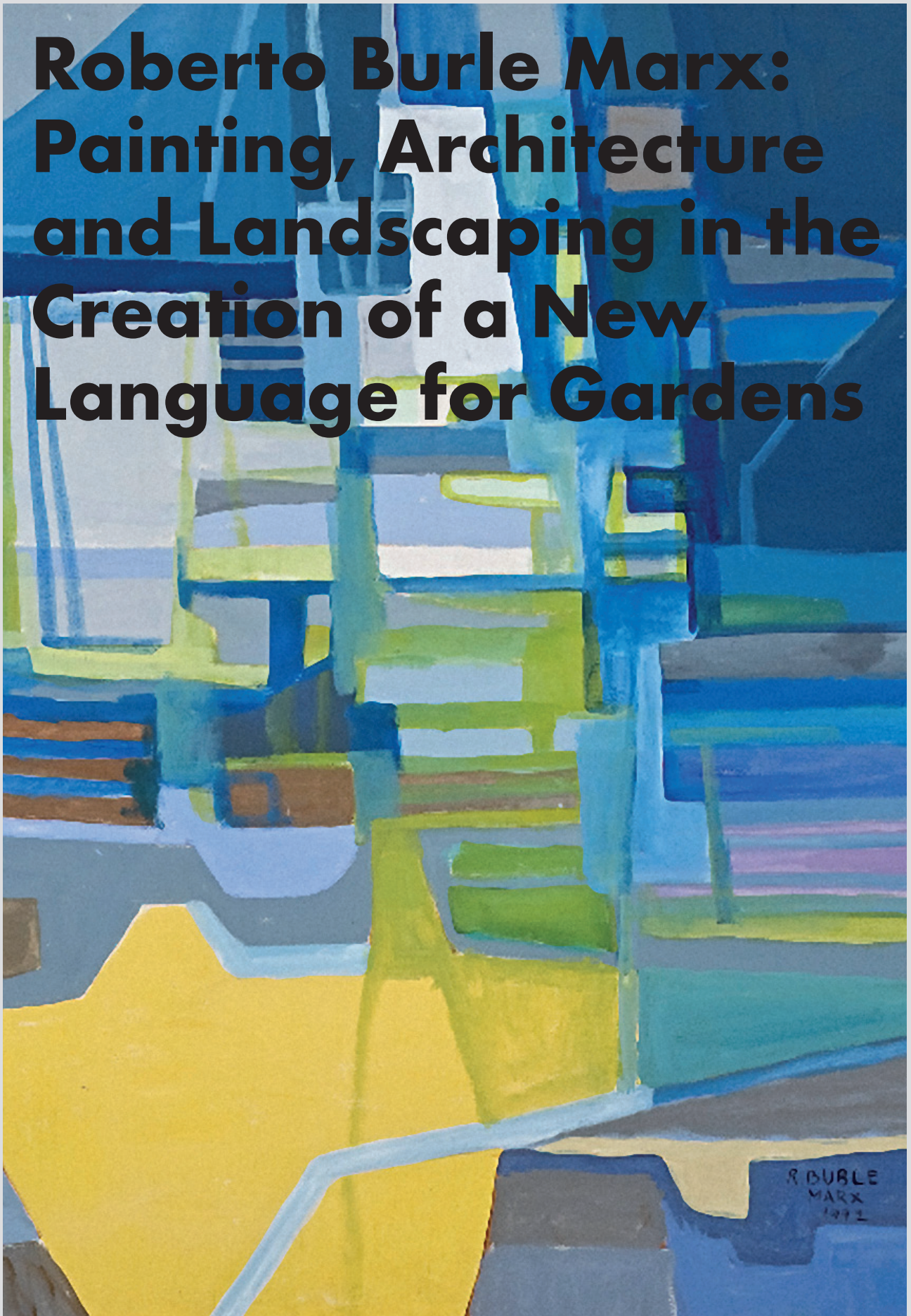


# Roberto Burle Marx: Painting, Architecture and Landscaping in the Creation of a New Language for Gardens

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**P**ainting, architecture and landscaping have never been so well incorporated in one person as in Roberto Burle Marx. His painter skills enabled Roberto Burle Marx to apply deep thorough pictorial principles to the landscape, thus avoiding other approaches made by pioneers who literally transposed cubist or abstract art, which almost resulted in caricatures. His botanical knowledge allowed him to discover new species in regard to their individual beauty and to their proper integration in ecological environments, which provided adequate choices of harmonious systems in terms of their aesthetics and their good survival in the new garden habitat.

