

***Mestre Vitalino e artistas pernambucanos.* Guacira Waldeck, ed. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Nacional de Folclore e Cultura Popular, 2009. 48 pp.\***

Reviewed by Lori Hall-Araujo

The theme of this brief exhibition catalogue might be framed as Brazilian “backwoods” art goes to town. From December 18, 2009 to March 28, 2010 the Centro Nacional de Folclore e Cultura Popular [National Center of Folklore and Popular Culture] in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil held an exhibition paying homage to Vitalino Pereira dos Santos (1909-1963), considered one of Brazil’s most important visual artists. “Mestre Vitalino e artistas pernambucanos” included woodcuts, wooden carvings, and ceramics made by “Master Vitalino” and other artists from the Northeastern Pernambuco state.

Anthropologist Guacira Waldeck was the chief writer and editor of the exhibit’s accompanying catalogue, *Mestre Vitalino e artistas pernambucano*. The catalogue’s many illustrations are mostly in color yet are small and include little contextualizing information. For the Portuguese reader the slim catalogue’s strength is Waldeck’s consideration of Master Vitalino’s historical impact on Brazilian visual art.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Brazil saw an increased interest in folklore and folk art among its artists and intellectuals. A founding member of the Modernist art movement, Mario de Andrade was instrumental in generating interest in Northeastern artists in his pursuit of a distinctly Brazilian “authentic” aesthetic. For the Modernists, the country’s “backwoods” region was a font of authentic tradition. U.S. trained anthropologists Gilberto Freyre (who studied at Columbia University under Franz Boas) and René Ribeiro (who worked at Northwestern University with Melville Herskovits) also cultivated interest in the region with their studies of Northeastern Brazilians. In the 1960s Ribeiro published a catalogue documenting Vitalino’s work elevating the Pernambucan from anonymous craftsman to influential figurative artist.

As Waldeck’s newer catalogue makes clear, Master Vitalino’s influence on Brazilian art cannot be overstated. Elements of Vitalino’s spare style and figurative depictions of quotidian Northeastern life are evident today in ceramics found in tourist shops, street markets, galleries, museums, and Brazilian homes.

*Lori Hall-Araujo is former Collection Manager for Costumes at the Chicago History Museum. She is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University. Her research focuses on dress as situated bodily practice. Her current project focuses on the social and cultural significance of Carmen Miranda in diverse periods and social settings.*

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.