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Author Christopher Turner

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MUSEUM LIFE

Beatriz Milhazes

**Christopher Turner**

April 18, 2024

For the [V&A's eighth collaboration with La Biennale di Venezia](#), artistic director Adriano Pedrosa selected as the featured artist his fellow Brazilian, [Beatriz Milhazes](#). Milhazes, one of the best-known and most distinguished practitioners of Brazil, is no stranger to Venice having been chosen to represent the country at the 2003 biennale. For her Special Project at the [Pavilion of Applied Arts](#) in the Sale d'Armi of the Arsenale, she has created a new body of work inspired by the V&A's collections.



Model for the Pavilion of Applied Arts Special Project – Arsenale, Sale d'Armi / Beatriz Milhazes

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Milhazes studied at the School of Visual Arts in Rio de Janeiro and was part of the so called '1980s generation' (Geração Oitenta) that returned to painting after the austere conceptualism of the 1970s. Her work, a rigorous investigation of colour, takes the formal language of European and Brazilian modernism but subverts its hard, abstract geometries by using pattern and decoration to signal a more sensual direction. Milhazes layers her zestful canvases with violently contrasting colours and tropical motifs drawn from Brazilian baroque architecture, carnival decorations, exotic botany and indigenous textiles and handicrafts.

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O Céu, as Estrelas e o Bailado by Beatriz Milhazes, 2023. Acrylic on linen. Private collection

Milhazes first came to Europe in 1985, when she encountered the work of Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian and visited the V&A, which she has described as her favourite museum – she says that she makes a point of visiting it for inspiration every time that she is in London. In 2013, for an event at [Frieze Art Fair](#), Beatriz picked 12 objects that she identified with her practice from the almost 3 million objects in the V&A collections.

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These included a fig leaf made around the time of the V&A's opening in 1857 to clothe a plaster cast of Michelangelo's David, supposedly in advance of a royal visit; an intricately carved limewood cravat made by Grinling Gibbons in the 18th century, which Milhazes admired for its use of pattern and 'obsessive repetition'; a stack of 17th-century delftware dishes that exploded in the kiln and were accidentally fused together in a Venn diagram of concentric circles; and an all in one velvet bodysuit made for Mick Jagger in 1972 by Ossie Clark.



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For the Pavilion of Applied Arts, Milhazes has made a new series of large-scale, vibrant, abstract paintings inspired by several textiles in the V&A collections. But she set herself a challenging game that she explains initiated a new direction in her work. Taking as her starting point the colour matching and scientific measurement of hues in the V&A book, *[Spectrum: Heritage Patterns and Colours](#)* (V&A / Thames & Hudson 2022), she used the exact percentages of colours found in these textiles to constrain her palette and force new structures.

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The Golden Egg, for example, takes its strict proportion of colour from one of the V&A's kimonos, a silk, gold leaf and embroidery jacket with sash (about 1960) that was a diplomatic gift from the emperor of Japan to a member of the British Royal family. Similarly, *Meia-noite, meio-dia* (Midnight, Midday) takes its inspiration and atmosphere from the colour and geometry of one of the V&A's cosmologically-themed textiles, a printed cotton handkerchief manufactured in the USA around 1970 with Sputnik-inspired Pop Art patterns.

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A kimono from the V&A with *The Golden Egg* by Beatriz Milhazes, 2023. Acrylic on linen. Private collection

Unfortunately, for conservation reasons, the V&A's fragile textiles could not be shown in Venice alongside Milhazes' paintings (we hope, if possible, to bring her canvases to the V&A in London after the Biennale closes and show them alongside these sources).

Milhazes has exhibited instead antique textiles from her own collection – from Mali and Congo, India and Guatemala, Japan and Brazil – that are displayed on a low table in the middle of the pavilion.

'They are also [made by] artists,' Milhazes says of such evidence of the artist's hand at work, which she believes counters the alienating effects of contemporary life. 'It's just a different kind of skill'. In Venice, Milhazes also exhibits a monumental panoramic tapestry, *Pindorama* (the Tupi-Guarani peoples' pre-colonial name for Brazil), which fills an entire wall of the pavilion with colourful, outsized floral and leaf-like shapes. It was created at the Pinton Mill in France, which has been in operation since 1867 and where modernist artists such as Sonia Delaunay and Alexander Calder also collaborated with weavers.

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Pindorama by Beatriz Milhazes, 2020/2022. Tapestry in wool and silk, 321 x 750 cm. Courtesy of Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State

Milhazes new body of work, with its self-imposed limitations, introduces a new rigour into her long-standing tradition of colour studies. Well-known for her energetic and intense palette, and use of swirling organic shapes and restless floral patterns that upset hard-edged geometries, she describes herself as a 'colour observer, a colour researcher'. 'Colour is a way for me to create contrast, drama and mystery,' she says. 'Colour brings balance, harmony, structure. It's life and nature. It is pure sensibility, poetry, imagination, abstraction and joy.'

Beatriz Milhazes' Applied Arts Pavilion Special Project at the Venice Art Biennale runs from 20 April – 24 November 2024

VENICE BIENNALE