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Elisabeth Nobiling and the German Immigrant Experience in Post-War São Paulo

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- Atlantique Sud - Europe
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The career of the German-Brazilian sculptor, ceramist, and engraver Elisabeth Nobiling illuminates the dynamics of cultural integration within Brazil's modernism. This article explores the context of German immigration and the negotiation of immigrants' identities in the modernist milieu.

This article examines the career trajectory of Elisabeth Nobiling, a German-Brazilian sculptor, ceramist, and engraver whose artistic practice illuminates the broader dynamics of cultural integration within Brazil's modernism. Organized around three principal axes—Nobiling's European artistic formation, her professional collaborations (predominantly with fellow immigrants), and the perception and negotiation of her identity within the Brazilian cultural context—this study investigates how the condition of forced immigration shaped her career development and professional strategies. The analysis is contextualized within the broader historical framework of German immigration to Brazil, the relationship between the Estado Novo dictatorship and immigrant communities, and the ethnic tensions inherent in Brazilian modernist milieu.

Transnational artistic training: German academy and French references

Born on December 9, 1902, in São Vicente, São Paulo, Olga Elisabeth Magda Henriette Nobiling was the fourth child of German immigrants Theodor and Rosa Nobiling. After losing her mother at age three, Elisabeth remained in São Vicente while her father worked in São Paulo and remarried. At age five, she began her primary education at home with German private tutors. These tutors, it appears, were the girl's only companions during this period, as her older siblings had relocated to the family's homeland. The fact that she did not attend regular local schools and traveled to Germany every three years to maintain family relations reinforced Elisabeth's connection to European culture and the German language. In 1918, Nobiling left São Vicente and moved to Hamburg, where her sister Gertrude Elbrechter and her husband were already living. After spending time at the universities of Cologne and Münster, Nobiling went to Munich, where she studied sculpture. From this point, a characteristic trait of her trajectory became apparent: her travels in pursuit of cultural enrichment and artistic training. "During vacation periods, she traveled to major European artistic centers such as Rome, Paris, and Vienna with the aim of refining her knowledge."[1]

Her admission to the *Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst* (United State Schools for Free and Applied Arts) in Berlin occurred in the winter semester of 1929/1930. The re-enrollment records I found in the institution's archives extend to the summer semester of 1932. Throughout this period, Nobiling studied under the sculptor Edwin Scharff, who was then one of the leading figures in German plastic arts. Scharff's work is characterized by a formal language that combines stylized figurative representation with abstracting features derived from expressionism and cubism. Her master's sculpture—especially the portraits—would become an enduring reference throughout Nobiling's career.

Edwin Scharff. Portrait of the actress Anni Mewes, 1917. Bronze. Karl-Ernst Osthaus Museum, Hagen

Source : Photo: wwwuppertal, Creative Commons

Elisabeth Nobiling. Portrait of Lúcia Suané, 1941. Bronze sculpture on granite base, 37 x 15 x 17 cm. São Paulo Museum of Art

Source : Estate of Elisabeth Nobiling

With the rise of the Nazi party, Scharff faced persecution, as his work did not conform to the regime's aesthetic directives. In April 1933, the Prussian Minister of Science, Art and National Education placed him on compulsory leave. That same year, Scharff was transferred to the State Academy of Arts in Düsseldorf. His refusal to collaborate with the regime eventually led to his expulsion from the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts and the banning of his professional practice.

Left without her mentor, confronted with financial problems and the escalation of Nazism, Nobiling abandoned her studies and returned to Brazil. She is not, of course, an isolated example of European training among Brazilian artists. Since the nineteenth century, the Rio de Janeiro Academy of Fine Arts had awarded travel grants abroad to its most distinguished students. One notable example is the sculptress Julieta de França, the first Brazilian woman artist to win this scholarship in late 1899, which allowed her to study at the Académie Julian. Many key figures of Brazilian modernism also trained in Europe—especially in Paris, including Tarsila do Amaral, Candido Portinari, Cícero Dias, and Vicente do Rego Monteiro—as well as in other cities such as Berlin (Anita Malfatti), Geneva (Oswaldo Goeldi), and Florence (Carlos Oswald).

