

# Athos Bulcão and the Architecture of Brasília



This essay aims to show Athos Bulcão's artworks integrated into architecture in Brasilia, his career and partnership and the significance of his work as a precious legacy for the city. The artwork of Athos Bulcão not only reveals beauty and colors but an architectural identity that reflects a successful partnership between modern architecture and fine arts in Brazil. Brasilia is the high mark of modern movement where Athos Bulcão became a unique artist with the skill to amalgamate his art into architecture.

By Rafael Miura Bonazzi

### Modern architecture and artworks

IN Brazil, modernism has provided a good relation between plastic arts and architecture, demonstrating the commitment of Brazilian architects to a creative and innovative way. A pioneer example of the integration of artworks in architecture is found in the Ministry of Education, today known as Gustavo Capanema Palace (1936), designed by a team led by Lucio Costa. The first involvement of Athos Bulcão with architecture is the Pampulha Park (1945), by Oscar Niemeyer, described as "a new opportunity, but more decisively for the integration of arts into Brazilian architecture" (Campofiorito, 1975).

Brasilia is the high mark of this movement, "a single instance in the twentieth century of a work that intended to express and signify the culture and aspirations of an epoch" (Campofiorito, 1975). Not by accident, during the International Congress of Critics of Art held there in September 1959, many of the discussions addressed the great opportunity provided by the new Capital for the integration of arts.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Bulcão was a unique artist with the skill to amalgamate his art into architecture.

### Athos Bulcão, the artist of Brasilia

When Athos Bulcão came to live in Brasilia, it was a vast construction site. Collaborating with its principal architect, Oscar Niemeyer, he had an exceptional opportunity to contribute with his talent to several works of art for the city's main civic buildings.

Today his oeuvre is part of the city's history, deemed a precious heritage which embellishes and gives meaning, grace and motion to many of its buildings. Besides his creations "were made in quantity and quality unparalleled that made him a genuine Brasilia artist" (Farias, 2002). In fact, his career "blends in with the history of Brasilia" (Ficher, 1998).

However, his works are not restricted to the monumental scene, as it is possible to encounter his contribution in

countless residences and commercial buildings, adding aesthetical values, and being the mark of an artist and his art. In Brasilia it is natural to run into Bulcão's panels and reliefs, already part of the townscape, many of them not attributed to him by the general public.

### Career and partnerships

Art has always been present in Bulcão's life. Some important aspects were decisive to his successful career, such as his forsaking in 1939 of medicine studies, devoting himself to full-time painting. At that moment, he started to attend the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx's studio, thus enhancing his technique.

As he was fond of saying, things happened to him by chance. By chance he met Niemeyer in 1942, who invited him to design a tile panel for the Municipal Theatre of Belo Horizonte—an unfinished work due to political causes. However, this event led to the opportunity to assist Candido Portinari paintings at the Pampulha Church, in 1945. Also by chance, important Brazilian artists influenced him in his formative years, among others Enrico Bianco, Candido Portinari, Carlos Scliar, Vinicius de Moraes, and Alfredo Ceschiatti.

Amongst Brazilian modern architects, a shared trait is the remarkable partiality for tile walls, in which Lucio Costa was the leading supporter, given their "plastic properties and their relation to the Brazilian constructive tradition" (Costa, 1962). And, luckily again, tile panels were Bulcão's comfort zone.

After Pampulha, Bulcão continued to take lessons with Portinari. From 1948 to 1949 he attended drawing and lithography courses at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, in Paris. Another crucial step in his career happened in 1958, when he moved to Brasilia to integrate Niemeyer's team. As an enduring choice, he definitively established there.

The relationship between Niemeyer and Bulcão worked really fine. Among their best-known moments: the tile panel at Our Lady of Fatima Church (1957); the white marble and black granite panel for the National Congress hall (1960); the concrete relief for the National Theater façade (1966), blending together heaviness and

< Sarah Children's Centre (1982), architect **Glauco Campelo**. Athos Bulcão giving explanations to workers about the tiles' layers.

