

# Samba Sessão

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[Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania](#)

through July 29

by Jeffrey Bussmann



West and Central African diaspora has immeasurably influenced Brazilian identity, particularly in the state of [Bahia](#). While there is ample academic discussion about how Afro-Brazilians have shaped national culture on the whole, their impact is less documented when it comes to Brazilian art in the twentieth century. There exists a multitude of reasons for this, not the least of which is that Brazilian artists who gained international traction subscribed to movements—such as Modernism, Constructivism, and Neo-Concretism—that reaffirmed the hegemony of Western European artistic conventions. The ways in which their works were affected by Afro-Brazilian currents are indisputably more generalized than those of outsider artists in Brazil, who were likely to come from an impoverished and institutionally undereducated background, and also to be black or mixed-race.

Today, Brazilian outsider art has become more visible than ever on a worldwide scale. Later this year [Arthur Bispo do Rosário](#), an influential but marginalized figure who voluntarily lived most of his adult life in a psychiatric colony, will come back into the limelight when he is featured at the *Bienal de São Paulo* (having previously represented Brazil in the 1995 *Biennale di Venezia*.) Collecting institutions are engaged in something of an “arms race,” looking to plug gaps in their Caribbean, Central, and South America holdings before the market is exhausted of quality buys or becomes prohibitively expensive. Many gallery-represented contemporary Brazilian artists, denizens of the international art fair economy, have consciously ingested elements of handicraft, folklore, and other traditional arts, though they are overwhelmingly university trained.

*Samba Sessão: Afro-Brazilian Art and Film*, presently on view at the [Arthur Ross Gallery](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, centers on a group of outsider works loaned from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Art collector John Axelrod amassed and only recently transferred the lot to the MFA, a transaction that exemplifies the need to rectify a historical oversight in its accession priorities, especially for a museum in a metropolitan area with significant Portuguese and Brazilian immigrant communities. Numbering seventeen pieces out of a larger cluster of African-American artists acquired by the MFA, the assortment is a small wonder of cohesion and visionary collecting. The exhibition at Penn, organized by Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw and Tamara J. Walker in conjunction with an undergraduate seminar, contextualizes the works with screenings (and video monitors in the gallery) of popular films like *Orfeu Negro* (*Black Orpheus*) and *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos* (*Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*).

Background for the uninitiated is not requisite but enhances the experience, since twentieth century Brazilian outsider artists generally imbued their work with the folkloric traditions from their region. Both paintings by Heitor dos Prazeres refer to a typical music and dance style rolled into one. *Samba* is better known to the average viewer, as are its well-researched Afro-Brazilian origins; but frevo, from the state of Pernambuco in the Northeast of Brazil, is perhaps more obscure. *Frevo* evolved from the *marcha*, an upbeat military band style at the turn of the nineteenth century that also incorporated some traits of ragtime music from North America. Its high-energy brass melody sets a fast tempo for an acrobatic dance (an offshoot of the martial art *Capoeira*) in which a parasol is used as a prop. Bodies stack upon each other in the planar flatness of *Frevo da Casa Verde*, heightening the sense that this is a snapshot of frenetic movement.

Physical and spiritual worlds commingle in some of the works, verging upon weirdness. Syncretic religions such as candomblé or umbanda (and other variants), which merged the Catholicism of Portuguese colonizers with the polytheistic beliefs of African slaves and freedmen, are distinct components of Afro-Brazilian identity, ever-present in national consciousness. Even though an overwhelming majority of Brazilians self-identify as Catholics, their beliefs are often elastic and inclusive of Afro-Brazilian and other world religions. Spiritism—along with Chico Xavier, its main protagonist in the twentieth century—remains a major component on this faith continuum, as well as a point of fascination in popular culture. Pedro Paulo Leal's *Sessão Espírita (Séance)* captures an eerie moment: one man lays prostrate at the left, while another man is being held up or possibly restrained at the right, overwhelmed by what they are sensing. Their exaggeratedly vertical hairdos also suggest a spirit presence in the room. Someone in the room must be acting as a medium, but it is impossible to tell whom.

Churches dating to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries still exist all over Brazil, and their Baroque iconography strongly influences visual tastes. In *Boizebú*, Waldomiro de Deus paints the devil in the way that Christ is often depicted: enthroned and flanked by winged angels (in this case, demons). One imagines that in the artist's worldview, Satan is a very real and constantly lurking force of temptation. The farther one ventures into the arid landscape of Northeast Brazil, the stronger convictions become about miracles and evil powers in daily life.

A majority of the work in *Samba Sessão* evokes a rural setting, but Maria Auxiliadora da Silva straddles bustling metropolitan life and the slower pace of the farm. She depicts a charming barrio in *Chuva sobre São Paulo (Rain over São Paulo)*. Despite the drizzle, happy people queue for a bus, walk their dogs, and head for the local restaurant. Inhabitants poke their heads out of windows as though they are chatting across the way. São Paulo is a place commonly noted for its crowdedness and architectural ugliness (at the time of her career it had already overtaken Rio de Janeiro as the most populous city in Brazil.) But Auxiliadora da Silva uses textures and colors that transform the scene into a *Sesame Street*-like urban oasis (or Vila Sésamo, in keeping with the Brazilian version.)

Texture becomes more prominent in Auxiliadora da Silva's *O Incendio (The Fire)*. She uses impasto strokes of paint on the flames, as well as glued fiber for the hair of those fleeing the blaze. The women have left their hair natural, and while the urgency of the situation means that homing in on a personal grooming habit would be ridiculous, it appears this emphasis on curly hair is an assertive statement. In Brazil, the history of hair as an indicator of ethnicity has largely mirrored that of America. Early in the twentieth century, a racially insensitive song such as "Teu Cabelo Não Nega" (Your Hair Doesn't Deny It), could be a massive Carnival hit. By the 1970s the Black Power movement was being embraced in South America, with many proponents in Brazilian popular culture: for example, Jorge Ben named his 1971 album Negro é Lindo (Black is Beautiful). It does not seem a stretch to regard Auxiliadora da Silva as an actor in changing attitudes toward blackness during the early 1970s, the last years of her sadly short life.

Placing works like those in *Samba Sessão* amid their own time and space is appropriate. But the artists drew from and contributed back to an ongoing narrative, which gives their work life beyond artifact status. Visit the weekly Feira Hippie (handicraft fair) in Rio de Janeiro, or any similar open-air market in cities all across Brazil, to see self-taught artists offering their paintings. There are the postcard vistas aimed at tourist shoppers, but there are also the scenes of plantations, tiny villages, and country dances. These artists are not acting so much as self-conscious preservationists of traditional culture as they are depicting what they know and see, encapsulating five centuries of national history, much of it bearing the mark of Afro-Brazilianism.

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