

## **Art's historiography: Mario Zanini's library**

**Lauci Bortoluci Quintana**

**Library Museu de Arte Contemporânea MAC**

**Universidade de São Paulo USP**

**Sao Paulo Brazil**

The aim of this text is a reflection on the Mario Zanini Library, donated in 1971 by the Zanini Family, along with the works of art to Museum of contemporary Art MAC from Universidade de Sao Paulo USP. We propose to find some points of intersection between the artist's plastic expression and his library, which will be exemplified in 3 books.

Mario Zanini is artistically in São Paulo society, working together with other artists in the 1930s-1950s. His performance was not only due to his plastic legacy, but also for the very existence of his library and the possibility that the unveiling of its content can open new frontiers of understanding of São Paulo's art and its artistic groups.

Mario Zanini's artistic language in the landscape genre, analyzed from three books from his Library, will be our point of reflection. We understand that these books can bring up a visuality of the artist, to reflect some principles of his plastic universe. In this sense, we draw attention to the following books of the Library of Mario Zanini: *Cézanne* (JOURDAIN, 1948), *Van Gogh* (MATHEY, 1956) and *Tratado del paisaje* (LHOTE, 1943).

The criteria adopted for the choice of these three books were based as follows: André Lhote raises questions about understanding the foundations of the modern landscape, Francis Jourdain presents the work of Paul Cézanne, showing an effective approximation in relation to the colors and the sense of visual apprehension of the landscape field, and François Mathey rewrite a biography of Vincent Van Gogh, chosen for research after zanini's work with river themes, The process of analyzing these books led us to the synthesis of some foundations of the expression of landscape paintings, which will be seen in zanini's works clipping.

The central issue lies in the library as a formor of a cultural panorama, which is in the genre paintings of the landscape. We understand that the process of formation of a

library is an instrument of world knowledge, which organizes concepts and poetics in the process of building artistic language. Thus, we can assume that this set of books is indicative of both the aesthetic and poetic culture of the painter, as well as the formation of his humanistic context of art thinking and the formation of his artistic language.

### **The Library and the themes of Mario Zanini**

The Library of Mario Zanini, composed of 226 books, was donated to MAC USP by the Zanini Family in 1971, as well as 108 works of art, which are now part of the museum's collection. The Library includes authors related to art history such as Henri Focillon, Raymond Cogniat and Pierre du Colombier, as well as titles that reference Egyptian, Greek and Japanese arts, Renaissance and modern art. Mario Zanini signed most of the books with his name and the date of acquisition, noting the passages he considered important. Let us take the example of Camille Bellanger's book *The Art of the Painter*: Mario Zanini signed his copy and dedicated himself to him, working on the issues of drawing techniques.

Mario Zanini makes his painting the result of a mental process, within a reflexive and instrumental intellectual dimension, since the Artist's Library is an accurate construction of his interests, experiments and experiences, resembling an organism living that accompanies him in his artistic journey, portraying his art ideals and his role as an artist. We can understand that interest in the Renaissance is reaffirmed by listing two books on El Greco, both published in London. The reading of the Renaissance was an activity that accompanied Mario Zanini for many years, a fact that we noticed in the analysis of the dates of edition of the books. Titles regarding the Greek and Italian arts, from 1923 and 1936, as well as a book dedicated to Rubens, 1949, were acquired during his trip to Italy, in the company of Paulo Rossi Osir, in 1950. From the time, there is the acquisition of a book that references Sandro Botticelli, containing a biographical essay by the Renaissance masters.

Pablo Picasso's 1956 books also coincide with his cubist and geometrized paintings. Examples of drawing, varnish, engraving, and canvas techniques date back to the 1920s, the years in which Mario Zanini devoted himself to oil painting, appearing in the Library's collection from the early 1940s.

There are books on ornaments, published in Florence, dating from 1928, as well as titles from the 1940s until 1950, related to painter biographies and abstractionism, published in France and the Netherlands. There is a book on pictorial anatomy in the

collection, dating from 1923. We note that during the 1920s until the early 1930s, Mario Zanini devoted himself to fundamental books on painting, that is, examples that would serve as the foundation of his culture and production. Only later, in the 1960s, would the artist devote himself to reading biographies of painters, as evidenced by Elsevier's acquisition of eight books published in Brussels. These titles, written by Belgian art critic François Maret, are related to abstractionist and realistic painters.

Mario Zanini was a reader who showed interest in pictorial technique, highlighting his search and research on the fundamentals of painting. His research dates from years before, in 1944, with the acquisition of the French Anthology of Painting from 1906 to our day, a book published in 1927 and written by Maurice Raynal, showing his interest in a theoretical work, produced almost twenty years before his acquisition. The 1926 book on Amedeo Modigliani may have been purchased later, along with other biographies of the 1940s. At this time the artist acquired and read *The Art of the Far East*, a book published in Paris.

