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How Brazil's design scene has developed its own distinct beat

São Paulo art fair shows how country's designers have adapted modernism by adding curved lines, spirited colours and natural materials



The SP-Arte fair, held in São Paulo's Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion earlier this month © Pétala Lopes

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by: Susan Moore

Against a backdrop of corruption scandals and the worst recession in more than a century, for five days earlier this month São Paulo's art fair, SP-Arte, put on arguably the most ambitious exhibition of its 12-year history. This year, for the first time, the fair included a design section, which took over one floor of Oscar Niemeyer's 1957 Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion. It would be hard to find a more appropriate setting, given Niemeyer's insistence on the importance of art in design. "It was the drawing that led me to architecture, the search for light and astonishing forms," he said in the

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mid 2000s.

“We have a strong design tradition in Brazil, and it is something that interests Brazilian collectors,” says fair founder and director Fernanda Feitosa. “Gallerists have been bringing one or two design pieces to SP-Arte for years in order to create ambience and they always ended up selling them, and so I have been thinking about organising a design fair for some time.”

Feitosa’s approach has been to embrace all eras — from the Portuguese antiques of the colonial era to mid-century modern and contemporary design. “I wanted to offer an overview of everything from the 17th century onwards, to show how essentially European styles were adapted here through the use of local materials and by the local aesthetic.”

Lissa Carmona Tozzi, of São Paulo furniture brand Etel, curated an exhibition displaying the history of the work of Brazilian designers from 1915 to 1980. I ask her if there is such a thing as quintessential [Brazilian design \(http://next.ft.com/content/484564fc-9d48-11e3-a599-00144feab7de\)](http://next.ft.com/content/484564fc-9d48-11e3-a599-00144feab7de). “Brazilian design is all about the exchange of cultures, and it is distinctive for its use of wood and for the virtuosity of craftsmanship,” she says.

“The Europeans who fled to Brazil after the first and second world wars were essentially Bauhaus modernists but they responded to the lush landscape and to the colours and light of Brazil by softening straight lines into sensual curves.”

What Tozzi calls “that bossa nova feeling” is expressed in the designs of the Rio-born Sergio

Rodrigues (1927-2014), who in the 1950s broke away from the prevailing modernist aesthetic by making chunky furniture of indigenous wood and soft leather that allowed users to sprawl rather than sit.

It was only in the 1990s after the “lost decades” of military dictatorship that Brazilians began to rediscover their modernist heritage, with trailblazing dealers sourcing and researching examples of classic design.

Mercado Moderno, a dealer in Rio, began selling modern design after co-founder Marcelo Vasconcellos acquired 1,000 pieces from publisher Bloch Editores — whose headquarters were designed by Niemeyer — after it was declared bankrupt in 2000. “It cost me more to pack up and move the pieces than it did to buy them,” Vasconcellos says. Among the haul was a jacaranda wood and studded hide sofa, plus two armchairs made in the 1950s by pioneer Brazilian modernist Joaquim Tenreiro.

It is still possible to find pieces created by Brazil’s distinguished designers in the dealers’ galleries — and sometimes at international auction.



Serie#7, a performance by Coletivo Baillistas at SP-Arte 2016 © Enio Cesar



Chaise-longues by Oscar Niemeyer, \$100,000 (with table), passadocomposto.com



Branche Ipê by Maneco Quinderé, \$1,293, manecoquindere.com.br



Axis Screen by Jader Almeida, \$10,100, dpot.com.br

Another SP-Arte exhibitor, Legado Arte, offered a painted conduit pipe-and-leather Tripé chair by architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi. São Paulo gallery Artemobilia, meanwhile, showcased a plywood chaise-longue (c1949) by Jose Zanine Caldas, whose experiments with sustainable materials revealed his concerns about the destruction of the rainforest.

Such pieces seem undervalued in relation to other mid-century modern design, where six- or seven-figure sums are common for the finest pieces. Most of the designs at SP-Arte were priced in the tens of thousands of US dollars.

The rediscovery of Brazilian modernist design has also resulted in re-issues that are in demand among collectors not least because much of this early furniture was made as one-offs or in very small batches.

Etel unveiled a collection at SP-Arte designed by the Lithuanian artist Lasar Segall (1919-2007) in 1968. Segall had created the furniture for his own modernist house because nothing suitable was available on the market. Passado Composto Século XX, a São Paulo-based dealer

and furniture shop, has reissued Jean Gillon's hammock-armchair Jangada (c1968). A cuboid leather furniture collection by Geraldo de Barros — an abstract photographer and exponent of the concrete art movement — is now available through the gallery DPOT.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a country where 60 per cent of the land is forest, wood is a prominent feature in contemporary design.

