

# “All World Art Comes from the Black”: Wilson Tibério, Black Artist and Internationalist Activist in the Era of Africa’s Decolonization

*“Toda a arte do mundo vem do prêto”: Wilson Tibério, artista negro e ativista internacionalista na era da descolonização da África*

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## Abstract

Drawing from the long-lasting invisibility imposed on twentieth-century Black Brazilian artists, this article explores how Wilson Tibério defied the inherent racism of the Brazilian artistic scene. A Black artist, Tibério was active in Brazil, France, and West Africa during the twentieth century. Relying on scholarship in Portuguese, English, and French, newspapers articles, photographs, and Tibério’s own artistic production, this article shows how he interwove art and anticolonial political activism during the end of European colonial rule in Africa and the rise of the Cold War era. By doing so, this article aims to contribute to the small but growing scholarship on twentieth-century Brazilian Black artists and intellectuals by showing the international anticolonial and antiracist dimensions of their activities. The article also aims to highlight the contribution of Black artists of Rio Grande do Sul, a state that despite its marginal position in the Brazilian national context, also has a long history

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**Keywords**

of international artistic production and Black activism. Black artists | visual arts | Pan-Africanism | France | Brazil | West Africa

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**Resumo**

Tendo como ponto de partida a duradoura invisibilidade imposta nos artistas negros brasileiros do século XX, este artigo explora a trajetória artística e a vida de Wilson Tibério. Artista negro brasileiro, Tibério foi atuante no Brasil, na França e na África Ocidental durante o século XX. Baseando-se em estudos em português, inglês e francês, artigos de jornais, fotografias e na própria produção artística de Tibério, este artigo mostra como a vida e a obra de Tibério entrelaçaram arte e ativismo político durante o fim do domínio colonial europeu na África e a ascensão da Guerra Fria. Procedendo assim, o artigo procura contribuir à pequena, mas crescente, literatura sobre artistas e intelectuais negros brasileiros do século XX, mostrando as dimensões internacionais de suas atividades. O artigo também procura destacar a contribuição de artistas negros do Rio Grande do Sul, estado que apesar de sua posição marginal no contexto nacional brasileiro também possui uma longa história de produção artística e ativismo negro.

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**Palavras-chave**

Artistas negros | artes visuais | panafricanismo | França | Brasil | África ocidental

Until the late 1980s, the works of Black Brazilian artists remained largely absent from formal academic studies and museum collections. Despite several new recent exhibitions, still today, few academic works (Araújo 1988; Conduru, Polk, Johnson and Sabrina Gledhill 2018; Pedrosa and Toledo 2021) explore the artistic production of Black Brazilian artists. Even fewer studies examine the artworks of Black artists from the south of Brazil, a region often regarded as Europeanized and peripheral to the main centres such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. This double invisibility has racist roots and is also associated with how art systems and the discipline of art history developed in Europe and the Americas. In Europe, the development of a formal artistic production was historically associated with the central role of the Church, whose existence was closely

connected to the monarchies. During the early modern period, an era largely dominated by the development of the Atlantic slave trade, and with the creation of the first European art academies and schools, official and formal artistic production continued to be restricted to elite circles.

These contexts were familiar to Brazil. Nearly five million enslaved Africans reached Brazil during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, a heritage still visible today in the country that has the largest population of African descent outside Nigeria. Art institutions, which mirrored societal structures that reproduced social and legal patterns of white privilege and racism, were replicated (more or less successfully) in the Americas. When the Royal School of Sciences and Arts, and Crafts (later renamed Imperial Academy of Drawing, Painting, and Civil Architecture and then simply Academy of Fine Arts) was created in Rio de Janeiro in 1816 (Araujo 2015, 42), slavery was still very alive in Brazil. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several Black artists and artisans were active in the then-Portuguese colony and were members of existing guilds. This context changed with the creation of the academy, where several Black men worked as living models (Williams 2001). Some Black students entered the academy, but sadly, as pointed out by Emanuel Araújo (2010, 107), without the support of the ancient guilds and with modest means, most Black artists could not survive solely from their production.

