

INSTITUTIONAL

Nearing its 25th anniversary, Instituto Tomie Ohtake reaffirms its original commitment to fostering broad and democratic access to art. Operating independently, without maintaining a collection of its own, Instituto is dedicated to promoting research and exhibitions that expand interpretations of historically significant works, collections, and archives. Within this context, the INSTITUTO TOMIE OHTAKE VISITS program was created, aiming at establishing partnerships with collectors and key figures in the art circuit to facilitate in-depth explorations of collections that are largely inaccessible to the general public.

The program's first edition, in 2022, presented a selection from the Igor Queiroz Barroso Collection in the exhibition *Centelhas em movimento* [Sparks in Motion], curated by Tiago Gualberto and Paulo Miyada. In 2023, the second edition traced the trajectory of art dealer Paulo Kuczynski, culminating in the exhibition *A coleção imaginária de Paulo Kuczynski* [The Imaginary Collection of Paulo Kuczynski], curated by Jacopo Crivelli Visconti. Both shows highlighted the diversity of Brazilian artistic production and its multiple narratives throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

For its third edition, the program turns to the Vilma Eid Collection, a distinctive selection that brings together so-called folk, modern, and contemporary artists. Throughout her career as a gallerist and collector, Vilma has played a pivotal role in recognizing and legitimizing artists often marginalized within the art circuit. Now being presented to the public for the first time, her collection challenges Eurocentric narratives of Brazilian art, exploring new horizons and addressing the preservation of Brazilian memories and narratives which have been historically underrepresented.

This is not the first collaboration: in 2012, the exhibition *Teimosia da imaginação* [Stubbornness of the Imagination], organized in partnership with Instituto do Imaginário do Povo Brasileiro – founded by Eid – featured works and interviews with ten folk artists. Much like that initiative, this new exhibition continues the effort to highlight and acknowledge these artists' production, broadening perspectives on Brazilian art and strengthening its dialogue with the public.

We thank Vilma Eid for the generosity and partnership in sharing her collection. Our gratitude extends to Stellantis and Itaú Unibanco, whose sponsorship, through the Culture Incentive Law of the Ministry of Culture, makes this project possible. We also thank the support of Galeria Estação, BMA Advogados, and Casa Fiat de Cultura, as well as the lenders who have kindly loaned works to this exhibition.

– Instituto Tomie Ohtake

Entre vizinhanças

Ana Roman e Catalina Bergues

Curadoras

“Art is art. No matter the labels.” It is with this succinct statement that Vilma Eid – collector, gallerist, founder of Instituto do Imaginário do Povo Brasileiro, and collaborator of important public institutions such as Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo and Museu Afro Brasil Emanuel Araujo – encapsulates her perspective on the multiple paths of artistic creation. This phrase, which serves as the catalyst for the exhibition *Em cada canto* [In Every Corner], reflects 40 years of a journey marked by sensitivity to works from different contexts and time periods. Her collection consists of pieces from what has come to be known as *folk art*¹, as well as modern and contemporary works legitimized by the institutional art world. Over these decades, more than 100 artists – each with their own language, history, and poetic expression – have found a place in Eid’s collection.

The formation of this collection sustains an intimate interplay between chance and intention. In her own home, Vilma arranges the pieces in a way that creates unexpected connections, fostering dialogues that leap between styles, eras, and techniques. This is the first time that such a heterogeneous body of work – which until now has inhabited a domestic environment – is being presented to the public on a large scale. The transposition from a private universe to a major show presents significant curatorial challenges: how to maintain the atmosphere of closeness, the interaction between the pieces, while not losing sight of the clarity of the exhibition and the potential of the visitor’s interpretation? And further: how to suspend the conventional labels and categories within the art world, which often segregate or hierarchize folk production in relation to contemporary art?

Vilma Eid’s trajectory is intrinsically linked to the process of recognizing and legitimizing *folk art* in Brazil, particularly between the 1980s and 2000s. First at Galeria Paulo Vasconcellos and later at the helm of Galeria Estação – founded with her son Roberto Eid Philipp, and which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024 – Vilma played a pivotal role in the shift in perspective that allowed the general public – as well as critics and curators – to see these works through a new sense of value and belonging. These creations, often neglected or confined to specific collector circles, began to appear in major exhibitions, catalogues, and museums.

