

Art **Reviews**

The Close Creative Dialogue of Two Brazilian Painters, Alfredo Volpi and Eleonore Koch

Every Saturday, Eleonore Koch visited the older painter Alfredo Volpi's São Paulo studio, learning, in her words, "through observation and being together."



by Lauren Moya Ford
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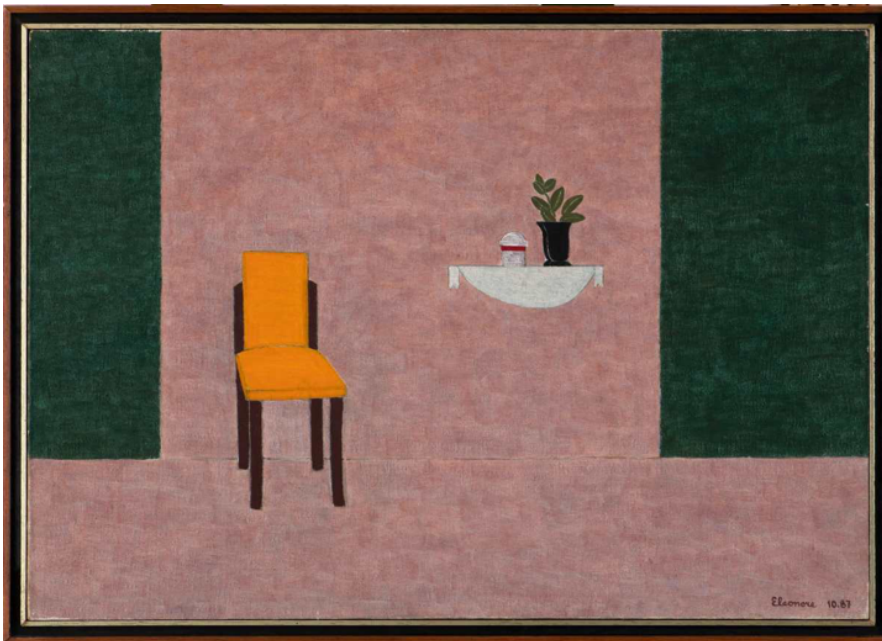


Alfredo Volpi, "Untitled" (1970s), tempera on canvas, 26 11/16 x 53 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Sicardi Ayers Bacino Gallery)

HOUSTON — In 1953, the influential art collector Theon Spanudis introduced the young Brazilian painter Eleonore Koch to a more established artist, Alfredo Volpi. Koch was looking for a mentor at the time and became the only student Volpi ever took on. Every Saturday for the next three years, Koch visited the older painter's São Paulo studio, learning, in her words, "through observation and being together, eating together, washing the dishes, observing his work rhythm, how he prepared the canvas, lived his fate as an artist and had the courage to destroy works that were not up to the mark." Perhaps most significantly, Volpi taught Koch to work with egg tempera, an ancient painting medium popular in Medieval and Early

Renaissance art. Both would use the highly pigmented, fast-drying technique for the rest of their careers.

Long after their initial encounter, [Alfredo Volpi and Eleonore Koch](#) at Sicardi Ayers Bacino Gallery brings the two artists back into close creative dialogue. Presented together for the first time in the United States, Koch's and Volpi's richly hued, carefully composed paintings and drawings from the 1950s to the late 1990s provide a fresh interplay of form, color, and flatness. The exhibition grants viewers the rare opportunity to view the work of two inventive, unique artists who not only indelibly shaped each other, but also whose legacies remain woefully under-recognized in much of the world.



Eleonore Koch, "Interior with yellow chair and green" (1987), tempera on canvas, 25 9/16 x 36 3/16 inches

Though Volpi belonged to the generation before Koch — the two were born and died exactly 30 years apart — he wasn't "the most obvious mentor for a young artist," exhibition curator Cecilia Brunson wrote in a recent email to Hyperallergic. The son of working-class immigrants, Volpi arrived in São Paulo from Lucca, Italy at the age of two. With only a primary school education, he worked as a book-binder and later as a painter-decorator, and took up painting canvases in his time off. "His initial approach to painting had no connection to the avant-garde debates of the time," Brunson said. And although he took an interest in geometric abstraction and painted with bright shapes, Volpi never affiliated himself with any artistic movement or group. Instead, he remained mostly self-taught, befriending other working class immigrant artists and attending as many local exhibitions as he could.

By contrast, Koch “came from a bourgeois background of German Jewish immigrants and had formal artistic training in Brazil and abroad,” Brunson noted. Although she absorbed elements of Volpi’s simplified forms and intense colors, Koch never left figuration behind. That decision would hinder her career in Brazil and eventually compel her move to London in 1968. Koch lived abroad for the next 20 years, painting quiet domestic scenes and imagined gardens inspired by England’s Neoclassical architecture. Despite their still, orderly feel, Koch’s sparse pictures of chairs, pedestals, and plants are searingly stark and subtly infused with feeling. By the 1990s, Koch had returned to Brazil. The paintings from this era exhibit a curious preoccupation with the canvas as a work space — shaped and modeled as a desktop — where writing artifacts like ink blotters and crumpled paper appear again and again.

Despite their innovations, both artists have struggled to gain the recognition they deserve. “While Volpi is considered one of the greatest Brazilian painters,” Brunson said, “his work didn’t quite fit into the Concrete and Neoconcrete art narratives that became the synonym of Brazilian art abroad.” As for Koch, “her main hurdles were the fact that her work has always remained firmly figurative when geometric abstraction was the dominating trend in Brazil in the late 1940s and 1950 and the fact that she was a woman working in a male-dominated environment.” However, this latest exhibition is a chance for American audiences to give these two artists — and their impact on each other — another look.



Eleonore Koch, “Untitled” (1981), tempera on canvas, 35 x 42 1/8 inches



Alfredo Volpi, "Untitled (Ogiva)" (1970), tempera on canvas, 28 5/16 x 18 7/8 inches



Alfredo Volpi and Eleonore Koch at Sicardi Ayers Bacino Gallery, installation view



Eleonore Koch, "Untitled" (1973), pastel on paper, 17 11/16 x 23 13/16 inches

Alfredo Volpi and Eleonore Koch continues at Sicardi Ayers Bacino Gallery (1506 West Alabama Street, Houston, Texas) through October 16, 2021. The exhibition is curated by Cecilia Brunson.