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Maravilhosa Natureza

Homage to Cérès Franco Through the Works of Two Brazilian Artists of the 1960s: Maria Grauben do Monte Lima and Francisco da Silva

Opening: Thursday, November 12, 5-8 pm
Exhibition: November 12–19, 2026, 11- 6 pm

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On the occasion of the centenary of Cérès Franco's birth, Virginie Louvet pays tribute to the Brazilian gallerist through an exhibition featuring two Brazilian naïve artists: Maria Grauben and Francisco da Silva.

Cérès Franco, a Gallerist Without Borders

The name Cérès evokes the Roman goddess of the harvest and echoes the Portuguese word *seara*, which refers to the harvest or a cultivated field, but also, figuratively, to a field of knowledge or creative endeavour. This resonance seems particularly fitting for a tireless discoverer of talent based in Paris. Throughout her life, she crossed the boundaries of the art world to bring extraordinary artists from all walks of life to public attention. Looking beyond artistic schools and categories, she recognised what united them: creative freedom, profound authenticity, and a shared passion for figuration, colour and the imagination. This quest took her from Brazil to France, via the United States, Spain and Morocco.

Cérès Franco's interest in so-called Brazilian "naïve" or "primitive" artists, however, was not simply a matter of fascination with marginal or self-taught forms of expression. She recognised their essential role in understanding Brazilian culture. Free from academic traditions and conventions, their spontaneous painting draws on the country's landscapes, beliefs, folk narratives and collective imagination. It thus reveals a Brazil defined not only by its avant-garde movements, but also by the richness of its popular and vernacular traditions.

This approach forms part of the broader search for a distinct Brazilian artistic identity initiated by the modernists of the 1920s. With the Anthropophagic Movement* and the manifesto published by Oswald de Andrade in 1928, artists and intellectuals advocated absorbing and reinventing European influences through a distinctly Brazilian imagination. So-called "primitive" cultures thus became essential sources of artistic inspiration.

Cérès Franco, however, chose to give a voice directly to these self-taught artists from modest backgrounds, who had attended neither art academies nor the intellectual circles of modernism, and whose painting sprang from an inner necessity rather than from theory or a manifesto. For her, "true Brazilian art is naïve art."

Maria Grauben and Chico da Silva : An alternative path to Brazilian modernity

Cérès Franco brought a distinctive perspective to naïve artists, whose works formed an essential part of her collection.

In 1965, with the support of Jean Boghici, a Brazilian collector and art dealer of Romanian origin, she organised the exhibition Eight Brazilian Naïve Painters (Huit peintres naïfs brésiliens) at Galerie Jacques Massol in Paris, featuring, among others, works by Maria Grauben and Chico da Silva. The exhibition catalogue featured a foreword by art critic Jean Chassaigne, who would become director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris a few years later. Through this exhibition, Franco broadened the scope of Brazilian art and championed a vision of modernity that extended beyond the avant-garde.

Maravilhosa Natureza brings renewed attention to her pioneering appreciation of Brazilian naïve artists who had long remained on the margins of the established art world. The exhibition brings together two artists from the state of Ceará. Both self-taught, Maria Grauben and Chico da Silva developed highly distinctive visual languages: a luxuriant world of flora in Grauben's work and a fantastical bestiary in da Silva's.

Writing about Maria Grauben, Chassaigne observed:

"Others are a revelation. A woman like Grauben, who came from a remote northern province, after an obscure existence as a minor civil servant, discovers painting at the age of seventy, ill and almost infirm, and the result is dazzling. A creative tide rises within her, and its proliferation never ceases. An overarching rhythm sweeps along details repeated to the point of obsession. The same elements are transformed, becoming in turn leaves, flowers, butterfly wings, shimmering fragments of light."

He was equally enthusiastic about the work of the artist of Indigenous descent:

"The Indian blood flowing through Francisco da Silva's veins draws him into a kind of totemic transposition. His dazzling birds and enormous insects recapture the intricate order of sand drawings or feather ornaments (…) yet in his work they retain a violent, colourful intensity."

Rather than "naïve art", perhaps we should therefore adopt the art critic's expression and speak of "an art of wonder and spontaneity."

Taken together, the works of these two artists, who might be described as modern primitivists, evoke a collective cultural memory nourished by multiple imaginative worlds and a creative freedom deeply rooted in this vast, continent-sized country, shaped by cultural intermingling and a plurality of identities, to which Cérès Franco remained so profoundly attached.

