

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>



Plates Full of Beauty and History in Upper Manhattan

New additions to Adriana Varejão's acclaimed "Plate" series are showing at the Hispanic Society Museum and Library, in her first solo museum exhibit in New York.

It is not advisable to attempt to eat off any of Adriana Varejão's plates.

Nor is it wise to ask the artist, one of Brazil's most prominent and audacious, to serve from them. (She once told an interviewer, with a hint of disdain in her normally gracious voice, "I don't cook.")

The curved fiberglass and resin plates she has on display at the [Hispanic Society Museum and Library](#) in Upper Manhattan — all but one nearly six feet in diameter — are encrusted with sculpted imagery and painted in surreally lifelike colors to convey flora and fauna, cosmologies and legends of the Amazon region. They reveal an artist whose work has assiduously engaged with many different chapters of Brazil's history.

"Each plate is like a universe," Varejão said cupping her hands in a gesture of gentle explanation. "I like how they relate to my passion for ceramics, for the decorative arts and their history, and how craft can disrupt artistic hierarchies."

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>



Varejão's "Guaranã," which comes with fruits cast onto the plate and tales of children's eyes planted in the forest floor. George Etheredge for The New York Times



The artist's "Boto e Aruá" plate has pink dolphins that can dart undetected among the shell life of the waters of the Rio Negro. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Varejão was seated late last month on a bench facing into the museum's interior courtyard, where the five most recent additions to her acclaimed "Plate" series are on view through June 22 in "Adriana Varejão: Don't Forget, We Come From the Tropics."

Her first solo museum show in New York, it was conceived as a dialogue between her barrier-breaking work and the vast historical array of ceramics from Spain, Portugal and their far-flung areas of conquest first amassed by the wealthy American collector Archer M. Huntington.

Ardent about the cultures of the Hispanic world, Huntington founded the society and made plans for the museum that would be a part of it in 1904. The neo-Renaissance building he erected to house his wide-ranging collections opened to the public in 1908, with thousands of works of art and artifacts ranging from paintings to ceramics, textiles, furniture, metal works, printed matter, and more.

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

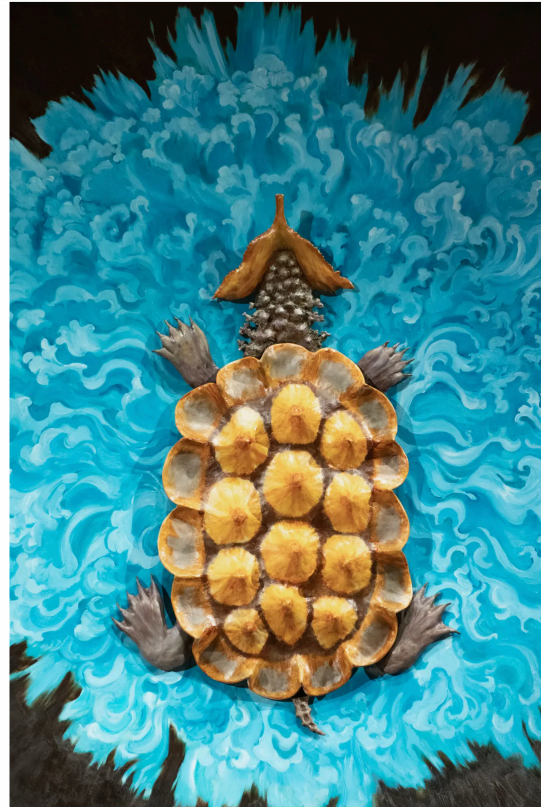
The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>

For the exhibition, Varejão's plates — raised on iron stands she devised to show the works from every side — have been placed in a semicircle around a mosaic crest that Huntington had inlaid in the courtyard floor. Emblazoned at its center is the Latin phrase "Plus Ultra," meaning "Further Beyond," the national motto of Spain since the 16th-century reign of King Charles I. "It's a symbol of the Spanish empire," said Guillaume Kientz, director and chief executive of the institution.



The Ghost Bird or Mother of the Moon referenced on Varejão's "Urutau" is a symbol of female divinity. George Etheredge for The New York Times



Varejão's plate "Mata Mata" features a turtle that can be mistaken for a floating leaf by prey and by traffickers illegally hunting them. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Medium	Web	Publication	The New York Times
Date	04.2025	Author	Celia McGee
Event	Adriana Varejão		
Web address	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share		

But the sun has long set on that spin of the globe. Since arriving at the Society in 2021, Kientz has made it his mission to steer the institution into fresher waters, to shake off the rusty grip of colonialist notions, and update the past with infusions of the present, building a relationship between traditional curatorial pursuits and a contemporary art world mindful of the realities at play around it. He has made concerted efforts to connect with the surrounding neighborhood, which is largely Hispanic.

Varejão's work is a resonant fit. Inspired early in her career by Brazil's homegrown Baroque architecture and its imaginative adaptation of azulejos — decorative Portuguese tiles — she has also repeatedly cracked open the ceramics' legacy to expose the violence of European conquest, the cruelty of slaveholding, and the persistence of inequality in the country of her birth.

She has critiqued its share of military dictatorships, and its insidious colorism. She produced "Mucura," the earliest plate in this show, in 2023 for the politically charged inaugural [Bienal das Amazônias mounted in Brazil's northern province of Belem](#).