In Rio Grande do Sul, even though the enslaved population was never as large as in states such as Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro, slavery remained an important institution in both urban and rural areas until its abolition in 1888. However, over the twentieth century, this context started to change gradually. Over the twentieth century, Rio Grande do Sul maintained its small but significant population of African descent. During this period, urban centres, such as the state's capital Porto Alegre, saw the rise of several Black intellectuals and artists. Most of these men and women were not necessarily affirming themselves along racial lines in a country that promoted the ideology of racial democracy, according to which racism did not exist and racial harmony prevailed (Telles 2004; Santos 2022). Yet, Wilson Tibério challenged this imposed invisibility. Not only he acquired a national and international reputation as a visual artist, but he also became a Black internationalist activist. Drawing from the scarce scholarship about Tibério in Portuguese, French, and English (Horn 2021), as well as primary sources such as newspaper articles, photographs, and his own artistic production, this study revisits the trajectory of this Brazilian artist. I show how his work and political engagement confronted Black invisibility and racism that prevailed in art circles during the end of the European colonial rule in Africa and the rise of the Cold War era. By doing so, this article also aims to contribute to the small but growing scholarship on twentieth-century Brazilian Black artists and intellectuals that has excluded Rio Grande do Sul, a state that, despite its position in the margins, has a long history of artistic production and Black activism (Alberto 2011; Pinto 2018, Chalhoub, Pinto and Pires 2020; Cleveland 2013 and Gledhill 2021).

### No Longer Invisible: A Black Brazilian Artist

Wilson Tibério was born in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, probably in 1916 (Levine 2006; Rocha 2016, 224). Raised in the historic centre of Porto Alegre, during his childhood, he resided on the 204 General Salustiano Street, near today's Gasômetro Plant (Usina do Gasômetro). In the same neighbourhood, he attended the Fernando Gomes School (Colégio Fernando Gomes) (Mullet, 2013, 7; Dossin 2016, 224-225). This Porto Alegre's region was closely connected to the city's past of slavery. During slavery, the official whipping post (*pelourinho*), where convicted criminals, including enslaved people, were tied and publicly whipped, was located just across the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, on Riachuelo Street, whose construction started in 1807, and was only completed in 1901. Nearly 200 meters from there was also the Gallows Square, today's Brigadeiro Sampaio Square (Araujo 2015, 576). Today, the square is a site of memory of slavery that was officially recognised as part of the Black's Route Museum (Figure 1). In 2010, the site was marked with a sculpture representing a drum to honour enslaved Africans and their descendants sentenced to the capital penalty (Araujo 2014, 120-123).



Figure 1  
Drum, Museu do Percurso do Negro  
(Black's Route Museum)  
Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil  
Photograph: Ana Lucia Araujo, 2013.

As a Black youth, Tibério certainly experienced racism in a city where the population of African descent was smaller than in other capitals of the country, such as Salvador and Rio de Janeiro and remained largely marginalised. Still during his childhood, Tibério's grandmother and aunts introduced him to Afro-Brazilian religions (Dossin 2016). We do not know to which extent Tibério was aware of this painful chapter of Porto Alegre's urban history, but his further trajectory as an artist and activist suggests that the city's slavery past and Black culture imprinted in the neighbourhood of his childhood had a long-lasting impact on him and his artistic production.

Tibério may have started drawing in the late 1920s when he was thirteen. He probably moved to Rio de Janeiro only three years after this beginning (*Fon-Fon* 1945, 8; 74). Available sources on Tibério's early career do not clearly explain how he found the necessary financial resources to move to Rio de Janeiro. Nevertheless, once in the national capital, he managed to attend free courses at the National School of Fine Arts (Escola Nacional de Belas Artes) with Polish artist Bruno Lechowski (*Fon-Fon* 1945, 8). Established in Rio de Janeiro in 1931, Lechowski joined the Núcleo Bernardelli, a group created that same year to provide an alternative artistic training to the traditional teaching offered at the National School of Fine Arts.

Tibério's work acquired recognition years later, during the New State (Estado Novo) (1937-1945), a dictatorship established by Getúlio Vargas, who, like Tibério, was originally from Rio Grande do Sul. His name appears in a Rio de Janeiro's newspaper for the first time on January 4, 1938, in a notice reporting that he almost drowned at Virtues' Beach (Praia das Virtudes) at the end of Rio Branco Avenue, a zone landfilled some years later (*A Batalha* 1938, 3). However, as the short notice refers to Tibério as a scenographer, one can infer that in addition to his artistic production, scenography offered him a way to make a living in the then Brazilian capital.

