houzz

Viva Brazil and Its Modernist Furniture!

As the Olympic Games approach, we salute the host country's overlooked midcentury designers and some of their striking chairs

Victoria Villeneuve 2 August 2016
Houzz Editorial Staff. Remodeling veteran, copy editor and reporter who enjoys writing...

When you pull up a seat to watch the opening this week of the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, you could hardly do better than an original Mole chair, with its plump calfskin cushions, adjustable leather straps and lustrous jacaranda frame. In his new book, *Brazil Modern: The Rediscovery of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Furniture* (The Monacelli Press), Aric Chen contends that the Mole and its midcentury cohorts, a sampling of which are highlighted below, deserve a place among the country's other icons, such as Copacabana, samba, the Amazon and the nut.

Photo courtesy of R&Co.
Sérgio Rodrigues' Mole chair, 1957

In the introduction to Chen's book, Zesty Meyers, co-founder of the R&Co. design gallery in New York, discusses what gives Brazilian furniture its special qualities. One of the major influences, he says, was immigration, and the resulting commingling of European furniture-making with indigenous, African and other influences.

You know you love midcentury modern when...

Leve chair with jacaranda frame, seat and back re-covered in hand-loomed fabric by Tara Chapas. Photo by Sherry Griffin

Leve (Light) Chair, 1942

Chen, a design critic and curator of design and architecture at Hong Kong's M+ museum, includes short biographies of a dozen of Brazil's most prominent midcentury furniture designers in Brazil Modern. One of them, Joaquim Tenreiro (1906-1992), learned woodworking from his father in Portugal, then brought those skills to Rio in 1928. At first he worked for studios that specialised in furnishing wealthy homes in traditional European styles like Chippendale and Louis XVI. Convinced that these heavy, overstuffed pieces were out of place in his tropical adopted country, he began experimenting with more streamlined forms.

In 1942, Tenreiro's work caught the attention of Brazil's foremost architect, Oscar Niemeyer, who commissioned him to design furniture for a house he was building. Those pieces relied strongly on Bauhaus, Italian and Scandinavian influences, Chen says, and later that year Tenreiro produced what he considered his breakthrough design, the Leve chair. With upholstered cushions floating on a graceful, swooping frame made of ivorywood, imbuia (similar to walnut) or jacaranda, the Leve embodies Tenreiro's ethos that modern Brazilian furniture should be "formally light … a lightness which has nothing to do with weight itself, but with graciousness and the functionality of spaces."

Photo by Sherry Griffin/R&Co.

Três Pés (Three-Legged) Chair, 1947

Not surprisingly in a country named after a tree, "the story of Brazilian design begins with Brazilian wood," Chen writes. Portuguese colonists were at first mainly interested in *Caesalpinia echinata*, which they called *pau brasil*, for the flame-red dye it produced. (*Pau* is Portuguese for *stick*, and *brasil* purportedly comes from *brasa*, or *ember*). Later, the wood was prized for its strength and flexibility, especially in the manufacture of violin bows, which is still the main threat to the endangered species.

The Três Pés chair displays what Chen describes as Tenreiro's unrivaled mastery in

working with richly coloured and grained Brazilian woods. In this version, five types of hardwood form the striated back and seat, which rests on three turned legs. These chairs clearly were special to Tenreiro, who, according to an article in Cultured magazine, consistently labelled them as an original design and reserved them for those who awarded him significant commissions.

10 iconic dining chairs to know about

Photo by Sherry Griffin

Bola (Ball) Chair, 1951
A relaxed attitude is another hallmark of Brazilian design. Chen notes, for example, that Tenreiro lowered table heights to encourage more comfortable sitting. Architect-designer Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) soon followed up with her Bola chair, a sling of leather stretched and laced over an iron frame capped by orbs of brass. She made it specifically for Casa de Vidro (Glass House), the São Paulo residence she designed for herself and her husband, art critic Pietro Maria Bardi.

The couple had come to Brazil from war-torn Italy, where Bo Bardi had worked with Gio Ponti, in 1946. “I felt myself in an unimaginable country, where everything was possible,” she recalled of her arrival. “I felt happy, and Rio was not in ruins.”

A year later, Pietro Maria Bardi cofounded the São Paulo Museum of Art, which he would lead for the next five decades and whose glass-and-concrete building his wife would design.

Photo by Marco Covi for Arper

Bowl Chair, 1951

In her architecture and furniture, Bo Bardi pursued the essential and authentic, not only by absorbing native customs but by prioritising human activity. “Until man enters the building, climbs steps and takes possession of the space in a ‘human adventure’ which develops over time,” she once said, “architecture does not exist.”

The revolutionary Bowl chair, her most famous piece of furniture, encourages interaction. Because the upholstered half-sphere seat nests loosely in its steel ring on four legs, it can tilt as the occupant wishes, or even pop out. At the time, Bo Bardi made only two versions: one in black leather that was featured on the 1953 cover of Interiors magazine and another in clear plastic.

Bo Bardi wasn’t widely recognised in her lifetime – her first major exhibition wasn’t until 1989. In recent years, the woman whom British critic Rowan Moore considers the most underrated architect of the modern era has been the subject of gallery and museum shows in North America and Europe. And in 2014, the centennial of Bo Bardi’s birth, Arper launched its limited series of 500 Bowl chairs, in black leather and seven colourful fabrics. Proceeds benefit the Instituto Lina Bo e PM Bardi in São Paulo, the custodian of her work.

Photo by Joe Kramm/R&Co.

Mocho Stools, 1954

The first generation of Brazilian modernist designers produced furniture on an artisanal scale, Chen notes. That changed with Sérgio Rodrigues (1927-2014), whom he calls “arguably the most Brazilian of designers.”