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By Lauro Cavalcanti

**P**AINTING, architecture and landscaping have never been so well incorporated in one person as in Roberto Burle Marx. Intended as a total artwork, modern architecture aimed to integrate structural support and visual appearance, organize both internal and external spaces and act upon urban planning and urban design. Within this process, the garden began to draw nearer or even merge with the building and art lost its façade decorative function, as it either had sculptural physical presence or acted as a source of inspiration for the organization of gardens.

His painter skills enabled Roberto Burle Marx to apply deep thorough pictorial principles to the landscape, thus avoiding other approaches made by pioneers who literally transposed cubist or abstract art, which almost resulted in caricatures. His botanical knowledge allowed him to discover new species in regard to their individual beauty and to their proper integration in ecological environments, which provided adequate choices of harmonious systems in terms of their aesthetics and their good survival in the new garden habitat.

The mastering of architectural space was an essential feature of his work, since it enabled him to establish a dialogue between buildings' forms, spaces and volumes, which could make the garden echo, harmonize, contrast, or even, when inferior in quality, surpass and outshine architecture itself.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, the importation of intellectual models and styles took place in every artistic field across the countries of South America. As far as landscaping is concerned, this practice became very serious as the imported elements faded or did not adapt to Brazil's climate. As a consequence, a two-fold strategy was needed: to break up with the rigid models of mainly French Fine Arts School and reduce or abolish exogenous species.

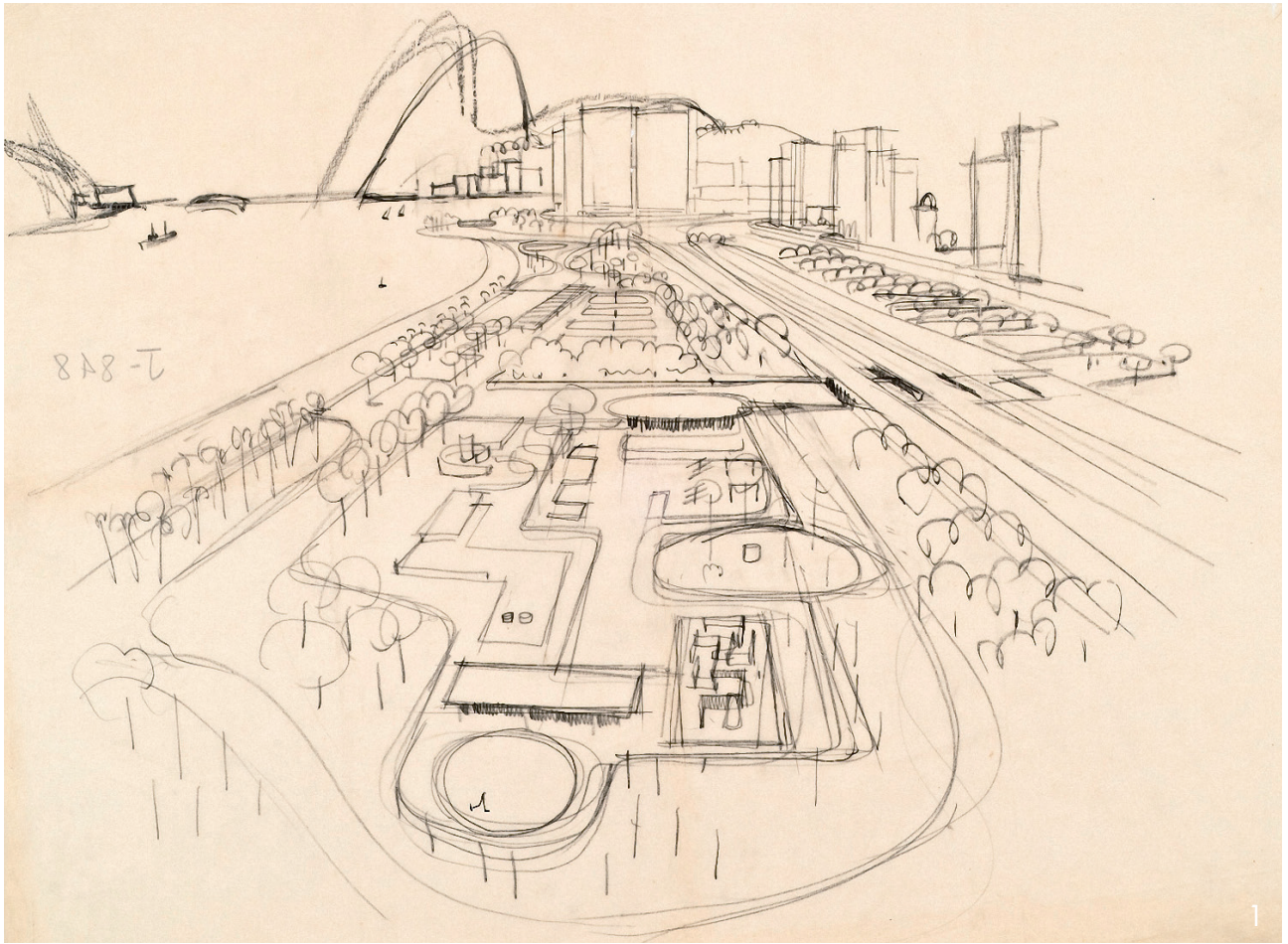
Like many other twentieth century landscapers of different nationalities, the creator of Aterro do Flamengo rehabilitated native plants and put them to noble use. Burle Marx knew how to accomplish this without adopting an

