

# The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release  
May 1991

## **ROBERTO BURLE MARX: THE UNNATURAL ART OF THE GARDEN**

May 23 - August 13, 1991

*A garden is the result of an arrangement of natural materials according to aesthetic laws; interwoven throughout are the artist's outlook on life, his past experiences, his affections, his attempts, his mistakes, and his successes.*

-- Roberto Burle Marx\*

A retrospective examining the sixty-year career of Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx (b. 1909), creator of some of the most lush gardens and exuberant parks of the twentieth-century, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on May 23, 1991. Organized by guest curator William Howard Adams, fellow, Myrin Institute, **ROBERTO BURLE MARX: THE UNNATURAL ART OF THE GARDEN** is the Museum's first exhibition devoted to a landscape architect.

On view through August 13, the exhibition is made possible by Banco Safra SA. Additional support has been provided by Mr. and Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros and The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

Since the 1930s, Burle Marx has designed nearly 3,000 gardens, mainly in South America, ranging in scale from small private gardens to large public parks. Working in collaboration with such celebrated architects as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Rino Levi, he has been an integral figure in the development of the Brazilian cityscape. This exhibition presents ten major projects, including residential gardens, gardens for the workplace, and public parks, represented by plans, models, and photopanel (list of projects

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attached). The exhibition also includes a selection of early drawings, an audio-visual presentation, and an installation design of real plant material.

Throughout his career, Burle Marx has sought to control nature by imposing on it his own creative vision, bringing his horticultural skills into symbiotic play with his artistic training. The precise lines and interlocking forms of his landscapes reveal his affinity for abstract art, notably the work of Arp, Calder, Léger, and Miró; many of his gardens also incorporate mosaics and sculpture of his own design. A consummate plantsman, he pioneered the use of exotic native flora in garden design. For more than forty years, he has also been an outspoken advocate for the protection of the Amazon rain forests.

Burle Marx's first major commission, a rooftop garden for the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro (1938), uses organic forms to introduce movement, texture, and strong color to the otherwise static architectural complex. Intended as much for the visual pleasure of workers on the floors above as for the users of the garden itself, the design resembles an abstract river winding alongside a high-rise "mountain," evoking the sweeping landscape in the distance. By the 1950s Burle Marx began to explore a more geometric form of garden composition, balancing the lushness of his plant material with a simplicity and economy of expression. Though his 1953 design for the monumental Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo was never executed, its plan shows a carefully resolved scheme incorporating elevated walkways, rectilinear pools, and cubic planting beds.

Conceived in 1979 and completed last year, Fazenda Vargem Grande, a vast private estate in São Paulo, is perhaps Burle Marx's finest garden design to date. Situated on a former coffee plantation, the garden employs the existing terraces, irrigation channels, and retaining walls that once scarred the

landscape. The wet garden--a series of pools at varying levels that fill to overflow--is the central element of his design; elsewhere are rock gardens and bromeliad arrangements. Filled with sound, motion, and brilliant color, the garden is a masterful example of *o estilo Burle Marx*--the style of Burle Marx.

Roberto Burle Marx was born in 1909 in São Paulo, Brazil. In 1928, while living in Germany with his family for a brief period, he discovered the rare tropical plants of Brazil in Berlin's Dahlem Botanic Garden. Returning to Brazil in 1930, he enrolled in the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio to study painting, architecture, and landscape design; there he met his mentor, the architect Lucio Costa. In 1934 he moved to Recife to become head of public parks for the State of Pernambuco, beginning an involvement with urban design that has become an important part of his legacy. Sitio Santo Antonio da Bica, an estate located in Campo Grande, near Rio, serves as the artist's home, studio, and garden laboratory.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Roberto Burle Marx presents a lecture titled "The Garden as an Expression of Art" on Tuesday, May 28, at 6:30 p.m. Tickets for the lecture, to be held in the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1, are \$8, \$7 for members, and \$5 for students, and are available at the Lobby Information Desk or by sending a check with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Department of Education.

Following its New York showing, an international tour is planned.

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\*PUBLICATION *Roberto Burle Marx: The Unnatural Art of the Garden* by William Howard Adams. Foreword by Stuart Wrede, Director, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art. 80 pages. 50 color and 41 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Paperbound, \$19.95, available in The MoMA Book Store.

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List of Major Projects

**Private Gardens**

*Burton Tremaine Residence*, 1948  
Santa Barbara, California (unexecuted)

*Odette Monteiro Estate*, 1948  
Correias, Rio de Janeiro

*Olivo Gomes Estate*, 1950, 1965.  
São José dos Campos, São Paulo

*Mr. and Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros Residence*,  
1980. Caracas, Venezuela

*Fazenda Vargem Grande*, Clemente Gomes Estate,  
1979-90, Areira, São Paulo

**Gardens for the Workplace**

*Ministry of Education and Health*, 1936-38  
Rio de Janeiro

*Safra Bank*, 1982  
Rua Consolação, São Paulo  
Rua Bela Cintra, São Paulo

**Public Gardens**

*Ibirapuera Park*, 1953  
São Paulo (unexecuted)

*Copacabana Beach*, 1970  
Rio de Janeiro

*Ministry of the Army*, 1970  
Brasília

No. 38

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