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Brazil is the Future

The Pitfalls and Potential of the Market for Post-War Art



Installation view, *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988* (2014). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

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Published 14 March 2017 in [Other Insights](#)

Brazil is “the country of the future... and always will be”, or so goes the popular quip that summarizes Brazil’s unique mixture of God-given optimism and sarcastic realism. The country’s art market has both characteristics in abundance. Any visitor to a Brazilian gallery or fair will be dumbstruck by the high prices being asked for mid-century works, whereas local buyers will scoff at those prices—saying that nobody pays retail, and that those prices are for foreigners or people who should know better (while also insisting that their own works are worth more than that).

Over the past two decades, Brazilian art has firmly moved from the margins to the center of the international art world. Scholars, curators, collectors and museum visitors now consider Lygia Clark, Mira Schendel, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and others to be an integral part of modern art history, with special attention paid to Concrete and Neo-Concrete art, the primary movements of 1950s and 1960s São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The work is rigorous, in creative dialogue with international art and has a perceptual/physical twist all of its own. And most of the central artists are women. What’s not to like?

Market challenges

But the Brazilian art market has its challenges. A protectionist tax code places a levy of almost 50% on art imports and exports (although the main art fair in São Paulo, SP Arte, has been successful in lowering it to 15% for the duration of the

fair). This has helped create a healthy but isolated local market of Brazilian collectors buying Brazilian art with little chance for international expansion. Some Brazilian collectors with homes abroad effectively have two collections: one of national artists at home and one of international artists abroad.

Another complicating factor is that the estates of the major artists are often not especially well organized, and representation has historically jumped from gallery to gallery. A buyer wanting to know, for example, how many works were produced by X artist in a particular style over a particular period will have great difficulty finding the information, which makes it especially difficult to judge a work's singularity or value.

The fact that very few of these works ever make it to auction only adds to the opacity—values are hard to set and collectors who are not familiar with the Latin-American art system can find it hard to access the works they need.

In addition, it can be difficult to establish authenticity, with few scholars of the material having the necessary connoisseurship skills. Add into this mix the experimental materials used by many artists, and it can be frustrating to try to establish the most basic information about any artwork (a [project](#) at the Getty is looking into the range of post-war experimental materials used in Argentina and Brazil, which should provide some benchmarks for future technical analysis).

History of collecting

The collecting of mid-century Brazilian abstraction has had its own history. At the time of production, in the 1950s and 1960s, the works were collected by a small group of supporters and fans, and often exchanged among artists. (Today, works will sometimes come on to the market from the collections of other artists or critics of the time.)

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a small handful of collectors—primarily Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Adolpho Leirner and João Sattamini—set out to make thorough and comprehensive representations of these artists' works.

By the early 2000s, international taste for art from Latin America had shifted away from realism toward abstraction, creating a new demand among international collectors, while museums, such as MoMA, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Tate, realized there were gaping holes in their collections and set about filling them. The purchase of the [Leirner Collection](#) by Houston in 2007 and the gift of the Phelps de [Cisneros](#) collection to MoMA in 2016 created substantial representations in museums outside Brazil for the first time.



Mira Schendel exhibition, Tate Modern, London (2013) © Tate, London 2015. Courtesy of the Mira Schendel Estate

Brazilian modern artists are now a part of mainstream exhibition programming, and 2017 brings us major retrospectives of [Lygia Pape at the Met](#) ("A Multitude of Forms", 21 March-23 July) and [Hélio Oiticica at the Art Institute of Chicago](#) ("To Organize Delirium", until May 7), and the Whitney following the 2014 [Clark retrospective at MoMA](#), [Schendel at the Tate in 2013-14](#), and the 2011 [Pape exhibition](#) at the Reina Sofia.

In terms of market, there is still significant disparity between the local Brazilian market and the prices that international buyers are willing to pay for work they still know little about. The game changer here has been the adoption of important estates by international galleries over the last five years, such as Hélio Oiticica by [Galerie Lelong](#), Mira Schendel and Lygia Pape by [Hauser & Wirth](#), or Lygia Clark by [Alison Jacques Gallery](#). These respected galleries give buyers greater confidence, and provide a buffer between the market and the sometimes-volatile estates. International art fairs have also helped somewhat, as over the past decade they have internationalized their offerings to include countries like Brazil. A number of high-quality works have been offered this way.

Brazilian intellectual property law has also set up some hurdles for the market, and for the field in general. Brazilian law enshrines robust concepts of moral rights for artists and heirs, meaning that 'fair use' is virtually unusable. In recent years there have been several [cases](#) of estates going after museums and curators in ways that would be unthinkable in the US or Europe. Collectors of certain artists have to be prepared to face a situation in which they may not be able to reproduce images of works from their collection in books or articles because of the onerous fees or negotiations required.

The Brazilian bust

In the past two years, Brazil's economy has gone from boom to bust. While it seems that Brazilian buyers are being more [cautious](#), and more works are appearing on the market, the prices being asked have not been visibly affected. [Others](#) say they welcome the adjustment, noting the overheating of the market and its effect on younger artists. More than ever, the international market seems to be the saviour, with several Brazilian galleries [opening](#) branches in the US and Europe for the first time.

Booms and busts aside, Brazilian post-war art is so important that it can only be a matter of time before we see a greater presence of it in European and US museums and collections. This raises the question of how Brazil itself would benefit. Local museums have small or no acquisition funds, and there are few incentives for donations from the private sector. With the growing involvement of international galleries managing the estates, it will be interesting to see how much of this patrimony will be institutionalized inside Brazil, or if, as at many times in its history, Brazil becomes an exporter of its most valuable assets.