Shortly before opening her first solo exhibition, Nobiling mentioned in an interview two other fundamental names in her training, French sculptors Aristide Maillol and Charles Despiau: "they perform the miracle of simplicity plus sensibility."[2] Referring to Despiau's work as a portraitist, Nobiling said: "It is the church in which I pray."[3] Her familiarity with both French sculptors, although decisive, appears to have never been through directly meeting them. From another interview, we understand that Nobiling was not actually their student: "In Paris, I never took courses constitently. I was there many times, and my dream was to study with Maillol after finishing the Academy"[4]. However, as we have seen, she was forced to return to Brazil before completing her

education, making the plans to train under Maillol impossible to fulfill. Although Nobiling's career unfolded entirely in Brazil, the European references and artists she regarded as her masters continued to shape her work throughout her life, as was the case for many Latin American artists of her generation.

Professional Partnerships

It was therefore in the early thirties, having recently arrived from Europe, that Nobiling began her insertion into São Paulo's artistic and intellectual circles. Despite the ambiguity of her refugee status—Brazilian-born but raised in Germany, compelled to leave Berlin due to a relative's political activities—it is noteworthy that she frequently collaborated with colleagues of European origin and moved within circles of foreigners. These artists, who shared with her the experience of forced immigration, would form what Nuria Peist Rojzman calls the "initial nucleus of recognition,"[5] that is, the group composed of peers, including not only artists but also critics, art dealers, and early collectors, who represent the first step toward recognition and success. Listed below are some of the most significant professional partnerships cultivated by Nobiling throughout her career,

1936: Grupo dos Sete (Group of Seven)

The 1930s witnessed the consolidation of the modernist scene in São Paulo, resulting in an environment distinguished by stylistic diversity and a more structured organization of cultural production and circulation. During this period, the city's art scene encompassed a wide array of artists with varied backgrounds, professional trajectories, and aesthetic perspectives, reflecting the ongoing expansion and increasing complexity of the local artistic milieu. Many artists who embraced up-to-date aesthetic developments came from an immigrant background, a distinctive element of São Paulo's cultural scene. The city's emerging cosmopolitanism brought a new balance between the local cultural repertoire and European references. A trend toward association emerged through a series of initiatives that led to the formation of numerous artist groups, not only in São Paulo but also in Rio de Janeiro, establishing a model that would later be followed in other Brazilian cities.

The Sociedade Pró-Arte Moderna—SPAM (1932), a multidisciplinary artist collective led by painter, sculptor, and engraver Lasar Segall—a Jewish emigrant from present-day Lithuania—promoted modernist ideas through social events and exhibitions, including key Brazilian modernism pioneers and maintaining close ties to the organizers of the 1922 Modern Art Week. The Clube dos Artistas Modernos—CAM (1932), an independent artists' collective led by Flávio de Carvalho (architect, painter, designer, and writer), deliberately contrasted with SPAM through its rebellious approach, financing itself through member dues and ticket sales while serving as a creative hub for provocative cultural expressions and antiestablishment attitudes. The Grupo Santa Helena (1934) emerged as a loosely formed community of artists—predominantly recent Italian immigrants—who shared workspace in the Santa Helena Building in downtown São Paulo. Without formal manifestos, these artists worked independently from mainstream circles until joining the Família Artística Paulista brought them public recognition. Most developed their skills through practical trade schools like the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios and the Escola Profissional Masculina do Brás, while other members attended Italian art schools before immigrating; references to Paul Cézanne and to the Novecento painters can be identified in the group's production. The Família Artística Paulista—FAP (1937), founded by painter Paulo Rossi Osir, brought together Grupo Santa Helena members and other artists across three exhibitions (1937, 1939, 1940), embodying a moderated modernism positioned between 1920s experimentations and traditional academic practices, though its diverse participants make any unified aesthetic direction impossible to identify.

