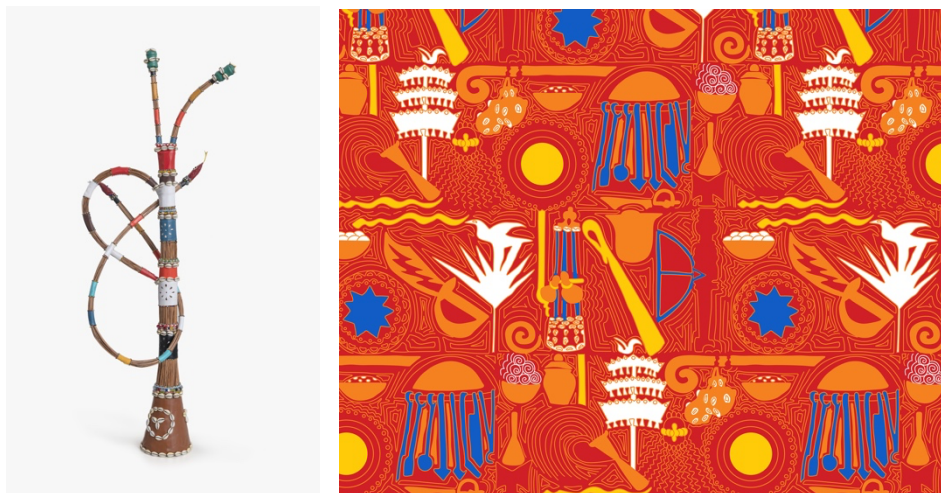




FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO PRESENTS
MESTRE DIDI: SPIRITUAL FORM
On View March 13 – July 13, 2025



L-R: Mestre Didi (Deoscoredes Maximiliano dos Santos, 1917, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil–2013, Salvador) *Igi Nilé Ati Ejo Ori Meji – Árvore da Terra com Serpente de Duas Cabeças* [Tree of Earth with Two-Headed Serpent], 1990s. Palm ribs, painted leather, cowrie shells, and beads, 43 3/4 x 20 x 6 1/4 in. Paulo Darzé Galeria, Salvador, Brazil. Image courtesy of Inaicyr Falcão and Almeida & Dale Galeria de Arte / Photo: Sergio Guerini.

Goya Lopes (b. 1954, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, works in Salvador) Detail of *Estampa Orixás* (Orishas Pattern), 2024. Installation with silkscreened textiles. Courtesy of the artist.

NEW YORK, NY, January 22, 2025 — El Museo del Barrio is thrilled to announce *Mestre Didi: Spiritual Form*, a landmark monographic exhibition exploring the work of the late Afro-Brazilian sculptor, writer, cultural advocate and Candomblé priest Mestre Didi (Salvador, Bahia, 1917–2013). *Mestre Didi: Spiritual Form* is co-curated by chief curator Rodrigo Moura and guest curator Ayrson Heráclito with Chloë Courtney, curatorial fellow. As the first major U.S. museum exhibition of Didi's work in 25 years, the survey unites over 30 of his sculptures and offers a rare view of his far-reaching spiritual and artistic legacy.

Over the course of his career as a sculptor, from the 1960s until the 2010s, Mestre Didi was a visionary emissary for Candomblé, an Afro-diasporic religion which developed in Brazil as

formerly enslaved Africans handed down their Yoruba spiritual practices. He was perhaps the first artist to reimagine Candomblé ritual objects as artworks in their own right.

"El Museo del Barrio is deeply honored to present *Mestre Didi: Spiritual Form*, an exhibition that not only highlights the exceptional artistry of Mestre Didi but also celebrates the profound cultural and spiritual contributions of the Afro-Brazilian community," said Patrick Charpenel, Executive Director of El Museo del Barrio. "It embodies El Museo's mission to elevate artists and narratives from Latin America and the diaspora, enriching global conversations about art and celebrating the impact these artists continue to have in the art world."

Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos, better known as Mestre Didi, was born into a highly esteemed Candomblé family in 1917. Didi spent decades making ritual objects in his elevated role at the religious society Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. Around 1962, he began to create non-consecrated sculptures, which were exhibited in Brazil and internationally during his lifetime. As guest curator Ayrson Heráclito states, "Through his religious knowledge, Mestre Didi established a unique body of work, in which the act of creation is a sacred one, and the resulting art object carries protective qualities, like an amulet." These works incorporate and combine traditional symbols, shapes, and materials related to the Candomblé deities, the orishas. While scholars and critics have written about Didi's role as a spiritual leader and his symbolic use of materials, they rarely delineate how his formal strategies changed over time to create a unique artistic idiom.

El Museo's exhibition will foreground Mestre Didi's spiritually evocative and formally imaginative sculptures and present new interpretations of his symbolic repertoire. His distinctive artworks combine the traditional materials, shapes, and symbols of the orishas, the Candomblé deities, to create a modern sculptural language.