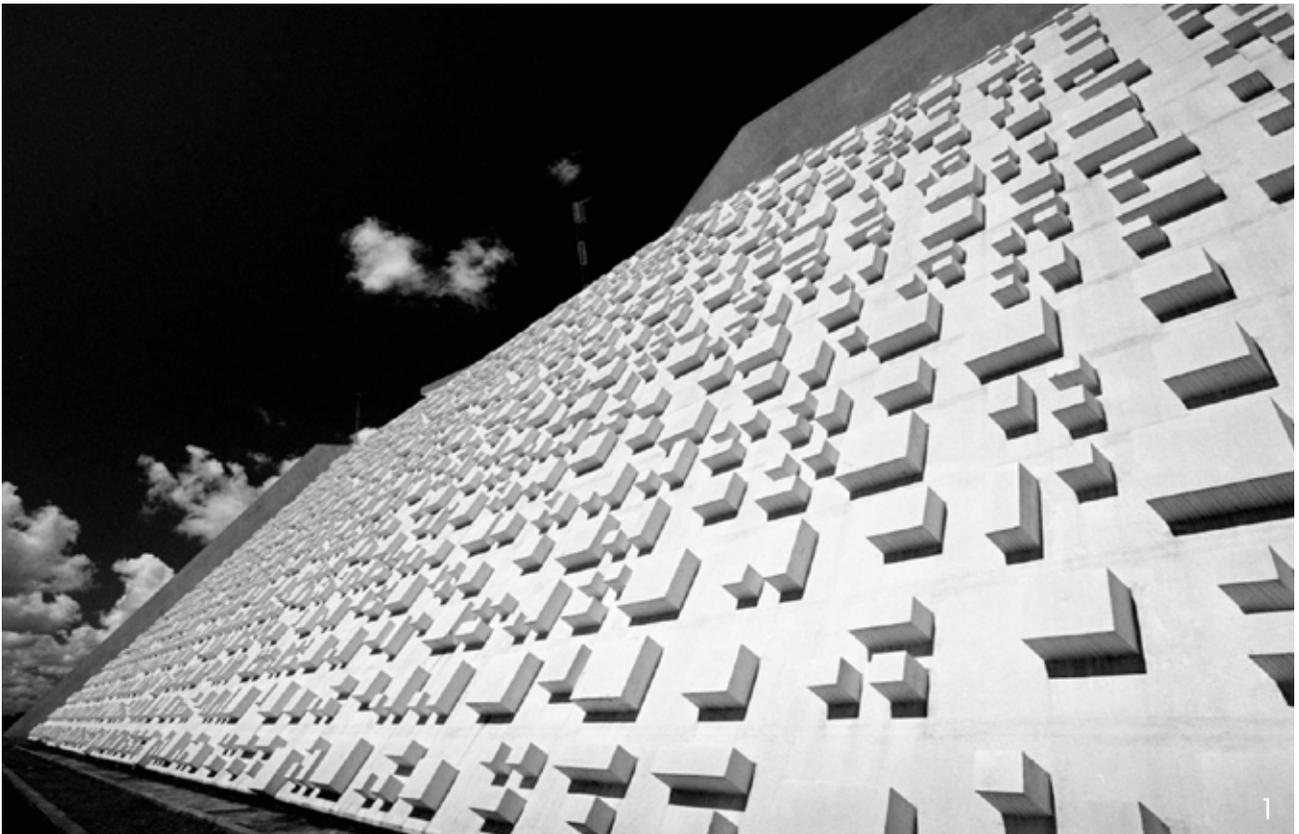


Figure 1. Claudio Santoro National Theater, architect **Oscar Niemeyer**. Concrete relief, 1966.

Figure 2. Itamaraty Palace (1966), architect **Oscar Niemeyer**. Hall marble relief.

Figure 3. Athos Bulcão in front of his panel for the Our Lady of Fatima Church (1957), architect **Oscar Niemeyer**.

Figure 4. National Congress (1960), architect **Oscar Niemeyer**. Hall white marble and black granite panel.

All pictures were gently provided by the Athos Bulcão Foundation

lightness, considered one of his masterpieces; the white marble relief for the entrance hall at Itamaraty Palace (1966); the wooden relief at the Brasília Movie Theater (1976); the tile panel at Flower Market (1983). These examples are enough to “certify the accuracy of Athos Bulcão in understanding and solving spatial problems which were claimed for his fellow architect” (Farias, 2008).

The great artist also collaborated with other important architects in Brasília, such as Lucio Costa (TV Tower), Milton Ramos (school façade), Glauco Campelo (Park of the City) and Sergio Parada (International Airport). Outstanding is his fruitful partnership with architect João Filgueiras Lima, better known as Lelé, initiated in 1962. As Lelé’s designs are thought out with the use of industrial-made elements, the artworks by Bulcão followed the same orientation, as in the Disbrave building. Together, they developed researches on constructive techniques and structural elements and conceived materials especially related to prefabrication. An amazing series of works can be found in the Sarah Rehabilitation Hospitals.

A distinctive mark of his practice was to create modular drawings for tiles and then encourage bricklayers to lay the pieces according to their own taste, somehow diluting the authorship of the final artwork. Many of these drawings would serve as patterns for the tiles manufacturing at an industrial scale. His sophisticated creations included graphic design for books and posters.

“The numerous panels, murals, reliefs, architectural elements that he created later as collaborative interventions in the designs of several architects, were geometrical abstract in style. This fact alone would suffice to place the artist in the forefront of Brazil’s constructive art—both

Concrete and Neo-Concrete” (Farias, 2008).

Athos Bulcão was born on July 2nd 1918 in Rio de Janeiro, and died on July 31st 2008 in Brasília. A man aware of his time, his art was crucial to architectural identity, and he profited of every occasion to create a microcosm of color and beauty, urging and instigating our eyes to feel. He became the protagonist where the artist was supposed to have a supporting role. His works are in constant dialogue with people, and now they are part of our historic heritage.

#### Notes

1. Rossetti, 2009. The congress took place in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Brasília, and was attended by renowned critics, artists and architects from different countries.

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