

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian Online
Club Tropicalia: the Mesmerising Power of Brazilian Art
Claire Armitstead
22 April 2018



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Live parrots, rainbow hammocks, exploding bricks ... Britain is on the verge of a Brazilian art invasion – and it all started with a wartime gift for embattled airmen.

In the autumn of 1943, the Brazilian art world decided it wanted to do something to cheer up wartime Britain and raise money for its embattled airmen. Seventy artists – including several stars of the country’s emerging art scene – clubbed together and 168 pictures were sent to the UK for exhibition and sale.

“As artists,” they wrote, “this was the best way we could find to express to the English our admiration and solidarity.” Britain’s ambassador in Rio de Janeiro wrote to foreign secretary Anthony Eden, asking for £25 to cover transport costs, pointing out that the Brazilians had framed the paintings themselves so “that we should be spared the difficulties [of doing so] in wartime”.

The pictures were duly shipped, but it took some high-level arm-twisting to persuade the Royal Academy to exhibit them. “It is amusing to read that the RA turned us down on the grounds that they didn’t like the pictures!” wrote one exasperated British Council staffer. “Neither do we: but that was not the point.”

The show finally opened in November 1944, and went on to tour the country – though not without some eye-popping condescension, even from the critic who wrote the catalogue prologue. Sacheverell Sitwell drew parallels between Villa-Lobos, “who has written too much music”, and Diego Rivera, “who has over-painted”. He loftily concluded: “The progress of painting has been fast on this prolific soil, so fast that we may hope it will become slower and more serious.”

So blinkered was the British art establishment about the potential value of any of the works that all but 25 of them left the country. Those that remained were doled out to 20 galleries around the UK, from Glasgow to Plymouth. They have had a sad afterlife, languishing unseen in storage – until this month, when a feat of sleuthing by an energetic Brazilian Embassy cultural attache has reunited all but one for an exhibition, *The Art of Diplomacy*, in London.

This reminder of a time when Europeans had no idea what to make of Latin American art comes just as Brazil’s artists appear to be in higher demand internationally than ever. London alone will be showcasing three of them this summer, with Beatriz Milhazes at White Cube Bermondsey, Luiz Zerbini at the South London Gallery and Paulo Bruscky at the Richard Saltoun Gallery.

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Zerbini and Bruscky are making their UK solo debuts, as are the collective OPAVIVARÁ! who will invite visitors to sip herbal tea and swing in a giant rainbow hammock at Tate Liverpool. Meanwhile, Cinthia Marcelle – whose installation *The Family in Disorder* is at Modern Art Oxford – offsets OPAPIVARÁ!'s politics of community with a vision of order and chaos: humble building materials such as bricks, planks and paper are neatly stacked in one room and exploded in another, as if they were destroyed by riots or bulldozed by city planners.

In the US, New York's Whitney Museum recently staged a major touring retrospective of the neo-concretist Hélio Oiticica, while the city's Museum of Modern Art has just opened a retrospective of Tarsila do Amaral, one of the 14 female artists who – unnoticed by Sitwell – contributed to the 1944 exhibition.

So what's so special about Brazilian art and why did it take the old world so long to recognise it? Tarsila, as she is affectionately called, was a member of the influential Grupo dos Cinco, a close-knit circle of five artists and writers who, as far back as the 1920s, had been making a case for a uniquely Brazilian modernism.

"I feel myself ever more Brazilian," she wrote to her family in 1923 from her base in France. "I want to be the painter of my country. Don't think that this tendency is viewed negatively here. On the contrary. What they want is that each one brings the contribution of his own country ... Paris has had enough of Parisian art."

But the Cinco were ahead of their time. As art historian Michael Asbury writes in *The Art of Diplomacy* catalogue, it would take decades for Brazil to be recognised as a major player: "The idea of exhibiting modernist works from outside the main economic and cultural centres would have been considered [...] an exercise in showcasing derivative modern art."

The 1944 show came at a turning point for Brazilian art. The country was about to make a visionary investment in its cultural heritage, as RA curator Adrian Locke points out. Between 1947 and 1948 – when much of the world was exhausted by the second world war – Brazil opened three major galleries, one in Rio and two in São Paulo. In 1951, it took the audacious step of founding the world's second biennale, which set out to rival Venice. Brâncuși, Picasso and Jackson Pollock were among the artists featured in the first two editions of the Bienal de São Paulo.

The respect was slow to be reciprocated. Dawn Ades – who curated a landmark exhibition, *Art in Latin America*, at London's Hayward in 1989 – tracks the turning point in the UK to two decades earlier, in 1969, when the Whitechapel featured an installation by Hélio Oiticica that has become a benchmark.

Tropicália, a scaled-down version of which went on display at Tate Modern last autumn, aimed to evoke the higgledy-piggledy homes of Rio's favelas, complete with tropical foliage and live parrots. "It was proto-performance art as well as this most wonderful construction," says Ades. Oiticica, who died in 1980 at the age of 42, was "fascinating because, on one level, he was completely international, but he thought of himself as having Brazilian roots."

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Guardian critic Adrian Searle noted as far back as 2007 that Tate Modern had been buying Oiticica's work, revealing the increasing influence of a group that also included his friends and associates Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape. "Theirs was a modernism freed from northern, protestant restraint, and an art that strove to go beyond the gallery and the closed world of the market."

For Ades, the question of what makes Brazilian art so special is itself wrong-headed. She argues against the "irrelevant and dangerous tide of nationalism" that has pervaded the history of art for the last century, citing Cildo Meireles as another example of why its artists should be judged on an international level. His 2001 work *Babel* – a circular tower made of hundreds of old radios tuned to different stations – was also recently purchased for Tate Modern.

On the coincidence of so many Brazilian solo shows in the UK, she says: "It might just be chance or it might be that there's a very rich ferment going on in the country right now. There's a real energy, but I certainly wouldn't put them in a box that says Brazilian art. There's a great exhibition to be done on the wave that goes from Brazil to Italy – *arte povera* – art that is on the edge of being an object in the real world."

The 24 pictures in *The Art of Diplomacy* might not all be world-class art but they contain forewarnings of this coming wave. The most powerful is a sinister oil painting in deep blues and browns of a small girl on a moonlit night, her head at an unnatural angle, as if she might be possessed by the toy she holds aloft on a stick. After the sale, which raised £1,000 for the RAF Benevolent Fund, *The Scarecrow (The Half-Wit)*, by artist, ceramicist and poet Cândido Portinari, was donated to Harrogate's Mercer gallery.

A soft-porny landscape of bare-breasted women on a beach was the Tate's only memento, gifted to the gallery by a Tory MP with more beneficence than taste. Even Cardoso Junior – the retired schoolteacher who painted the work, called *They Amuse Themselves* – might chuckle at the company he now keeps.