

## Landscape Artist Roberto Burle Marx's Lasting Influence

A new exhibit at New York's Jewish Museum demonstrates the late Brazilian landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx's influence on today's contemporary artists, including distinguished painter Beatriz Milhazes who challenges motifs of the tropics



**A TOWERING FIGURE** of Brazilian modernism, 20th-century landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx has long been known as the father of tropical garden design, the man who opened his compatriots' eyes to native vegetation at a time when European-style plots full of imported roses and begonias were all the rage. Taking indigenous flora like Amazonian water lilies, cactuses, palm trees

and agaves as his palette, he created biomorphic abstractions that recall the work of the artist Jean Arp. And he applied this bold new approach to some 2,000 public and private projects in 20 countries around the world, including the monumental parks and floating gardens of Brasília, his country's utopian capital.

An even richer picture of the man will emerge this spring with the opening of *Roberto Burle Marx: Brazilian Modernist*, running May 6 through September 18 at New York's Jewish Museum. The first wide-ranging exhibition of Burle Marx's work in North America, it will feature rare highlights—such as an 87-foot-long tapestry that has left Brazil only once and never-displayed designs for synagogue gardens and stained-glass windows—revealing his talents not just in landscaping and botany, but also in painting, jewelry, sculpture, and costume and set design. (The show will later travel to Berlin's KunstHalle by Deutsche Bank and the Museu de Arte do Rio in Rio de Janeiro.)

More than two decades after Burle Marx's death, in 1994, his legacy continues to influence contemporary artists, as can be seen in the seven projects the museum assembled, and in most cases commissioned, to accompany the show, by talents as varied as the Venezuelan conceptualist Juan

Araujo, the American experimental composer Arto Lindsay and the French video artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster.



Of those works, a particularly thrilling one will be *Gamboia II*, an extravagant, efflorescent canopy made of dangling beads, balls, flowers and other materials typically used for samba floats. Its creator, painter Beatriz Milhazes, is a true Carioca—a native of Rio de Janeiro, where Burle Marx spent most of his life—and her

piece is named after the city’s samba school district. It will take pride of place in the museum lobby, hanging from the ornate ceiling, its sparkling tendrils drifting above visitors’ heads like the flowering heliconia and spiky bromeliads in a Burle Marx garden. Even the connection to Carnival is a fitting tribute to the late designer, who was considered such a national treasure that in 1988 he was saluted at Rio’s annual festival with a float and song that started “Oh! Grand master Burle Marx!”

Known for her colorful collage-like paintings that pulsate with décorative and geometric motifs, Milhazes, 56, is one of Brazil’s most successful contemporary artists, both in terms of prices and renown. And she spent her childhood, in Rio’s Copacabana neighborhood, immersed in the work of Burle Marx. To the north of her family home stands one of his largest public projects, the gardens for Parque do Flamengo, a 300-acre expanse of beaches, playgrounds and playing fields, completed in 1967. In the 1970s, as Rio expanded, Burle Marx redesigned the medians and sidewalks of Copacabana’s oceanfront Avenida Atlântica, creating a 2.6-mile-long stretch of stone mosaics magnifying and riffing on the pavement’s original 1905 black-and-white wave pattern, itself a play on a centuries-old Portuguese motif. “I was always going to the beach and walking through his designs,” Milhazes recalls.

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Both her mother, an art historian now retired from the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, and her father, formerly a lawyer, are passionate about Brazilian culture, and they made sure their daughters understood the significance of Burle Marx's work. "It was always an important thing to talk about and show us," Milhazes says. By the time she attended Rio's Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, in the waning days of the 1964–1985 military dictatorship, she was keenly aware of Burle Marx as a leading cultural figure. Later, after Milhazes started teaching at the school, the director organized a show of Burle Marx's paintings, and she had the chance to meet the artist. "It was an exciting moment," she recalls. "He was very elegant—not his clothes but his posture; he had this feeling of confidence and warmth." Despite his friendly demeanor, Milhazes was too shy to strike up much of a conversation.

It wasn't until the early '90s, when she was trying to find her own way as an artist, that Milhazes started to look at Burle Marx's work in earnest. She had rejected the figurative painting that was fashionable at the time, wanting instead to create abstract work. But she was looking for a more personal expression than the neo-concretist abstraction of her fellow countrywoman Lygia Clark. On a trip to Paris in 1985, she was electrified by her first in-person viewing of the work of Henri Matisse. "It changed everything," she says. "I'd never seen any of the modern painters live. I hadn't seen the real pressure, the scale." Inspired by Matisse's use of color and his abstraction of natural forms, she veered even further from the mainstream.

For direction, Milhazes looked to the Brazilian artists of the '20s and '30s, especially those, like the surrealist painter Tarsila do Amaral, in the Antropofagia—or "cannibalism"—movement, which ingested elements of European modernism and fused them with Brazilian culture. (It flowered again in



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the famous Tropicália movement of the '60s.) She was similarly drawn to Burle Marx, she says, because “he was focused on what he could find within Brazil, in the tropical environment.” And though she later came to admire his paintings, which ranged from portraits to still lifes to abstractions, initially, she explains, “it was more about his concepts, his landscape drawings. I liked the simplicity. Then I went back to the Copacabana sidewalk. From there I went to the plants themselves.”

Milhazes developed a language that melded geometric shapes (squares, squiggles, target-like circles, pop art–inspired, Bridget Riley–esque dots) with stylized fruit and flowers, arabesques, paisleys and other motifs drawn from Brazilian culture—Baroque churches, folk amulets and colonial arts all the way to Carnival and Carmen Miranda headdresses. The painting style she developed is equally unusual: It involves applying acrylic paint to sheets of plastic, gluing the painted side to the canvas, peeling off the plastic and placing the shapes on top. Though the work reads as flat and graphic when it’s reproduced, in reality it is layered and multidimensional.

