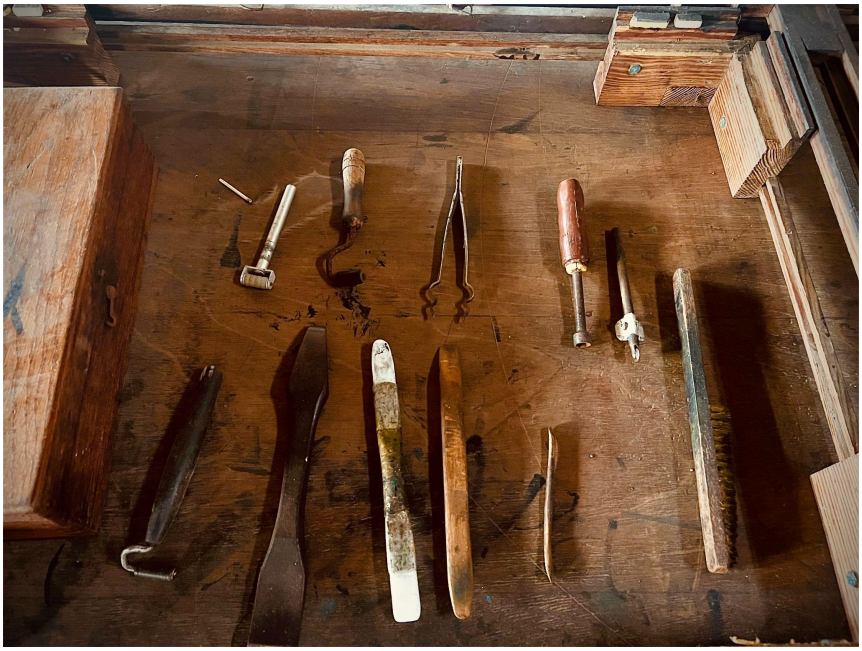
Gilvan Samico's Woodcuts: the peculiar confluence of Highbrow and Popular Art in Brazilian Northeastern Culture

The delicate lines and sharp curves that adorn Gilvan Samico's best-known engravings (such as *A Luta dos Anjos*, from 1968) encourage the viewer to reflect on the disagreement between the meticulousness of the drawing and the rustic means through which it was originated, the wood matrix. In his stylistic consolidation phase, during the second half of the 1960s, the engraver separated himself from his first master, Lívio Abramo, and began to make a particular use of white space and rigid black lines, while he also began to conceive a mythological theme of his own–as can be seen in the jaguars, fishes, and birds that gained an air of divinity in his engravings. Also remarkable from that time was his involvement with the work materials themselves; the artist, during this phase, began to adapt his working materials, learning to modify the gouge for more precise carving, also becoming a specialist in the types of wood that were most adapted to the making of the extremely detailed matrices. For this reason, it can be argued that he did not only seek to enrich a technique but also hoped to develop a characteristic aesthetic repertoire, his own language within the woodcut. This purpose was as essential for his future works as it was for making him one of the names of the Armorial and Pernambuco art, and the Samico that can be seen from that decade on did not become a celebrated name outside the artistic world, but ascended amongst art critics and connoisseurs of national erudite art, being recognized for the refinement of the technique and the refinement of the works. However, the inflection points that marked his distinctive style–the artist remained to make this type of piece until the end of his life–have roots in the change in his own look on art, a repertoire opening that would not happen outside the Recife-Olida axis, or the context of the Armorial Movement. When opening the studio for my visit, the artist's grandson informed me that his grandfather, who died in 2013, was a fan of the European Renaissance and Neoclassical, coming into contact with Brazilian art, and more especially popular art, through the suggestion of Ariano Suassuna, with whom he was a great friend. In the artistic effervescence headed by the Suassuna (who, although born in Paraíba, lived his whole life in the capital of Pernambuco), the movement sought to foster the local culture, in an effort to produce erudite works inspired by popular practices typical of the Northeast region. Interestingly, the more Samico drew inspiration from the popular, the more highly regarded (read: erudite) his works became: the engraver who is currently on

permanent display at MoMA in New York is, therefore, an artist who evaded the blunder notion that woodcuts are notoriously unpretentious, modest and, above all, easy to reproduce. His studio, still maintained by the family, although not open to public visitation, not only holds the gouges and knives (kept as if in a museum ready for visitation) but also shows evidence of his moment of transition: on the modest metal shelves one can find books on Brazilian art (from Tomie Ohtake to João Câmara) and a two-volume compilation of Cordel Literature.



