

Our Green Is Dark, **Almost Black**

Intangible Heritage: Expeditions, Observations and Lectures by Roberto Burle Marx and Collaborators

EDITED BY MARÍA A. VILLALOBOS H. AND CARLA URBINA;
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REVIEWED BY DANIELLE N. CHOI



Are translators artists or technicians? Literary translators of novels and poetry are hidden conduits of emotion, quietly making creative interpretations of character, atmosphere, and form. However, the majority of professional translators work on a seemingly more mundane range of material—instruction manuals, street signs, nutritional labels, legal documents—that chronicle an infrastructure of globalization. *Intangible Heritage* gives us the translator as a designer. This lavishly illustrated (and heavily annotated) volume of texts on and by the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx offers an unusual hybrid of the creative and the technical. Editors and translators María A. Villalobos H. and Carla Urbina assemble frameworks, layouts, and copious details for interpreting the multi-hyphenate designer-artist-gardener Burle Marx, a subject they celebrate for embodying the “balance between everyday life and exception, between scientific knowledge and the arts.”

Intangible Heritage presents new English translations of reports, interviews, lectures, and public testimony spanning more than three decades of practice and research by Burle Marx and his collaborators. Much of the material has been

published previously in Portuguese or French, but the majority is presented here in its first-ever English translation. Together with a parallel Spanish-language volume, *Patrimonio Inmaterial*, the editors make an important contribution to the field by dramatically expanding access to source material about the landscape architect.

If, following the historian Marina Warner, the translator's dilemma is one of fidelity versus felicity—a spectrum from literal precision to a more liberal or contemporized rendition of an original author's intent—then the editors of *Intangible Heritage* are among the faithful. In this representation, Burle Marx seemingly emerged onto the scene in the early 1960s as a fully formed thinker and designer, his legacy unifying the progressive continuum of 20th-century landscape architecture around environmental advocacy, ecology, and aesthetics. Unlike earlier monographs on Burle Marx, *Intangible Heritage* is not a portfolio of built work; nor does it claim to trace the evolution of the designer's oeuvre, analyze the cultural significance of specific projects, or assess his relationship with contemporaneous Brazilian politics. Rather, the project is highly indexical, directing the reader to the hundreds of



LEFT

A century before Roberto Burle Marx's expedition, the French botanist Auguste de Saint-Hilaire traveled across southern Brazil to document its flora and fauna.

vibrant collection of references seeks to “plant curiosity in the reader’s mind, along a path that offers any number of tools,” inviting flexible and nonlinear engagement.

Burle Marx (1909–1994) transformed the moods and materials of landscape design in the 20th century. His brightly colored plans for parks and gardens were unmistakable compositions of flat, organic shapes. Often painted in gouache, these representations are confident, kinetic, and tightly articulated. As built work, Burle Marx’s landscapes are elaborately layered; at eye level, the plan compositions dissolve into overlapping fields of highly textured vegetation. Hundreds of private gardens and well-known public works in Caracas (Parque del Este), Rio de Janeiro (Parque do Flamengo and Avenida Atlântica), and Brasília (Jardín del Ministerio de la Armada) synthesize the jazzy geometric abstraction of contemporary modernism with the forms, colors, and habits of endemic Brazilian vegetation.

Intangible Heritage is organized into three chapters, each derived from a unique form of communication: the expedition report, the interview, and the public lecture. The book begins with a report of a 1983 botanical expedition to the Amazon, where Burle Marx led a team of landscape architects, a botanist, and an agronomist/ecologist on a bioprospecting mission to collect live plants that might “be usable in landscaping projects due to their ornamental value.” Here, in the early pages of the first chapter, we meet Burle Marx late in his career—the embittered maestro searching for small moments of beauty in a hostile landscape devastated by deforestation and road construction. The report reveals an 11,000-kilometer journey that taxed man and machine: Van breakdowns were common, despite funding from the federal government and the state-owned oil corporation Petrobras to outfit the expedition with durable equipment. The team camped rather than spend money on hotels, and Burle Marx noted that at his age, “I have to content myself with collecting samples near the roads, letting the rest of the team handle the strain of going deeper into the mountains.”