From the 1940s onwards, critics and artistic institutions started questioning the requirement for formal training in the arts, recognizing the validity of works arising from other contexts and thus

¹ The concept of *folk art* appears in italics throughout the text to highlight its historically constructed and conventional nature, within a process of hierarchy and subordination. The use of italics emphasizes that the term has undergone revision and re-signification.

expanding the very concept of art². At various points, *folk art* was valued precisely for challenging academic norms – sometimes due to it being considered spontaneous and pure expression, at other times for its formal similarities to modern art experimentation³. In this process, art produced by popular classes not only established a dissonance with erudite traditions — although, at times, its interpretation was subordinated to these references, relegating its own histories, contexts, and narratives to the background — but also helped construct a critical perspective that differs from the predominant artistic discourses in Europe and the United States⁴.

In parallel, the recording and analysis of this popular production gained ground in the historiography of art in Brazil. Although the term “popular” is often used to refer to an origin that is rooted in tradition and collective memory, it also carries ambiguities that, if not contextualized, can reduce the complexity of creative processes to simplistic stereotypes. The intentional use of this concept has enabled multiple readings that, while recognizing the importance of artisanal practices and cultural expressions originating from non-formal contexts, challenge hierarchies and expand the debate on what constitutes art. This tension – between historical valorization and the limitations imposed by a rigid classification – highlights the need to analyze the conditions of production, specific references, and contexts of each work, avoiding comparisons that may inadvertently reproduce an ethnocentric view marked by prejudice⁵.

However, from the perspective of collections, it cannot be ignored that, in the last decades of the 20th century, the visual arts system underwent an increasingly evident segmentation, driven by the growth of contemporary art and the discussions surrounding the material and immaterial production of matrices considered folk. In some private and institutional spaces, discomfort arose in maintaining, under the same roof, collections classified at times as erudite/contemporary art, others as *folk art*, with conservation and communication policies varying from institution to institution⁶. *Folk*

² Some of the key figures in the recognition of this field include: Clarival do Prado Valladares, Emanuel Araujo, Janete Costa, Lélia Coelho Frota, Lina Bo Bardi, Mario Pedrosa, Pietro Maria Bardi, Roberto Pontual, and Aline Figueiredo. Today, this debate has been expanded by names such as Amanda Reis Tavares Pereira, Ana Avelar, Angela Mascelani, Ayrson Heráclito, Emerson Dionisio, Fernanda Pitta, and Ilana Goldstein. In addition to these, Germana Monte-Mór, Lorenzo Mammì, and Rodrigo Naves have also played a fundamental role in this field, working in close collaboration with Vilma Eid.

³ These debates intersect, elliptically and historically, with issues of race, class, gender, and mental health – as well as the distinction between urban and rural spaces.

⁴ PITTA, Fernanda. Isso ninguém nunca me ensinou: oito mulheres artistas populares. In: PITTA, Fernanda; EID, Vilma (org.). *Catálogo da exposição Mulheres na arte popular*. São Paulo: Galeria Estação, 2020.

⁵ Amanda Reis Tavares Pereira was a key interlocutor in the research and writing process of this text. With her contributions in the field of *folk art*, she has been consolidating research that expands and updates the debates on the subject. Currently, in partnership with Instituto Tomie Ohtake, she is organizing the book *Arte popular – Modos de usar* [Folk Art – How to Use], which compiles, discusses, and revisits the historiography and issues related to this field, with a launch in May 2025.

⁶ OLIVEIRA, Emerson Dionisio Gomes de. O popular e o contemporâneo no museu de arte: coleções e narrativas. *Textos escolhidos de cultura e arte populares*, Rio de Janeiro, v.11, n.1, p. 129-141, mai. 2014.

art often occupied a secondary or segregated space in these places, even though, as previously mentioned, it provided fundamental elements for the formation of the very concept of modernity in the history of art in Brazil.

Built on affective affinities, Vilma Eid's collection highlights how key Brazilian artists have not yet been properly incorporated into their country's history, which relegated *folk art* to a subordinate status. In this regard, this exhibition proposes to explore the neighborhoods and interactions that emerge from the collection itself. These approaches are constructed both through the dialogue between forms – such as between geometric abstraction and informalism – and through the convergence of temporalities and narratives, allowing traditional categories – whether they refer to abstraction, figuration, represented scenes, or even the very concept of perspective – to be challenged and re-signified. Small curatorial notes throughout the rooms serve as possible exercises in these associations.

