

DAZZLED BY NATURE

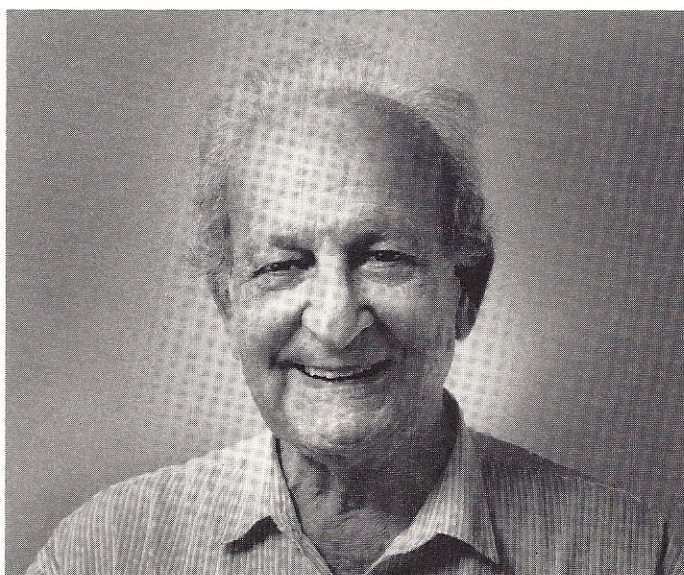
By Geri Trotta

Photographs by Dane Penland

The elegant jewelry of the Brazilian Haroldo Burle Marx—exquisitely hand-crafted necklaces studded with rubellites or green tourmalines or orange-brown essonite garnets; heroic rings; flexible collars of textured gold; slender articulated torques that conform to the neck's contours and dangle a huge pendant of extraordinary opal or amethyst or aquamarine—brings to mind the half-mythical women of a shadowy past: Nefertiti, Cleopatra, Empress Theodora, Aztec princesses. Burle Marx himself denies that he is consciously influenced by antiquity: "Although I love it, the past can't be brought back again. New things must be made. I like to think that I'm a small link in pioneering jewelry concepts, in finding new

roads, although I deeply respect the old roads." Paul Desautels, the recently retired curator of the Smithsonian Institution's department of mineralogy, agrees: "You feel that Burle Marx is using ancient motifs. Yet if you search for something specific, you can't find it." Burle Marx's jewelry is timeless and unique; no two pieces are ever exactly alike, and all are clearly the work of an artist.

Besides fine design, his jewelry demonstrates an ingenious use of the colored gems that are one of Brazil's most important natural resources—emeralds, aquamarines, tourmalines, topazes, and opals among them. (Though Burle Marx makes little use of diamonds, the country mines first-rate specimens. Eons ago the Brazilian landmass may have been contiguous



WILHELM BRAGA

Haroldo Burle Marx designs jewels of timeless artistry

with South Africa, before the two southern continents drifted apart; the conditions that produced diamonds in one would produce them in the other.) Pains-taking workmanship multiplies the value of his colored stones, however beautiful they may be before they are set. When appropriate, the jewelry is expertly engineered. A seemingly rigid gold neck torque, for example, is imperceptibly hinged, so that it lies comfortably flat against the body.

Since 1955, members of the Brazilian government have been commissioning Burle Marx to create jewelry to be given to official visitors and to heads of state and their first ladies. Madame Josip Broz (Tito) was given a gold necklace set with rose tourmalines; Madame Helmut

Schmidt, a free-form aquamarine neck collar and brooch. Japan's Empress Nagako received an opal necklace; Princess Michiko Shoda, wife of Prince Akihito, aquamarines. Other recipients were Empress Farah Diba, of Iran; Madame Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, of France; Grand Duke Jean of Luxembourg; Indira Gandhi; and Queen Margrethe, of Denmark, who was photographed on her wedding trip wearing her Burle Marx aquamarine brooch and ring. A list of other international clients reads like a mixture of the *Almanach de Gotha*, the *Social Register*, and *Variety*—Prince Ragnhild Lorentzen of Norway, the marchioness of Villaverde (Franco's daughter), Happy Rockefeller, Valentino, Merle Park, David Wall, Joan Bennett, Merle Oberon, Natalie Wood, Carol Baker, Carmen MacRae, Mrs. Zubin Mehta, Neil Sedaka.

Although Burle Marx has attracted some 2,000 American customers over the years, it was not until 1981 that his jewelry was made available in the United States. That year, Alta Leath, the energetic young wife of Congressman Marvin Leath (D., Texas), brought it to Washington, where she opened a small shop, the Altomar Collection, in the lobby of the Watergate Hotel. It is devoted to the designs of Haroldo Burle Marx, on which she holds world rights.

Geri Trotta is a New Yorker who spends the greater part of the year traveling on magazine assignments.



