

# Chico da Silva

## Fantastic Animals

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### The cycle of deaths and resurrections of Chico da Silva

by **Andrea Bellini**

Visionary and cosmogonic, Chico da Silva's art has retained its force over time; what has changed is the way we look at it, confirming that it is not the work of art that is exposed to the public, but the public - with its own cultural categories - that is exposed to the work of art.

The story of this extraordinary Brazilian artist can serve as a breviary for all possible Western misunderstandings of the so-called New World, which - as we know - is as old as our own. Chico da Silva has long been considered a paradigmatic figure of indigenous Brazilian art, that is, of a unified style and aesthetic that never existed as such, except in the European imagination. According to this interpretation, da Silva is an indigenous artist who paints bizarre animals in primitive style, immersed in mythical, untamed nature. Da Silva has never claimed an indigenous identity for his work, however, and has explicitly stated that the subjects of his paintings are not memories of his childhood in the Amazon, but the product of his imagination. The Brazilian artist's is in fact an original pictorial language, capable of expressing a singular universe through the use of unusual techniques.

Born in 1922 or 1923 and raised in the Amazon rainforest in the north-western state of Acre, da Silva lost his father, a Peruvian-born fisherman, to a rattlesnake bite as a child. In the early 1930's, he moved with his mother to Pirambu, one of Fortaleza's poorest districts. It was here that he began to draw large-beaked birds, monstrous fish and ghost ships in charcoal on the walls of fishermen's houses. In 1943, Jean-Pierre Chablotz, a Swiss artist who had recently settled in the area, saw the drawings while strolling through the streets of the neighborhood and was impressed.

After some research, he met the young self-taught artist and encouraged him with paper, ink, gouaches, pencils and brushes. During the five years he lived in Brazil, Chablotz promoted his work, placing it in various local and national exhibitions, and looking after its market. However, Chablotz's support came to

an end in 1948, when he returned to Europe. Unsure of how to support himself, da Silva stopped painting for twelve long years, devoting himself to a variety of trades: shoemaker, clog maker, umbrella repairman, barber and cabin boy on fishing boats.

Things changed again in 1960, when Chablotz settled permanently in Brazil. Chablotz not only convinced him to resume his painting, but also managed to get him hired at the art museum of the Federal University of Ceará. For a few years, between 1961 and 1963, thanks to a fixed salary, his protégé was finally able to devote himself entirely to art.

From a pictorial language perspective, da Silva matured a series of formal solutions already defined in the early 1940's: the application of color without gradation, the pointillist technique, the absence of three-dimensional depth, the creation of rhythm and the visual orientation of the work through the drawing of long and short lines. The iconography is enriched by bizarre anthropomorphic beings and mythological animals, always depicted with mouths wide open from which a forked tongue protrudes.

When, in the mid-1960's, his work gained notoriety in Brazil and demand for his work grew rapidly, Chico da Silva left the institution to set up his own "workshop": the Pirambu School was born. The members of the school were four young local men: Sebastião Lima da Silva (Babá), José Claudionor Nogueira (Claudionor), Ivan José de Assis (Ivan), José dos Santos Gomes (Garcia) and his daughter Francisca da Silva (Chica). Da Silva taught them the trade and organized a collective work method. He, Claudionor and Ivan took care of the drawings; Babá, Ivan and Garcia were responsible for color, pigmentation and stippling; finally, Chico da Silva took care of the finishing touches. He then affixed his signature (or "logo") to the paintings, which he sold directly. Thanks to the contributions of his pupils, the master's imagination expanded and his animal repertoire grew. Roosters, herons, jacanas, owls, snakes, flowers, butterflies, pets and small insects now appeared in his compositions.

In 1965, he was invited to represent Brazil at the 1966 Venice Biennale and received an honorable mention from the jury. Two years later, some of his large-

format works were exhibited at the São Paulo Biennale.

His international success coincided, however, with a public controversy that had dramatic repercussions on his health and his art.

It was in 1967 that his first mentor and supporter, Jean-Pierre Chablotz, wrote a highly polemical article in which he declared that most of da Silva's works in circulation were fake and pictorially modest. Chablotz's stance, followed by an aggressive and disparaging press campaign, led to the collapse of da Silva's market. Once again, the Western view on the question of authenticity and originality is far from that of the Brazilian artist: in his school, a technique is transmitted and works are produced collectively, they are not fakes. Traumatized by the controversy, the artist was hospitalized several times between 1970 and 1977 for his alcohol addiction and nervous breakdowns.

Unwillingly trapped in a continuous cycle of death and resurrection, Chico da Silva's new life began a decade after Chablotz's article. The rebirth took place in 1977, thanks to the initiative of a group of intellectuals led by artist and researcher Hélio Rola, who proposed - as part of an exhibition in Ceará - a performance entitled *Homens trabalhando*. Presented as a conceptual work, the performance consisted in the creation of a large canvas in front of an audience by the five artists of the Pirambu school, under the aegis of their master. Painted in seven days, *Homens trabalhando* is an emblematic work of Brazilian art of the second half of the 20th century, which has the merit of presenting the school as a collective art phenomenon, a place of experimentation and expansion of the imagination, and not as a center of counterfeiting. Partially rehabilitated by this performance, Chico da Silva returned to an individual practice in 1978, abandoning works on paper and beginning to paint exclusively on canvas.

This exhibition at MASSIMODECARLO Pièce Unique represents a rare opportunity to see a significant body of work by Chico da Silva in Europe, a visionary creator of worlds of diverse fortunes, who deserves a place of honor in the history of Latin American art in the second half of the 20th century.

**About the artist:** Francisco Domingos da Silva, known as Chico da Silva, was born in Alto Tejo, in the Brazilian state of Acre, to an Indian-Peruvian father and mother from the state of Ceará. His exact date of birth remains uncertain to this day, between 1910, 1922 and 1923.

With the help of the art critic Jean-Pierre Chablotz, whom he met in the 1940's, da Silva began to paint with simple materials such as tempera, varnish and paper and participated in exhibitions in Brazil and Europe. The peak of his career came in 1966 when he represented Brazil at the Venice Biennale.

In recent years, his work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions such as Chico da Silva, David Kordansky Gallery, New York (2023); Chico da Silva and the Pirambu studio, Pinacoteca de São Paulo (2023); Chico da Silva: Sacred Connection, Global Vision, Museu de Arte Sacra, São Paulo (2022); Chico da Silva - O Renascer 100 Anos, Espaço Cultural Correios, Fortaleza, Brazil (2010); Retrospective Chico da Silva: do delírio ao dilúvio, Espaço Cultural do Palácio da Abolição, Fortaleza, Brazil (1989). Part of his production is in many public and private collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate, London; Pinacoteca de São Paulo; El Museo del Barrio, New York; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Museu de Arte do Rio de Janeiro; and Fundação Edson Queiroz, Fortaleza, Brazil.

**About the author:** Andrea Bellini studied philosophy and art history at the University of Siena and prehistoric archaeology in Florence. He was editor-in-chief of Flash Art International in New York, director of the art fair Artissima in Turin, and co-director of Castello di Rivoli, a contemporary art museum. He currently directs the Centre d'Art Contemporain and the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement in Geneva. He has been entrusted with the curatorship of the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024.