

CHRISTIE'S

CHRISTIE'S



Pedro Friedeberg: Inventor of alternative realities

The celebrated Mexican artist discusses his influences, painting on mannequins and works offered in the Latin American Art sales in May

‘I admire everything that is useless, frivolous and whimsical,’ Pedro Friedeberg says on his website. ‘I hate functionalism, post-modernism and almost everything else. I do not agree with the dictum that houses are supposed to be “machines to live in”. For me, the house and its objects is supposed to be some crazy place that make you laugh.’

A painter, sculptor and draughtsman, Pedro Friedeberg seems to have a limitless imagination. From his iconic hand and foot chairs and his trippy architectural drawings to clocks in the shape of hands and ‘tattooed’ mannequins, Friedeberg’s art brings levity and whimsy to any space it occupies. With a career spanning more than five decades, he has developed something of a cult following among collectors and designers across the globe.

Pietro Enrico Hoffman Landesman (as was his given name) was born in Italy in 1936 to German-Jewish parents. At the age of three, Pietro and his recently divorced mother fled Italy at the onset of the Second World War and settled in Mexico. Soon after arriving in the new country, Pietro’s mother remarried and went to work as a translator for expats — such as the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky and German writer Anna Seghers — both of whom had fled their native countries and sought asylum in Mexico.

His drawings and sketches bear the stamp of an architect's mind and, paradoxically, even the most seemingly chaotic compositions reveal an obsession with spatial organisation

From an early age, Friedeberg was surrounded by radical thinkers and artists, which undoubtedly had a tremendous impact on him. Mexico City and its surroundings provided a wealth of influences for a young, inquisitive mind.

By the 1950s, the murals of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco graced the walls of the National Palace and the Palace of Fine Arts in the city centre. Mere footsteps away, the Aztec Templo Mayor stands as a reminder of the ancient city of Tenochtitlán. And just north of the city, as the modern skyline falls away, the pyramids of Teotihuacán rise above the horizon.

Architecture, both ancient and modern, has always been a source of inspiration for Friedeberg. In 1955 he enrolled in the Universidad Iberoamericana to study architecture. By 1961, however, he had already started exhibiting in local galleries and with the support of his mentor and fellow artist, Mathias Goeritz, Friedeberg abandoned his studies to focus solely on his art.

By 1962 Friedeberg was showing internationally, in Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., Munich and Lisbon. In many ways, architecture still dominates Friedeberg's creations. His drawings and sketches bear the stamp of an architect's mind and, paradoxically, even the most seemingly chaotic compositions reveal an obsession with spatial organisation.



Pedro Friedeberg (b. 1936), *Hand and Foot Table*. Painted wood and glass. 23½ x 27 x 27 in (59.7 x 68.6 x 68.6 cm). Estimate: \$15,000-20,000. Offered in Latin American Art Online, 18-30 May

As his art and his autobiography attest, Friedeberg is a myth-maker, and inventor of alternative realities. Space and time are immaterial; the ancient mingles with the modern; hands and feet become chairs, animals dance among classical architecture; images, shapes, and letters

are repeated ad infinitum. Anything and everything is possible in the crazy world of Pedro Friedeberg. We spoke to him ahead of the Latin American Art sales at Christie's in New York and online.

Aside from your mentor Mathias Goeritz, who else has influenced you?

Pedro Friedeberg: 'Aside from Mathias Goeritz I was influenced by Leonora Carrington, Bridget Tichenor, Kati Horna, Edward James, Antonio Souza and Guadalupe Amor.'

Can you tell us about how your most iconic pieces, namely the hand chair and hand/foot chairs, came to fruition?

PF: 'This began as a joke, I was asked to give some work to Mathias Goeritz's and Luis Barragan's woodcarver and carpenter in their absence — in 1961. This was the result.'



Pedro Friedeberg (b. 1936), *Hand and Foot Chair*, 2000. Mahogany.
36 x 19 x 30 in (91.4 x 48.3 x 76.2 cm). Estimate: \$18,000-22,000.
Offered in Latin American Art Online, 18-30 May

Your paintings and drawings have an interesting mix of geometry, religious symbolism, spiritualism, and Classicism. How do your personal beliefs affect your art, and what from your childhood has influenced your artistic development?

PF: 'At an early age I was influenced by theosophy, Catholicism, atheism, Eastern customs and religions.'

We see a lot of architectural elements in your works...

PF: 'I was always fascinated by religious architecture: cathedrals, Aztec pyramids, synagogues, Gurdjieffian temples, and so on.'



Pedro Friedeberg (b. 1936), *Pañuelo de una virgen maya el día de su sacrificio y ejecución*, 2008. Acrylic, watercolour and ink on paper in hand-painted mat. 14¾ x 11 5/8 in (37.5 x 29.5 cm). Estimate: \$3,500-5,000. Offered in Latin American Art Online, 18-30 May

What can you tell us about your use of repetition, either within the same piece, or when you make many iterations of the same image/theme?

PF: 'If you repeat anything more than three or four or five times it automatically underlines its aesthetic values and its absurdity.'



Pedro Friedeberg (b. 1936), *Avión angelical*, circa 1990. Wood assembly (rulers, screws, found objects), collage and gold leaf. 9 x 19¼ x 26 in (22.9 x 50.2 x 66 cm). Estimate: \$4,000-6,000. Offered in Latin American Art Online, 18-30 May

Where do you draw the line between art and design?

PF: 'There is practically no art left today, but a lot of very good and even more very bad design.'

You say that you 'hate functionalism'. Why?

PF: 'I don't believe a house should be a "machine to live in". I believe a house should be a space to make you laugh or to inspire you aesthetically.'



Pedro Friedeberg (b. 1936), *Cubist tea pot*. Carved, painted, and gilt mahogany. 8½ x 10½ x 7 in (21.5 x 26.6 x 17.7 cm). Estimate: \$3,000-5,000. Offered in Latin American Art Online, 18-30 May

If you were not an artist, what would you have been?

PF: 'If I had not become an "artist" — a horrible word — I would have become a spiritualist or a gigolo.'

21 May 2018

**POST-WAR &
CONTEMPORARY**

ART | INTERVIEW

Main image:

Pedro Friedeberg.
Photo courtesy the
artist