An eighteen-karat-gold necklace flavored with the art of Marajó, an island in northern Brazil. Silver alloy creates the soft patina.



A necklace and bracelet set with a wealth of heliodor, a member of the beryl family.

Mrs. Leath first met Burle Marx in Rio when he was considering retirement. "I'm indebted to Alta," he admits. "She made me young again by

giving me such confidence and encouragement that I had to become better and better." Before she left Rio, she had also given him a large check and *carte blanche* to send her the equivalent in jewels. Both sides are pleased with their arrangement. For her part, Alta Leath is no dilettante. Although she had never run a business, she studied gemology and collected stones as a hobby for some years. In Burle Marx's jewels she recognizes a quality that effortlessly links past to present.

It can be seen in a massive gold ring set with a rectangle of carved golden beryl that suggests an archaeologist's find, and in an imposing gold cross combining amethyst with rubellite (red tourmaline), reminiscent of ecclesiastical jewels from the Middle Ages. (This piece was ordered by the Brazilian government for Pope John Paul in 1981, but after his statement on human rights, it was withheld.) A gold necklace that seems to have come from an Egyptian tomb uses radials that look symmetrical. On closer examination, they are seen to be artfully asymmetrical but perfectly balanced.

Burle Marx gladly gives credit where it is due, admitting that great jewelry can be produced only by a close cooperative

effort. "One man can't be the perfect designer, gem cutter, goldsmith, and engraver. My workshop is a team bound together by love more than by business."

In his musty atelier in the old part of Rio, the atmosphere is relaxed, intimate, cozy. Paradoxically, at the close of our computerized, high-tech century, here is a man unpretentious as a next-door neighbor, operating a Dickensian workshop that produces some of the world's most sought-after jewelry.

His right-hand man, Bruno Guidi, master goldsmith and engraver, is an important part of the working family. So are three or four gem cutters who facet the rough stones or carve them in the free-form, three-dimensional shape developed by Burle Marx in 1948 and named for him. At the heart of the collaboration are the eight or nine craftsmen who sit at workbenches carefully constructing each piece of jewelry in eighteen-karat gold alloyed with silver to give it its distinctive soft patina. Because every goldsmith has a slightly different "hand," each piece of jewelry will be begun and finished by the same man.

"It would be easy to take shortcuts and save a lot of money," Burle Marx admits.

"But I'd be miserable." Instead, every piece bearing his signature has the integrity of an original small-scale sculpture, meticulously executed

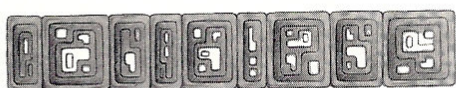
from a finished drawing in white chalk on mat black paper. These drawings, architectural in their precise detail, are beautiful in themselves. He keeps a complete file of some 10,000 drawings representing four decades of work.

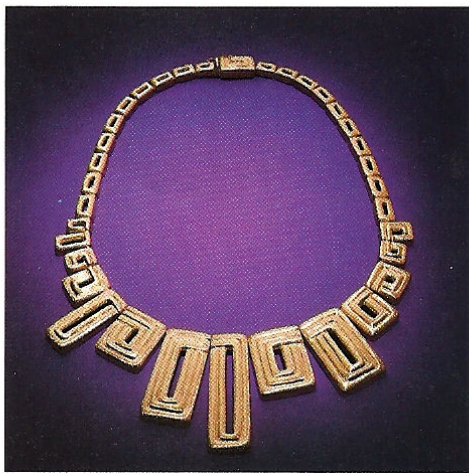
His approach to jewelry evolves quite naturally from Burle Marx's personality. In his short-sleeved, cream-colored safari suit, worn almost like a uniform, he looks more like the proprietor of a little trading post in the tropics than an international jeweler. The fashionable scene, fame, and fortune don't beguile him; he has had them all his life.

He was born in 1911 to one of Brazil's richest and most distinguished families. The eldest of his brothers, Walter, now retired and living in Philadelphia, was a conductor of the Rio Philharmonic. The next, Roberto, is a celebrated landscape architect who, in collaboration with Oscar Niemeyer, evolved the contemporary look of many Brazilian cities that culminated in the capital, Brasilia. In these ambitious projects, Roberto was assisted by the youngest brother, Siegfried.

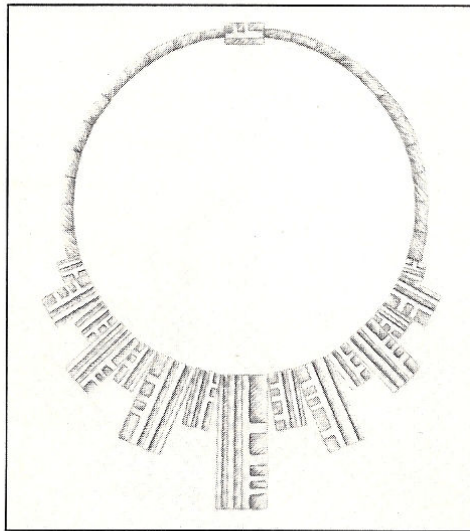
The Marx family had its origins in Trier, a charming old German town near the Luxembourg border. Haroldo's great-

Haroldo Burle Marx does many drawings before a piece is made, with each varying but harmonious section drawn separately to scale.