In Rio de Janeiro, notable examples include the Pró-Arte Sociedade de Artes, Letras e Ciências (1931), a cultural association headed by German art dealer Theodor Heuberger that focused on fostering cultural, intellectual, and scientific exchanges between Brazil and Germany, and the Núcleo Bernardelli (1931), a collective of painters who opposed the conventional curriculum at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes, prioritizing technical mastery and career advancement over artistic rebellion, with work showing references to Cézanne and Impressionist techniques that reflected the broader 'return to order' movement.

Drawing upon the aesthetic achievements of the modernist movement, these associations established their own dialogues with what was then a recent cultural

legacy, while displaying an attitude of independence from the traditional institutions of the period (such as, in Rio, the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes). The emergence of artistic collectives throughout the 1930s reveals, primarily, how effectively collaborative organization served as an approach for artists seeking to engage with Brazil's cultural landscape.

It is in this context of *associativismo* that Nobiling joins the so-called *Grupo dos Sete*, which brought together modern artists who, like her, came from Europe or were trained there: sculptor Victor Brecheret (Italy), architect Rino Levi (educated in Italy), painter Yolanda Mohalyi (Romania), designer and textile artist Regina Gomide Graz (educated in Switzerland), painter and designer Antônio Gomide (educated in Switzerland), and designer John Graz (Switzerland). The group, despite featuring prominent artists, was short-lived, since "it did not fulfill its primary purpose, which was to establish an active museum."[6] This goal remained unattainable due to the absence of essential municipal government support, notwithstanding the backing of Mário de Andrade—a leading figure in Brazilian modernism as writer, musicologist, literature and art critic, and collector, who served as the first director of the Departamento Municipal de Cultura established in 1936.

1937-1939: Elmer Gollmer

In 1937, Nobiling intensified her practice as a ceramist, opening a studio in the Sumaré neighborhood in partnership with the Hungarian artist Elmer Gollmer, also a ceramist and painter. Nobiling and Gollmer organized a joint exhibition that was "well-attended."[7] After a five-month stay in Vienna to attend ceramics classes, Nobiling returned to São Paulo. In 1939, another exhibition took place, once again a Nobiling-Gollmer partnership:

"The exhibition of sculpture and art objects by Elisabeth Nobiling, which is open to public visitation on Barão de Itapetininga Street, has garnered significant attention in the artistic circles of São Paulo's capital. The sculptures presented by this splendid artist are complemented by Brazilian ceramic and majolica art objects, to which painter Elemer Gollner [*sic*]'s brush brings a valuable contribution."[8]

Elisabeth Nobiling and Elmer Gollmer in her studio. Photographer unknown

Source : Suplemento em Rotogravura, O Estado de S.Paulo newspaper, n.149, 1939, p. 52

1947-1951: Galeria Domus (Domus Gallery)

In the mid-1940s, Nobiling took another step toward consolidating her career by joining the group of artists represented by the newly inaugurated Galeria Domus. Established by the Italian immigrant couple Anna Maria and Pasquale Fiocca, it was pioneering in its dedication to promoting the modernist generation and the one that succeeded it, contributing to renew São Paulo's art scene with an ambitious mission, outlined in its first event catalog: "To offer the public a series of exhibitions of contemporary local and foreign artists, an activity that, beyond providing a comprehensive view of current worldwide aesthetic developments, would enable critics and artists to wage a new polemical battle for the affirmation of contemporary art in the international arena."[9]

Inside the Domus Gallery, in the background: Anna Maria Fiocca, Pasquale Fiocca (right) and two unidentified men. Photographer unknown. Fiocca Family Collection