The spatial arrangement of the exhibition – structured through diagonals, voids, and overlays – recreates the “neighborhoods” present in Vilma's home, where each work dialogues with another and transforms according to the context of the viewer's gaze; it also proposes new encounters, exploring the numerous possible dialogues within a rich and heterogeneous collection. We focused on the concept of relationship: what was once confined to an intimate environment reinvents itself when placed in the exhibition space, such that multiple possible interpretations emerge through the presence of new neighborhoods and the audience.

Instead of fixing a definition of what is “popular” or “erudite”, *Em cada canto* suggests new possibilities for coexistence and dialogue. By presenting for the first time the set of works gathered by Vilma Eid, the exhibition highlights how the pieces transform when seen side by side, encouraging the public to perceive Brazilian art as a field open to constant intersections and reinterpretations. Along this journey, we are invited to remember that the true power of art lies less in classifications and more in its ability to establish conversations that provoke our gaze, memory, and imagination.

Art Is Art: A Conversation with Vilma Eid

How did your collection begin, and what led you to bring together folk, modern, and contemporary art in one space?

When I was young, I had no idea what a collection was. My mother, who was an artist, took me to Cosme Velho (an art gallery that no longer exists) to give me a work of art for my birthday. There were barely any galleries at that time. I was just a child, and in my fondest memories, I recall seeing paintings covering the gallery from floor to ceiling. Suddenly, my gaze settled on a painting of a few little oxen in a field.

It was a painting by José Antonio da Silva, whom I didn't know at the time, but the gallerist and my mother advised me against choosing his work, saying he was a "primitivist" – the term people used back then – and that they weren't sure if he would "develop and make it into the art market". They told me to choose "something more modern", a phrase I never forgot. And so I did, since I knew little about art and thought it best to trust them.

It was only in the 1980s, when I became a partner at Galeria Paulo Vasconcellos, that I discovered who José Antonio da Silva was. I began visiting his home and studio in São Paulo and became even more captivated – he was an incredibly good-humored person, full of jokes and with a huge ego. I started buying his works, and from there, I became fascinated by masters of folk art such as Antônio Poteiro, Ranchinho, and Agostinho Batista de Freitas. Later, I moved on to modern and contemporary artists.

As I got to know these artists, I began to realize that it was worth trusting my own perception, which told me that those people's work was just as significant as modern art. That's how I started my collection – acquiring what I liked, within my means. In my home, I always found a place for each piece, never considering, at the time of purchase, whether it would relate to the ones I already had.

About the artists, you always maintained a very direct connection with them during your travels. How did these encounters take place?

In the 1990s, I traveled extensively, conducted a lot of research, and gradually got to know the artists I worked with. At the time, I was a partner in a music label that represented various artists from the

North and Northeast of Brazil, and I took advantage of these trips to also meet visual artists. That's how I came to know Nino, Manoel Graciano, the Cândido sisters, and many other incredible people. At a certain point, I met Zé Bezerra in Vale do Catimbau, in Pernambuco, which ended up marking a turning point in the history of our art gallery. Professor Rodrigo Naves was deeply impressed by his work and agreed to curate an exhibition of his pieces. That moment was a watershed for us, as folk art truly began to capture the public's attention.

When I met Zé Bezerra and we went to his property, I entered and cried from emotion. It was a wattle-and-daub house, all decorated with figures embedded in little stones, and a yard full of sculptures emerging from the ground. He told me that he dreamed of everything he made. He used to go into the woods and pick up the branches, without killing the trees, and proudly said he gave life to what was dead. This was an emotional discovery for me.

I went to Juazeiro to meet Nino and also to Vale do Jequitinhonha to see the works of Ulisses Mendes, Noemisa Batista, and Dona Izabel. Dona Izabel's house was very organized, she had a studio where she fired the pieces in the oven. Noemisa's house was also beautiful, she painted the walls in the same way she painted the ceramics. At Ulisses's house, a very simple place, there was a room where his widow exhibited several sculptures on a beam. I wanted to buy them, but she said she wouldn't sell: "I need them here because people come from abroad to take pictures, and I charge for the photos". That really shocked me, although it's the reality. In my romantic fantasy, I thought she wanted to keep the work, but actually she needed it to make some money.

Mixing folk art with modern and contemporary pieces can be seen as a political act, as well as a cultural one, especially in a country marked by inequality. How has your collection become a way of valuing voices that are often left aside in the hegemonic art circuit?

