



## Educational Guide for Teachers and Families

### OVERVIEW OF THE EXHIBITION

**Bandits & Heroes, Poets & Saints** provides an opportunity to explore many facets of Brazilian history and culture and to consider parallels in North America. The exhibition focuses on the rich culture that has arisen from the mingling of European, African and indigenous roots in Brazil for more than 500 years. The exhibition highlights this interesting history and culture from the perspective of ordinary people as expressed through their art. The show pays particular attention to the influences of Africa in Brazilian history and culture and suggests parallels in the history and experience of the U.S..

**Bandits & Heroes** emphasizes the following themes:

1. *Complexity in Culture* – Cultures of the Americas arise from many traditions and voices. All have something essential to add, though some aspects are not immediately recognized or welcomed. Ultimately, however, all contribute to creating a diverse and rich cultural fabric.
2. *Strength in Community* – Being a part of a community – with its bonds of mutual support, shared stories, celebrations, and beliefs – can sustain people through difficult and challenging times.
3. *Common Sense – The Wisdom in Common People* – For all people, meeting the hardships and challenges of daily life with integrity and creativity brings about a unique perspective that can lead to wisdom.

**BEM VINDO!**

**WELCOME TO THE EXHIBITION!**

## Section 1 – Entrance

The entrance section opens with the title and credits for the exhibition, a welcome panel, a map locating the position of the Northeast of Brazil, and two large photo panels introducing the busy Pelourinho square in Salvador and the dry, isolated backlands of the *sertão*. A flat screen video with a photomontage of dozens of “faces” of people of the Northeast, interspersed with lively drumming in the streets of the Pelourinho, greets visitors and introduces the diversity in the Northeast. Woodblock prints introduce the three sections of the exhibition, and a grouping of colorful puppets, and a carnival truck introduce the concept of popular art. Colorful banners with logos of the three sections of the exhibition hang from the ceiling, and two humorously grotesque Exu figures stand as guardians at the entrance, opening the way to the exhibition itself.

### Main Ideas:

- Northeast of Brazil has a very diverse population because of the mingling of cultures – African, European, and indigenous – for more than 500 years.
- This is an exhibition of “**popular art**” -- art made by ordinary people inspired by their own experiences and their culture, not art by professionally trained artists.
- The exhibition is divided into three sections:
  - The Land & Its People
  - Expressions of Faith
  - Poetry, Celebration & Song
- Two figures of Exu stand at the entrance to the exhibition. Exu is a mischievous messenger spirit in the African-Brazilian religion of Candomblé; he is often found in doorways and intersections and has the power to open pathways for people ... or close them.



## Section 2 – The Land & Its People

This section presents the **geography** and **history** of the Northeast of Brazil, emphasizing the intersection of European, African and indigenous traditions that have contributed to the complex Brazilian culture. In this section, visitors will learn of the history of slavery and the plantation economy of the agriculturally rich coastal area with its cosmopolitan colonial port cities that date from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century (nearly 100 years before Plymouth Colony). Visitors will also learn of the dry backlands of the Northeast and its a cattle herding culture which, like the North American “Wild West,” was home to bandits and heroes. You will encounter a number of heroes who are popular among the common people and poor of the Northeast and will be invited to consider qualities that define heroism.

### Main Ideas:

- Portugal established the colony of Brazil in the 1500s (nearly a century before the British colonized of North America).
- Brazil became a very wealthy colony based on a sugar economy that was built on the forced labor of enslaved Africans. More enslaved Africans were brought into Brazil than any other country in the Americas – 10 times as many as arrived in North America. Five million enslaved Africans were brought to Brazil as compared with half a million to the U.S.
- Salvador, Bahia, became the colonial capital of Brazil in 1549; Salvador and other cities along the coast became very rich and beautiful cities because of the wealth from the sugar plantations.
- The interior of the Northeast of Brazil is a vast backlands of dry, inhospitable land where escaped slaves were able to establish their own independent communities. Eventually, the backlands became an area of cattle herding, much like the “wild west” in the U.S.
- Through history, there have been many popular heroes in Brazil who have stood against injustice and given hope to the poor and oppressed.

### Take-away Questions:

- What parallels do you find between the history of Brazil and our own history in the U.S.?
- Who are *our* popular heroes? What makes a person a hero?



### Section 3 – Expressions of Faith

The Northeast of Brazil is rich in practices of faith and has a deep sense of spirituality. This section of the exhibition focuses on the two primary religious traditions of the Northeast – **Christianity** and the African-Brazilian religion called **Candomblé**. Several engaging videos of religious processions and ceremonies give a context for sculptures, paintings, and religious objects from both traditions. In this section, you will learn about these two strong religious traditions that enliven the culture and give meaning to people's lives in the Northeast.

#### Main Ideas:

- The Northeast of Brazil has two very strong religious traditions – Catholicism and the African-Brazilian religion called Candomblé.
- Wealthy Portuguese landowners in Brazil were Catholic, and they baptized enslaved Africans so that they too became Catholic. However, the newly baptized Africans had their own religious traditions from Africa, which they continued to practice in secret.
- Enslaved Africans saw connections between their traditional gods – called orixás – and saints of Catholicism. They saw, in certain Catholic saints, characteristics similar to characteristics of some of the orixás and were able to honor privately the orixás while outwardly *seeming* to pray to the Catholic saints.
- Today, it is common knowledge in the Northeast that particular Catholic saints are associated with particular orixás. Saints and orixás share feast days and are honored in public processions and by the faithful wearing specific colors.
- Catholicism and Candomblé have intersected for more than 500 years, and today there are places regarded by the faithful of both traditions as holy places and places of miracles – for example, the Church of the Rosario of the Blacks and the Church of the Bonfim in Salvador.

#### Take-away Questions:

- How have differing religious traditions shaped *our* country?
- What traditions and celebrations unify our communities? And how do we accommodate differing religious traditions?



## **Section 4 – Poetry, Celebration & Song**

This section focuses on the ingenuity, lively imagination and improvisational capacities of the people of the Northeast and points to the power of the vision and creativity of ordinary people in creating and sustaining culture. A prominent wall with dozens of colorful folios of *literatura de cordel* (a popular poetry tradition of small, hand-printed chapbooks) is a centerpiece in this part of the exhibition. Woodblock prints and carvings of fantastic animals crowd nearby walls and platforms. Videos of popular festivals and a model of a market stall with handmade toys, lamps, and other common objects evoke the energy of the Northeast. A final video introduces many of the popular artists in the exhibition, putting a personal face on the makers of the works in this exhibition.

### Main Ideas:

- Invention and making things is in an integral part of life in the Northeast, where until very recently, people made by hand or bought from vendors in local markets everything they needed for survival – furniture, lamps, saddles and guns, toys, baskets and bowls, musical instruments, etc.
- Cultural traditions of the Northeast were passed on through the stories, songs, and colorful festivals and celebrations that have been repeated generation after generation, continuing to this day almost untouched by the passage of time.
- In the middle of the 1900s, a tradition developed in the Northeast of small chapbooks of poetry called *literatura de cordel*, which recorded the songs and stories of troubadours. These popular, hand-printed booklets were sold in markets clipped to strings and became a popular source for news, entertainment, and social commentary in these isolated areas.
- The heirs of all of these traditions are the craftsmen and popular artists of today – each expressing in his or her own personal way rich traditions of craftsmanship and culture – each artist reflecting and creatively “riffing” the rich history and culture of the Northeast of Brazil.

### Take-away Questions:

- What roles do tradition *and* improvisation play in *our* daily lives?
- How do we connect personally with tradition, and how do we tap into our own creativity?