AUGUSTE DE SAINT-HILAIRE

references—botanical, environmental, artistic, biographic, geographic—that drift through Burle Marx’s written and spoken words. The editors juxtapose photographs of specific plants in their original ecosystems with their usage in urban landscapes designed by Burle Marx. Afro-Brazilian sculpture from Burle Marx’s personal collection commingles with reproductions of Old World paintings and architecture. Archival photographs capture Burle Marx and his collaborators on the road, in the field, and in the gardens of Sítio Roberto Burle Marx, his estate outside Rio de Janeiro. This eclectic and

"I flatly refuse to accept the most frequent and common assessment of my work, which is to call it 'original.'"

—ROBERTO BURLE MARX



ABOVE
Sítio Roberto Burle Marx, where the landscape architect lived and practiced for decades, was an active laboratory for design, construction, and plant cultivation.

As the team documented the unique conditions in dozens of landscapes, from the rocky outcrops of Serra do Caiapó to the lowlands of Igarapé das Lajes, they were shocked by the omnipresence of disintegrating natural environments. It was not the first collecting trip on which Burle Marx and his collaborators had encountered the "brutality of humanity in using nature as though it were inexhaustible," but this time, the pervasiveness of destruction had increased by several orders of magnitude. As the caravan traversed the territory, even the small cities of the Amazon issued unnerving landscape insults, such as a colossal tree stump displayed like a trophy in the central square of Vilhena. The surrounding landscapes were so thoroughly compromised that Burle Marx was appalled by the decorative use of exotic vegetation in these cities;

of a particular time and place. It is a hopeful and seemingly unprejudiced posture, yet one gets the sense of an artist redirecting attention away from the inner workings of his creative process and toward a philosophy of how to interpret the natural environment. On Brazilian landscape traditions, Burle Marx asserts that designed landscapes—other than domestic agricultural landscapes—did not exist prior to colonization: "[T]he natural landscape is what prevails." Burle Marx's legacy is often linked to his passion for tropical vegetation and his advocacy for Brazil's diverse phytogeographic regions. Paradoxically, this appeal to nature is also an intentional break from the past; he abhors the popularity of plants introduced during the colonial era but makes little mention of Indigenous land practices threatened by industrial-scale extraction.

he suggested that urban squares and boulevards incorporate regional elements not merely as demonstrations but as the last possible refuges for native flora.

The second chapter jumps forward a decade to a 1994 interview of Burle Marx by the French art critic and curator Jacques Leenhardt. Here, Burle Marx is the venerable artist reflecting on changing conceptions of art and nature in Brazil's polycultural environment. When asked by Leenhardt if he considers himself a pioneer or innovator, Burle Marx demurs, "I flatly refuse to accept the most frequent and common assessment of my work, which is to call it 'original.'" He explains that his projects never deny history but are affirmatively the fullest expressions

RIGHT

At the Maracaibo Botanical Garden in Venezuela, the Castillito (little castle) was built as a play structure in 1983 but sat unused for decades.

BELOW

The Castillito playground reopened in 2013, marking a moment of renewal within the greater Maracaibo Botanical Garden.

Designing with nature is intimate and generative; through attentive observation and botanical study, the landscape designer must form “an interpretation and understanding of natural associations” and deploy this knowledge to create new and artificial associations based on “selective and personal criteria.” In Burle Marx’s gardens, aesthetic harmony sets the possible range of ecological performance.

What, then, would it mean to reinterpret Burle Marx’s so-called unoriginal work? To translate the designer’s built work into the design practices and materials of the present day? The reader is tantalized by several photographs of the ongoing restoration and expansion of the Maracaibo Botanical



Garden in Venezuela, initiated in 2009 by none other than Villalobos and Urbina, the volume’s editors (both born in Venezuela). Conceived in 1983 by Burle Marx and the Venezuelan botanist Leandro Aristeguieta, this garden school in a tropical dry forest was abandoned for decades and recently threatened by development. A remarkable fusion of design activism and public education by Villalobos, Urbina, and an international team of collaborators, the garden reopened to the public in 2013.