Some of Samico's working tools kept by the family

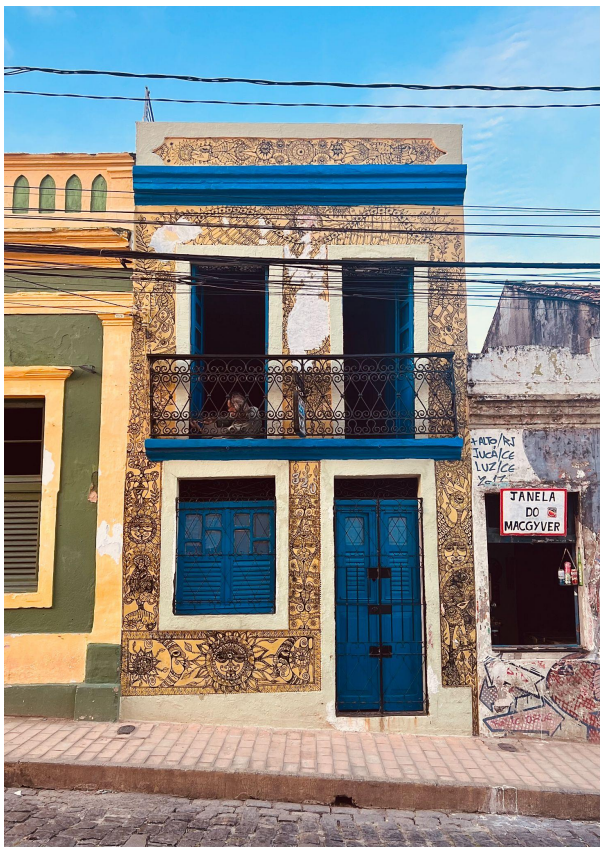
With that in mind, I structured the second part of my visit so that I could delve deeper into the conversation between cordéis and woodcuts specifically in the context of the Brazilian Northeast. However, after two weeks in Recife, I was faced with a context that was somewhat different from what I expected, making my gaze turn to a part of the city's scenario that only marginally involved the cordéis–but that explained a lot of the popular-erudite dynamic that preached Suassuna. By a stroke of luck, I had the opportunity to access the tremendous cultural strength of the Recife-Olinda hub: popular art as an industry. My timing for the research period was right because during the month of July–despite the terrible floods that destroyed parts of the city–some of the most significant events for regional art took place, the Fenearte (the largest craft fair in Latin America) and the second edition of Art Pe (Pernambuco Contemporary Art Fair).

Both proved the entanglement between popular artistic manifestations and the fine arts: in both events, works by renowned artists, such as Francisco Brennand, Burle Marx, and Cícero Dias, shared space with artists whose works had a strong appeal and popular origins–such as the muralist Bozó Bacamarte, who is inspired by codel literature, and designer Breno Loeser, now known for the prints he creates for a famous clothing brand).

The exterior of Museum of the State of Pernambuco

The coexistence between these two apparently disparate artistic models also permeated my observations during the other points visited around the city, in which architectural aspects (the interweave between Neoclassical, Colonial, Modern, and even Moorish styles make the most common description of the city's architecture to be "eclectic"), historical (in the Museu do Homem do Nordeste, the relics of two distinct cycles share the same hall, sugarcane, and cinema) and cultural (places where figures such as the legend of ciranda, Lia de Itamaracá–who I discovered during my visit to the Island that names its illustrious resident –share popular imaginary with names from the academic elite, such as Gilberto Freyre) beg for the comparison of two universes which appear to be in frank dialogue at the mere sight of Marco Zero. Cordel, therefore, did not appear so much in the archives of the ostensibly abandoned Federal University

of Pernambuco (UFPE)–where I did find rarities such as the mapping of cordels written by women, and some cordéis from Patativa do Assaré–but in the popular markets of the city (such as the Mercado de S. José, Espinheira, Casa Amarela, as well as the Pernambuco House of Culture, a penitentiary complex turned into a market for regional products), places that made my visit to Recife a real hunt for the treasures that are cordéis. The search for these small booklets was somewhat difficult precisely because I did not understand where did they come from and also where the cultural richness of Pernambuco operated: on the streets, in everyday conversations, in the allegories that the people make of themselves. In this very rich context, where maracatu, ciranda, cordel, repente, and sertaneja aesthetics are added to the great names of fine arts (such as Samico himself) and Literature (such as João Cabral de Melo Neto), it becomes somewhat challenging to come to terms with just one course of action, for a conclusive outcome of strict academic research requires everything these manifestations do not fit into: a defined cataloging, exact references, defined objects; none of these definitions seems to hold back the expansive force of what happens in the streets of the chaotic center of Recife.



House in the city of Olinda

Recollecting my material from the field trip, I struggle to attain a solid channel between the cordéis and the work of the engraver who took me to that city, but I left with a strong notion that Recife seems to be an abbreviated piece of the rest of Brazil in the form of poetry: not for its aesthetics (although the city has beautiful sights), but for synthesizing in every corner, as in verses, the key to an entire story–each one so distinct that the only common thread seems to be that piece of land by the sea. The most significant cultural confluence I found, therefore, is not so far from cordel, which, sometimes, like poetry, is capable of condensing large abstractions of what an entire people thinks and feels.

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