exaggerated nationalist stance. In order to escape this chauvinistic trap, he took use of his intellectual sophistication, of his admiration for universality driven by abstractionism and last but not the least, he invested in the growth of the scope of his work by leading botanical research expeditions around tropical and subtropical areas of the planet.

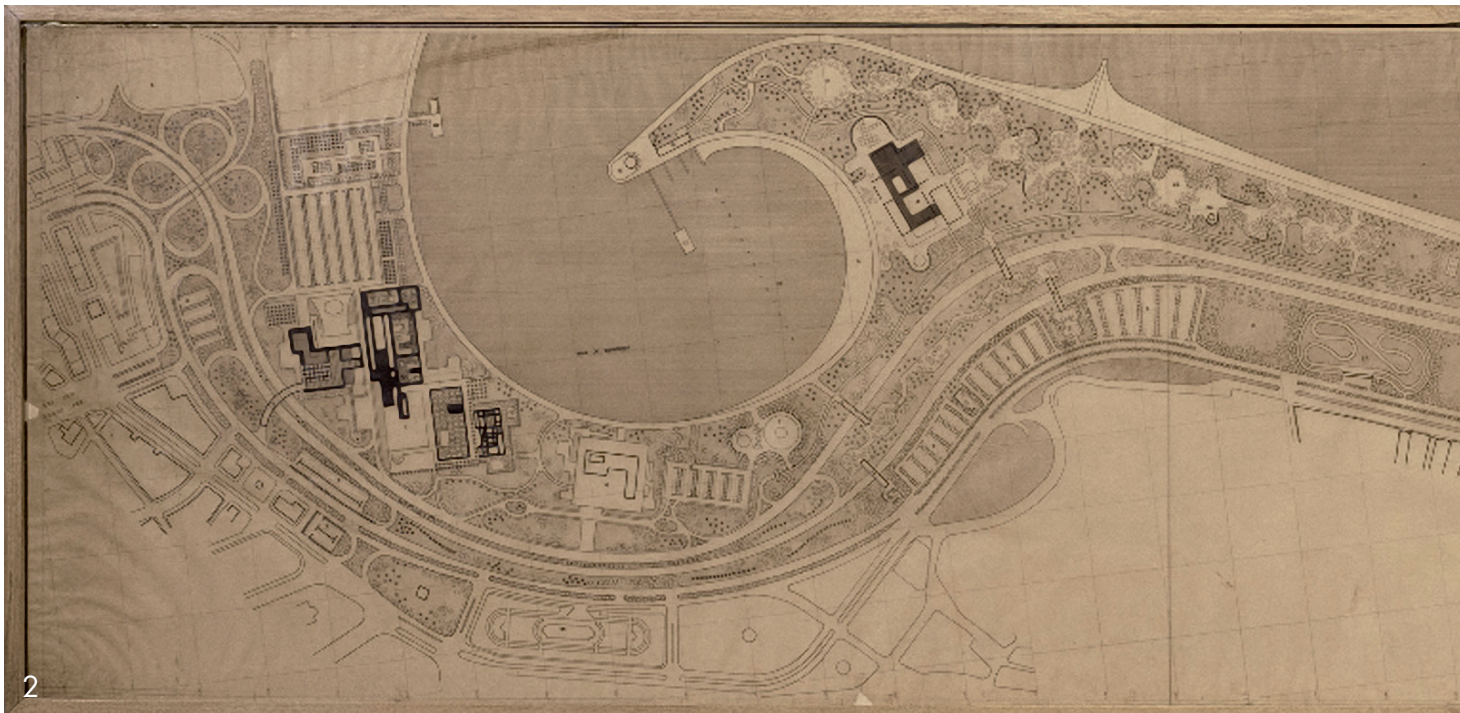
One of the weaknesses of modern architecture was its inability to cope with the inevitable effects of the flow of time in its accomplishments. Pure and ideal works almost always age very badly. Whereas *patina* and small flaws provide strength and density to historicist styles, in modern buildings they stain smooth surfaces and therefore reveal modernism's pretensions of obtaining timeless and definitive accomplishments. Burle Marx's botanical knowledge aided his landscaping, specifically in the choosing of the proper plants, in guaranteeing a good climate adaptation and in precisely anticipating their volumes, colors and textures throughout their lifetime. As far as more fragile and perishable specimens were concerned, being familiar with them helped him predict the moment to replant. Thus, time was not his enemy, but rather a constant ally. The landscaper used to say that his function was simply to initiate work in the garden, as "time finishes the idea."<sup>2</sup>

Artists of peripheral nations tend to, in most cases, simply translate and deploy visual thinking already developed in the Northern Hemisphere, or engage in a compulsory regionalism, as exoticism is the only way they may obtain international awareness and interest. Burle Marx was able to avoid both of these traps. Along with his enormous personal qualities, how could we explain this rare phenomenon?

Nothing in Brazil's origins or its elite aversion towards native specimens, suggested that the country would give birth to the man who deployed twentieth century landscaping worldwide. It was of great value to Burle Marx to have had a family education, where he learnt French, German and Pernambucan cultures with common-sense and sophistication. Besides this, he had a favorable so-