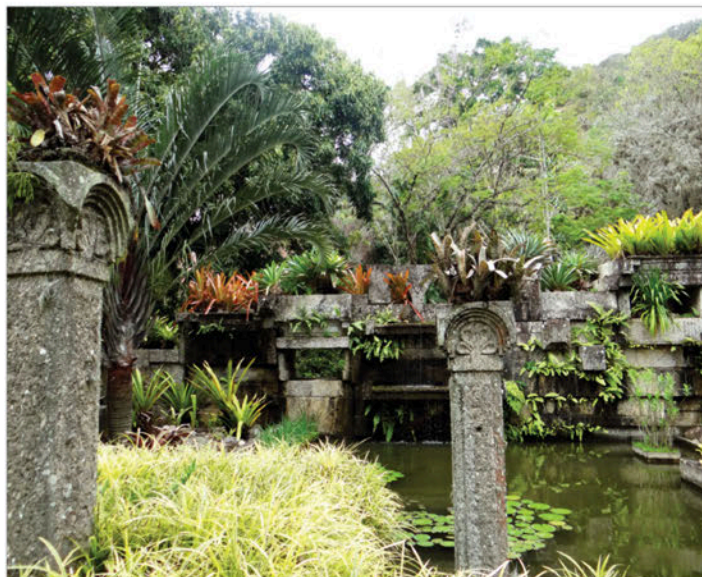
Burle Marx, however, was notoriously ambivalent about the opinions of clients and visitors, so an expanded story of the garden’s 21st-century renewal—and the alliances required to sustain the project—could have cast new light on a “Pedagogy *Burle-marxii*.” Unfortunately, beyond a few paragraphs in the book’s introduction, the reader is left to speculate on how Villalobos and Urbina interpreted and translated a significant built work, bringing it into the meteorological, economic, and political climates of the 21st century.

The final chapter is the longest and most wide-ranging, including nine lectures delivered by Burle Marx and a short essay by the architect and longtime collaborator José Tabacow. A breadth of topics across two decades introduces us to Burle Marx the public intellectual, with a complicated relationship to the military regime that governed Brazil from the mid-1960s until the restoration of civilian rule in the early 1980s.

In a 2018 volume of translated lectures edited by Gareth Doherty, Haruyoshi Ono, Burle Marx’s longtime creative



MARIA A. VILLALOBOS H., 2021, TOP; CARLA URBINA, 2014, BOTTOM

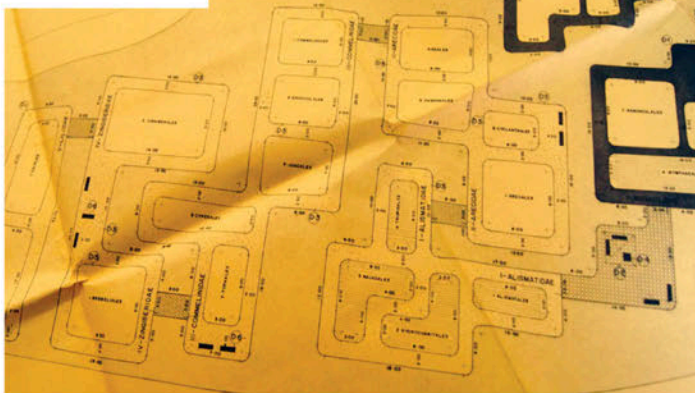


LEFT

Features recovered from demolition work in the center of Rio de Janeiro were reused at Burle Marx's estate.

BELOW

Burle Marx's original planting scheme for the Maracaibo Botanical Garden followed a phylogenetic layout, arranging plants by evolutionary history.



partner and successor to the studio, claims that Burle Marx disliked the practice of simultaneously speaking and showing slides. Instead, he preferred to deliver an unaccompanied oral presentation, followed by a slideshow. With this preference in mind, the present-day reader may think differently about a passage from the 1966 lecture "Considerations on Brazilian Art" published in *Intangible Heritage*.

Burle Marx asks the audience not to look at but to imagine the colors of Brazil. "Our green is dark, almost black and, by strange contrast, it joins together with two dominant colors: the yellow of the *cassias* and the *ipês* (which add variety to the chromatic composition) and the purple of the *quaresmeiras*, seemingly intended to create the ritual atmosphere of Easter," he says to the crowd. "Colors that can only be explained by this light and this sky, contrasting with the dark, dense green of the surrounding vegetation."

In 2025, deforestation in the Amazon is rising at alarming rates while profit and harm continue to be unevenly distributed. Poachers of rare plants—perhaps even species collected by Burle Marx—want to turn a quick profit on the international

market, perhaps more concerned with day-to-day subsistence than the preservation of regional genetic diversity. Long-term investment in urban public spaces and hinterland conservation is fully exposed to the demands of the market, either to generate returns for private developers or to monetize nature through carbon credits or similar schemes. The conflicts of Burle Marx's time are still with us. *Intangible Heritage* instructs us on how designers can apply the force of their personal convictions to matters of public concern. ●

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CARLA URBINA, 2018. TOP LEFT, MARIA A. VILLALOBOS H., 2012. BOTTOM RIGHT