Source : MAM

Operating from March 1947 to December 1951, Domus was São Paulo's leading modern art venue before the creation of the São Paulo Museum of Art—MASP (1947), the Museum of Modern Art—MAM-SP (1948), and the first São Paulo Art Biennial (1951). The gallery's activities coincided with a postwar era of transformation, when Brazil was re-democratizing after almost a decade under Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship, known as Estado Novo (1937-1945). This period also marked São Paulo's emergence as a metropolis with more than two million residents. Over its five-year tenure, Galeria Domus organized 91 exhibitions—most of them brief—primarily featuring artists active in São Paulo, including many immigrants, as well as visiting international artists. Joining Domus represented a boost to Nobiling's career, and she would exhibit there regularly until 1951. Many of Nobiling's colleagues at the gallery were either European immigrants or first-generation Brazilians of European descent, including Alfredo Volpi, Aldo Bonadei, Francisco Rebolo, Victor Brecheret, Ernesto De Fiori, and Bruno Giorgi.

1950-1953: Klara Hartoch

In the 1950s, textile artist Klara Hartoch, also of European origin, became Nobiling's new collaborative partner for production and exhibition, much as she had previously formed a partnership with Gollmer. Between April 24 and May 13, 1950, an exhibition of tapestries created by Hartoch and based on Nobiling's designs was held at the Casa e Jardim Gallery, which was owned by the German art dealer Heuberger, founder of Pró-Arte, in Rio de Janeiro. In 1953, the partnership between the two artists was renewed with another exhibition. Inaugurated on November 27 at the Artesanal Gallery, it again showcased Hartoch's works based on Nobiling's designs, which were also displayed.

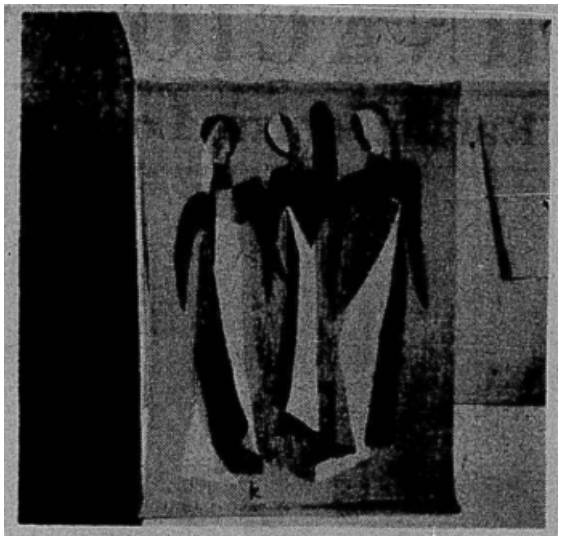

Illustration from a newspaper article about the second exhibition by Nobiling and Hartoch

Source : Jean, Yvonne. O anjo, a escultora e a tecelã. Diário Carioca, 6.12.53, p.2

Based on Klara Hartoch's biography presented by Ana Julia Melo Almeida in her doctoral thesis, we know that the artist was born in 1901 in Lopatyn (now Ukraine) to a Jewish family and emigrated to France in 1933, settling in Paris. There, she worked in textile and print production, though details of her formal training remain unknown. In 1941, Hartoch arrived in Rio de Janeiro, where her occupation was listed as a textile designer. She became a Brazilian citizen in 1954. Hartoch collaborated with the Casa e Jardim Gallery in São Paulo, which aimed to promote modernist ideas through art and design objects for domestic spaces. In the early 1950s, she was appointed as weaving instructor at the Instituto de Arte Contemporânea (IAC) of MASP, overseeing the textile studio linked to industrial design education until the program ended in 1953; the studio continued under her supervision for at least two more years. Concurrently, she maintained an independent artistic practice, producing textiles and carpets characterized by the use of natural fibers—especially cotton blended with sisal and straw. After her period in São Paulo, Hartoch relocated to Spain, returning briefly to Brazil as a tourist in 1969. Yet in her early years in Brazil, she was part of a modernist circle largely composed of fellow immigrants, contributing to the development of Brazilian textile art and design.