*The anthropophagic movement was a Brazilian artistic movement that emerged in the late 1920s within the context of modernism. Inspired by Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, it advocated the appropriation and assimilation of foreign influences, particularly European ones, rather than their rejection. This form of cultural "anthropophagy" sought to transform these influences in order to forge a distinctive Brazilian and Latin American identity.

Maria Grauben (1889-1972) was born in Iguatu, in the Brazilian state of Ceará, in 1889. In 1908, she moved to Rio de Janeiro. She initially led an independent and unconventional life, working in journalism and at the Ministry of Finance at a time when Brazilian society remained deeply shaped by patriarchal norms.

She only began painting at the age of seventy, inspired in particular by the light and the views from her apartment in Rio de Janeiro. Encouraged by the painter Ivan Serpa, she attended classes at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. Her painting is characterised by a remarkably free approach to landscape. Rather than faithfully reproducing the visible world, Grauben created imaginary landscapes in which nature is transformed through colour and light. Her compositions are built up from countless small brushstrokes that fragment the pictorial surface, creating effects of shimmering luminosity. Forms seem to dissolve into a space where reality and imagination intertwine.

Often associated with naïve art, alongside artists such as Grandma Moses and Séraphine de Senlis, Maria Grauben nevertheless stands apart through the importance she places on colour, light and brushwork. The critic Mário

Pedrosa emphasised the luxuriant and luminous quality of her paintings, while Walmir Ayala drew parallels between her work and Neo-Impressionism.

Despite a relatively short career spanning just over a decade, Grauben produced nearly three thousand paintings, reflecting an exceptionally prolific artistic practice. She exhibited in Brazil and internationally, notably at the São Paulo Biennial, in Paris and at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro.

Today, her works are held in several public and private collections in Brazil and France, including the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio), the National Museum of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro, the Anatole Jakovsky International Museum of Naïve Art in Nice, and the Cérès Franco Collection in Montolieu, France.

Francisco da Silva (c.1910-1985) was born in the 1910s. His mother had left Ceará for Acre, where she worked in the rubber industry. Chico thus spent his early years immersed in the Amazon rainforest, its stories, beliefs and mythical forces.

Around 1940, his family settled in the Pirambu neighbourhood of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará. Chico began painting on the walls of Praia Formosa. With no formal artistic training, he developed an instantly recognisable visual language: fantastical animals, birds, serpents and hybrid creatures inhabit compositions in which the boundaries between reality and imagination seem constantly to shift.

His encounter with Jean-Pierre Chabloz, a Swiss painter and art critic, helped bring his work to the attention of Brazilian and international art circles. Gradually, the artist moved from the whitewashed walls of fishermen's huts to

paper, replacing charcoal, chalk and fragments of brick with gouache. His work began to feature in exhibitions in Brazil and abroad, culminating in his participation in the Venice Biennale in 1966. Yet this recognition also came with the construction of the artist as a “primitive” or “naïve” figure, reflecting the academic and colonial perspectives that had long shaped the reception of artistic practices emerging from the margins of art history.

Chico da Silva’s extraordinary inventiveness finds expression in a visual language entirely his own. Having remained unable to read or write throughout his life, he developed a universe populated by creatures that defy established categories. Somewhere between animal and human, his figures inhabit a cosmology in which the fantastical offers a way of imagining a world in perpetual transformation. The mouth, a recurring motif in his work, particularly embodies this dynamic: it threatens, devours, absorbs and gives birth to new forms.

Chico da Silva died in poverty in Fortaleza in 1985. His rediscovery in the 2000s has prompted a reassessment of his work: beyond the figure of the “primitive painter” or “exotic genius” emerges an artist whose paintings invent worlds of their own. Numerous artists, from Denilson Baniwa to Jaider Esbell, have since acknowledged his influence.

His works are held in numerous public and private collections, including Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom; the Rollins Museum of Art, Winter Park, Florida, United States; the Denver Art Museum, United States; El Museo del Barrio, New York, United States; the Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel, Switzerland; the Anatole Jakovsky International Museum of Naïve Art, Nice, France; and the Cérès Franco Collection, Montolieu, France.

In Brazil, his works are also represented in the collections of MAUC – Museu de Arte da Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza; Pinacoteca do Ceará, Fortaleza; MASP – Museu de Arte de São Paulo; MAM-SP – Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo; MAC USP – Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo; MAM Rio – Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro; MAR – Museu de Arte do Rio; and Museu de Arte de Belém, Belém.

Portrait de Cérès Franco par Corneille

Cérès Franco (1926-1921)
was born in Bagé, southern Brazil. In 1948, she moved to the United States to study art history at Columbia University and the New School in New York. She settled in Paris in the early 1950s, where she became an art critic and curator. She soon developed a particular interest in artists working outside the mainstream art world.

