

Press release

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Anatomy of Space



October 16, 2025 – February 22, 2026

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Anatomy of Space

- **Dates:** October 16, 2025, to February 22, 2026
 - **Curator:** Flavia Frigeri
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- The idea of space is a central theme in Maria Helena Vieira da Silva's work; her compositions, featuring labyrinthine structures, chromatic rhythms, and fragmented perspectives, capture the essence of a world in perpetual transformation.
 - Vieira da Silva dissolved the boundaries between real and imaginary urban landscapes and moved beyond formal references to Portuguese visual culture and avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Futurism.
 - Throughout her career Vieira da Silva developed a unique pictorial idiom, in which the physicality of space merges with the implications of time and memory.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Maria Helena Vieira da Silva: Anatomy of Space*, an in-depth exploration of the evolution of the visual language of Portuguese-born French artist Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (1908-1992). Unfolding across eight thematic sections, the exhibition explores key moments in Vieira da Silva's career from the 1930s to the late 1980s. Particular attention is given to her interest in architectural space, where she dissolved the boundaries between real and imaginary urban landscapes and moved beyond formal references to Portuguese visual culture and avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Futurism.

Born in Lisbon, Vieira da Silva trained in that city and in Paris. The idea of space became a central theme in her work, merging tradition and modernity. Her compositions, featuring labyrinthine structures, chromatic rhythms, and fragmented perspectives, capture the essence of a world in perpetual transformation. Works such as *La Chambre à carreaux* (*The Tiled Room*, 1935) or *Figure de ballet* (*Ballet Figure*, 1948) reflect her interest in architecture and movement, dissolving the distinction between figure and background and revealing a highly personal understanding of space. Influenced by her studies of sculpture and anatomy, as well as the great masters of the past, such as Paul Cézanne and the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, Vieira da Silva developed a unique pictorial idiom, in which the physicality of space merges with the implications of time and memory.

The artist is linked to both Peggy Guggenheim – she was one of the thirty-one artists included in the Exhibition by 31 Women, held at her New York museum-gallery, Art of This Century, in 1943 – and to Solomon R. Guggenheim through Hilla Rebay, the first director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, the forerunner of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, who was one of her earliest supporters through the purchase in 1937 of *Composition* (*Composition*, 1936), which is still in the holdings of the U.S. museum.

TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

Maria Helena and Arpad

The first section of the exhibition explores Vieira da Silva's relationship with her husband, Szenes, through a series of reciprocal portraits that introduce their profoundly symbiotic personal and artistic connection. In 1928 Vieira da Silva moved from Lisbon to Paris to pursue her art studies at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière where she met the Hungarian painter Arpad Szenes. The two locked eyes on her arrival at the art school, but only properly made each other's acquaintance two years later, and married shortly thereafter. Szenes respected Vieira da Silva's total devotion to painting and celebrated it in the many portraits he made of her at work, such as *Portrait de Marie-Hélène (Portrait of Maria Helena, 1940)* exhibited here. This work is shown alongside Vieira da Silva's self-portrait and portraits of Szenes that she made over the years.

The Anatomy of Space

The show then deepens the theme of the studio-atelier, the artist's workspace but also the locus of her reflections on architectural space, as seen in the paintings dating from the 1930s on view, where the skeletal structures of the environments take on an almost anatomical quality. *Composition (Composition, 1936)*, on loan from the Guggenheim New York, is emblematic of this period. The skeletal forms that take centre stage in *Composition* and its pendant work *Composition (Composition, 1936)* can be described as anatomical studies of space. The representation of space will become a recurrent motif in Vieira da Silva's work.

Checkmate: Dancers, Chess Players, and Card Players

The third section of the exhibition brings together a series of works dedicated to the subject of dancers and chess players, such as *Danse (Dance, 1938)* and *Échiquier rouge ou Joueurs d'échecs (Red Chess Board or Chess Players, 1946)* in which the game of chess becomes a metaphor of existence, an interplay of action and reaction. In these works Vieira da Silva crafts a language of abstraction in which figurative forms are both concealed and revealed. Small, juxtaposed squares painted meticulously are the basis for these lively works which call to mind the earthenware tiles, *azulejos*, from her native Portugal.