1953: Rino Levi (USP University Tower)

In 1953, Elisabeth Nobiling joined the team of professionals responsible for the conception and construction of the University Tower at the University of São Paulo, also known as the Clock Tower. Nobiling was in charge of the artistic conception of the monument, although it was built only in the 1970s. On the external faces of the gables, as specified in the project, panels would be installed, executed in high and low relief in exposed concrete, each with dimensions of 5 meters by 5.50 meters. The twelve panels, arranged in groups of six, represent the integration of the areas of Sciences, Arts and Humanities.

View of the Clock Tower on the Butantã campus of the University of São Paulo. Photo: Julio Bazanini

Source : Jornal da USP/USP Imagens

For this project, which would mean increased visibility for her work, Nobiling was invited by Rino Levi, her former colleague in the Grupo dos Sete. Levi was an architect and urban planner who played a pivotal role in transforming São Paulo's architectural landscape, establishing himself as a leading figure in Brazilian modernism. Born to Italian parents, he received his architectural education in Milan and Rome before returning to Brazil in 1926. He began his independent practice the following year, initially focusing on small residences and rental housing for the Italian community in São Paulo. In 1927, he founded Rino Levi Arquitetos Associados, marking the beginning of a distinguished career. Levi's diverse portfolio encompassed industrial complexes, commercial and office buildings, residential projects, cinemas, hospitals, theater, and banks, reflecting his adaptability to the evolving urban demands of the metropolis. A

defining feature of his work was his commitment to articulating the distinctiveness of Brazilian modern architecture, developing innovative solutions responsive to local climate, materials, and cultural contexts. Levi also pursued the “synthesis of the arts” ideal, integrating architecture with landscape design, furniture, frescoes, and murals—hence his inclusion of Nobiling’s panels in the University Tower project. Beyond his design practice, Levi was actively involved in professional organizations and architectural publications, contributing to the regulation of the profession, the advancement of modern architecture in Brazil, and the development of a uniquely Brazilian architectural approach.

1962: Hilda von der Schulenburg

A brief article in *Última Hora* mentions yet another partnership with an immigrant artist, as had occurred with Elmer Gollmer and Clara Hartoch: “Hilda von der Schulenburg and Elisabeth Nobiling, the former with painted fabrics and the latter with ceramics, will exhibit in Rio in November, at the studio of architect couple Vera and Bernardo de Figueiredo.”[10] To date, this is the sole documented instance of collaboration between the two artists, and unfortunately no further details about Schulenburg could be ascertained.

Local Perspectives

German immigration to Brazil, one of the country’s largest migratory movements, unfolded in successive waves from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The process began officially in 1824, initially under government sponsorship targeting the Southeast and South regions. This movement intensified following slavery’s abolition in 1888, as Brazil sought European immigrants to replace enslaved labor with free wage workers on farms. However, Germans came not only as agricultural workers but also as artisans, merchants, clergy, and teachers, many of whom settled in urban centers. Between the early nineteenth century and World War I, roughly 250,000 Germans migrated to Brazil. Post-war emigration resumed during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), when Brazil received over 58,000 Germans, making it their main Latin American destination. This wave, initially facilitated by government incentives, declined after 1924 and was further reduced by the global economic crisis, as receiving countries suffered similar impacts to those of the German Empire and imposed restrictions on immigrant entry. Immigration policy became more restrictive under Getúlio Vargas: by 1930, benefits were curtailed, visas for third-class passengers were limited, and quota laws were introduced. Nonetheless, the German presence grew, reaching about 685,000 individuals and descendants by 1932. Hitler’s ascension and subsequent anti-Semitic policies transformed immigration patterns, introducing political dimensions to the movement. Throughout two centuries, Brazil-Germany relations oscillated between attraction and mistrust, reflecting broader geopolitical dynamics. To understand how Elisabeth Nobiling was perceived and how her German ancestry shaped these perceptions, we must have in mind not only the broader context of German immigration to Brazil, but also the evolving relationship between immigrant communities and Brazilian national identity during the early to mid-twentieth century. German immigrants and their descendants steadfastly preserved their cultural roots. Within German households, Portuguese was seldom spoken, and educational practices prioritized German literacy for children. The German-language press was instrumental in sustaining linguistic and cultural ties, with numerous periodicals circulating exclusively in German, especially in São Paulo. This linguistic preservation would later become a marker of non-assimilation in the eyes of Brazilian society. The rise of Brazilian nationalism in the 1930’s amplified criticism of these communities, accusing them of remaining isolated and reluctant to embrace national culture. Brazilian citizenship, grounded in the principle of *jus soli* (citizenship by birthplace), expected all born in Brazil, including German descendants, to identify with national culture, discouraging the formation of segregated groups. This contrasted with the traditional German principle of *jus sanguinis* (nationality by descent). Although a process of acculturation among German Brazilians emerged after World War I, particularly in urban centers, these changes did not fully address governmental concerns about integration.

