Rediscovering Brazil: The Marajoara Style in Modernist Art and Design

Alyson Brandes

Chapman University, brand155@mail.chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons, Ceramic Arts Commons, Furniture Design Commons, Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation


https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts/336
Rediscovering Brazil: The Marajoara Style in Modernist Art and Design

Alyson Brandes
B.A. Art History
Minor in Anthropology

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 the rich cultural heritage. The discovery and excavation of Marajo Island in the 1870s provided evidence of a great, ancient civilization, and inspired Brazilian Art Deco and early Modernist artists. Polychrome ceramic art, tombs, and tangas (public 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 ceremonial and iconography of Marajoara ceramics, the ceramic forms, architecture, and painting created from the late 1890s until the 1930s can be viewed from a perspective 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 subsequent influence of artistic products made in this period, therefore reflect an interest in native cosmology and an evolving 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 discussions such as those by Boss and Arceu, fueled a Brazilian desire to find their own great civilization of the past in order to legitimize their country’s national identity. Marajo Island, located in the Northeastern Brazilian state of Pará (fig. 1), quickly became the archaeological pride of Brazil after its rediscovery in the 1870s. Artists such as an “Art Deco” beginning, 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 1933, Brazilian Eugenicist, Roquette Pinto, described the Marajoara society as being “the germ of the race” which would lead to the emergence of “the parent style,” through their ceramics, supplying reason to return the style to create a national identity tied to the “original” Brazil.

Marajoara Culture

Marajoara society existed from 400 to 1300 CE and families were organized by social hierarchy, with more prominent families living on higher and larger carbon-mounds to stay dry during seasonal flooding. The variation of ancient and extremist ceremonial rituals were important aspects of the culture, with social status being indicated in the placement of the urn, and the value and décor exist of the ceramics found inside, including jewelry of wood, feathers, and stone, bones, beads, and Tangas. While the Marajoara are familial, 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. 1: Map of Brazil, with Marajo Island

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

Fig. 3: Plate, 400-1300 CE, Marajo Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 13.3” 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 much merit by the Art Deco artists of Brazil, as they could be incorporated woodcut into the Art Deco style. Interior design began to focus on using the intricate patterns of Marajoara ceramics in home mosaics, decorative items, dinnerware and architectural design. Manuel Pimenta’s design for a teapot (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. Marajoara 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 Marajo to the international Art Deco world, in 1928. Brazilian artist, Roberto Lacombe. The ‘Sherpa’ themselves used their large, decorated urns, and the prominent placement of these urns, to legitimize status and serve as a way to negate modernity. With modern artists serving as intermediaries for Sherpa’s 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.

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

Fig. 5: Design for Marajoara Vases, Manual de Oliveira Pastana, 1934. Graphite on paper, 24.5 x 33.4 cm. Museu do Casa das Oone Janelas, Belém, Pará.

Fig. 6: Ronaldinho para café, chá e leite” (Tea service) by Antonio de Oliveira, 1934. Watercolor on paper, 35.5 x 47.9 cm. Museu de Casa das Oone Janelas, Belém, Pará.

National Identity & Conclusion

The Marajoara culture was used in Brazil to exhibit national identity repeatedly, beginning with the Portuguese rule of Dom Pedro II, who was influenced by Romantic ideology tied to a new and nascent in the natural sciences and aesthetics of Brazil. Under the First Vargas Regime (1930-1945) especially, the Marajoara style was adopted as a way of displaying national pride. The idea of preserving the Marajoara culture, and its representation of the Marajoara style, 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. 7: Plate, 400-1300 CE, Marajo Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 13.3” diameter. Museu Barbier-Muller d’Arte Precolombí, Barcelona.

Fig. 8: Vase, 400-1300 CE, Marajo Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 18.4” height. Museu Barbier-Muller d’Arte Precolombí, Barcelona.

Fig. 9: Vase, 400-1300 CE, Marajo Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 18.4” height. Museu Barbier-Muller d’Arte Precolombí, Barcelona.

Fig. 10: Vase, 400-1300 CE, Marajo Island, Brazil. Earthenware with colored slip, 18.4” height. 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 much merit by the Art Deco artists of Brazil, as they could be incorporated woodcut into the Art Deco style. Interior design began to focus on using the intricate patterns of Marajoara ceramics in home mosaics, decorative items, dinnerware and architectural design. Manuel Pimenta’s design for a teapot (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. Marajoara 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 Marajo to the international Art Deco world, in 1928. Brazilian artist, Roberto Lacombe. The ‘Sherpa’ themselves used their large, decorated urns, and the prominent placement of these urns, to legitimize status and serve as a way to negate modernity. With modern artists serving as intermediaries for Sherpa’s 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.