Tibério's artistic production and activism can be better understood within the general political and cultural context of the New State. Despite the civil rights restrictions imposed by the new regime, Tibério's interest in depicting Brazilian Black life was propelled by several initiatives promoting African heritage that emerged during the Vargas era. As a populist ruler who sought the support of unions and subaltern groups, including Black workers, Vargas sponsored Carnival's schools of samba (Green 1999, 207), recognised capoeira (Assunção 2015, 18) as a form of physical education activity, and also decriminalised Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion, characterised by the worship of multiple deities and spirit possession, and whose ceremonies involve dance and music. (Matory, 2005, 163). In 1938, numerous activities commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery were held around the country. These events promoted Brazilian Black culture, even though the emphasis on Princess Isabel as the redeemer who signed the Golden Law abolishing slavery still reflected the predominant paternalistic view of Brazilian abolition of slavery that prevailed during Vargas's rule (Araujo 2014, 161-162).

On November 23, 1940, about two years after Tibério's arrival in Rio de Janeiro, the National Museum of Fine Arts (Museu Nacional de Belas Artes) hosted an important retrospective show titled *Exhibition of the French Artistic Mission of 1816* (Exposição da Missão Artística Francesa de 1816). This was the first Brazilian exhibition (Williams, 2001, 165) showcasing Jean-Baptiste Debret's watercolours, executed during the period the French artist spent in Brazil between 1816 and 1831. Debret used these watercolours to produce the lithographs of his famous travelogue *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* that contained numerous plates representing enslaved Black individuals. Tibério probably saw the exhibition displaying these iconic images that are still widely used today to portray Brazilian slavery.

Vargas era's new recognition of African and Afro-Brazilian heritage certainly influenced how Tibério's artistic production embraced topics related to Brazilian Black life and how his future international activities eventually embodied the ideas of Pan-Africanism and Négritude. Emanoel Araújo argued that Tibério's interest in Black Brazil developed as a form of nostalgia for his homeland after moving to France (Araújo 2008). However, this interest must have emerged earlier because, since the early period of his career, Tibério engaged the various dimensions of Afro-Brazilian culture in his drawing and paintings. As argued by Dossin, Tibério's travels in Europe and Africa only expanded his already existing interest in the history and culture of the African diaspora (Dossin 2016, 224).

Tibério certainly faced great hardships to become visible as a Brazilian Black artist in the country's capital Rio de Janeiro where the fine arts scene was dominated by white Brazilians and European-born artists. In 1940, Rivadávia de Souza, a journalist from Rio Grande do Sul, wrote a positive article narrating Tibério's trajectory as a Black artist in Rio de Janeiro in the newspaper *A Noite*. Souza was responsible for covering the news coming from the Catete Palace (Palácio do Catete), the headquarters of the Brazilian government, led by Vargas. Gaúcho (a native of Rio Grande do Sul) himself, the journalist's two-page article, was a call to support and promote Tibério's work, as the artist was undoubtedly going through hard times. In the two-page article, Souza explains that although poor, Tibério was born an artist, a Black artist who just wanted to study:

Wilson Barcelos Tibério, to benefit from using an expression that it is as usual as vague, is an artist of colour. [...] Tibério needs to study. Moreover, it is unfair to allow the interference of fate in such an objective matter, even because fate has nothing to do with it. The art lovers, the smart creatures, the ones who still have sensitivity, these are called to help Wilson Tibério, the artist who fights the acute points of this dilemma: either he buys a pencil or drinks a coffee with a piece of bread and butter (Souza 1940, 12-13).

In a period when very few Afro-Brazilians were recognised by an elitist art system, Tibério was aware of how racism operated in Brazil. He knew how racism encompasses

social exclusion, preventing Black Brazilians like him from having access to formal artistic training and keeping a sustained artistic production. Visible in his work, Tibério's consciousness was also noted by the articles published by Rio de Janeiro's press commenting his work, therefore confirming his very early involvement in Black activism. In 1943, the artist participated in creating the Black Experimental Theatre (Teatro Experimental do Negro) led by the prominent Black Brazilian artist, actor, and activist, Abdias Nascimento (Almada 2009, 68, Domingues 2009: 119). As a visual artist, Tibério contributed to the group's activities as a scenographer.