From 1938 onward, the Brazilian state increasingly viewed foreigners as a threat. To maintain its heritage, the German community had established a robust network of institutions—ranging from schools and sports clubs to social venues like bars and restaurants—that fostered communal bonds. Germans were thus labeled as non-assimilable and perceived as undermining national unity and patriotism. Consequently, the government enacted measures to dismantle cultural institutions that deviated from

the national ideal, envisioning society as a unified entity. Legislation banned radio broadcasts, newspapers and magazines in foreign languages; foreign cultural, charitable, and educational organizations were required to obtain licenses and undergo a process of nationalization, with managing positions reserved for Brazilians. Schools could not be directed by foreigners, and the Ministry of Education and Health assumed oversight of language instruction as well as the teaching of Brazilian history and geography. Religious services were mandated to be conducted in Portuguese, and business dealings in foreign languages were prohibited. Diplomatic relations with Axis countries were severed in 1942, further intensifying anti-foreign sentiment and reinforcing a national project intolerant of ethnic and ideological diversity. It is also noteworthy that, starting in 1937, anti-Semitic immigration policies became systematic, with secret directives and visa restrictions specifically targeting German Jewish refugees.

Beyond Nobiling's own choices and partnerships stemming from her ambiguous immigrant status (raised and educated in Germany, but born in Brazil), we must also consider how others perceived her within this charged political and cultural environment. Periodical articles consistently emphasized Nobiling's European heritage, reflecting broader societal preoccupations with foreign identity and cultural belonging. The following examples from the press illustrate how Nobiling's German ancestry was perceived and articulated during this period of heightened nationalism, revealing a pattern that would characterize both her career and press coverage: the persistent association of her identity and artistic work with European origins:

> "We are before a tall young woman with perfectly Aryan features; a type of woman who, in no way, makes us think that she is Brazilian, not even a Brazilian from the south. Moreover, her way of speaking Portuguese, a frankly Germanic manner, also does not give us hope of recognizing in her a legitimate Paulista *jus soli*. She is indeed a German-Brazilian educated in Germany."[11]

Journalist Mozart Firmeza's use of the term *jus soli* and his emphasis on Nobiling's "frankly Germanic manner" of speaking Portuguese directly reference the question of true citizenship and the linguistic markers of foreignness that concerned the government and society at large. Another journalist wrote:

> "Her parents, who had recently arrived from the old continent, transmitted to her a dose of international blood, and with it some typically European inclinations—such as the spontaneous taste for sports, arts, and travel—which contributed greatly, later on, to the formation of the artist who emerged in this interesting little Brazilian from São Vicente."[12]

At times, the work itself is seen as having transatlantic origins:

> "One of the highlights of the exhibition lies in the two works by Elisabeth Nobiling. Reminiscences of the Germanic expressionist Gothic filtered through rare sensibility."[13]

Her artistic training abroad is also made explicit, as in this critical text written in 1936 by the painter Tarsila do Amaral:

> "Elisabeth Nobiling is an artist who knows what she wants, and her works are conscious, serene, without hesitations. Behind them lies the effort of many years of study in the classical academies of Berlin."[14]

The following comment illustrates how gender and immigrant identity intersect in perceptions of Nobiling:

