



*Rooster Gallery
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TABLECLOTH: THE UNEQUIVOCAL RESULT OF FRIENDSHIP

In 1972, in the opening essay for the catalog of Roberto Burle Marx's retrospective exhibition held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in the following year, Clarival do Prado Valladares stated that Burle Marx "[...] lacked the chance of a global exposure for a better critical evaluation of its large and eclectic oeuvre¹."

Throughout the years, Burle Marx's work and its importance have been given more exposure, which it already deserved when Prado Valladares wrote the above-mentioned warning. It was not an issue of giving him credit or reevaluating his work, since in the 1970s he was already regarded as the most influential landscape architect alive. The real issue was allowing Burle Marx to be also seen as an artist with broader ambitions and not only as an architect whose works could only be experienced in situ, a curse not exclusively his.

The musealization of architecture has always raised problematic issues whose answers have varied, depending on the moment and the people who pertinently addressed the subject. The fact that Burle Marx dealt with landscape architecture and not with architecture per se, raised additional issues though. The common architecture exhibition held at museums, due to the obvious impossibility of bringing the real work of art inside the museum space, revolves around architectural representation. Burle Marx's architecture however does not deal with iron or concrete but with a combination of sidewalks, flowers and trees. Although his projects can be shown just like any other architect's, its organic and perishable nature does not fit the small-scale models and its details do not fit a blueprint. An inevitable sense of incompleteness therefore arises.

If the project's unity is blatantly compromised with the absence of smells and rustling leaves in the exhibit space, the association of his work with the work of other fairly celebrated Brazilian modernist architects, such as Oscar Niemeyer or Lúcio Costa, relegated him to a complementary role.

But, Prado Valladares was not necessarily addressing any of these issues. Burle Marx's genius and creativity was broader and the man far more complex. His originality could not be resumed to one single activity.

Born in 1909 in São Paulo, Brazil, Burle Marx was the fourth child of Wilhelm Marx and Cecília Burle, an upper class family of European descent.

Brought up in a cultured environment, Burle Marx soon developed a passion for the visual arts, music and gardening. The former was first stimulated as a child due to his parents' love for this activity and evolved during a stay in Germany in 1928-29, when he visited a greenhouse of Brazilian plants at Berlin's Botanical Garden. It was also in Germany that he

first studied painting and drawing in Degner Klemm's school and first became acquainted with the work of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee and Hans Arp, among other European avant-garde artists. Both experiences had an obvious impact on the young Burle Marx's future choices.

In 1930, upon his return to Brazil, he went on to study Fine Arts at the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro and then became Cândido Portinari and Alberto da Veiga Guignard's studio assistant.

It was also at the National School of Fine Arts that Burle Marx familiarized himself with architects and botanists. Equipped with his passion for gardening and the recently acquired knowledge on landscape architecture, in 1932, he developed his first landscape integrated in a project by Lúcio Costa for the Schwartz family private residence in São Paulo. This collaboration with his former professor indelibly marked Burle Marx's fate and in 1934 he was appointed Director of Parks and Gardens in Recife, a position he held until 1937. There he had the chance to design his first gardens with an ecological character, namely the gardens for the Praça da República and the water gardens of Casa Forte.

In 1937 Burle Marx was awarded the Gold Medal for Painting at the National School of Fine Arts and in 1941 he finally had his first painting solo exhibition at the "Associação dos Artistas Brasileiros" in Rio de Janeiro. Two years later, in 1943, Burle Marx started to collaborate with Niemeyer – a partnership that would last throughout life – and conceived the gardens of the Pampulha complex.

The 1940s is, in fact, the period of affirmation of his artistic career. The intense rhythm and prolific collaborations that evolved in the next decades would earn him his reputation as a landscape architect. Burle Marx, nevertheless, did not neglect his career as a painter and in 1948 his paintings were shown in the Brazilian section of the Venice Biennial.

