belo Horizonte, which were never built. It was only in 1955, with the execution of a tile mural for the Sul América Hospital of Rio de Janeiro, also designed by Oscar Niemeyer, that Bulcão started implementing his outstanding project of integrating artworks to architectural renditions.

After this mural, Bulcão made countless contributions to Niemeyer's project designs. In Brazil, the first two were the tiles for the Church of Our Lady of Fatima, and a mural for the Brasilia Palace Hotel, both in Brasilia. Abroad, he also contributed important works for Oscar Niemeyer's commissions as for example the headquarters of Italy's largest publishing house Mondadori and the Mondadori residence in Milan, the headquarters of the French Communist Party, the University of Algeria, and others.

Despite being on high demand for his works in partnership with architects, Bulcão always devoted himself part time to easel painting. After dropping out of medical school in Rio de Janeiro as result of his lack of vocation, he began to study painting. In 1941, he showed in the Modern Section of the National Salon of Fine Arts and received two silver medals for his works of drawing and painting, respectively. During 1945, he attended the studio of Cândido Portinari, where he worked on a mural representing St. Francis of Assisi, for the Pampulha Church, of Belo Horizonte.

Although the artist himself admits that some influence by Paul Klee, Fernand Léger or Miró may be spotted in his painting, his entire production is original and always reflects his condition as a self-taught artist.

In our life of all but daily contact during a long period in Brasilia, I followed the development of his works of the figurative phase (1960s and 70s) and of masks (1970s and 80s), all of them always impregnated with strong mystical content. Despite the imminently abstract nature of his more recent production, the artist confesses to his need to make chance forays into figurative painting.

As of lately, in the 1990s, Bulcão has been actively working for hospitals and buildings designed and built by the Technology Center of Sarah Hospitals, an institution that currently houses a very important collection of his more recent works.

Athos Bulcão moved to Brasilia at the beginning of its construction, in 1958. Thanks to his extraordinary creative capacity and tireless devotion to work, his works are found throughout the city. Today Athos Bulcão stands on a par with the highest-ranking cultural references in our country.