At Kientz's invitation she followed up with the other four. Andrew Heyward, a director at Gagosian, the gallery that represents Varejão in the United States, said, "It's been wonderful to watch Guillaume revitalize the institution, and Adriana's immediate connection to it."

For Varejão, Kientz added, the plates are a balancing act "between beauty and danger, history and modernity, nature and artifice."

"They're both painting and sculpture," said Varejão, "and nothing is as it seems."

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>



The backs of Varejão's plates mimic designs she found on the ceramics in the Hispanic Society's extensive collection – like the blue-and-white florals of 18th-century Ming-style pieces made in Spain and Mexico.
George Etheredge for The New York Times

Medium	Web	Publication	The New York Times
Date	04.2025	Author	Celia McGee
Event	Adriana Varejão		
Web address	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share		

If the front of Varejão's plates teem with the natural and supernatural life of Amazon rainforests and waterways, their backs mimic designs she found on the ceramics in the Society's extensive collection. From 15th century Spanish lusterware she took a recurring grape-and-ivy-leaf motif; blue-and-white florals came from 18th-century Ming-style pieces made in Spain and Mexico; and stylized fruit had its roots in 16th-century Ottoman Iznik pottery. She has also curated a selection of such pieces as a complement to hers, set shelf upon shelf in imposing glass-and-metal display cases from the Huntington era that now run the full length of the courtyard's rear wall.

On an even more dramatic scale is Varejão's interaction with the society's monumental outdoor sculpture "El Cid." Opposite the entrance, it was created in 1927 by Anna Hyatt Huntington, the well-known sculptor who in 1923 had become Archer Huntington's wife. By wrapping the equestrian statue of the notorious medieval Spanish knight in the coiled, brightly colored stranglehold of a giant Amazonian anaconda made of fiberglass, Varejão felt she had mounted a challenge, she said, to "a symbol of masculine imperialism. The snake's open mouth looks like a woman's vulva, and it's about to attack."

An avowed feminist, Varejão likes to joke that she married her second husband, the film producer and gallerist Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, for his mother, the celebrated feminist writer and intellectual Helóisa Teixeira. (Varejão's first husband was the mining magnate Bernardo Paz, whose 5,000-acre art complex [Inhotim](#) to the north of Rio includes a pavilion dedicated to larger size Varejão works.)

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>



Varejão wrapped “El Cid,” the large equestrian statue of the notorious medieval Spanish knight created in 1927 by Anna Hyatt Huntington, in the coiled stranglehold of a colorful, giant Amazonian anaconda made of fiberglass. Varejão said her work was a challenge to “a symbol of masculine imperialism.” George Etheredge for The New York Times

Medium
Date
Event
Web address

Web
04.2025
Adriana Varejão

Publication
Author

The New York Times
Celia McGee

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>

Not often mentioned is that Varejão, 60, spent her early childhood in Brasília, the planned city then under construction as a new federal capital in the still remote Central Highlands. Her father was a pilot in the Brazilian Air Force. Her mother, a nutritionist, frequently took her daughter along as she tended to the children of the city's poverty-stricken immigrant labor force. "I think my mother connected me to a certain kind of tenderness," Varejão said, "and to the kind of openness that can absorb many things."

At university, she would abandon engineering to study art, graduating from Rio de Janeiro's Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage just as Brazil was emerging from two decades of military dictatorship, in 1985. Intrigued by the country's Indigenous cultures, she spent a period researching among the Yanomami, a tribe of the Amazon Basin in northern Brazil.

[Her work at the Hispanic Society returns her to those earlier explorations.](#) "Mucura (Opossum)" and its shamanistic depiction of an opossum head atop a woman's round-bellied pregnant body, like the imagery on the other four plates, draws on Indigenous conceptions of animals as receptacles for the spirits of humans.



For the exhibition, Varejão's plates were raised on iron stands she devised to show the works from every side and placed in a semicircle around a mosaic crest in the courtyard floor. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Medium	Web	Publication	The New York Times
Date	04.2025	Author	Celia McGee
Event	Adriana Varejão		
Web address	https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/arts/design/adriana-varejao-plates-hispanic-museum.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share		

Such creatures also have the uncanny ability to blend in with their surroundings. The turtle of her plate “Mata Mata,” Varejão pointed out, can be mistaken for a floating leaf by its fishy prey, and by traffickers illegally hunting them.

The Ghost Bird or Mother of the Moon on the “Urutau” plate, considered a symbol of female divinity, resembles a mere tree branch when its wings are folded. The pink dolphins of “Boto e Aruã” can dart undetected among the colorful shell life of the silt-clouded waters of the Rio Negro. The eerily ocular-looking fruits sculpted onto “Guaranã” come with tales of children’s eyes planted in the forest floor.

Varejão doesn’t want it forgotten that the plates are messengers from a world at risk from deforestation, industrialization, and climate change. “Its natural ecosystem is being destroyed,” she said. “The Amazon is burning. A way of life is disappearing.”

“There’s a constant tension in Adriana’s work,” said Kientz, “between civilization or society, and nature or planet earth. But it gives hope that a balance can be found.”

A correction was made on April 23, 2025: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the earliest plate made by Adriana Varejão for her show at the Hispanic Society Museum and Library. It is “Mucura,” not “Mucara.”

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)