In 1962, Cérès Franco organised her first exhibition, L'Œil de Bœuf, featuring round and oval artworks. In 1972, she opened the L'Œil de Bœuf gallery in Paris, where, for more than twenty years, she championed artists associated with New Figuration, Art Brut, naïve art, the CoBrA movement and outsider art.

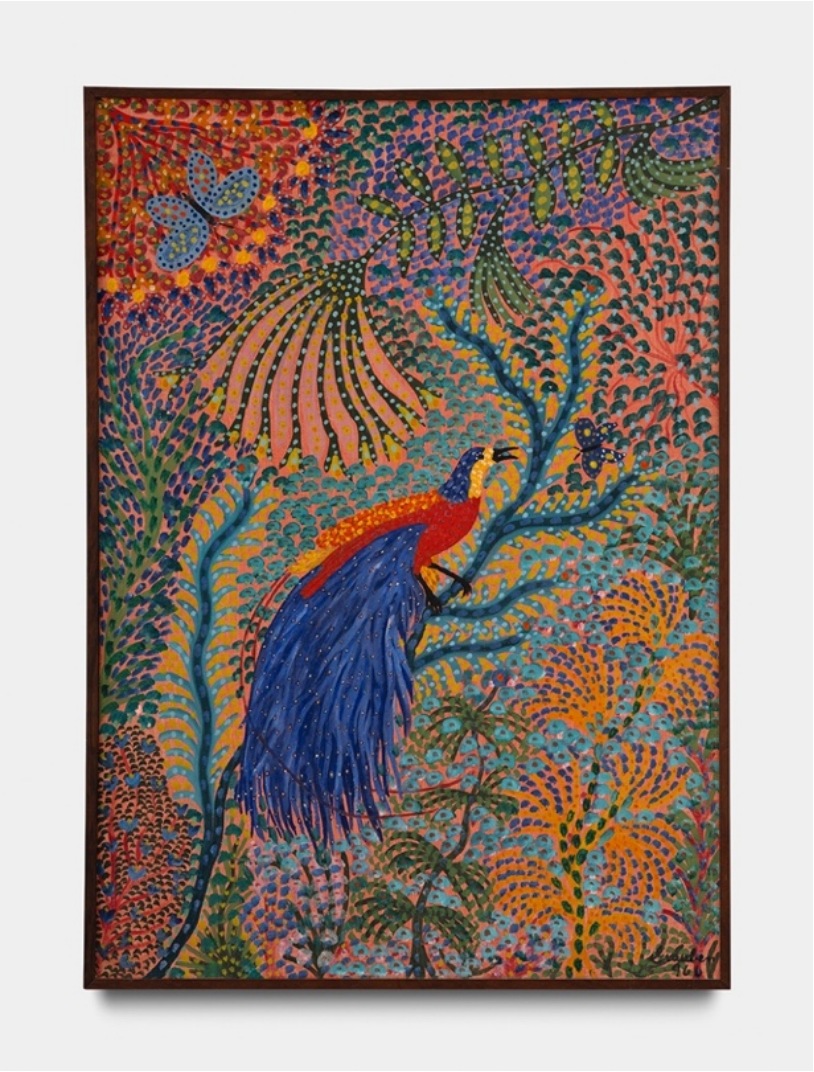
Alongside her career as a gallery owner, she built an extensive collection of more than 1,700 works, with a strong emphasis on Brazilian artists. Today, her collection is housed at the Coopérative-Musée Cérès Franco in Montolieu, in the Aude region of southern France, which has recently reopened.

VISUALS

Francisco DA SILVA known as Chico DA SILVA (1910-1985)
Toad and heron, 1965
Gouache sur papier
56 x 77 cm
Signed on the bottom-right corner
Provenance : Cérès Franco collection

Maria Grauben do Monte Lima known as Maria GRAUBEN (1889-1972)
Passano, borboletas e flores, 1966
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm
Signed and dated on the bottom-right corner
Provenance : Cérès Franco collection

Francisco DA SILVA known as Chico DA SILVA (1910-1985)
Marin fauna, 1965
Gouache on paper
56 x 77 cm
Signed and dated on the bottom-right corner
Provenance : Cérès Franco collection



Maria Grauben do Monte Lima known as Maria GRAUBEN (1889-1972)
Untitled, 1966
Oil on canvas
69,5 x 40,5 cm
Signed and dated on the bottom-right corner