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Rediscovering Brazil: The Marajoara Style in Modernist Art and Design

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Abstract

During the Portuguese rule of Dom Pedro II (1831-1889) through the years of the First Brazilian Republic (1889-1930) and into the First Vargas Regime (1930-1945), Brazil struggled to solidify a strong national identity that would finally unify the country and legitimize its rich cultural heritage. The discovery and excavation of Marajó Island in the 1870s provided evidence of a great, ancient civilization, and inspired Brazilian Art Deco and early Modernist artists. Polychrome ceramic urns, vessels, and *tangas* (female pubic covers) were among the most abundant archaeological finds, many with zoomorphic and geometric motifs that show the cultural importance of various animals and stages of life. By understanding the cosmology and iconography of Marajoara ceramics, the ceramics, furniture, architecture and painting created from the late 1890s until the 1930s can be viewed from a perspective more in line with the original context in which the ancient motifs were used. The borrowing of the Marajoara style by Brazilian Art Deco artists, and the sheer multitude of artistic products made in this period, therefore reflect an interest in native cosmology and an overarching political desire to adopt Brazil's primitive roots as part of its national identity.

Discovery & Finds

The rise of anthropology and archaeology in the nineteenth century, along with discoveries such as the Incas and Aztecs, fueled a Brazilian desire to find their own great civilization of the past in order to legitimize the country's national identity. Marajó Island, located in the Northeastern Brazilian state of Pará (fig. 1), quickly became the archeological pride of Brazil after its rediscovery in the 1870s. Artifacts such as an "Owl Face" funerary urn,



Fig. 1: Map of Brazil, with Marajó Island

dating from 400-1300 CE (fig. 2) demonstrated to nineteenth century scholars a "primitive" form of geometric design in line with that of Ancient Greek art, supplying evidence of a civilization in the midst of development. In 1937, Brazilian Eugenicist, Roquette Pinto, described the Marajoaran society as being "the germ of the race" which would lead to the emergence of "the purest style" through their ceramics, supplying reason to rebirth the style to create a national identity tied to the "original" Brazilians.



Marajoara Culture

Marajoaran society existed from 400 to 1300 CE and families were organized by social hierarchy, with more prominent families living on higher and larger earthen mounds to stay dry during sea-seasonal flooding. The veneration of ancestors and extensive funerary rituals were important aspects of the culture, with social status being indicated in the placement of the urn, and the value and decoration of the contents found inside, including jewelry of wood, feathers, and seed, stone axes, beads, and *tangas*. Of the funerary items found, there is a definitive geometric style, with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs repeated throughout the finds. As seen with this Marajoara plate (fig. 3), the undulating band that makes up the central composition can be viewed as a snake, which is mythologized as having brought all original inhabitants to their assigned homes along the rivers.

Fig. 2: Funerary Urn, 400-1300 CE. Marajó Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 18.4" height. Museu Barbier-Muller d'Arte Precolombí, Barcelona.



Fig. 3: Plate, 400-1300 CE. Marajó Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 13.5" diameter. Museu Barbier-Muller d'Arte Precolombí, Barcelona.

"The undulating band that makes up the central composition can be viewed as a snake, which is mythologized as having brought all original inhabitants to their assigned homes along the rivers."

Influence on Art Deco

The geometric and zoomorphic designs found on Marajoara ceramics were adopted with excitement by the Art Deco artists of Brazil, as they could be incorporated seamlessly into the Art Deco style. Interior design began to focus on using the intricate patterns of Marajoara ceramics in furniture, decorative items, dinnerware and architectural design. Manoel Pastana's design for a tea set (fig. 4) shows the emergence of Marajoara

motifs such as anthropomorphic figures that can also be interpreted as caymans or lizards, and the natural foliage of the jungle. Marajoaran influence was celebrated within the international Art Deco world, in 1928 Paul Rivet, founder of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, attributed the fascination with Marajó Island to its mysteriousness and purity, stating that bringing back the style would "rejoin the past to the present in a beautiful esthetic tradition."

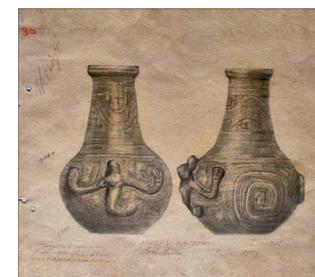


Fig. 5: Design for Marajoaran Vases, Manoel de Oliveira Pastana, 1934. Graphite on paper, 24.5 x 33.4 cm. Museu da Casa das Onze Janelas, Belém, Pará.

Fig. 4: Design: "Aparelho para café, chá e leite" (Appliances for coffee, tea, and milk) by Manoel de Oliveira Pastana, 1933. Watercolor on paper, 35.5 x 47.9 cm. Museu da Casa das Onze Janelas, Belém, Pará.

National Identity & Conclusion

The Marajoara culture was used in Brazil to exhibit nationalism repeatedly, beginning with the Portuguese rule of Dom Pedro II, who was influenced by Romantic ideology to find awe and importance in the natural sciences and archaeology of Brazil. Under the first Vargas Regime (1930-1945) especially, the Marajoara style was adopted as a way of displaying national pride. The Brazilian pavilion for the 1940 Portuguese World Exhibition (Exposição do Mundo Português) was designed in the Marajoara style, with decoration by Art Deco artist, Roberto Lacombe. The Marajoara themselves used their large, decorated urns, and the prominent placement of these urns, to legitimize status and serve as a way to negotiate power. With modern artists serving as intermediaries between a political agenda for a hegemonic national style, and anthropological and artistic interest in Marajoara culture, there is certainly a duality found in Brazilian Art Deco works from this time.