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cial and economical situation and a good network of social contacts. Above all, he belonged to a generation that strived, in various fields, to build a contemporary culture that would not deny world's cultural singularities.

The 'new' architecture was part of Brazil's broad cultural vanguard movement of the first half of the twentieth century, which distanced itself from folklore and offered cosmopolitan versions of 'Brazilness'. Based on his *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, metaphorically speaking, Oswald de Andrade wanted the European culture to be devoured by our native organism, taking advantage of its virtues and discarding its obsolete or inadequate characteristics: "Brazilians and of our time."<sup>3</sup>

The vegetable kingdom was not free from discrimination. At bourgeois houses, there was a clear distinction between gardens and backyards. In the former case, usually located between the building and the street, 'noble' specimens such as roses, cypresses, pines, begonias and azaleas were predominately planted between geometrical carved hedges, in the form of French topiary. It was unthinkable to use local plants, even if those from temperate climates were wilted due to their poor adaptation to

our hot and humid climate. Out of sight from passers-by and most ceremonial guests, the backyards had mostly fruit trees and native shrubs. In one of these backyards, at the foot of Pedra do Leme, young Roberto cultivated his first flowerbeds by planting bromeliads and other creeping plants which he collected during his strolls on the trails that shored the sea and bordered the hill. His discovery of native vegetation was concomitant with the discovery of the ocean, as described by the landscaper: "It was in Rio that I felt the sea for the first time . . . the smell of sand. An enchantment for me, the sea."<sup>4</sup>