The contribution of the circle of friendships also occurs in the process of library formation. In 1944, Paulo Rossi Osir presented Zanini with Hippolyte Taine's book *Philosophy of Art*. These were the years of Zanini's work at Osirarte, when Rossi Osir had a habit of taking friends to his home library for reading sessions.

A new aesthetic was inaugurated from the movements of the early decades of the twentieth century and, with this new aesthetic, a new look at the landscape. From the 1920s, the old began to live with the new. The old buildings of downtown São Paulo's architecture were embraced by new skyscrapers, many of them in art nouveau style using materials from modern industry, such as iron and cement. The transition through São Paulo, between 1893 and 1924, is marked by a resignification of cultural values. Urban patterns are defined by the modern, which at that time had the features of an industrialized city. The landscape seemed to be drawn with a ruler and a compass, and impersonality was symbolically recorded in the faceless figures. The artistic works confirm this perception of the city, with nature superimposing the human in the urban landscape. Agricultural production progressively moved away from the center, and trade, services and the financial sector developed there. Industry growth, at significant rates, also influenced verticalisation.

Mario Zanini was a painter who retained his own personality, even though he had participated in many artistic groups and associations during his lifetime. Professor

Walter Zanini pointed out that in his evolution the role of impressionist and expressionist lessons learned, respectively, from Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh is noted. Its landscapes reveal traces of post-impressionism, identified in the rural and bucolic aspects (ZANINI, 1995, p. 9-10).

Zanini's landscape presents the marks of a past moment, but which continue to reveal and unveil the landscapes of São Paulo, and that can contribute to the construction of a new look and perception about the city, in which its inhabitants can better recognize themselves, in a city with features and whose reflexes of gestures are not lost in time and space.



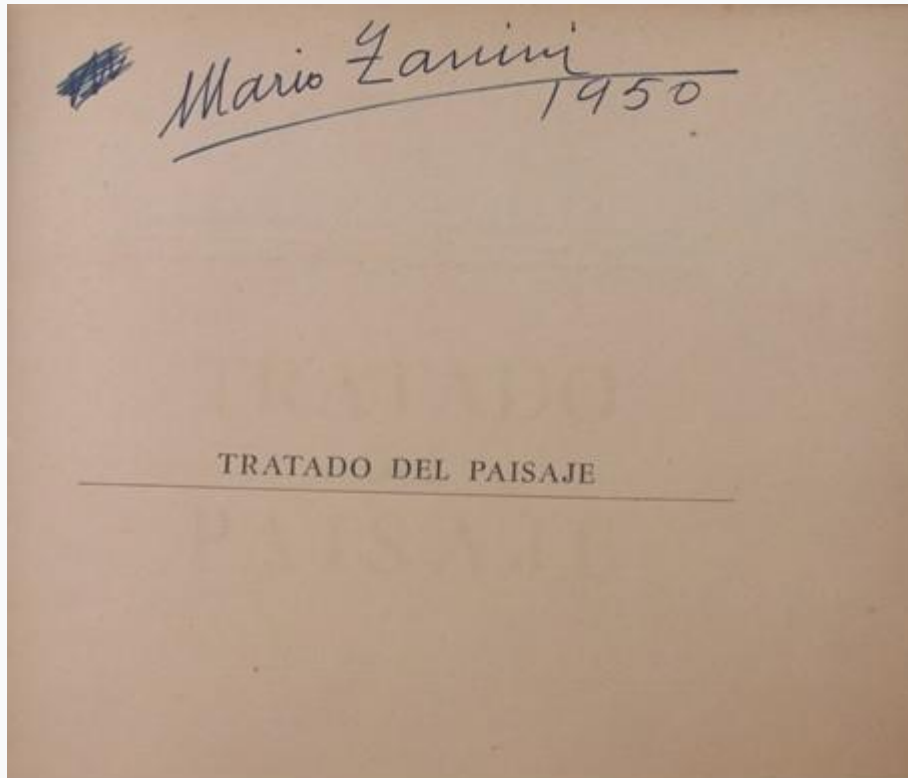
The book *Cézanne* (fig. 1), published in 1948, by Francis Jourdain, has ten illustrative boards, seven landscapes, one portrait and two still lifes. Jourdain had met Cézanne during a visit to the painter in 1904, an episode Jourdain reported in 1946 in the magazine *Arts de France* in the article *A pittore difile: Cézanne*.

In this book, Jourdain looks back on the writings on Cézanne, exercising his criticism and contrasting his own judgment about the artist. Jourdain mentions an

erroneous analysis of Cezanne, long running, as a painter of heavy and formless works. The author states that this criticism demonstrates the ease with which Cezanne's work is judged by artists, and questions whether his lesson was understood by painters influenced by the French artist (JOURDAIN, 1948, p.1).