In 1952, Roberto Burle Marx had his first retrospective exhibition – that included paintings and landscape projects – at the Museum of Art of São Paulo; contributed to an architecture exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art of New York; and won the Prize for Landscape Architecture, back again in São Paulo. In 1956 a solo exhibition of his work took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. In that same year the construction of Brasília started. Once again, Burle Marx collaborated with Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, this time in one of the most striking moments for architecture in the 20th century. The construction of the new Brazilian capital took 41 months and was inaugurated in 1960 by the President Juscelino Kubitschek.

Two of his most prestigious projects are conceived in 1961, the Monumental Axis also in Brasília and the Flamengo Park in Rio de Janeiro. Throughout the 1960s his landscape activity intensified and in 1965 he received the Fine Arts Medal of the American Institute of Architects.

The amount of projects Burle Marx designed throughout the 1970s and 1980s are too extensive to list. However, it is worth noting the Copacabana promenade pavement, which became a landmark of Rio de Janeiro (1970) and the Inhotim Park in Brumadinho, which in 2004 would house the contemporary art collection of Bernardo Paz.

In 1994, Roberto Burle Marx died in Rio de Janeiro at the age of 84, leaving behind over 2,000 landscape projects.

The large amount of projects left by Burle Marx, either built or just planned, is not only too extensive to list but it is also accompanied by an extensive pictorial oeuvre. After all, he did study painting and throughout his life did show these works in exhibitions independently from his other areas of interest and activity.

Burle Marx believed the solutions and compositional options in landscape architecture did not have a direct correlation with painting due to the three-dimensional nature of the first in opposition with the two-dimensionality of the latter. Therefore, according to Prado Valladares, Burle Marx did not accept “[...] a critical interpretation of plastic unity between architecture and painting².”

In spite of Burle Marx’s opinion, it is fair to believe, landscape architecture and painting had, to some extent, some type of relationship. Prado Valladares smooths an eventual controversy by saying that “The landscape built by Roberto Burle Marx, in the form of gardens, is one of his ways of painting [...] since painting is all the changes of colors over any surface, through unlimited processes and materials arising from the aesthetic reason and plastic order.³” If in a first period his paintings might have not had a direct connection to it – due to the imprisonment to earlier pictorial influences – the contamination of painting by landscape architecture becomes evident when analyzing the pictorial grammar of subsequent phases. The reverse is also true, and some solutions can be found in his landscapes, which are indebted to his pictorial activity. As Lauro Cavalcanti stated “Painting and landscape interact as a continuous flow in Burle Marx’s art without one taking precedence over the other.⁴” The works being shown at “Roberto Burle Marx: Tablecloth,” are dated from 1973 till 1990 and correspond to a mature period of the artist’s work and therefore chronologically fit this assessment.

Produced for or during his stays at José Ramoa’s palace at Constância, Portugal, this tablecloth and twelve works on paper are not only good examples of the aforementioned evaluation, but they are also a testimony to the friendship that bonded these two men.

José Ramoa was born in 1941 in Braga, Portugal, and in 1961 immigrated to Brazil where he worked in public relations for the “Companhia Brasileira de Empreendimentos Sociais” at Rio de Janeiro. This allowed him to meet several personalities of the Brazilian cultural scene, such as Burle Marx. In 1969, Ramoa returned to Portugal and started working at an art and antiques gallery in Lisbon. Throughout this time, he met several Portuguese intellectuals such as Vasco de Lima Couto, Natália Correia, Alexandre O’Neill, Sofia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Beatriz Costa, among others.

In 1975 he acquired the aforementioned Constância Palace and from then on the cultural gatherings started taking place there. When in Brazil, Ramoa was a frequent visitor of Burle Marx’s residence at Santo António da Bica. The friendship resumed in the recently acquired palace and Burle Marx’s stays lasted until his death in 1994. Ramoa would later open, in 1988, the Galeria de Constância and in 1990 Burle Marx’s works were shown there. The tablecloth was not one of the works displayed there along with the majority of the works on paper on display at Rooster since they were gifts and have remained unseen till the present date.

