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**Goeldi, Oswaldo**

**Born:** 1895, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Died: 1961, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



*Chuva* (Rain), c.1957, coloured woodcut on paper, 22 x 29,5 cm. Instituto Moreira Salles, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Oswaldo Goeldi (1895-1961) was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but had his artistic formation in Switzerland, during the 1910s. He was influenced there deeply by **German Expressionism**. His first drawings reveal his interest in the mysteries and fantastic figures that could emerge from the cracks of the real world. He returned to Brazil in 1919, finding a new environment, which seemed more fabulous than anything he had known in Europe. The convulsive lines of his first Brazilian drawings show his impulse to capture and transfigure this reality. The learning of the modern woodcut technique opened a whole new artistic field, in which Goeldi was really a master. His drawings and engravings are one of the finest depictions of Brazilian modernity, marked by the contradiction between the provincialism and the cosmopolitanism, the exuberance of nature and the poverty of peoples. In his pieces, these extremes were transfigured into the contrasts between light and darkness, incisions and surface, and into the obsessive repetition of subjects as lonely and marginalised people, isolated beaches, desolated houses, abandoned cities, wastelands, vultures. His works achieved some recognition after his participation in the I Bienal de São Paulo (1951).

Oswaldo Goeldi (1895-1961) – fifth son of Emil Goeldi, a well-known Swiss naturalist who went to Brazil by invitation of the Emperor D. Pedro II in 1894, and Adelina Meyer – was born in Rio de Janeiro, but spent the first years of his childhood in Belém, Pará, where his father directed a Museum of Natural History and a centre for the study of the flora and fauna of the Amazon. In 1900, Emil was transferred back to Rio de Janeiro, and in 1905 decided to establish his family in Bern, Switzerland. In Europe, Oswaldo Goeldi started his studies and, when he turned 20 years old, went to Zurich to the respectful Polytechnic School.

There, a new vocation emerged: drawing. In 1917, after he had served in the First Great War, with the death of his father and the return of Adelina and his siblings to Brazil, Goeldi abandoned his scientific studies and entered the Arts and Crafts School in Geneva. Six months later, he left this school and studied for a short period of time at Serge Panke's and Henri van Muyden's studio. Of great importance in Goeldi's formation was the contact with the Swiss artist Hermann Kümmerly. In his studio Goeldi learned the lithographic technique and developed some of the themes that would be present in his work thenceforth: the solitary houses, the empty streets, the fantastic figures, the nocturne scenes.

In 1917, the Wyss Gallery in Bern invited Goeldi for his first exhibition. At this time, he discovered the work of another artist who had participated in *Der Blaue Reiter* group along with **Kandinsky** and **Klee**, and who would influence him decisively: Alfred Kubin. In Kubin's images, a whole array of mysteries, heretical symbols, monsters and demoniac elements were poised to emerge through the cracks of the common and visible world. But it was only in 1926, 9 years after his return to Brazil, that Goeldi wrote the first letter to Kubin. Their correspondence would then last until 1951.

Goeldi's first drawings show the central influence of the imaginative and fantastic expressionism that spread from Germany to German speaking countries. As he wrote to his friend Kümmerly, in 1933, he was completely amazed by the reality of Rio de Janeiro, with lampposts buried halfway in the sand and the vulture street furniture on the sidewalk, in short, things that would impress any European newcomer. Completely different from his memories of his childhood years, and more fantastic than anything he knew, this new reality stimulated him to draw furiously, in order to assimilate the forms of the world. Most of these drawings were shown at his solo exhibition in 1921, in the *Liceu de Belas Artes* in Rio de Janeiro.

The challenging environment, as well as his job as an illustrator for the illustrated magazines *Para Todos, Leitura Para Todos* and *Ilustração Brasileira,* brought a new problem for his expressive art: the risks of realism or literality. He found the solution in the modern expressionist woodcut technique, learned from Claudio Bampi, an artist who was living in Niterói (a city near Rio de Janeiro). Using, at first, a matrix made from small pieces of wood, with irregular shapes and thickness, usually collected at random – demolition boards, cigar box lids etc. –, Goeldi elaborated rough and concise works, marked by repeated and interwoven lines, creating luminous concentrations opposed to black ink. These woodcuts were not the mere transposition of the nervous hatches of the drawings into the new medium. Conversely to the drawing, that needs to tame tropical light sprawled by the white of the paper, in the prints the trace is cut, the light exists as negativity. The woodcuts revealed immediately their expressive potential to Goeldi.

During the 1930s, in a voyage to Europe, he participated in some exhibitions in Berlin, Muri and Bern. But the main result of this trip was his perception of the risk of formal repetition in the woodcuts. So, Goeldi decided to concentrate on drawing and watercolours. In these new works, he seemed to be particularly concerned with tropical atmospheric events, like tempests and windstorms that could transform reality in something fantastic. From this time came his first attempts to make coloured woodcuts, like the ones he did to illustrate the novel *Cobra Norato*, by Raul Bopp, an imaginative narrative based on Amazonian mythology. Although he was not satisfied with the results, it was a particularly important experience that opened a whole new direction to his art.

We can note some innovations in his woodcuts: the graphic use of colour – achieved by using only one matrix, warily covered with black or coloured ink –, the less but profounder incisions, the larger areas of white and light, and the more solid and structured order. Until his death, even with the fragile health, Goeldi continued to experiment in drawings, watercolours and specially engravings. This experimentalism gave a freshness to his mature artwork. He continued to depict isolated beaches, fishermen, homeless people, desolated houses, abandoned cities, wastelands and vultures as figures both of tropical exuberance and decadence.

But his works still circulated mainly via the books, newspapers and magazines he illustrated, at least until his participation in the *I Bienal de São Paulo,* from October to December 1951. From that time onwards, Goeldi achieved new acknowledgement and participated in some important exhibitions, like the retrospective in the Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro (1956), the Venice Biennials of 1956 and 1958, the III Woodcuts Salon (Xylon) in Italy and Switzerland (1955), and the show *Graphic aus Brasilien* in the Albertine Museum of Vienna. The recognition was not enough to change his very austere lifestyle. He died alone in his apartment in Rio de Janeiro, on February 16, 1961, from a heart attack. Today his works are spread in a few public institutions and in some private collections in Brazil.

**References and Further reading:**

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**List of works:**

*Sem título* (Untitled), c.1920, ink on paper, 18,4 x 29 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

*Cais* (Wharf), c.1927, woodcut on paper, 9,5 x 12,2 cm. Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

*Favela* (Slum), nd, woodcut on paper, 14,6 x 15,1 cm. Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

*Cobra* (Snake), illustration for Cobra Norato, by Raul Bopp, c.1937, coloured woodcut on paper, 27,3 x 10,9 cm. Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de janeiro, Brazil.

*Sem título* (Untitled), c.1940, charcoal on paper, 33,9 x 25 cm. Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

*Sem título* (Untitled), c.1940, charcoal on paper, 20 x 26,2 cm. BANERJ Collection, FUNARJ, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

*Luz sobre a praça* (Light over the square), c.1949, coloured woodcut on paper, 16,1 x 21,8 cm. Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Woodcut awarded at I São Paulo Biennial, 1951.

*Homens na praia* (Men on the beach), c.1950, woodcut on paper, 22,5 x 41,5 cm. Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

*Despedid*a (Farewell), 1951, coloured woodcut on paper, 20 x 32,7 cm. Private collection, São Paulo, Brazil. Woodcut awarded at I São Paulo Biennial, 1951.

*Chuva* (Rain), c.1957, coloured woodcut on paper, 22 x 29,5 cm. Instituto Moreira Salles, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.