In 1941, a short article published in the *Jornal do Brasil* announced an exhibition commemorating the recent official recognition of the Rio Grande do Sul Fine Arts Institute (Instituto de Belas Artes do Rio Grande do Sul) in a decree signed by Vargas. In addition to Tibério, the exhibition, organised by the Brazilian Society of Fine Arts (Sociedade Brasileira de Belas Artes) and held at the Christian Youth Association (Associação Cristã de Moços), included the works of white artists such as Angelo Guido, João Fahren, and Fernando Corona (*Jornal do Brasil* 1941, 13). The article shows that Tibério's work had a place in Rio de Janeiro's art system, even though he was still perceived as an artist from Rio Grande do Sul.

### **Decolonizing Art in the Country of Racial Democracy**

At some point, either during the 1930s or in the early 1940s, Tibério started travelling to Salvador, Bahia's state capital. In Salvador, Tibério attended Candomblé ceremonies and observed the daily life of the city's Black population, especially women street vendors. He gradually started incorporating the materials from these observations in his paintings.

Tibério's interest in Bahia was linked to his Black heritage. Salvador was and still is a Black city. Since the nineteenth century, European travellers and artists who sojourned in the city were either stunned or disappointed when they realised that most people performing all kinds of activities in the streets were Black people, and therefore visiting Salvador was an experience similar to visiting Black Africa (Araujo 2015). Tibério may have also been captivated by Salvador's celebration of Black culture. Compared to Porto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro, Salvador was the "Black Rome," a term coined by Mãe Aninha, a Candomblé priestess and then head of Candomblé temple Ilê Opô Afonjá to convey the capital city's importance as a centre of African culture in Brazil (Matory 2005, 264).

Yet, when Tibério started visiting Salvador, the city had already become a cultural centre that attracted other artists and intellectuals (Romo 2010; Alberto 2011; Romo 2022). In 1938, Argentine painter Héctor Julio Páride Bernabó (alias Carybé) visited Bahia for the first time. A few years later, he made Salvador his home, and Bahian Black culture also became his work's central theme. Likewise, French-born photographer and ethnographer Pierre Verger came to São Paulo in the 1930s. After obtaining a contract

with the Brazilian magazine *O Cruzeiro*, he settled in Salvador in 1946. Afro-Brazilian and African religions, such as Vodun and Orisha, also became central elements of his work developed between Brazil and West Africa (Araujo 2013, 116). Still, unlike these artists, Tibério was, along with Bahian artist, writer, and Candomblé and Egungun priest Mestre Didi (Dardashti 2023), one of the very few recognised Black Brazilian artists whose work focused on Afro-Brazilian religions by the time.

In 1945, although Tibério's work had acquired reputation in the national artistic scene, a newspaper article still mentioned how “racial prejudices have kept Wilson Tibério in obscurity.” (*Fon-Fon* 1945, 74). Despite the hindrances provoked by Brazilian society and art system's systematic racism, he slowly started reaping the rewards of his hard work. During the early 1940s, he participated in at least two editions of the Salon of Painting of the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro. He obtained honourable mentions in 1941 and 1944 (Dossin 2016, 230). Yet, his first individual exhibition occurred only in 1945. The show held at the gallery of the Brazilian Press Association (Associação Brasileira de Imprensa) starting on October 17, 1945, received some attention from Rio de Janeiro's newspapers. The exhibition was dedicated to white Brazilian anthropologist Arthur Ramos, who published the influential book *O Negro Brasileiro* (1931) a few years earlier. Ramos was among the first scholars to “replace the terms of race and miscegenation with the notion of culture” (Santos 201, 315-316). Ramos was also the first author to use the term racial democracy, which many scholars erroneously attribute to Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (Araujo 2010, 214).

Tibério's first individual exhibition comprised a series of painted portraits and scenes representing Afro-Brazilian figures (*A Manhã* 1945, 3). At that occasion, one critic referred to Tibério as an “intelligent observer, knowing like very few, how to take profit from the light and colour, rich in sensitivity and good taste, having his name linked to a curious series of works, all of which reproduce motives observed in favelas and scenes showing modest street peoples” (*A Noite* 1945, 10). As noted by this critic, from its inception, Tibério's work not only gave visibility to Black Brazilians as subjects in his paintings, but also emphasised that most of them lived socially and economically excluded and remained marginalised in Brazilian society. Poet Jorge de Lima, who authored another article about the exhibition, positively compared Tibério's interest in African cultures to Picasso's work, which also drew from African art (Blier 2019). Lima says, “Tibério's dancers do not suffer from vegetal elephantiasis that embellishes Picasso's dancers. They are hybrids of syncretism of diverse cultures that culminated in these extraordinary women represented in this exhibition” (*A Manhã* 1945, 4).