> "There is no doubt that her striking personality is an important factor in the reception she deserves: an independent woman, a typical representative of the emancipated European woman, she shocked, provoked astonishment and admiration in a transitioning patriarchal society like that of Brazil in the 1930s, in which she moved. This fact becomes clearer when she moves to the Sumaré neighborhood; her way of strolling with long pants, cigarette holder, and dogs will earn her the nickname "the remarkable woman of Sumaré" in the newspapers of the time."[15]

It is not uncommon, therefore, in press articles about Nobiling, for the foreign origin of her family to be highlighted, along with physical and personality traits associated with

Europeans, and her studies in German institutions. A very subtle shift, however, draws attention: whereas, in the 1936 text, Mozart Firmeza clearly stated that she was a "German-Brazilian," in Maria Antonia's 1947 text cited next, the national specification gives way to more generic terms, such as "old continent," "international blood," "European inclinations." Brazil had just emerged from a war with the Axis countries, and the choice of words seems to reflect the difficult situation experienced by Germans and their descendants during that period. While Nobiling's individual experience reveals the complexities of German-Brazilian identity in the cultural sphere, her case cannot be fully understood in isolation from the broader ideological forces that shaped the relationship between immigrant communities and Brazilian modernism.

Modernism and ethnic tensions

The interaction between the Estado Novo and the German community illustrates the tensions in the construction of Brazilian national identity during the authoritarian Vargas era. Nationalist and xenophobic policies led to heightened repression of the German community, while intellectuals and artists focused on national identity were integrated into public administration to forge a Brazilian identity. This created a conflict between the state's alleged support of Modernism—seeking a linguistically and culturally homogeneous society—and German-Brazilian cultural practices. Identity disputes lay at the core of Brazilian Modernism, as developing a "national" modernist agenda required selectively endorsing particular identities over others, generating unease regarding immigrant communities (notably Italians, Germans, and Japanese).

The relationship between art and immigration in Brazil traces back to earlier iconographic traditions, particularly the *bandeirante* figure that emerged in late nineteenth-century São Paulo. As Barbara Weinstein demonstrates, this iconography represented an early artistic engagement with identity questions that would later inform modernist approaches to immigration and cultural assimilation. The *bandeirante* refers to colonial-era explorers who, from the early sixteenth century, ventured into South America's interior from São Paulo. Primarily Portuguese descendants, they pursued mineral wealth—especially gold and silver—while capturing indigenous peoples for enslavement and destroying *quilombos* (maroon communities). Their activities expanded Brazil's territorial boundaries and uncovered major gold deposits that defined the colonial economy. Weinstein examines how *bandeirante* iconography served as a discursive strategy for São Paulo's elites to affirm their preeminence over later European immigrants. Though substantial European migration allowed São Paulo to construct a whitened regional identity—and immigrant-established industries by entrepreneurs such as Francesco Matarazzo, Rodolfo Crespi, and Roberto Simonsen became emblematic of local progress—intellectuals and public figures from traditional paulista families refused to credit São Paulo's modernization to immigrant entrepreneurs or workers. By cultivating the *bandeirante* mythology, these elites anchored the region's perceived superiority in a pre-immigration historical narrative. Simultaneously, the *bandeirante*'s supposed capacity to assimilate positive cultural elements provided an ideological framework for incorporating European newcomers into Paulista society.

Sergio Miceli also interprets Paulista modernism as encompassing not only aesthetic innovations but also the social and ethnic tensions permeating the movement. He notes that, except for Tarsila do Amaral and Antonio Gomide, all visual artists within the Paulista modernist circle were connected to European migratory flows toward Brazil—including Lasar Segall, Victor Brecheret, and John Graz. In analyzing the Grupo dos Cinco (Group of Five), formed in 1922 by painters Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti with writers Mário de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, and Menotti del Picchia, Miceli notes the internal dynamics marked by tensions beyond aesthetic concerns. He argues the group's conflicts carried a clear ethnic dimension, manifesting as division between "natives" (Mário de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, and Oswald de Andrade) and Italian immigrants, known as *oriundi* (Anita Malfatti and Menotti del Picchia). The clash of uneven forces and cultural capital involved not only creative stimulation but also competition, discomfort, and tension among peers with unequal advantages in the Brazilian cultural field. Hence this crucial division should not be overlooked when analyzing the artworks and ideological stances of all group members.