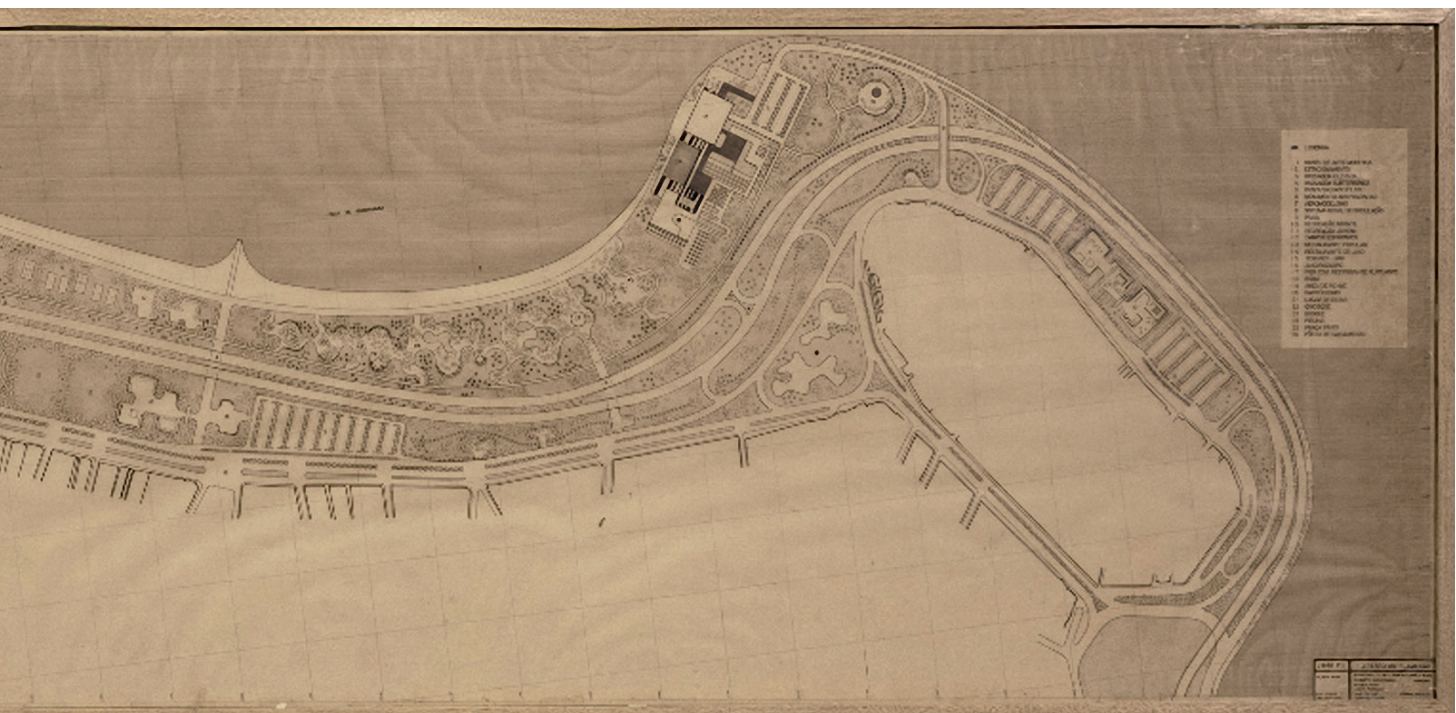
Due to his numerous journeys, Burle Marx's life was rich in revelations and stories: his move from São Paulo to Rio as a boy allowed him to have his first tropical nature experience. In addition, his trip to Germany consolidated his fondness for Brazilian specimens as he gazed at them at the greenhouse of the Botanical Garden of Berlin, where he painted outdoors.

Upon returning to Brazil in 1932, Roberto moved to Recife and in his family's propriety he began trying to plant native specimens. In 1937, he took up permanent residence in Rio de Janeiro, where he executed a series of abstract gardens, which were to become modern movement 'classics'.