Following this first exhibition, Tibério's work gained some recognition in Rio de Janeiro. With the rise of the Cold War in 1945, the United States made efforts to increase its influence in Brazil by establishing institutions to foster cooperation between the two countries through the promotion of Brazilian culture and art. Just two years earlier, in 1942, Walt Disney released the motion picture *Saludos Amigos*. The film featured



Donald Duck, who, during a trip to Rio de Janeiro became a friend of Joe Carioca, a Brazilian parrot, embodying the typical features of a rogue (*malandro*). Also, during the 1940s, Luso-Brazilian singer Carmen Miranda, whose dancing silhouette appeared in one of the scenes of Walt Disney's movie, starred in almost one US film yearly. In this context, the Institute Brazil-United States in Rio de Janeiro initiated a project to showcase the production of Brazilian and US painters by choosing one single painting to be exhibited for fifteen days through a raffle. How the artists were selected to enter the raffle is unknown. But during the second half of July 1946, a painting by Wilson Tibério was displayed at the institution as part of this initiative (*Jornal do Commercio* 1946, 11).

On May 1946, Tibério held a second individual exhibition at Hotel Quitandinha in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro (Dossin 2016, 236). Then at the end of 1946, Tibério's other individual exhibition was held at the headquarters of the Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro. Including 127 watercolours and oil paintings, this show received generous comments in *Letras e Artes*, a supplement of the pro-Vargas newspaper *A Manhã*: "Concerned with, inspired by, the themes of his race, integrated into the Black Rome, in its candomblés and rituals, strongly feeling this condensed vein of symbols for him, Tibério has here his strong point (*A Manhã* 1946, 4)." Journalist Antônio Bento published a positive critique of the exhibition in the newspaper *Diário Carioca*, which supported Eduardo Gomes, the opponent of Eurico Gaspar Dutra, backed by Vargas in the 1945 presidential election. According to Bento, "the artist has the concern to capture all dimensions of the lives of Blacks in Brazil, in street scenes, domestic customs, collective amusements, markets, balls, work, in the ceremonies of sorcery and love." Although the journalist refers to the artist's lack of formal training, he emphasises his "undeniable intuition" and underscores that "Tibério fills the gaps of knowledge about his trade with his natural abilities of an observer (Bento 1946, 1)."

### **Black Artist, Black Subjects, Black Activism**

Whereas Tibério's work became visible and gained greater attention in Rio de Janeiro, his activism continued evolving. In the 1940s, the artist met the Communist leader, Luis Carlos Prestes. Even though the exact circumstances of this meeting remain unknown, it probably occurred after Prestes was released from prison with the end of the New State in 1945. In May 1946, along with other Black intellectuals and activists such as Edison Carneiro, Tibério signed a statement supporting Prestes, published in *A Tribuna Popular* (1946, 2), the newspaper of the Brazilian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Brasileiro, PCB).<sup>1</sup> Six months later, Tibério announced he was joining the PCB (*Tribuna*

<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian Communist Party was legalized in 1945, as part of the amnesty process launched by Vargas. The *Tribuna Popular* was intended to expand the influence of the party among the masses. But two years later, as the party was again made illegal, the newspaper was also shut down.

*Popular* 1946, 3).<sup>2</sup> His entry into the party was not dissociated from other Black artists' actions and political views in the African diaspora during the Cold War era. Although other artists and intellectuals, most of them whites, were also members of the PCB during the same period, as early as in the 1920s, many black intellectuals, artists, and activists, especially in the United States, joined the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), because, during the Jim Crow Era, it was the only party that recognised the position of social, economic, and racial exclusion of African Americans. Among the prominent figures who joined the party was the singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson, referred to by Tibério as the “spiritual sponsor” of his exhibition held in 1946 (Dossin 2016, 236; Araujo 2017, 130-131). In 1934, Robeson visited the Soviet Union for the first time (Araujo 2017, 131). Twenty-four years later, Tibério followed Robeson's steps. In 1958, a photograph shows the Afro-Brazilian artist in an art studio in Leningrad (today's Saint Petersburg). This full-body profile portrait shows a smiling and serene Tibério. In front of an easel, holding a palette, the painter is surrounded by other artists at work. In 1957, Tibério also travelled to China, where Robeson was also venerated, though the African American singer, actor, and activist never visited the country (Wilson Tibério n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

