

MARIA HELENA VIEIRA DA SILVA

1908 -1992



Composition 55, 1955, oil on canvas, 116 x 137 cm
© Jean-Louis Losi, Courtesy Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbonne

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva became acquainted with art early on through her grandfather, founder of the Lisbon newspaper *O Século*. After studying at the School of Fine Arts in Lisbon, she left her homeland for Paris in 1928, where she continued her studies at the Académie de La Grande Chaumière, taking classes with Fernand Léger, Bourdelle, and at the Académie Ranson. It was during this time that she met her future husband, the Hungarian painter Árpád Szenes. Introduced to the new artistic movements of Impressionism, Futurism, and Cubism, as well as to sculpture, she dedicated herself to painting from 1929 onward, seeking her own style through observation and experimentation, claiming that she did not want to belong to any specific movement. The spatial research of the Sienese School and the perspective fascinated her, as did the discovery of Cézanne and his *Joueurs de cartes*, with their spatial continuity, which gave her «the key to pass behind the seemingly dead-end wall.» **Her collaboration with Jeanne Bucher began in 1933**, with the publication of the *Kô & Kô edition*. At this time, Vieira da Silva became interested in

unusual perspectives built around a vanishing point, where space played a primary role. She would later construct this space using color and diamond shapes, reminiscent of Portuguese azulejos, creating a structured network «where figures wander, rise, and fall» within a spatial grid. She defined perspective as «the ability to suggest an immense space within a small piece of canvas,» creating her own unique space. During World War II, Vieira da Silva and her husband traveled to Portugal, then exiled in Brazil, before returning to Paris in 1947. Upon her return, the French government initiated a policy of acquiring her works. Naturalized as French in 1956, Vieira da Silva received numerous awards, both Portuguese and French, including the Grand Prix National des Arts in 1966. She was later named *Knight of the Legion of Honor* in 1979 and received the *Grand Cross of Liberty* in Portugal in the 1980s.

The infinite perspectives of her compositions are always read as the manifestation of an essential exploration of space, its corners, and its connections, whether intimate like rooms or distant like stretched corridors. From a convergence of lines woven into networks, she invites the eye to identify emerging images, drawing from her memories and intuitive sense of motif and rhythm. The psychological space created by this fragmented representation of reality captures how the mind retains and reshapes memories: it not only reflects her life in Paris but also the sensory experiences of her childhood in Lisbon, famous for its diamond-paved streets, the *calçada portuguesa*. Although she maintained a sense of depth of space and perspectives through underlying structure and order, Vieira da Silva enjoyed blurring the line between representation and abstraction, so that the evocative surfaces of rooms, houses, familiar train stations, bridges crossing or aerial urban views never fully described a single location or panorama, but rather a tangle of visited places. Vieira da Silva certainly painted her astonishment at being a living being, at moving, persisting, opening herself to light, and exchanging with everything around her. In the growth of the organic tissues of her paintings, where lines cross and recross, she constantly discovers new exits of light, this empty/full, this destination of unknown presence that she has explored since the beginning

of her work, and especially in her works from the 70s to the 90s, where an upward trajectory becomes more evident, as if our life were a detour, of which we are the architect, the engineer, and the designer, evolving within a reality where the multiplication of viewpoints causes certainties to waver along a labyrinthine path where the artist alone holds the thread of Ariadne. Her uncertainty becomes certainty, where what guides her is innovation and the demand of a profound metaphysical and spiritual quest. The canvases of her later years free themselves



Solo exhibition *Maria Helena Vieira da Silva*, 2019, Jeanne Bucher Jaeger - Espace Marais © Hervé Abbadie, Courtesy Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbonne

