

The New York Times

A Visionary Brazilian Artist Is Rediscovered

A wave of new interest in the artist of Indigenous descent known as Chico shines a light on his dreamlike paintings of animals and the issues of authorship and autonomy that affected his life.



The paintings of Francisco da Silva, known as Chico, were known for their brilliant colors and patterns. "Untitled" is from 1972. Credit: Dario Lasagni, via David Kordansky Gallery

By Hilarie M. Sheets

Oct. 19, 2023

This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on the art world's expanded view of what art is and who can make it.

Francisco da Silva was one of the first Brazilian artists of Indigenous descent to achieve international fame. In the 1960s, his paintings of fantastical storybook creatures, inter-

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locked in animated combat and hallucinatory fields of brilliant color and pattern, grew to be wildly popular in Brazil and beyond. One even decorated the cover of the telephone book in Fortaleza where the artist — known simply as Chico — lived and established a pioneering and controversial collective studio practice.

By the time of his death in 1985 from alcoholism, Chico was destitute and dismissed by the art world, which had raised him up for his unique "primitive" vision only to then question the authenticity of his work. Now, a new wave of interest and scholarship is re-assessing Chico's work and revisiting questions of authorship, autonomy and exoticizing that surrounded his story.

On Oct. 27, the first major solo show in New York of his work opens at the David Kordansky Gallery, with some 25 paintings and works on paper from the 1960s and early 70s. This follows a Chico presentation last year at the Independent art fair in New York by the São Paulo gallery Galatea, and the artist's largest survey exhibition ever, "Chico da Silva and the Pirambu Studio," on view this spring at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo and through Oct. 29 at the Pinacoteca do Ceará in Fortaleza.

"As the art world begins to widen its eyes to indigeneity," said Mr. Kordansky, "we want to bring widespread attention to the work and legacy of Chico da Silva who, in the most visionary manner, paved the way for a new generation of Indigenous artists starting to come up in Brazil."



Another "Untitled" by Chico, this one from 1966. Credit: Ding Musa, via David Kordansky Gallery

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Contemporary Brazilian Indigenous artists including Denilson Baniwa and Jaider Esbell have specifically cited the influence of Chico's work. Mr. Esbell took his own life at 41 in 2021, while his work was being featured in the São Paulo Biennial.

Graham Steele, a dealer and collector, said the tragic circumstances surrounding the final years of the two artists deserve more scrutiny. "This idea of another Indigenous artist who died because of similar pressures, there is so much to be learned from Chico's story and how these artists are used in a way," said Mr. Steele, who with the dealer Alexandra Mollof co-organized the Kordansky show in Manhattan, on view through Dec. 16.

According to the catalog accompanying the survey exhibition, Chico was born in 1910 (though it may have been as late as 1922-23) to an Indigenous Peruvian father and mother from Ceará in northeastern Brazil and spent his youth in the Amazon forest. As a child, he would accompany his father, a boatman, on the river, where the rampant flora and fauna would fuel his artistic imagination.

After his father's death from a rattlesnake bite, Chico eventually moved with his mother to Fortaleza. There, the self-taught artist began his practice of painting birds on the exterior walls of fishermen's houses using charcoal, chalk and crushed organic matter as pigment.

In 1943, the art critic and artist Jean-Pierre Chabloz, an émigré from Switzerland, saw one of the murals and sought out its maker. Striking up a friendship, Mr. Chabloz began supplying Chico with painting materials and canvases. His stylized menagerie of dragons, serpents, fish and fowl, rendered in dizzying pointillist constellations, proliferated over the next few years. The critic went on to exhibit and sell these works to collectors in Rio, São Paulo and European cities.

Promoting Chico's work in art journals, Mr. Chabloz described him as "gloriously primitive, divinely illiterate and, above all, a wonderful artist who, until then, lacked nothing but a favorable opportunity to reveal his extraordinary gifts."

For a white European man of that era, Ms. Mollof credits Mr. Chabloz with a certain open-mindedness. "His eye sees the singularity and the power of Chico's work and I think Chabloz goes out of his way to really champion the work," she said. "Of course, he profits from it as well at some point."

To Mr. Steele, Mr. Chabloz was as much Chico's colonizer as his champion. "When you think of the dialogues around the 'noble savage' and modernists looking at someone who comes from the outside for purity of expression," he said, "this massive appreciation is very much a double-edged sword. It's putting Chico into a box."

From 1948 to 1960, Mr. Chabloz went back to Europe and Chico lacked the resources to produce much. His practice gained steam again when Mr. Chabloz returned to Brazil and found Chico a job in 1961 in the art museum at the Federal University of Ceará, where he received a salary and painted some 40 canvases for the institution over three years. Mr. Chabloz also introduced Chico to his first dealer, Henrique Bluhm.