In 1938, the design of the plaza in front of Santos Dumont airport (1937-1944), built by the Roberto Brothers, gave Burle Marx the opportunity to develop the first modern public artwork. Rocks, water and trees from different places across Brazil were used. The plaza has not one

Figure 1. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Park of Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro, 1961. General perspective view. 50 x 70 cm.

Figure 2. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Park of Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro, 1961. General plan. Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda. Photo by Cesar Barreto.



straight line: it was designed based on two sinuous parallel paths, which defined three major plant 'islands'.

In the central part, a large lake with Amazon aquatic vegetation contains a small island and three small equally rounded hills. From the long and undulating benches, which run along the bed line, one could spot the pilonis of the terminal and behind it, the great monumental glass window, the airstrip and Guanabara Bay. Critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock referred to the site as the "most beautiful airport in the world."<sup>5</sup>

Burle Marx's reputation largely surpassed the strict realm of his professional field from the moment he designed the gardens for the Ministry of Education and Health (1937-1943). A vertical building of fourteen stories high, suspended by pilasters, with glass façades on the south side and brise-soleil on the north side, enables the public to cross the ground and experience the geometric and abstract shapes of the garden as a large public square, where boundaries between public and private areas faded.

In this project, he had the opportunity to work with the most renowned personalities of the new architecture, such as Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy and Jorge Moreira. Alongside Costa and Niemeyer, Burle Marx contributed to confer our own modernism with a specific peculiarity, the introduction of curves to Le Corbusier's initial proposal. Here, these sinuous lines, which would become one of the main characteristics of Brazilian modernism, experimentally appear in subsidiary elements of construction: furniture, screens, rugs, murals and gardens. Later on, curves definitely materialize in the church of Pampulha and establish themselves in the

stupendous work of Oscar Niemeyer. During the construction of the Ministry of Education and Health building, Burle Marx had a sort of an informal post-graduation in painting, as Portinari's frescoes assistant, and in landscaping, with the guidance of Lúcio Costa.<sup>6</sup>

A close examination of his three proposals for the Ministry's garden reveal the slow and debated process that took place until reaching the brilliant final result: the first project, requested presumably by Le Corbusier, was devised to have aligned palm trees on the ground floor and well tidy squared long beds on the garden-terrace; in the second sketch, already supervised by Lúcio Costa, the first rounded shapes appear, although not so charming as the ones contained in the third built project; here sinuous shapes acquire definitive form, where natives specimens are spread along a vast pattern of different shades of green, red and yellow. By possessing bright hues, different from those found in a royal garden, Roberto's palette possess, by itself, the intrinsic value of a work of art in the best tradition of informal abstractionism.

Following Gestalt principles, Roberto's drawings of gardens at the time did not have a separation between figure and background; they interchange, depending on the way we look at them. One may perceive the colored surface that demarcates the planted areas or privilege to view the bending blank space, which defines the several existing pathways. In the former case, abstract irregular shapes like amoebas are made visible. On the other hand, when focusing on the paths, the impression one gets is that of a liquid that melted and found a twisted way through the obstructing obstacles.

When flying over the South American continent, Le



Corbusier was very impressed by the winding river routes and their estuaries. In his book, named *Précisions*, the author of *Le Poème de l'angle droit* described that vision as a metaphor to express the need to substitute the lingering natural order by another rational straight, fast and pure order. After the master's return to the Old Continent, Valérie Frasier made a conjecture about how the landscaper had despised drawings that depicted aligned palm trees upon flat soil.<sup>7</sup> As a sweet revenge, based on the information contained in *Précisions*, he argued: "with Burle Marx's gardens, Brazil has recovered its own flora and topography in order to embrace the contradictions of the barbarian, however ours."