Years after the Grupo dos Cinco disappeared, a brief 1939 statement by critic Geraldo Ferraz reveals persistent tensions between the Paulista modernist milieu and immigrant communities. Ferraz accused painters of the Família Artística Paulista of being "traditionalists, defenders of the artistic *carcamanismo* of Paulicéia, dying in love with the techniques of Giotto and Cimabue."[16] The comment discloses a clear ethnic

dimension through the use of the term *carcamanismo*, derived from *carcamano*, a pejorative label commonly employed in São Paulo to refer to Italians and their descendants. By linking alleged resistance to modern artistic innovations with a specific nationality, Ferraz exposes the ethnic tensions underlying artistic debates, and how the directions of Brazilian art were intertwined with issues of national identity and xenophobia.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Elisabeth Nobiling illuminates the dynamics of forced migration, integration and recognition in the post-war Brazilian art scene. Her European background and German artistic references remained fundamental to her work even after her return to Brazil. The professional strategies adopted by Nobiling (partnerships with other immigrants, participation in collectives such as the Grupo dos Sete, and association with the Galeria Domus) demonstrate how solidarity networks among foreign artists were crucial for insertion into the modernist circuit in São Paulo. Simultaneously, the reception of Nobiling's work by Brazilian critics and press highlights how her identity was constantly negotiated through markers that sometimes emphasized her “Germanness” and at other times her status as a “Brazilian from abroad,” oscillating according to the charged political context of the period. This case study aims to contribute to our understanding of the larger political and cultural dynamics that governed the intersection of immigration, nationalism, and artistic production in twentieth-century Brazil.

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1. Fernanda Perracini Milani, “Obra escultórica de Elisabeth Nobiling (1930-1950)” (master's thesis, University of São Paulo, 1982), 25.
2. Mozart Firmeza, “Simplicidade e Sensibilidade, eis a verdadeira arte,” *Correio de São Paulo*, April, 1936, 3.
3. Firmeza, “Simplicidade e Sensibilidade.”
4. “Em visita ao atelier de Elizabeth Nobilinga [*sic*],” *Correio Paulistano*, November, 1944, 9.
5. Nuria Peist Rojzman, “El proceso de consagración en el arte moderno: trayectorias artísticas y círculos de reconocimiento,” *Materia* 5 (2005):17–43.
6. Milani, “Obra escultórica,” 31. It is possible that the museum Milani mentions corresponds to the never-built Pavilhão para Exposições de Artes Plásticas, designed by Rino Levi precisely in 1936 for República Square in downtown São Paulo.
7. *Correio Paulistano*, April, 1938, 7.
8. *A Noite Ilustrada*, December, 1939, 17.
9. Quoted by José Armando Pereira da Silva, *Artistas na metrópole: Galeria Domus 1947-1951* (São Paulo: Via Impressa Edições de Arte, 2016), 9.
10. *Última Hora*, October, 1962, 3.
11. Firmeza, “Simplicidade e Sensibilidade.”
12. Maria Antonia, “Que é arte?” *Jornal de Notícias*, March, 1947, 4.
13. Gianfranco Bonfanti, “Paulistas,” *Revista Joaquim* 2, no. 10 (May 1947): 12–20.
14. Tarsila do Amaral, “Exposição Elisabeth Nobiling (1936),” in *Crônicas e outros escritos de Tarsila do Amaral*, ed. Laura Taddei Brandini (Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2008): 75–76.
15. Milani, “Obra escultórica,” 30.
16. Quoted by Paulo Mendes de Almeida, “A Família Artística Paulista,” in *De Anita ao museu* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1976): 116.

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