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Literature of  
the Saõ Paulo Week of Modern Art

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## LITERATURE OF THE SÃO PAULO WEEK OF MODERN ART

The Brazilian modernist movement, from its early development circa 1917 through its first creative phase ending in 1929, encompassed the fine arts as well as literature in a broad attempt to renovate artistic and intellectual life. The Week of Modern Art celebrated in the Municipal Theater of São Paulo from 11 to 18 February 1922 was a focal point for the critical spirit seeking to redefine artistic values and stood as a symbol of a new expressive and interpretive tradition that would profoundly alter Brazilian writing.

Sixty-five years later, the guiding forces of modernism and its literary program are being increasingly studied by a circle of scholars who contribute to an understanding of this complex moment of impetuous revolt and ingenious invention. Inspired by an iconoclastic insurrection against the Parnassian ideals and theoretical models of the past, with their limiting views of national reality, modernist writers initiated a poetic rediscovery of Brazil and sought a new identity through popular language set in regional and folkloric detail, rich in music and magic, dance and myth. The movement aimed to produce a literature for export to replace the dominant imported literature.

Characteristic of modernism as a whole is the promotion of a critical consciousness of national reality, accompanied by an integration or incorporation of its most diverse elements: the Indian and the Portuguese, the piano and the *berimbau*, the jungle and the school. As a mode of cultural criticism, modernist essays shaped ideas on ethnography, sociology, and economics, among other topics, beginning with Graça Aranha and Paulo Prado and extending to Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Freyre, and Caio Prado, Jr. Modernism can also be viewed as an avant-garde movement that paralleled developments in European literature, its revolt against nineteenth-century norms, with particular attention to expressionism, cubism, and futurism for innovative methods of composition. While the modernists at first had no fixed aesthetic program or ideology, the Brazilian movement gained a structural referent from the European vanguard movements, through manifestoes, inventive shorter genres, critical experimentation, and literary events. One could say with some irony that the Brazilian modernists called on the European avant-garde when necessary for techniques with which they declared their independence from styles and ideas imported from Europe, at the same time that they developed national or folkloric themes that were not at all vanguardist in themselves.

An evaluation of modernist works must consider two essential directions: first, the critical nationalism resulting from a rediscovery and more comprehensive observation of Brazilian life; and, second, the modernists' search for innovative and contemporary styles of writing in which to express their new awareness of reality. The strength of this synthesis will form the basis of the movement's most innovative legacy, its serene and corrosive modernity.