Tibério's second and third individual exhibitions and his painting displayed at the Institute Brazil-United States, provided him with new international opportunities that were not available for most Brazilian artists of the period, including white artists. In 1947, the artist obtained a French fellowship to study mural painting in France. Despite the lack of detailed information, a notice published in *Correio da Manhã* on September 26, 1947, announced that Tibério was travelling to the United States the next day to show fifty works on Afro-Brazilian themes in New York City. The note also indicates that afterwards, the artist would travel to Belgian Congo to document its customs. The exact source of the financial support that made his travel to France and its West African colonies possible is unknown. However, it is possible that the US exhibition was either sponsored by or part of an agreement with French institutions. Some sources refer to a fellowship from the French Embassy. In contrast, others refer to a fellowship from Musée de l'Homme, a plausible option because of Tibério's further travels to West Africa. Likely, Tibério's PCB membership probably passed unnoticed by the US immigration services in the early days of the Cold War, just before the rise of the Red Scare.

Tibério arrived in Paris during the difficult period of reconstruction that followed the Second World War. In the following years, France was shaken by the rise of anti-colonial movements in its African colonies. Upon his arrival in Paris, Tibério joined the Académie de la Grande Chaumière (Figure 2), a school of painting and sculpture founded in 1904.

<sup>2</sup> However, the article erroneously spells the wrong name (Communist Party of Brazil, Partido Comunista do Brasil), a party created only in 1958.

<sup>3</sup> The pictures are displayed on the website created by Tibério's family members and dedicated to his work.



Figure 2  
Académie de la Grande  
Chaumière  
Paris, France  
Photograph: © User:  
Mu/Wikimedia Commons/  
CC-BY-SA-3.0, 2010.

Situated on the Street of Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse, despite its name, the school was an independent institution that offered private courses in painting and sculpture free from the academic restrictions imposed at the School of Fine Arts (École des Beaux Arts). Also, at the Academy, he met other Black artists and intellectuals and became a good friend of South African artist Gerard Sekoto, who had also moved to Paris in 1947 (Eyene 2010, 432).

In 1948, as part of his relations with French institutions, Tibério travelled to Dahomey, then a French West African colony that, after its independence in 1960, was renamed the Republic of Benin. One photograph documenting Tibério's stay in Dahomey in 1948 shows him sketching a group of Porto-Novo's Vodun priestesses. Another photograph taken the same year shows the artist observing the bas-reliefs of the royal palace of King Glele, in Abomey, the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey (Wilson Tibério n.d).<sup>4</sup> Tibério also travelled to the then-French colony of Senegal, probably during this period. According to an anecdote reproduced in an article published in the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* in 1955, the artist visited the plantation areas surrounding Dakar. One afternoon, he was painting a group of quarry labourers and was outraged by the slave-like working conditions imposed on local workers. Among others, the artist witnessed a white colonial agent whipping a group of men transporting stones on their heads. Shocked by the violent scene, Tibério did not hesitate and beat the overseer. According to the artist, one week later, a French colonial agent accused him of being a subversive and a political agitator and therefore ordered his expulsion from Senegal (Martins 1955, 1).

<sup>4</sup> The two photographs are displayed on the website created by his family members and dedicated to his work.

Tibério's paintings and sculptures were mainly figurative. Influenced by the language of realism and the production of European avant-gardes, he explored various paths in formal terms. Still, social issues dominated his repertoire. During his career, the artist explored the various dimensions of African and Black life and cultures. During the 1950s, African art remained confined to ethnography and anthropology museums despite having inspired European painters such as Picasso. Nevertheless, African art was central to Tibério's work. In 1955, he told a journalist that he needed "neither to go to the Louvre, nor see Picasso" because "all world art comes from the Black (Martins 1955, 1)."

Tibério painted several self-portraits. One of these portraits today in the collections of the Gallery Barão de Santo Ângelo at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, emphasizes the representation of himself both as Black man and as a painter (Figure 3).