I take great pride in my collection, and as I built it, I came to understand that everything I have could coexist, regardless of where the works came from. For me, there's no such thing as something not fitting in or not engaging in dialogue with another piece. I never set out to match things, just as I never intended to become a reference in what I do. Incorporating works by artists who were not recognized within the established circuit happened simply because it was my truth, what I had always believed in.

I never stitched anything together in my collection or aimed at creating a narrative – I just liked the works and gradually expanded it. I usually say that, in a way, I feel very much like my artists because I believe in the power of making. My collection came about casually, without premeditation. I started inviting people to see it, and when I noticed their overwhelming reactions, I began to understand that there was something significant about it.

In short, I started my collection because I like folk art just as much as I like modern and contemporary art. I like art, in general. I believe that when art is truly good, it coexists with everything. Art is art – no matter the labels.

The Art of Confrontation

Amanda Reis Tavares Pereira

The urgent need for historiographical revision, along with its categories and classificatory criteria, has brought to light significant gaps in art research. This has exposed and imposed challenges in understanding artistic productions that have historically been rendered invisible and/or confined to “categories” (some deemed “lesser arts”) that, in contemporary times, have undergone profound reassessment – such as so-called naïve, ornamental, and folk art.

This same urgency has prompted institutions, collections, and artists to rethink works, trajectories, and the “sutures” made within the field of history and art. The belief that narratives, discourses, and interpretations inherited from a colonial and Eurocentric tradition can be re-signified in the present has opened new pathways in institutions and historiography, allowing for the reevaluation of artists who were once reduced to perspectives now under scrutiny.

In the catalog for the exhibition *Mulheres na arte popular* [Women in Folk Art], held at Galeria Estação in 2020, curator Fernanda Pitta reminds us that it is “necessary to historicize the relationship that the arts in Brazil have established with the so-called ‘popular’ in order to understand their status today, in the contemporary context”. While a recent institutional effort to broaden and critically engage with this discussion has become evident, it is also essential to acknowledge the longstanding presence of this category within Brazil’s artistic canon and historiography, dating back to the early decades of the 20th century.

So-called “folk art” played a fundamental role in shaping modernism in Brazil. Within this context, its appreciation fostered a significant body of references and scholarship on the subject, promoting important dialogues between what was considered “folk” and “non-folk” or “erudite” production. Following the path set by European modernist discourse and its valorization of the so-called “primitive”, both critics and institutions in Brazil embraced a perspective on modern art that advocated for expanding the very concept of art – one that, in their view, could emerge anywhere and be created by “anyone”, without requiring formal training. Primitives, self-taught people, the “mad”, and children were also among those considered “apt” to produce art. In this expanded framework, so-called folk art took on a central role, and the formal, visual, and technical repertoire associated with it fueled numerous dialogues between artistic productions, whether classified under this category or not.

In her text “Cultura popular, um conceito e várias histórias” [Popular Culture, One Concept, Multiple Histories] (2003), professor Martha Campos Abreu states that popular culture is one of the most controversial terms she knows and that, if “folk art is something that comes from the people, it is that very idea of people that no one quite knows how to define”. We share with the author this sense of controversy and the understanding that it is not a “concept that can be defined a priori, as an immutable and restrictive formula” – rather, its meaning is always in negotiation. Abreu recalls that, since the 19th century in Brazil, the term has appeared in the production of anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, theorists, educators, and artists. In the 1930s and 1940s, it took on a political dimension, linked to Latin American populist regimes and their efforts toward recognition. By the 1960s, it was associated with class resistance, and in subsequent decades, it also became entangled with the cultural industry and mass communication.

It is essential to recognize that the meanings and uses of the term continue to shift over the years, but they also vary within the same historical moment, depending on who is speaking and with what motivations. From this perspective, in each of these contexts – our own included – what is understood as “folk art” is subject to change. For this reason, it is crucial to critically and consistently reassess the presence, circulation, and reception of works associated with this category during Brazil’s modern period, as well as the ways in which its transformation over time and across debates informs our understanding of contemporary production. As Abreu states, “popular culture is not to be conceptualized; it is to be confronted”. Understanding that what she says about culture also applies to folk art, we continue to be challenged by this debate, remaining acutely aware of what is at stake when a work or an artist is linked to this category.