

FORMA LIVRE



The Jewelry of Brazil's Burle Marx Brothers Exhibition 2 – 25 June 2016

Notes on the Jewelry of Haroldo Burle Marx and Roberto Burle Marx

The most amazing and talented brother act in Brazil.
TIME magazine, July 21, 1967

This is the first significant exhibition in the United States of jewelry and drawings by both Roberto Burle Marx (1909–1994) and Haroldo Burle Marx (1911–1991), Brazilian brothers who worked together to create jewelry, and then feuded till the end of their lives. Over sixty works are presented. It is an overdue and welcome opportunity to understand the jewel-works of two men who were inspired by nature, by Brazil's plants, oceans and beaches, landscapes, minerals and gemstones. In 1967, TIME magazine called them, along with a third brother, the classical musician Walter, "the most amazing and talented brother act in Brazil." Between the 1940s and 1980s, together and separately, they created innovative and beautiful jewels that are truly fine ambassadors for Brazilian modernist jewelry and modernist design.

The Burle Marx brothers drew on Brazil's natural bounty to make one-of-a-kind, handmade jewels in worked gold, most often yellow and high karat, and deployed colorful stones, gaining early admirers worldwide. The jewelry celebrates Brazil's fecundity in colored gemstones: aquamarine, tourmaline, topaz, garnet, quartz, citrine, amethyst, chalcedony and amazonite, and emerald among many others. In the late 1950s, Brazil's leaders began commissioning Burle Marx jewels for visiting counterparts. In the 1960s, Burle Marx jewelry helped establish international interest in Brazil's gemstones, making them attractive to jewelers who had long focused on sapphires, rubies and diamonds. (In this effort they kept company with a distant relative, Hans Stern, who founded the eponymous Brazilian jewelry company.)

This special exhibition illustrates the talent and vision of the Burle Marx brothers. The creative process of making jewelry began with exquisitely detailed drawings showing their thought process, and culminated in handmade, one-of-a-kind, artist and fine jewelry. Theirs are jewels to stroke and carry like talismans, wear close to the body, settle on a collarbone, richly encase a wrist, and transform a finger through the cut of the stone. There is, however, a subtext to their fascinating story, one that involves a family crisis. The two brothers, after working closely for about a decade, parted ways, likely over creative and business matters. The exact dates are unclear, but the estrangement was severe enough to endure the rest of their lifetimes. At the time of Haroldo's death, in 1991, they had not reconciled. A family member has said that when asked, Haroldo reaffirmed as he was dying that he had no regrets about not

saying goodbye to his brother. Roberto died just a few years later. A great deal was left unsaid. Partly as a result, which brother could claim creation of which jewels became a subject of some dispute, as others took up the brothers' quarrel; similarly, who invented the pioneering *forma livre* cut of stone is occasionally debated.

The challenging, novel and hard to reproduce *forma livre* or free form style of cutting stones, became a characteristic and stunning aspect of Burle Marx jewelry. In rings and brooches from the early years, the cuts resemble Roberto's abstract art, and his sinuous, sculpted landscape designs. Haroldo, though, had trained in lapidary work and gemology. He knew the hardness, malleability and fracture quotient of Brazilian stones; and, he understood the craft of cutting, sizing and shaping them. He claimed ownership of the *forma livre* cut outright, inventing it around 1948, and went on to create variations for the entirety of his jewelry career. TIME magazine credited him with the cut in 1967. The *forma livre* design did, however, change over time: in the period of brotherly collaboration, when Roberto's powerful point of view dominated the design process, the gems often appear voluminous, spiraling upwards. The cuts became distinctly less rough and piercing, and more elegantly rippled during the post rift period when Haroldo made jewelry for himself.

The drawings of jewelry in the exhibit are signed by Roberto Burle Marx, and the smaller selection of jewelry in the exhibit attributed to him was designed during the period of partnership between the late 1950s and mid to late 1960s. After the rift, Haroldo went on to a long career as a star jeweler for a Brazilian and worldwide clientele. The exhibit shows a large selection of his jewelry.

In the international world of jewelry, the Burle Marx brothers are among the neglected masters. American jewelry insiders may know Haroldo's work but they have never fully valued its craftsmanship, exquisite *forma livre* colored gemstones, and modernist beauty. Roberto's fame as a path-breaking landscape designer and artist eclipsed public awareness and scholarly appreciation of his radical jewels. He is not known to have made much jewelry himself after the brothers split up. (H. Stern bought certain rights to Roberto's jewelry drawings after his death and made "inspired by" jewels.)