Figure 3  
Wilson Tibério  
*Self-portrait*, 1941  
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 80 cm  
Courtesy: Pinacoteca Barão  
de Santo Ângelo  
Federal University of Rio  
Grande do Sul  
Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil.

Perhaps based on a photograph, the painted portrait represents him from profile sitting in front of his easel holding an unfinished painting depicting a naked female model. The painter's left-hand lies on his left knee, whereas his right hand, holding a brush, lies on his left forearm. The portrait's focal element is Tibério's head, emphasised by the effect of light and shade that gives it sculpture-like volume. The light green background almost merges with the light green colour of the painter's coat. The painter's dark skin and hair contrast with the light background. His inquisitory black eyes challenge the viewer. This is a metaphor for how Tibério's challenged Brazilian racist society.

Black persons, either collectively or individually, always occupy a central place in Tibério's paintings. Among the various topics developed in his paintings are Black urban daily life, Candomblé ceremonies, and Black motherhood. Unlike most visual representations, in engraving, photography, painting, and sculpture, representing Black women during slavery and in the post-abolition period (Figure 4), in Tibério's works, Black mothers are not depicted as wet nurses. Although portrayed in settings where they live in poverty, the painter features Black mothers breastfeeding their own children and not the children of their owners or employers (Figure 5).



Figure 4  
Lucílio de Albuquerque  
*Mãe preta* (Black Mother)  
Oil on canvas, 1912  
Photograph: Ana Lucia Araujo, 2017  
Museu de Arte da Bahia, Salvador,  
BA, Brazil.



Figure 5  
Wilson Tibério  
*Bahia*, 1946  
Oil on canvas, 66,5 cm x 46,5 cm  
Courtesy: Gallery Aldo Locatelli  
Photograph: F. Zago/StudioZ  
Municipal Secretary of Culture  
Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil.

In Paris, through his contact with Sekoto, Tibério met Léopold Sédar Senghor, who became the first President of independent Senegal, a few years later. Because of this meeting, both Sekoto and Tibério were invited to attend the first Conference of Black Writers and Artists (Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs) in Paris in 1956 (Mudimbe 1992, 372). The event was convened by the magazine and publisher *Présence Africaine*,

a major publication for the development of Pan-African and Négritude movements (Moura 2021). Among the conference participants were prominent Black internationalist activists such as Aimé Césaire, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, and Joséphine Baker. After Senghor took office as President of Senegal, both Sekoto and Tibério were also invited to participate in the first World Festival of Black Arts (Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres) held in Dakar from April 1 to April 24, 1966, two years after the military coup that instated a twenty-one-year dictatorship in Brazil. Following their participation in the festival, the two artists spent one year working together between Dakar and Casamance. In the following years, they continued to exhibit their works together mainly in Senegal and France. During the 1970s, because of his political activities, and probably because of his criticism of Senghor and the Négritude movement, Tibério was expelled from Senegal (Eyene 2010, 432). Over the next three decades, the artist kept his residence in France, where he deceased in 2005.

### **Making Tibério Visible Again**

Despite all the odds, Tibério successfully made himself visible in an era when Black artists and Black art were devalued in Europe and the Americas. Today, Tibério's name appears in several international publications associated with the rise of Négritude and Pan-Africanism. Both his trajectory as a black internationalist activist and his work focusing on Black subjects remain unique. Tibério was one of the few Black Brazilian artists of his time whose work portrayed the populations of African descent not only in Brazil but also in West Africa. Still, his artistic production and political importance remain largely unknown in Brazil. This neglect is related to a series of factors. Having spent most of his life between France and West Africa, the task of gathering his works remains difficult. Tibério did not benefit from formal artistic training, unlike other Brazilian white artists of his time. Moreover, only a few of his paintings are housed in Brazilian collections, such as the Afro Brazil Museum in São Paulo, the Gallery Barão de Santo Ângelo, and the Gallery Aldo Locatelli in Porto Alegre. During the past decade, curators such as the late Emanuel Araújo made great efforts to promote the work of Afro-Brazilian artists, who remain unknown even among specialists. It will be to the present-day generation of scholars and artists to discover Tibério's work and incredible trajectory as a Black artist and internationalist activist and make him visible again for future generations. These new studies will finally give Tibério the place of honour he deserves in the African Diaspora's history and art history.

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