Rodrigo Moura explained the timeliness of these new perspectives on Didi's work, stating that "As decentered approaches to the histories of modernism expand the reach and relevance of the Global South, the far-reaching influence of African art has finally gained full recognition at the global stage." Moura elaborated further on the importance of Didi's abstract language, saying "What is at stake in his striking forms is a stark disavowal of the discourse that mythologizes abstraction as an invention of European 'high modernism.'"

The exhibition also contextualizes Didi's practice by featuring key works by his artistic peers and by contemporary practitioners. In addition to Mestre Didi's sculptures, the exhibition includes works by **Emanoel Araújo, Jorge dos Anjos, Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos, Aurelino dos Santos, Ayrson Heráclito, Antonio Oloxedê, Abdias Nascimento, Arlete Soares, Nádia Taquary, and Rubem Valentim**. It also includes a site-specific textile installation by acclaimed artist and designer **Goya Lopes**, especially created for the entrance of the exhibition space. The influence of these artists' shared interest in African visual languages ranges from 20th century modernisms to the continued innovation of Black diasporic aesthetics today. In Heráclito's words, the exhibition "is rare experience of immersion in a universe of the artistic and the sacred."

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue featuring contributions from the curators and newly commissioned scholarly essays by art historians Roberto Conduru and Abigail Lapin Dardashti and biographer Joselia Aguiar. It will also include selected reprints of the artist's own writings, made available in English for the first time.

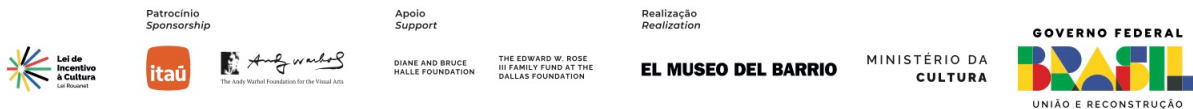
ABOUT THE CURATORS:

Rodrigo Moura has been chief curator at El Museo del Barrio since 2019. Before coming to El Museo, Rodrigo spent 12 years at Instituto Inhotim as curator and then as artistic director. As adjunct curator of Brazilian Art at the Museu de Arte São Paulo (MASP), he organized exhibitions such as *Djanira: Picturing Brazil* (2019), *Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments* (2018), *Images of the Aleijadinho* (2018), and *Who's afraid of Teresinha Soares?* (2017). In March of this year, he will begin a new role as Artistic Director at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericana de Buenos Aires (MALBA).

Guest curator Ayrson Heráclito is a visual artist, curator, and Candomblé practitioner from Bahia, Brazil whose sculptures, installations, performances, and photographs feature Afro-Brazilian spirituality and explore the connections between Africa and the diaspora in the Americas. Ayrson co-curated the 3rd Bienal da Bahia in 2014 and the landmark traveling exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* organized by the Museu de Arte São Paulo (MASP) in 2018.

SPONSORS

Mestre Didi: Spiritual Form is presented by the Ministério da Cultura of Brazil, Itaú, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Additional support is provided by the Diane & Bruce Halle Foundation and The Edward W. Rose III Family Fund at The Dallas Foundation, and by Guilherme Simões de Assis, Almeida & Dale Galeria da Arte, São Paulo, James Cohan Gallery, Guilherme Texeira, Fernanda Feitosa & Heitor Martins, Allan Schwartzman, and Graham Steele.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mestre Didi, born as Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos, was closely involved in the Candomblé religious society Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá from a young age, where he spent decades making traditional ritual objects. Around 1962, he began to create sculptures and pursue exhibition opportunities, with early shows at Galeria Ralf (Salvador), Galeria Bonino (Rio de Janeiro), and the Museu de Arte Moderna, Salvador. After receiving a fellowship from UNESCO to conduct fieldwork in West Africa in 1967, Didi and the anthropologist Juana Elbein dos Santos, his wife, organized the exhibition *Afro-Brazilian Art*, which was presented in Lagos, Accra, Dakar, Paris, London, and Buenos Aires between 1968 and 1974 and included Didi's work. Since the 1980s Didi has been included in landmark exhibitions such as *A Mão Afro-Brasileira* [The Afro-Brazilian Hand] at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) in 1988; *Art in Latin America* at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1989; *Magiciens de la Terre* [Magicians of the Earth], Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 1989; the 23rd International Biennial of São Paulo, in 1996, with a solo presentation; and *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, MASP, in 2018. His works are included in public and private collections internationally, including at El Museo del Barrio, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Dallas Museum of Art, Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Museu Afro Brasil, and Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro.

ABOUT EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

El Museo del Barrio is the nation's leading Latinx and Latin American cultural institution. The Museum welcomes visitors of all backgrounds to discover the artistic landscape of these

communities through its extensive Permanent Collection, varied exhibitions and publications, bilingual public programs, educational activities, festivals, and special events. The Museum is located at 1230 Fifth Avenue at 104th Street in New York City.

The Museum is open Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 11:00am – 5:00pm. Pay what you wish. To connect with El Museo via social media, follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [X](#). For more information, please visit www.elmuseo.org.

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