According to Walter Zanini (1976, p. 17), in the decade ending in the 1950s, Mario Zanini knew how to release formal components, reorganize space and create contexts of a disciplined structure, without losing spontaneity, within a conception that takes away I benefit from all Cezanne's teachings. However, this context has some variants, in which movement is always the dominant datum, characteristic of its expressionist temperament.

Figurative representation was for Mario Zanini a vital factor from the point of view of content. However, Cézanne's words “interpret nature in terms of the cylinder, sphere and cone, put everything in perspective so that each side of the object goes back to a central plane” (BERNARD, 2009, p. 23). they were the geometry solution that allowed Zanini, while accompanying the latest trends in painting, not to sacrifice thematic objectivity.



André Lhote's *Traité du paysage* was originally published in 1939 by the French publisher Floury. The version belonging to the Mario Zanini Library was released in

Buenos Aires, four years later, under the title *Treaty of Paisaje* (Fig. 2), translated from French to Spanish by Argentine painter and art critic Julio Eduardo Payró. In the book, the starting point for illustrating landscape as a reconstruction of reality is drawing. The absence of colors causes the image to move away from an “impersonal reality” to a “higher reality”. According to Lhote (1943, p. 55), "every artistic expression implies a primordial and tyrannical choice of one element in spite of others, dealing first of all with the organization of a system of preferences."

The treaty discusses in its chapters themes such as the historical importance of landscape, colors, the composition of the canvas, light, drawing, the impressionist revolution and the pictorial technique.

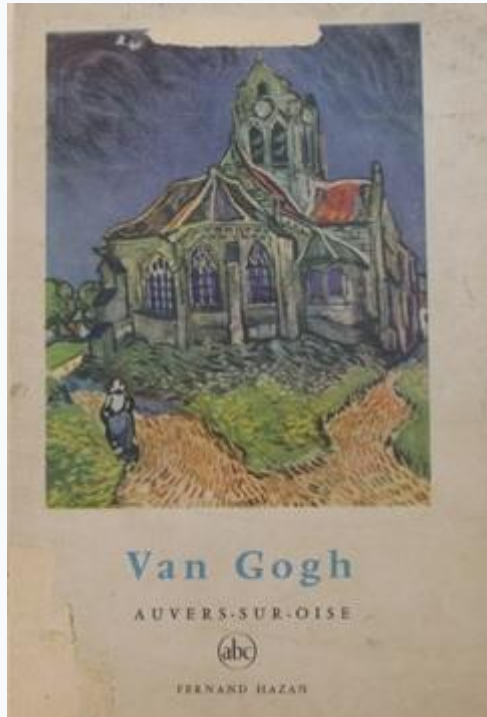
The concerning with the compositional structure is always present in Zanini's work. The Balance composition is a constant in his works. The artist continues in search of a personal language, in which the resource of geometry does not revert in a concretist or cubist form, but that allows the color and the expressiveness of the apprehended landscape.

Zanini's problematic is the beginning of a question about the fundamental points of his work: being or not being true to nature. Painting of the real at the time of the formation of the St. Helena Group thirty years earlier was a revolutionary act. At that point the artist came to a question about the value and existence of the figurative motive. His private library answers this question, with André Lhote citing the artist's respect for the laws of nature, but without subordinating himself to it, always avoiding imitation.

In short, the Lhote matrix, a formal concept for the elaboration of a treatise, must be understood by the importance of drawing in the structure of the work. His method favors preferences for symmetrical shapes, balance in all components of the shapes composition, correlation, colors, sharpness and technique. The primacy of geometric shapes and their maxim of exaggeration and suppression would be the components for creating a perfectly symmetrical canvas.

Mario Zanini followed the new directions of 1950s art, in practical and theoretical terms. From Lhote's book, let us remember the highlighted part of a schematic geometric design, which demonstrates that the artist was in line with his historical moment of performance, without practicing sacrifices in his own way of

seeing and feeling his figurative world. Thus, even in contact with abstract, geometric and cubist theorems, Zanini sought to portray the emotion that connected him with his theme, bringing to his observers the ability to highlight the landscape that generated his production.



The book on Vincent Van Gogh (fig. 3) by François Mathey is part of the 1956 *Petite Encyclopédie de l'Art*, a collection edited by Hazan Publishing. The author has curated art exhibitions and has written other books on Impressionism.

The text introducing the book deals with Van Gogh's May 1890 trip to Auvers-sur-Oise, where he was treated by Dr. Paul Gachet. It describes the states of depression, sadness, loneliness and relapses that affected the artist until his last day of life on July 29. The illustrative boards are of canvases made in the interval of these three months mentioned. The book features eleven landscapes out of a total of fifteen illustrations.



