

Eleonore Koch (1926 - 2018)

The work of Eleonore (Lore) Koch has long been one of the best-kept secrets in Brazilian art history. Koch was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1926 to a Jewish family. Facing persecution, they moved to São Paulo, Brazil, in 1936, when Lore was just 10 years old. Lore showed an early interest in art, but it was only when she moved to study in Paris in 1949, that she found the right teachers. On her return to Brazil in 1952 Koch met the Brazilian painter Alfredo Volpi, who mentored her throughout his lifetime, providing rare and invaluable guidance to the emerging artist. In 1966, Koch exhibited at Mercury Gallery in London, where she found unexpected support in the figure of Alistair McAlpine, a controversial businessman, politician, and pioneering art collector, who became a significant patron of her work, making it possible for her to move to London in 1968, where she lived for the next two decades. McAlpine was one the great collectors of his time, eventually donating a significant number of works to Tate and other museums. He asserted that art had to, “spring and strike the eye, grab you in the guts and leave you breathless with excitement,” and it seems that Koch made him feel this way, as she was a complete outsider in the British context.

Koch’s paintings are simultaneously evocative and understated in subject matter and style. She focused on a relatively small number of subjects and compositions, re-working them in subtle and exquisite variations. At first, they seem to depict a magical kingdom, a world in which objects are suspended and depicted in precious colors, almost recalling images from medieval manuscripts. But the objects she chose to depict are quotidian: lampposts, deck chairs, columns, lighthouses, trees. Throughout her years in London, many scenes are based in Regent’s Park, but she imbues them with an otherworldly quality, quite different from the reality of an urban park.

Koch’s work does not fit into the conventional narratives of Brazilian art history, or indeed global art history. To find an equivalent body of work we would have to look to Giorgio Morandi, De Chirico, or Alice Neel. These are all artists who stood aside from the mainstream of their era, creating works with a strong sense of independence and a lifelong dedication to a single or few subjects. As with Koch, their importance was realized posthumously, having spent their lifetimes in the studio, only to receive massive critical reappraisal after their death. It is perhaps significant that Volpi was one of Koch’s few contemporaries in Brazil to recognize her genius, as he himself went against the grain, being an artist of humble origins whose commitment to figurative painting meant he was somewhat marginalized by the important Concrete artists of Brazil, but also by the more overtly political artists like Candido Portinari or Emiliano di Cavalcanti who wanted a clear social message in their works.

Mário Pedrosa, Brazil’s most important art critic (and co-founder of the Worker’s Party with Lula) was one of the few who defended this kind of quiet and introspective art. In his analysis, the most political act an artist could do was to turn their back on the simplistic expectations of their time to express deeper truths about the human condition. In this sense, Koch’s work points to the need to recover spaces for divergency and introspection in times of turmoil.

In recent years, Koch's work has been rising to prominence both in Brazil and abroad. She was a highlight of the 34th Bienal de São Paulo (2021) *Faz escuro mas eu canto (It is dark, but still I sing)*, and the gallery Modern Art London held a solo exhibition in 2020. Her first monograph was published in 2013 in São Paulo by CosacNaify. Before that, she was very much an 'artist's artist', with a passionate following by a small group of collectors and admirers. The recent reexamination of art history has also contributed to her reappraisal, as more women artists, past and present, have come into focus, as have alternative narratives that move away from traditionally male-dominated discourses and linear models in favour of other modes of expression that include the more intimate and personal.

Koch's paintings stand out in any context, in part because of her anachronistic preference for egg tempera, a medium widely used in the Renaissance, but very rarely in modern art, which creates an intriguing, ethereal surface, in which the small, delicate brushstrokes seem to be lightly held by the fibres of the support. Her use of colour is also remarkable, and she maintained a large 'library' of pure pigments in her studio, which she would use to handcraft her paints, thus avoiding the punitive taxes Brazil imposed on foreign paints during the dictatorship.

Nothing in Koch's work is left to chance or delegated to habit or convention. Her subject matter, technique, and colours, all coalesce to make a body of work that enchants and confounds at the same time. Her unique voice within the cacophony of modernism makes her an artist force to be reckoned with, and one of the most original artists of her generation.

Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro

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Eleonore Koch

b. Berlin, Germany, 1926

d. São Paulo, Brazil, 2018

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 *Eleonore Koch: Em Cena [On the Scene]*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 2024 *Eleonore Koch*, Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
- 2023 *Eleonore Koch*, curated by Cristiano Raimondi, Fundación Fernando de Castro, Madrid, Spain
- 2022 *Eleonore Koch: espaço aberto [open space]*, Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 2020 *Eleonore Koch: The Essential Painter*, Modern Art, London, United Kingdom; Mendes Wood DM, New York, US
- 2009 *Eleonore Koch: Mundo ordenado*, Centro Universitário Maria Antonia, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1993 *Eleonore Koch*, Escritório de Arte Sylvio Nery da Fonseca, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1985 *Eleonore Koch*, Arco Arte Contemporânea Galeria Bruno Musatti, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1982 *Eleonore Koch*, Rutland Galley, London, United Kingdom
- 1981 *Eleonore Koch*, Companhia do Metropolitano de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1978 *Eleonore Koch*, Campbell & Franks Fine Arts, London, United Kingdom
- 1976 *Eleonore Koch*, Rutland Galley, London, United Kingdom
- 1972 *Eleonore Koch*, Rutland Galley, London, United Kingdom
- 1970 *Eleonore Koch*, Galeria de Arte Portal, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1965 *Eleonore Koch*, Galeria Goeldi, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 1964 *Eleonore Koch*, Seta Galeria de Arte, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1960 *Eleonore Koch*, Galeria São Luís, São Paulo, Brazil
- 1956 *Eleonore Koch*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil
- 1952 *Eleonore Koch*, Galeria Ambiente, São Paulo, Brazil

Selected Group Exhibitions

2025	<i>Brazil: Tempera Reimagined</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2023	<i>Cinza das horas</i> , Mendes Wood DM Brussels, Belgium
2022	<i>Lugar Comum</i> , Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
2022	<i>Entre a Estrela a Serpente</i> , Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Brazil
2021	<i>XXXIV Bienal Internacional de São Paulo – Though it's Dark, Still I Sing</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil
2021	<i>The Women's Century: Female Perspectives in Brazilian Art</i> , Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, UK
2021	<i>Alfredo Volpi and Eleonore Koch</i> , Sicardi Gallery, Houston, US
2020	<i>Eleonore Koch e Alfredo Volpi</i> , Bolsa de Arte, São Paulo, Brazil
2018	<i>Mínimo, Múltiplo, Comum</i> , Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
2011	<i>Alfredo, Eleonore, Fang e Mira: Aspectos da Pintura na Coleção Theon Spanudis</i> , Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
2004	<i>Coleção Theon Spanudis</i> , Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
2003	<i>Natureza Morta</i> , Espaço Cultural BM&F, São Paulo, Brazil
1999	<i>IV Salão de Arte do Clube Hebraica</i> , Hebraica, São Paulo, Brazil
1986	<i>Permanência e Matriz: 7 Artistas de São Paulo</i> , Galeria Montesanti, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1982	<i>Arteder 82: Muestra Internacional de Arte Gráfica</i> , Bilbao, España
1981	<i>Arte Transcendente</i> , Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM SP), São Paulo, Brazil
1979	<i>Coleção Theon Spanudis</i> , Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), São Paulo, Brazil
1978	<i>Construtivistas e Figurativos da Coleção Theon Spanudis</i> , Centro de Artes Porto Seguro, São Paulo, Brazil
1968	Redmark Gallery, London, United Kingdom
1967	<i>IX Bienal Internacional de São Paulo</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil
1966	<i>Mercury Gallery Salon</i> , Mercury Gallery, London, United Kingdom
1965	<i>VIII Bienal Internacional de São Paulo</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil

1965	<i>Exposição do Acervo da Galeria Goeldi</i> , Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1963	<i>VII Bienal Internacional de São Paulo</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil
1962	<i>Seleção de Obras de Arte Brasileira da Coleção Ernesto Wolf</i> , Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM SP), São Paulo, Brazil
1961	<i>VI Bienal Internacional de São Paulo</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil 10º Salão Nacional de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1959	<i>V Bienal Internacional de São Paulo</i> , Fundação Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil
1958	<i>7º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1957	<i>6º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1956	<i>5º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1955	<i>4º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1954	<i>3º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1952	<i>2º Salão Paulista de Arte Moderna</i> , Galeria Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil
1948	Salão Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Selected Public Collections

Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP, São Paulo, Brazil

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), São Paulo, Brazil

Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil

Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Tate, UK