Milhazes has gone on to great acclaim, representing Brazil at the 2003 Venice Biennale and showing at galleries and museums around the world. But at first, “People in Rio didn’t know what to do with her early work,” says Tobias Ostrander, the chief curator of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, which mounted the artist’s first U.S. survey, *Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico*, in 2014. “The older guard were all geometric abstraction folks who thought it was too decorative, too figurative,” Ostrander explains, while the younger crowd, moved by artists like Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente, didn’t find it figurative enough. “She was painting references to the body, particularly the decorative feminine body—lace and flowers and pearls,” Ostrander adds. “It was this hybrid that was really uncomfortable for both sides.”



Of course, Burle Marx, in his time, presented a discomfiting hybrid too. Born in 1909, he grew up in Rio, but it wasn't until he went to Berlin to study painting that he became fascinated with Brazilian plant life. It was on a visit to Berlin's botanical garden, in 1928, that he first encountered certain Amazonian flora and other unfamiliar specimens. Returning home the next year, he began experimenting with them in his mother's garden. A neighbor, the architect Lúcio Costa—later the planner of Brasília—took notice, and by the age of 25, with Costa's help, Burle Marx had become the head of the parks department in Recife, a city in the northeast. There, his use of cactus and red sugar cane, both associated with workers' uprisings against the

era's military dictatorship, figured in accusations of sedition against the young designer, who was later dismissed. "Yet the modernists were also using the cactus as a symbol of Brazil," says Claudia Nahson, one of the curators of the Jewish Museum show.

"So he was really operating within the context of early modernism."

Burle Marx went on to work with Costa and Oscar Niemeyer (then Costa's assistant) on Rio's Ministry of Education and Health, an International Style building. With the three gardens Burle Marx created there in 1938, he ruptured completely with the past, massing native plants into textured, amoeba-like shapes that seem to burst from within their rectilinear frames.

"He showed Brazilians how beautiful it was to use native plants and tropical plants from all over the world," says Lauro Cavalcanti, the curator of an in-depth Burle Marx show that opened at Rio's Paço Imperial in 2008 and traveled to São Paulo, Berlin and Paris. "And he introduced the aesthetics of painting to landscape design." Burle Marx sparked a creative revolution, if not a populist revolt.

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Though one might not describe Milhazes's work as overtly political either, it too broke boundaries. "Her abstractions are built from elements of Brazilian folk and pop culture," says Jane Cohan, a partner in New York's James Cohan Gallery, which represents Milhazes in the U.S. "With some irony, she's playing with what the world thinks of as her culture—she's giving us what we expect, but she's made it up."

Nahson sees many commonalities between the two artists, especially the way Milhazes, like Burle Marx, is a major colorist. They both exhibit a huge "push and pull between the rational and the lyrical," she says. "Beatriz's work bursts with energy, but behind it there's a thought-out process. Burle Marx was also very much about that—there's nothing left to chance."



The relationship between nature and art is at play in the work of both, which is evident in their respective studios. The Sítio Roberto Burle Marx, a sprawling collection of orange and banana plantations outside Rio that the designer acquired piecemeal over decades, eventually became ground zero for all his creative experimentation, the place where he worked out his ideas in multiple art forms, from painting to sculpture, and nurtured the thousands of plants—he discovered close to

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50 species—he brought back from his jungle expeditions. (A pioneering ecologist, he also helped spearhead the rainforest preservation movement.)

Burle Marx's inventive spirit found other outlets as well. He entertained frequently, cooking, playing music and hosting guests like Le Corbusier, Alexander Calder, Buckminster Fuller, Pablo Neruda and Susan Sontag. With the help of Costa and other architect friends, he built modernist follies: He held parties in an open-roofed "stone kitchen," assembled from granite salvaged from 18th- and 19th-century Rio buildings. Toward the end of his life he created a fantastical studio from the remains of another historic structure. "He designed the facade like a puzzle," recalls Haruyoshi Ono, a longtime colleague who now runs the landscape firm Burle Marx founded. "It's an artistic composition."

As for Milhazes, she works out of two small row houses in Rio's Jardim Botânico district, using one for painting and one for making her collages. "I'm isolated there," she says. "Every subject can have its own space and time. It's perfect."

Her two spaces border on Rio's 19th-century botanical garden, allowing her to observe the paradoxes of the tropical environment. "People think it's colorful, when it's not," she says. "It's actually very green." (If you visit the Sítio Burle Marx, she adds, "you'll understand that very easily, because it's all about different kinds of green and shapes and ornamentation.") Lately she has found herself preoccupied with raw nature itself. "Since I grew up in Rio, with an ocean and a forest as well as a garden, I find I need it for my creativity," she notes.

Milhazes's work remains deeply grounded in the streets of the city, too, as can be seen in *Gamboia*, a work that she first developed from a set she made in 2004 for her sister, the choreographer Marcia Milhazes. After years of channeling her energies into painting, she says, "I started thinking I would like to develop something that was more about volume." Over time she has reconfigured the original *Gamboia* for different shows. This process inspired her to create her first sculptures, made with materials like brass, copper, aluminum and wood, which premiered last fall at James Cohan's Chelsea gallery.

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And now she has re-envisioned *Gamboa* as a tribute to Burle Marx. “Modernism has had such a huge influence on me,” she explains. “And Burle Marx was part of everything having to do with modernism in Brazil.”