WRIGHT



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Roberto Burle Marx

Roberto, born in São Paulo in 1909, became the most famous of the Burle Marx siblings. He was a genius, a man for all seasons: a world-renowned landscape architect with a distinctly Brazilian modernist formulation, a botanist, environmentalist, painter, ceramicist, textile and theater-set designer, singer, and a jewelry designer. Roberto designed some 2,000 public parks and gardens, along with mosaic pavements of the Copacabana Beach promenade in Rio de Janeiro – surely one of his most visible and beloved creations. His artworks reside in museums, and his home, a former plantation outside of Rio that is today a public complex known as the Sítio Roberto Burle Marx.

As the finely sketched tempera drawings of jewelry show, Roberto designed ancient feeling yet entirely new jewels with a hand that showed a deft understanding of massing, volume and the formal organization of space. A deep green *forma livre* cut tourmaline brooch in the exhibit displays these attributes. Other signature qualities are evident in an early amethyst brooch: organic forms and asymmetries that also characterize Roberto's landscape designs. Early jewelry drawings show his experimentation with amoeba-like shapes dotted with cabochon gems, while drawings from 1962 - 1964 include geometric necklaces and bracelets. The jewelry is sculptural and always with significant dimensionality. The rings rise high from their bezel settings, their gemstones jutting upwards, as if searching for the sky. Roberto's interest in choreographed, textured surfaces emerges in brooches, some of which look as though they have been etched on a landscape of gold.

Haroldo Burle Marx

Haroldo Burle Marx was younger than Roberto by two years. He became a specialist who excelled in his chosen métier: jewelry. He was an innovator in his fields, lapidary work and gemology, and a masterful independent jeweler. When TIME magazine wrote about the Burle Marx brothers in 1967, Haroldo was described as the manufacturer of "Brazil's most exquisite jewelry". Haroldo trained in gemology and lapidary work for four years, studied in Idar-Oberstein, the center of semi-precious stone cutting in Germany, and began making jewelry in the late 1940s. By 1954 he ran a jewelry workshop full time, employing Italian and Brazilian artisans. He owned a fashionable boutique selling fine jewels, on Rodolfo Dantas, 6 Copacabana, in Rio de Janeiro.

As a jeweler, heavily influenced in the early years by his artist brother, and like him, by Brazil's natural beauties, Haroldo's style gradually evolved in a different direction. For him, gems were central, an ancient material, as much "a product of nature as clouds or trees," he told Connoisseur magazine in 1983. Haroldo's gemstones are of high quality and often perfectly matched; and, the yellow gold

becomes more often polished than stippled and textured, with clear borders. Often the gold has an unusual patina, denoting the use of silver as the main alloy. His jewels have symmetry and balance. Among jewelry collectors of his time, Haroldo Burle Marx became a coveted name, known for exquisitely constructed, stylish and modern fine jewelry. Haroldo was a jeweler of choice for movie stars, high society, dignitaries, and royal families. Queen Elizabeth I of England, the Empress of Iran, Farah Diba, and Queen Margrethe of Denmark owned his jewelry. The latter is reported to have worn a Burle Marx aquamarine brooch and ring on her honeymoon. Carroll Petrie, the stylish American collector and philanthropist, owned Burle Marx jewelry (an example is in the show), as did Valentino and Happy Rockefeller. The exhibition contains a selection of photographs documenting Haroldo's impressive clientele as well as of a group of models showing off Burle Marx jewels at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio in May 1965.

In 1982, during the last decade of his life, and as he was phasing out his Copacabana jewelry boutique after a traumatic robbery, Haroldo, entered a new chapter: his "American" period. Mrs. Alta Leath, the wife of a U.S. congressman from Texas, met and admired Haroldo's jewels during a visit to Rio. She arranged to sell his jewelry through a dedicated store in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. (The building was designed by Luigi Moretti.) Always an admirer of opals, he created a necklace in the mid-1980s that featured a Brazilian opal of more than 260 carats, priced at \$250,000, according to an article about him in the New York Times.

Mrs. Leath attracted numerous celebrities to her shop including Sammy Davis Jr. and Oscar de la Renta, and in the 1980s ensured a wide audience of jewelry aficionados for Haroldo's work. In one photograph, she is seen with the model Carmen Dell'Orifice. Carmen wears a large blue topaz and yellow gold cuff bracelet similar to the one in the exhibit. Natalie Wood appears in another photograph from Mrs Leath's collection, wearing a striking geometric collar by Haroldo. On the photograph, she writes: To dear Mr. Burle Marx, with my deep thanks, affection and admiration." With this American venture as his last hurrah, the younger Burle Marx closed out a remarkable career and legacy of beautifully crafted modernist Brazilian jewelry.

This exhibit reminds us that the jewelry of Roberto Burle Marx and Haroldo Burle Marx deserves a renewed international reputation and a new, appreciative audience.

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References available.