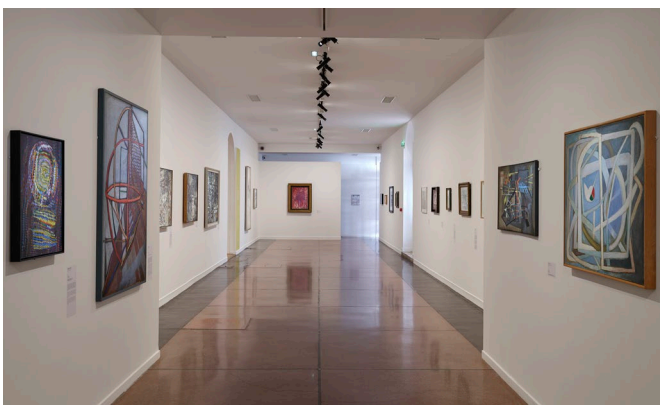
from any structure, as if to better probe the light, that luminous clarity found beyond the mirror of life.

Vieira da Silva passed away in Paris in 1992, two years after the creation of the Árpád Szenes – Vieira da Silva Foundation in Lisbon, and just before the inauguration of the Museum that houses her works and those of her husband. The artist remained faithful, promoted, and defended throughout her life and continues to be by the Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger: Jeanne Bucher introduced her at the start of her career, Jean-François Jaeger promoted her work from 1947 to 2003, and since 2004, its President Véronique Jaeger, who was co-curator of the commemorative exhibitions for the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of the Lisbon Foundation, has continued this mission by participating in countless exhibitions, both in France and internationally. Exhibited worldwide, her works are now in the collections of major institutions and international private foundations; in the United States, those of MoMA (the first to acquire her work) and the Guggenheim in New York, the Phillips Collection in Washington, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago; in France, at the Centre Pompidou-Mnam and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, museums in Dijon, Marseille, Colmar, Nantes, Metz, Rouen, Lyon, Grenoble, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Tate Modern in London, the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, the Basel Museum in Switzerland... In 2019, the gallery, together with two colleagues, organized a historic traveling exhibition between Paris, London, and New York. In 2022-2023, as part of the France-Portugal Season, the Museum of Fine Arts in Dijon and the Cantini Museum in Marseille, in partnership with Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, organized a retrospective titled *Vieira da Silva, L'œil du Labyrinthe*; this retrospective gathered more than 80 iconic works in the artist's journey from prestigious institutions.



Portrait of Maria Helena Vieira da Silva in her studio, rue St-Jacques in Paris, 1948 © D.R. Courtesy Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbonne

In 2023-24, the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat, in collaboration with the Árpád Szenes - Vieira da Silva Foundation in Lisbon, organizes, for the first time in Morocco, a major exhibition dedicated to the couple Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Árpád Szenes, titled *A Love Story and Painting*. As part of the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, Vieira da Silva is chosen by the Portuguese State as the official artistic figure symbolizing the notion of universalism and freedom. An exhibition titled *A nos a Liberdade (To us, Freedom)*, gathering around thirty major paintings, will be inaugurated on April 23, 2024, at the São Bento Palace of the Assembly of the Republic in Lisbon until the end of July 2024: among them will be the two works created by Vieira da Silva with Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen titled *A Poesia está na rua (Poetry is in the street)*, celebrating the Carnation Revolution. Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger will present major works during Art Paris in early April 2024, and the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris will feature a selection of essential Vieira da Silva paintings, displayed in the theater's entrance for nearly a month, as part of the commemoration of the Carnation Revolution, paying tribute to an artist who always placed the values of freedom and universalism at the heart of her work. In 2024-25, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva will be featured in the exhibition *InformELLES: Women Artists and Art Informel in the 1950s/60s* at Hessen Kassel Heritage, Kassel, Germany. **From April 12 to September 15, 2025, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection will present *Maria Helena Vieira da Silva: Anatomy of Space*, curated by Flavia Frigeri, curator at the National Portrait Gallery in London. After Venice, the exhibition will be presented at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from October 17, 2025, to February 22, 2026.**



Exhibition view, *Vieira da Silva, L'œil du Labyrinthe*, 2022, Musée Cantini, Marseille © David Giancattarina



Exhibition view, *Vieira da Silva L'œil du Labyrinthe / L'œil des collectionneurs* 2022-2023, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, France © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon / Philippe Bornier