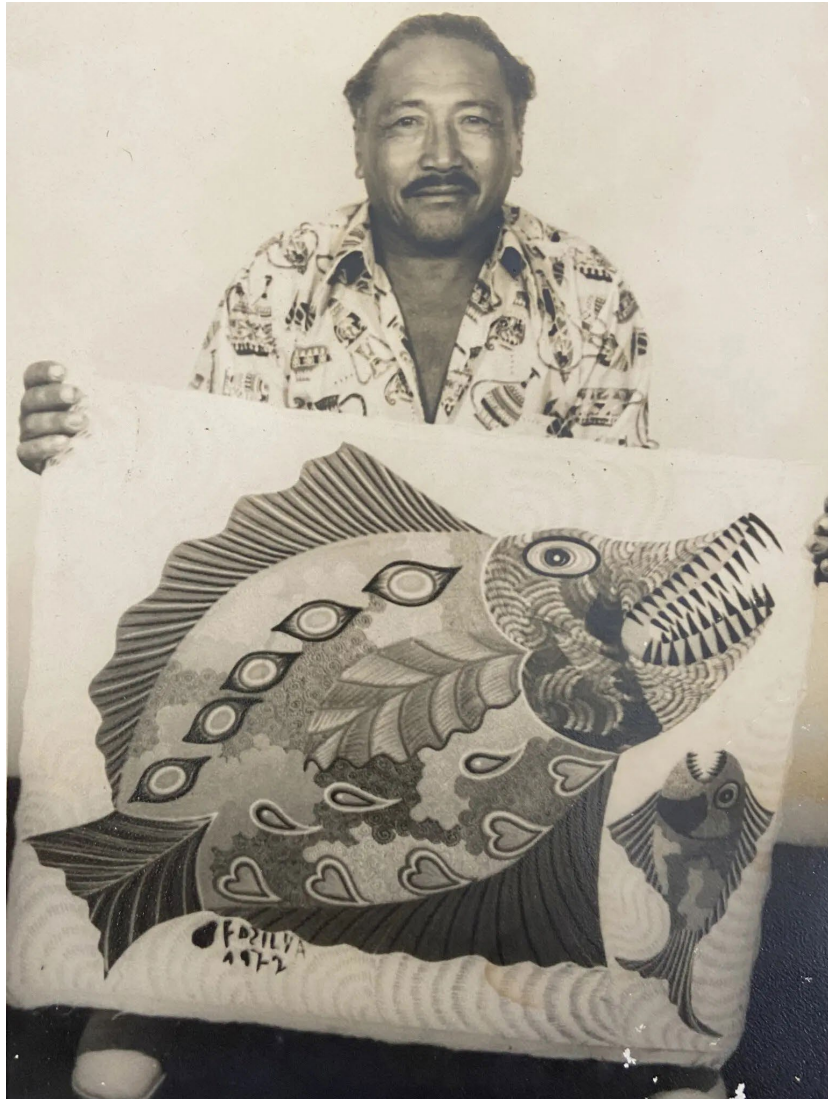
With more demand for his work, Chico began to train assistants and students from the

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favela of Pirambu in Fortaleza to paint in his style. At this time, Chico's work attracted the attention of the art historian and critic Clarival do Prado Valladares, who included him in a group show on naïve art at the Brazilian pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1966. Chico also participated in the 1967 São Paulo Biennial.

The Pirambu Studio, as Chico's workshop was called, came to be a local phenomenon — and a target of criticism. Chico's paintings were sold on the streets in local markets and hung in houses all over the region. In a 1969 article in "O Povo," Mr. Chabloz publicly broke with Chico, saying the studio production had diluted the power of his work and devalued its worth. The pushback from the art establishment coincided with Chico's heavy drinking and hospitalizations in mental institutions into the 1970s from which he never fully recovered.

Alongside Chico's work, the current survey show in Brazil showcases works by the five principal apprentices he worked with collectively, who went by the names Chica (Chico's daughter, Francisca), Babá, Ivan, Garcia and Claudionor — and each eventually developed independent art practices with their own signed works.



A new wave of interest and scholarship is reassessing the work of the artist Chico, shown here in 1972 holding up one of his paintings, and revisiting questions of authorship, autonomy and exoticizing that surrounded his life story. Credit: via David Kordansky Gallery

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"The discussion that was dominating the review of Chico da Silva's work was always centered around this idea of if it's an original or not," said Jochen Volz, director of the Pinacoteca de São Paulo. "It's much more interesting to think that he created a certain economy within the neighborhood of Fortaleza, where people would travel to see paintings of fantastic animals. It was part of the collective imagination."

The Brazilian curator Keyna Eleison, who grew up in Rio and often encountered Chico's paintings hanging in people's houses, views his communal practice as authentically Afro-Indigenous. "Of course, the studio was demonized by Chablos because it was like Chico's freedom movement," she said, "and every freedom movement needs to be collective."

The use of assistants was seen as radical and "unheard-of coming out of Brazilian modernism," Mr. Kordansky said, but is commonplace in contemporary art and dates to the Renaissance. "Why is it OK for Andy Warhol but not OK for Chico da Silva?" he asked, referring to the production line in Warhol's studio, The Factory.

In tandem with the exhibition, the Pinacoteca de São Paulo for the first time acquired work by Chico for the history of Brazilian art in the permanent collection. The Tate in London and Centre Pompidou in Paris have also made recent acquisitions.

Mr. Steele pointed to a pantheon of Brazilian modernists, including Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Mira Schendel, and said works by Chico are starting to be integrated in this context.

"That is something that's happening now in an interesting way" Mr. Steele said. "There is a deeper interest in wanting to look at Chico's story and how it holds a mirror up to issues of racism and classism."

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 22, 2023, Section F, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: A Pioneer of Indigenous Art.