Although not noticeably noted, we can affirm some traces of Van Gogh's influence on Zanini's work. The set of symmetrical lines of *Canindé* (fig. 4), from the MAC USP art collection, brings a basically symmetrical organization on the surface, keeping the composition balanced. Van Gogh's work suggests the dynamic effect of the movement of the waters, the calming and tranquil simultaneous effect of the bottom horizontal base, which shows green water and landscape, and the bluish hues in the background, leading us to think of the work cited by Zanini, with its colorful waters at the lower limit that supports the composition.

For Zanini, each stroke would include an attempt to update reality through the pathways of expression. Although far from Van Gogh, in the profusion of colors worked and in the conception of the use of palettes, it is possible to understand how the way of applying the brushstroke refers to the Dutch, and may also notice a concern of the artist with the insertion of points of light at the ends, thus giving a precise outline of the space submitted no longer to the drawing, but to the organic matter of each stroke.

Zanini obtains a synthesis of plans that marks the essential, with the landscape expressively conveying its message with its essential elements. From Zanini's landscapes, it is possible to see *Stimmung*, the atmosphere of the atmosphere, which links the artist to his motive, the binding element. We observed a tendency of Zanini to



study the natural, which determined a distancing of the artist to imbue himself with an experience based on structural constructivity, as was the case with Volpi

#### Painting-Library Connections: staring at the link

Mario Zanini's process of making and artistic production not only manifests itself in its aesthetic aspect, that is, it does not merely bring into its frame the questions of form and structure. The process takes place insofar as it is configured as a cultural act and therefore revolutionary. Their results are new ways and ways of intuiting and grasping the real. The artistic making, in its realization, comprises a tension between an aesthetic and political act, which results in a new experience of language construction.

To our understanding of Mario Zanini, artistic making is intrinsically related to perception, reflection and sensitivity. In contrast, the artistic object will be understood as cultural production, that is, as a document with historicity and diversity.

We understand that Zanini's artistic work allows reflection on the guiding principle of the Library's construction process.

Painting is a trace of our historical relationship with the world, and this, in turn, is something to be built. In short, any work of art is not a representation or a transposition, figurative or symbolic, of a reality. The work and the artist are not external to the sensitive world and the social world in which they operate. Art manifests a kind of human action, for the process of perception is socially organized in a particular way at each historical moment. Like art, the library is a historically situated constructo.

Mario Zanini's trajectory can be defined in relation to the development of his creative potentials gradually conquered through an artistic and intellectual effort. The artist has always attached importance to the theoretical basis of his work and to the constant work in the conquest of a personal figurative language. Zanini was the example of an artist who, rooted in an artisan tradition, followed the paths of art towards the predominance of the formal and intellectual over his tradition, but abandoned this research, opting for isolation. Their recollection in their last years of life is the result of this conscious gesture of irreversible return to their figurative origin.

The years between 1930 and 1940 allow us to reflect on some artistic aspects of Mario Zanini, related to characteristic points of Cezanne's work, such as the artistic

construction of the landscape as an object of study, an aspect that is reflected both in the correlation of forms and in the perception of totality. We think of the perception of wholeness present in each part of the screen as the identification of the landscape's *Stimmung*. In this sense, *Canindé* (fig. 4) follows the same reflection, situating the same compositional structure, in which aspects of the form relate in a balanced but more expressive way, thus accentuating a movement of coloristic and luminous brushstrokes. It is the new structures of apprehension of the landscape that Zanini will show in his proposition of a new look at the object.

The maturation phase of Zanini's painting is situated in the late 1940s, highlighting the emergence of the artist's essential iconographic index: the views of the Tietê River, of which *Canindé* is the first aesthetic reference.

From the mid-1930s until the late 1940s, Mario Zanini thickened his interrogations. Early focused works show a more intuitive style in landscape construction, with the modern concern of depth construction with diagonal surfaces. However, there was not yet a brightness that characterized its language. This changes radically with the understanding of the Cezannian precepts of aesthetic interpretation of landscape. An organism of colors, where everything is at the same time, together with intentionality situated as *Stimmung*, are apprehensions that will demonstrate the intensification of Zanini's aesthetic project, illustrated by critics of Alice Brill and Walter Zanini.

The actuality of Mario Zanini's painting is a fact over time, from his early years at the Santa Helena Palace to the present, as we have seen in exhibitions held in this century. While on the one hand the appreciation of these artists as a group strengthened, on the other hand the individual appreciation leveraged new question marks about each of the Santa Helena Group's components. It should be noted that the judgments were made a posteriori, for, as we have noted, Zanini was the builder of his own plastic destiny, of his own trajectory, with his return being effected in the way he thought best for his art.