Besides his geographical journeys, one other kind of voyage was crucial for Roberto Burle Marx's professional trajectory: the shifting of painting principles to the discipline of garden composition. As a painter, drawer, engraver, sculptor, ceramicist, scenographer, musician, jeweler, and of course landscaper, Marx was a complete artist. Within this polyhedral humanism, his painter and landscaper sides remained especially inseparable. His status as a painter helped him transplant logics and forms of artistic vanguard into gardens, therefore molding a unique and modern aesthetic of nature's plastic organization. Although today our concept of painting is very broad, it is still impressive to witness the contemporaneity of his words: "I decided to use the natural topography as a surface for composition and nature's elements—minerals, vegetables—as materials to plastically organize, similar to what a painter does when using a canvas, paint and brushes."<sup>8</sup> Besides the sinuousness of the elements, one of his major contributions was to use continuous splotches of color, therefore substituting the existing miscellaneously colored flowerbeds and gardens.

Despite the visual harmony that permeates his work, it would be misleading to regard his landscaping as a simple translation of his painting. Firstly, it is important to stress that in the 1930s and 1940s, while beautiful figures prevailed in his canvas, abstractionism had already influenced his terraces and public squares projects. Secondly, his painting theory concepts would be worthless if it were not for his deep botanical knowledge of species.

Figure 3. **Roberto Burle Marx**, project for the terrace garden. **Oscar Niemeyer, Lúcio Costa, Affonso Reidy** and team, consultation by Le Corbusier, Ministry of Education and Health, Rio de Janeiro, 1938. Gouache on paper, 52 x 105.5 cm. Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda.

Figure 4. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Untitled, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 132.5 x 134 cm. Collection Jardim Botânico do Rio de Janeiro. Photos by Cesar Barreto.



To understand soil adaptation, climate, odor, volume and appearance during the various stages of vegetal specimens' existence is crucial to create the unstable and yet permanent landscape compositions. No pictorial expression could replace the feeling of walking along the various tones, textures, noises, lights and shadows of plants, stones and waters of Burle Marx's gardens.

Painting and landscaping are a continuous flux in Roberto's art, without one diminishing the other: "Each specialty calls for a specific technique and a means of expression. As a result, I struggle a lot: I do not wish to make a painting that resembles a garden. However, there is no doubt in my mind that painting and all its artistic problems have influenced my own concept of art. During my life, I have strived not to confine myself to one formula. I hate formulas. I love principles."<sup>9</sup>

The resounding success of the landscaper contributed to eclipse, in a sense, his abstract vigorous painting. However, an examination of his overall visual artwork, which was assembled at his commemorating hundredth anniversary exhibition, corrected this distortion and made it clear that he was in fact an important figure in Brazilian art: his scattered brushstrokes sometimes generously and amply spread across the surface and define colored areas; at other times, his grand gestures contrast with detailed sections within large shapes. Both series of engravings and black and white drawings demonstrate that the quality of his work does not solely reside in the excellence of his vibrant chromatic palette. In some of his 1950s works, it is clear that constructivism was beginning to take its first steps until it became the mainstream of national art. Rigid geometry was not surely his favorite means of expres-



Figure 5. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo, 1953 (partially done).

Plan. Automotive painting on Eucatex, 122 x 150 cm.  
Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda.

Figure 6. **Roberto Burle Marx**, country house for Odette and Julio Monteiro, 1948. Project. Gouache.

Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda. Photos by Cesar Barreto.

sion. As far as containment is concerned, Roberto used to say that it was fundamental to a painter to know when to stop and recognize a finished work. However, he also believed that this idea should not translate in being afraid to be daring. With a rich personality, he would rather risk being excessive than to stop due to fear or shyness. Especially in landscaping, this boldness was framed by a careful selection and exclusion of elements: “we must have the courage to reject elements that seem beautiful but do not bring the desired outcome when associated with others. An apprentice tends to use everything he is familiar with. As a result, he will create a cluster of plants and not a garden, a work of art.”<sup>10</sup>

Two aspects were central to Roberto Burle Marx’s success: his botanical knowledge and his management of an entire garden as a single aesthetic element. These two qualities are inseparable throughout his work: his ecological knowledge allowed him not only to predict the growth of specimens, but above all, to choose cohesive sets of plants that unfold and dialogue harmoniously between themselves, with others sets and with minerals and water. By also being organized according to other aesthetic criteria such as mass, volume texture and color, this sys-



tem forms an indivisible whole. As el-Dahdah observed: "What Burle Marx proposes in his work is what the French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson once referred as *continuous multiplicities*, which are shaped by several temporal heterogeneous forces and cannot be divided into constituents."<sup>11</sup>