World War II: a View from Rio de Janeiro

A particularly poignant section of the exhibition tackles the period covering World War II, when Vieira da Silva was an exile in Brazil and created works imbued with a pain and tension that reflect the human tragedy ongoing at the time. Except for *Les Noyés (The Drowned)*, painted in 1938, which prefigures the arrival of dark times, and *Rio Carnival (Carnaval de Rio, 1944)*, which is infused with the joy and ebullience of the local festivity, all the other paintings included in this section represent the tragedy at the heart of World War II. Vieira da Silva's response to the news from Europe also conveys her own suffering, experienced at a distance yet physically tangible.

Return to Paris

When World War II ended, Vieira da Silva was reinvigorated in her desire to return to Europe. Lisbon, the city of her birth, continued to influence her, but it was Paris, the city of her professional achievement, that she returned to in 1947. Despite the state of disrepair in which she found the city, Vieira da Silva's outlook was positive, and she celebrated France's newfound freedom in *Fête Nationale (National Celebration, 1949-50)* and *Fêtes à Paris (Paris Celebration, 1950)*. Concurrently, she delved into the study and dissection of architectural spaces, as evinced by works like *Le Couloir ou Intérieur (The Hallway or Interior, 1948)* in



which Vieira da Silva reimagines an interior space using the checkered technique that characterizes her representations of dancers and harlequins.

Cities: Real and Imagined

This section considers how Vieira da Silva turned the “city” into a subject of visual study. Real and imaginary urban landscapes are the subject of an extensive body of work, where the faithful representation of places becomes subordinate to capturing their atmosphere, as seen in works such as *Paris, la nuit* (*Paris, the Night*, 1951) or *Fête vénitienne* (*Venetian Celebration*, 1949). Whereas *La Ville tentaculaire* (*The Tentacular City*, 1954) and *Personnages dans la rue* (*Characters in the Street*, 1948) speak to the humdrum of city-dwelling, referring to all cities rather than to one in particular.

Exteriors and Interiors

From the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Vieira da Silva dedicated herself to the depiction of interiors and exteriors, a selection of which is presented in this room. Works featuring building sites, railway stations, and churches are poised between construction and infinity, in works such as *Chantier* (*Construction Site*, 1950) and *La Chapelle Gothique* (*The Gothic Chapel*, 1951). This investigation on the organization of space continues in works in which external and internal spaces merge and transform continually, such as in *Intérieur nègre* (*Black Interior*, 1950) or *L'Arène* (*The Arena*, 1950).

Shades of White

The last section of the exhibition showcases works from various phases of the artist's career that highlight the special role that the colour white held in her pictorial investigations. United by the colour white they speak to different moments in Vieira da Silva's artistic journey through abstraction.

DIDAKTIKA

In Focus, the educational space located in the same space as the exhibition, will address the relevance of the various studios the artist had throughout her career in places as diverse as Lisbon, Paris, and Rio de Janeiro, among others, and will be accompanied by the screening of excerpts from José Álvaro Morais's film, *Bicho, Ma Femme Chamada* (1978), showcasing Vieira da Silva's home-studio designed by architect Georges Johannot.

Educational Programs

Opening Talk (October 14)

Exhibition Curator and Curatorial and Collections Director at the National Portrait Gallery, London, Flavia Frigeri, will present the exhibition, which was first shown at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

Shared Reflections: Key Concepts (November 5)

These tours are led by Museum professionals and offer different perspectives on the exhibition. In this case, Education Coordinator Luz Maguregui will reveal the most relevant ideas stemming from the show.

Tours with Music: Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (October 30, November 6, 13, 20, 27)

Guided tours of the exhibition from a musical perspective with musicologist Patricia Sojo, addressing aspects such as the artist's inspiration in Strauss's music, her friendship with composer Pierre Boulez, her favourite musical pieces, playing the piano, or musical references to Paris and Portugal.



Tour with... (November 14)

A visit to the show to learn and appreciate it from a different perspective, on this occasion, that of psychologist María Rodrigo Yanguas, about the psychological benefits of chess in daily life.