Hugo Franca's work is a response to the depletion of this once-abundant natural resource; he spent 15 years living with indigenous tribes in the north-eastern state of Bahia, where he learnt their traditions of working with wood. Using a chainsaw, he transforms burnt and fallen trees into sculptural yet functional objects that reveal their root formations and grain patterns.

His pieces could not be further removed from the subtle contrasts of the sucupira wood, limestone and stainless steel found in Claudia Moreira Salles's range of box tables, with their sliding covers and "secret" compartments opened by removable magnetic knobs.

Refinement of finish similarly characterises Juliana Llussa's Shelf Ciutat, a structure inspired by an electrocardiogram.

There is a playfulness about the best of recent Brazilian design. It is evident in the work of the celebrated Campana Brothers. Their exuberant Cangaco collection is inspired by, and handcrafted in the style of, the intricate leather clothing of the Cangaco bandits who roamed north-east Brazil in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Shelf Ciutat by Juliana Llusa, \$4,170, lussamarcenaria.com.br



Cangaco Armchair by Estudio Campana, price on request, firmacasa.com.br



*Cangaco Mirror by Estudio Campana, price on request,
firmacasa.com.br*

At SP-Arte Jader Almeida, one of Brazil's rising stars, presented a room divider made up of three wooden helices that change shape as users rotate the wooden blades along the axes. There is also a sense of fun in pieces by designers Luciana Martins and Gerson de Oliveira, who established their Ovo workshop and gallery in 1991. A set of eight giant spools wound with thread "began as an idea for a side table," says Martins, "and the threads — in different colours, shiny or matt — are wound close-together or in wavy lines to give texture and movement".

The art collective Coletivo Amor de Madre designs objects related to urban infrastructure. Founder Olivia Yassudo describes the collective's projects as "problem-solving for cities".

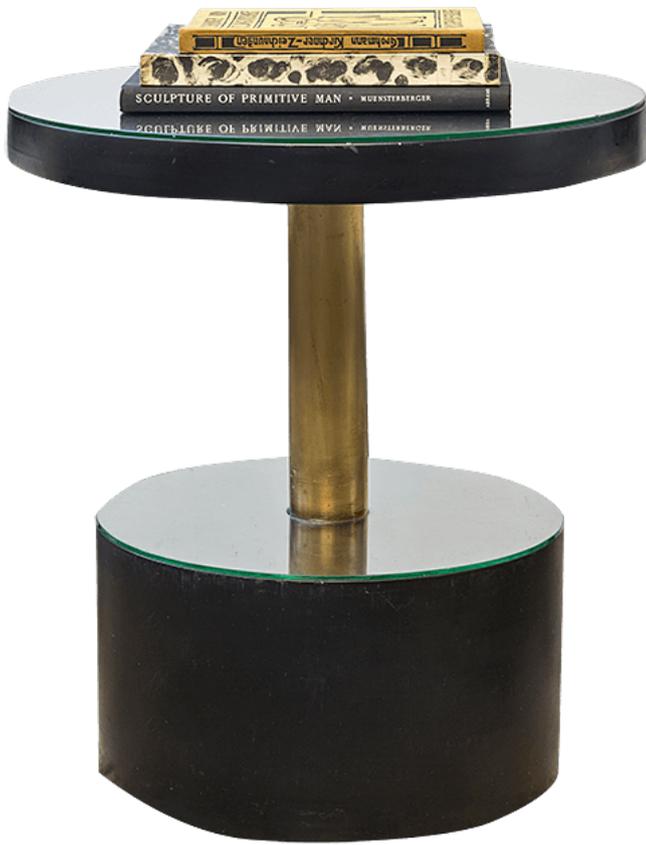
One of the collective's designs is a site-specific

bike stand with seats that feature a map of the location and a support in the shape of the state of São Paulo. The project is about making the city more human-centric and fostering a sense of belonging, says Yassudo. “However difficult it may be here, we can all live together in this city.”

Her characteristic Brazilian optimism is echoed by fair director Fernanda Feitosa: “Brazil is a strong country. Our market for art and design is young and relatively small in size but it has been built on a solid basis in much more difficult times than these.”



Membrana vase by Jacqueline Terpins, \$826, terpins.com



Segall Side Table by Lasar Segall, \$6,722, etelinteriores.com.br



Paem Sideboard by Hugo Franca, \$19,000, hugofranca.com.br



*Deslize Coffee Table by Claudia Moreira Salles, \$9,731,
etelinteriores.com.br*

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Photographs: Pétala Lopes; Enio Cesar

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