In Burle Marx's definition, landscaping was a planned organization of the natural elements: a human cultural intervention in the existing world. An action analogous with the actions of the Neolithic man: "to change the topographic nature in order for human existence to adapt individually and collectively, functionally and pleasurable."<sup>12</sup> By being aware of economic issues but averse to reductionisms which ignored the symbolic dimension, Burle Marx argued that landscaping should attend to "an aesthetic need which is neither luxury nor waste, but an absolute human life need, without which civilization itself would lose its aesthetic reason."<sup>13</sup>

The garden is neither a mirror nor a copy of nature, since it acts differently and independently from Man's concepts. For the author of Parque do Flamengo, the planned garden should establish a constant mediation with the landscape so as to produce echoes, contrasts

or even havens like microclimates, when needed within a city or a hostile environment. Not only plants were used to craft a garden: stones, lakes, streams, waterfalls, animal life, constructions in the shape of panels, granite gables, sculptures and stone Portuguese pavements.

Although a great innovator, he despised his work to be criticized, as above all, he valued originality: "My own philosophical concept of constructed landscape is based on the historical direction of all eras, recognizing in each period, the expression of aesthetic thought which manifests in other art forms. In this sense, my work reflects modernity and the moment in time of its creation, however it never loses sight of the reasons of tradition, which are valid and required."<sup>14</sup>

With rare judgment, Burle Marx understood that garden compositions were lagged when compared with the aesthetic principles of the new paintings. He established a unique dialogue between both disciplines and uses the horizontal organization of abstract painting as a starting point for the layout of gardens species.





Figure 7. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Painted tissues, 1980s-1990s.  
 Show "Burle Marx: 100 years, the permanence of the instable" at Paço Imperial.  
 Collection Janete Costa (longest tapestry) and  
 Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda (other tapestries).  
 Photo by Cesar Barreto.

## Notes

1. Burle Marx lived with several architects of the first modern generation, had Costa as his mentor and studied architecture for one year.
2. Apud Rosana Vaccarino, "Correspondência de tempo e instabilidade dos Jardins", na página 161 do livro *Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos: a permanência do instável*, organizado por Lauro Cavalcanti e Farès el-Dahdah (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2009).
3. "Manifesto da poesia do pau-brasil". Em Oswald de Andrade. *Do pau-brasil à antropofagia e às utopias. Obras Completas 6* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1972, p. 10).
4. Trecho retirado de depoimento de Roberto Burle Marx a Soraia Cals para o filme: *Eu, Roberto Burle Marx*. Direção geral: Tamara Leftel; coordenação e reportagens: Soraia Cals, 1989.
5. Hitchcock, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955, p. 35).
6. He was also an assistant of Alberto Guignard and a student of Mario de Andrade, in the carioca season of the author of *Macunaima*.
7. "Canibalizando Le Corbusier: os jardins do MES de Burle Marx," in Cavalcanti and el-Dahdah, *Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos*.
8. "Conceitos de composição em paisagismo," in Cavalcanti and el-Dahdah, *Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos*, 77.
9. Interview with Susy Melo, published in the exhibition catalog *43 anos de pintura*, curated by Lélia Coelho Frota in the Museu de Arte da Pampulha.
10. "Jardins residenciais," in José Tabacow (ed.), *Arte&Paisagem conferências escolhidas* (São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 1984), 103.
11. "Paisagens instáveis," in Cavalcanti and el-Dahdah, *Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos*, 110.
12. "Conceitos de composição em paisagismo," in Cavalcanti and el-Dahdah, *Roberto Burle Marx 100 anos*, 78.
13. Idem.
14. Idem, 77-78.

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Figure 8. **Roberto Burle Marx**, Tapestries, c. 1970.  
The largest is 26 x 3.3 meters, the other on the left is 2.75 x 5 meters.  
Show "Burle Marx: 100 years, the permanence of the instable" at Paço Imperial.  
Collection Burle Marx & Cia Ltda.  
Photo by Cesar Barreto.