Painted in 1985, the hand painted tablecloth shows the coherence of Burle Marx’s artistic perspective. Colored in a greenish blue, this work fitted Ramoa’s dining table perfectly. The geometric patterns in the center of the composition, painted with the use of fabric ink and stencils, assume preponderance and the edges a secondary function since those sitting at the table would not see them directly. As Pia Catton pertinently noticed, when completely

stretched and seen from above this work resembles the Copacabana promenade. The aforementioned large strips that can be found on the sides could be the roads on both sides of the central axis that constitutes the promenade pavement.

By overlapping the geometric patterns, Burle Marx achieves a complex composition that nevertheless is still guided by rationality, becoming harmonious despite its intentional confusion of lines. One could dare to say that Burle Marx intervened in the fabric the same way Nature intervened in his gardens.

If the tablecloth reveals patterns carefully imagined and displayed, the works on paper reveal a looser approach to the act of painting. As Lélia Coelho Frota stated, “The freedom intrinsic to drawing lent great fluidity to the imaginative weave of forms in Burle Marx’s prints, India ink drawings and etchings [...]”.⁵ Dated from 1973 till 1990, these works also provide an excellent opportunity to understand Burle Marx’s different approach throughout time due to their temporal length and heterogeneity. If we carefully look at them in a chronological order these differences will be more apprehensible. In a 1973 drawing Burle Marx comes closer to Wilfredo Lam’s “jungles” due to its carefully intricate composition. But, as time goes by, the organic and biomorphic shapes have the tendency to become simplified and in the 1990s drawings the patches of color take over the compositional space and his love for form seems less restrained and more flexible.

Despite the lack of color, the works on paper still retain a very unique sensitivity, specific to the 20th century Latin American art and derived from a very creative period in time, a time of cultural affirmation on which Brazil was one of its most fertile soils.

Since Prado Valladares’ warning in 1972, Burle Marx has received more attention and exposure. In 1991, while still alive, a retrospective exhibition of his work curated by William Howard Adams was held at MoMA. More recently, several exhibitions took place, which provided a clearer look into his work; especially the 2009 retrospective exhibition curated by Lauro Cavalcanti held at the Paço Imperial in Rio de Janeiro, “Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos, A Permanência do Instável.”

“Tablecloth,” in regard to the previously mentioned warning, falls short when addressing Burle Marx’s complex body of work. As Coelho Frota accurately puts it, “He was a draftsman, painter, great connoisseur of botany, set designer, musician, sculptor, and landscape architect. To appreciate any one aspect of Burle Marx’s multifaceted personality, one must bear in mind that we are dealing with an anthropological phenomenon, a cultural complex, a whole Burle Marx tribal group in which each individual was autonomous and, at the same time, relative⁶.”

Nevertheless, despite its inevitable incompleteness, “Tablecloth” provides valuable insights on Roberto Burle Marx’s personal relationships – particularly with his friend José Ramoa – thus allowing the viewer to experience these never before seen works in a more intimate level, which are in turn an unequivocal result of his friendship.

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- 1 VALLADARES, C. P., Roberto Burle Marx, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian / Embaixada do Brasil, 1973, p. 7.
 - 2 Idem, Ibidem, p. 9.
 - 3 Idem, 43 Anos de Pintura – Roberto Burle Marx, Museu de Arte da Prefeitura de Belo Horizonte, 1972.
 - 4 CAVALCANTI, L., “Roberto Burle Marx – The Permanence of the Unstable” in Roberto Burle Marx: The Modernity of Landscape, Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine/Institut français d’architecture and Actar, 2011, p. 34.
 - 5 FROTA, L. C., “A Planetary Modernist” in Roberto Burle Marx: The Modernity of Landscape, Cité de l’architecture & du patrimoine/Institut français d’architecture and Actar, 2011, p.146.
 - 6 Idem, Ibidem, p.141