Left, a necklace of gold with a florentined finish; center, a necklace design; right, a necklace with mixed gold finishes.



grandfather was a cousin of Karl Marx; his grandfather invented a tanning process for crocodile skins that would make them supple and suitable for handbags, luggage, and the like. Though Haroldo's father, Wilhelm, loved Trier, he left it late in the nineteenth century after an anti-Semitic incident—his house was stoned. Moving to Morocco, he set up the postal service between Marrakech and Mogador and designed its first stamp.

In 1896, Wilhelm went to Brazil to oversee the family business of friends, and there he met Cecilia Burle. Her ancestors the Burghleys had fled from England to France after the Wars of the Roses and later emigrated to Brazil. Although Cecilia was a Catholic and the Marxes disapproved of the marriage, it was a happy one, based on mutual interest in nature, art, and music. Enrico Caruso was a family friend; so was Arthur Rubinstein.

About the time of World War I, Wilhelm started a leather business, Cortume Carioca S.A., which employed stranded German sailors. It became one of the world's largest leather companies. There was never talk of money at home, says Haroldo, though the gracious things it could buy were an integral part of his childhood. He shakes his head ruefully: "But I think we were educated in the wrong way—we were tutored. What saved us was that my mother kept open house. It was mecca for the neighborhood children." She was helped in managing her household and family of six children by a Hungarian immigrant who became a second mother, "a wonderful cook and a fantastic woman, intelligent and devoted."

"It's important to have a philosophy of life," says Haroldo Burle Marx, "and to live by it. I believe warmth and love rank above intelligence. Art can be created only with love. I have a mongoloid

nephew. Yet despite his limitations, his paintings have harmony and color. What he expresses, only God could give him. An artist is born with his power. A painter or writer can't be made if he doesn't have the talent inside himself." Burle Marx's homespun philosophy is part of his charm.

In 1931, Haroldo left his father's export business to open his own philately firm—though he never approved of the basic principle of stamp collecting: rarity. "An item is valuable not necessarily because it's aesthetically gratifying, but because nobody else has one like it." By 1945 he was already designing jewelry on the side, and in 1954 he gave up his stamp business to devote himself to the gemstones that had always fascinated him.

"Dazzled by nature, as something amazing," he says of himself. "If you look at the world in terms of nature, you must look back millions of years and look forward millions of years. So I'm optimistic. Whatever the extent of human mismanagement of the world, the force of nature is so much stronger that it will eventually erase our stupidity and return to equilibrium. Gems reflect this continuity. They were formed 120 million years ago as part of an ongoing process. They are as much a product of nature as clouds or trees."

Perhaps an important key to Burle Marx's character is the fact that while most people would equate gems with wealth and status, he has been so accustomed to both since his birth that he can see them unencumbered in terms of nature and beauty. Feeling this attraction, he studied gemology and lapidary science for four years.

Brazilian opals, which were not found until the 1950s, mesmerize him. They owe their mysterious color in part to moisture inside the stone. If they were to be heat treated, as aquamarines and blue topazes often are to intensify their color, they would be ruined. Beautifully translucent, Brazilian opals are in Burle Marx's estimation not so brittle as the Australian variety, discovered during the nineteenth century and worn by Queen Victoria to stimulate a world market for them. Nevertheless, opals—probably first mined in Hungary—were well known in the ancient world. A Roman senator, Nonius, is said to have had an enormous opal that Burle Marx postulates would be worth nearly a million dollars today. Mark Antony coveted it, but rather than part with his prize, Nonius chose exile.

Burle Marx has mounted several of the new Brazilian opals, each the size of a sea biscuit. One of them, weighing 184 carats, belongs to Alta Leath, who wears it on a heavy gold chain. Burle Marx admits that setting it was a tour de force. The bezel surrounding the opal was completed; then the stone was gently eased into it from beneath. In the Altomar Collection Alta Leath also has a gold chain clasped with an oval 25-carat opal that holds a central opal of 241 carats. "I'm convinced," says Paul Desautels, "that many of Haroldo Burle Marx's jewels are going to end up in museums, because they are unquestionably of museum quality."

Burle Marx delights in recognizing his jewels in photographs of fashionable women at great balls and receptions. But while his handiwork enjoys the social whirl of five continents, he is content to live unostentatiously in his sprawling condominium with his second wife and adopted daughter, first and foremost the private person and the artist. □