Creative Session: Stained Glass (January 22)

Workshop led by Paula Ruibal about a practical approach to one of the least known aspects of Vieira da Silva: her stained-glass work. Taking her commission for a number of stained-glass windows for the Saint-Jacques church in Reims (France), participants will become familiar with the creative and technical aspects of this process and Vieira da Silva's vision of light as a transforming element of space.

Screening of VIERARPAD (January 30, 31)

The correspondence between Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and her husband Arpad Szenes as a pretext for this visual journey. A Zulfilmes production premiered in 2022 directed by João Mário Grilo reflecting the social, intellectual, and political context, accompanied by interesting archival images.

Performance Olatz de Andrés -Lokke- (February 7)

The practice of chess was relevant to Vieira da Silva as a method of rational analysis that could be extended to other creative practices such as dance. In this interactive performance entitled Doppel-Chess, two bodies merge with the game of chess in relation to the architecture of the Atrium of the Museum.

Museum Member Activities

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao members also have the opportunity to participate in additional tours and activities related to each exhibition.

Soirée, Matinée (October 13, 14)

Members-only tours with the exhibition curators prior to opening to the public. For International and Honor Members.

Lagunartean (October 23)

Guided tour of the exhibition and lunch at the Bistró Guggenheim Bilbao.

Exclusive Tours (October 28 and 31, November 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16)

Guided group tours of the exhibition.

In-Depth Tours (October 29, November 5)

Small group talks that contextualize the exhibition followed by a guided tour.

360° Immersions (November 13)

Free, live online guided virtual tours of the exhibitions given by Museum's Associate Director of Digital Education Marta Arzak.

<https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/museum-members>



CATALOGUE

The show will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, with essays by exhibition curator Flavia Frigeri and authors Lauren Elkin, Jennifer Sliwka, and Giulia Andreani, on different aspects of the artist's work, such as her ability to transform space into intricate abstractions, the lessons she learned from the Renaissance masters, or her vision of the city, both real and imagined, among others. The catalogue also includes a detailed chronology.

COVER IMAGE

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Le Couloir ou intérieur (The Hallway or Interior), 1948

Oil and graphite on canvas

46 x 55 cm

Private collection

© María Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025

For more information:

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Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Online press image service

In the press section of the Museum's website (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.eus), journalists can download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building.

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For further information, the Press Department of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao can be contacted by phone (+34 944 359 008) or email (media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus)

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), 1930
Oil on canvas
54 x 46 cm
Comité Arpad Szenes – Vieira da Silva, Paris
© María Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
La Chambre à carreaux (The Tiled Room), 1935
Oil on canvas
60.4 x 91.3 cm
Tate, Accepted by HM Government in lieu of tax with additional assistance from the Nicholas Themans Trust, 2014
© María Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Composition (Composition), January 1936

Oil on canvas

105.3 x 161.5 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim

Founding Collection, By gift 37.399

© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Composition (Composition), 1936

Oil on canvas

146 x 106 cm

Fundação Arpad Szenes – Vieira da Silva, Lisbon

© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

La Scala ou Les Yeux (La Scala or The Eyes), 1937

Oil on canvas

60 x 92 cm

Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbon

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Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Le Jeu de cartes (The Card Game), 1937

Oil and graphite on canvas

73 x 92 cm

Private collection, France-Portugal.

Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbon

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Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

História trágico marítima ou Naufrage (Tragic Maritime Story or Shipwreck), 1944

Oil on canvas

81.5 x 100 cm

CAM – Centro de Arte Moderna Gulbenkian, Lisbon

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Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Figure de ballet (Ballet Figure), 1948
Oil and graphite on canvas
27 x 46 cm
Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbon
© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Le Couloir ou intérieur (The Hallway or Interior), 1948
Oil and graphite on canvas
46 x 55 cm
Private collection
© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Fête vénitienne (Venetian Celebration), 1949
Oil on canvas
65 x 100 cm
Private collection, France
Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbon
© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
L'arène (The arena), 1950
Oil on canvas
60 x 73 cm
Private Collection, Portugal.
Courtesy Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris-Lisbonne
© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
La Ville (The City), 1950–51
Oil on canvas
97.3 x 129.4 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman
© Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, VEGAP, Bilbao 2025





Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Passage des miroirs (Pasaje de los espejos), 1981

Óleo sobre lienzo

100.3 x 81 cm

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