Born in Rio to an opera singer and artist, Rodrigues was exposed to furniture-making by his great-uncle, then studied architecture in college. In Brazil at the time, Chen writes, interior design was a fledgling field compared with architecture, and Rodrigues began to focus on it. His first piece was the Mocho stool, a playful riff on a traditional milking stool. Its hole and bulbous shape became signature details.

In 1955, Rodrigues founded the furniture company Oca, named after an indigenous thatched dwelling, to showcase his designs and the laid-back Brazilian lifestyle. At

its peak, Oca had a large factory, branches across Brazil and an affiliate in California.

Photo courtesy of R&Co.

Mole (Soft) Chair, 1957
Quintessentially Brazilian in its form and material – and extremely comfortable – the Mole chair catapulted Rodrigues to fame, Chen says. It won first prize at the 1961 international furniture competition in Italy, whereupon it was renamed the Sheriff, produced in Italy and distributed internationally. It paved the way for fat, oversize and bohemian furniture, ultimately winning a spot in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

"In my own home, it's full of prototypes," Rodrigues said in a video interview. "I take chairs home to see if they work well – if it's OK, if my wife likes it, if my dog likes it, because, for example, during the Bauhaus era, the cat would climb up on the chairs and slip right off. But at my house, the cats and dogs sit very well."

The Mole appeared on the market just after Brazil broke ground on its new capital, Brasília, the first city to be built from scratch through modern urban planning and, as then President Juscelino Kubitschek pledged, "50 years of progress in five." Lúcio Costa was the planner and Niemeyer the chief architect. Both were impressed by Rodrigues' work and invited him to contribute a large quantity of furniture to the new buildings.

It was a heady time for the country, which embraced a spirit of newness, invention and nationalism not just in architecture but also in the arts. According to Chen, Rodrigues embodied this spirit and carried it forward. He produced more than 1,200 works over six decades.

Photo by Joe Kramm/R&Co.

Lounge Chairs by Forma, 1950s and 1960s
Carlo Hauner (1927-1997), an immigrant from Italy, owned a furniture shop with Rodrigues for a time and bought a São Paulo furniture-production factory that had belonged to Bo Bardi and her husband. In 1955, he and Vienna-born Martin Eisler (1913-1977), who had settled in Buenos Aires, Argentina, founded Forma to sell their own designs as well as pieces licensed from Knoll International. Venturing further into mass production and international marketing, their decades-long collaboration resulted in industrial-inspired pieces that were elegant yet accessible, Chen writes. Today, Forma's successor, Interieur Forma, is based in Argentina but remains active in Brazil.

By the early 1960s, Chen notes, Kubitschek's critics were complaining that Brazil was experiencing "50 years of inflation in five." The country suffered social unrest and political turmoil. In 1964, a right-wing coup installed a military dictatorship that would last until 1985. An ensuing period of extraordinary economic growth, known as the Brazilian Miracle, benefited some designers, such as Ricardo Fasanello and Jean Gillon. But, Chen points out, the military's suppression of dissent and curtailing of exports forced others into exile.

Photo courtesy of Atelier Ricardo Fasanello

Esfera (Sphere) Chair, 1968

As a child in a wealthy São Paulo family, Ricardo Fasanello (1930-1993) was so revved up about race cars that he learned to drive when he was 11. Even after a serious accident hospitalised him for a year, he wanted to design them. Instead, he ended up designing furniture that borrowed details, such as the stitching, from luxury-car upholstery. Like much of Fasanello's work, the Esfera chair combined new materials (fibreglass, polyester resin) with beloved ones like leather. And when he couldn't find leather up to his standards, Chen writes, he set up drums in his backyard to tan his own.

Photo courtesy of Passado Composto Século XX, São Paulo

Jangada (Raft) Chair, 1968

Romanian-born architect Jean Gillon (1919-2007) arrived in Brazil in 1956, taking inspiration from native materials and crafts in designing interiors, hotel projects, tapestries and furniture. The Jangada, his most well-known chair, nods to the Brazilian sailing vessel after which it was named, with fishnet and jacaranda supporting a leather seat.

A 2007 re-edition of the Rio chaise in black leather with bentwood base. Photo by Sherry Griffin

Rio Chaise, 1971

In 1967, Niemeyer (1907-2012), an avowed Communist, fled Brazil's dictatorship for Paris. There, in 1971, he began designing furniture for the first time, in collaboration with his daughter, Anna Maria Niemeyer, who had overseen interiors for most of Brasília's main buildings. The woven cane seat and bentwood frame of his Rio rocking chaise evoke the signature characteristic of his buildings: "the curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuousness of its rivers, in the waves of

the ocean and on the body of the beloved woman."

Although Niemeyer came late to furniture, Chen says, he grew to see it as an extension of his architecture and acknowledged that its design proved, in the architect's words, "difficult to come to a solution of comfort and aesthetics."

Photo by Joe Kramm

Sculpted Solid Wood Chairs, 1970s

In the 1940s and 50s, self-taught José Zanine Caldas (1918-2001) made a name for himself designing and building affordable plywood furniture in São Paulo and private houses in the new capital. The 1964 coup, however, forced him out of his teaching position at the University of Brasília. When he returned to his home state of Bahia, he was horrified by the deforestation around him. Inspired by local craftspeople who carved boats from felled logs, he began sculpting furniture from salvaged wood when possible (and planting trees when not). With what Caldas described as his "outcry furniture," Chen writes, he brought attention to the environmentally destructive practices upon which his industry had been based.

Today, Zanini de Zanine, Caldas' son and Rodrigues' apprentice, continues his father's furniture-making legacy, using industrial byproducts and materials repurposed from demolition projects in innovative ways. Maison & Objet Americas named him its 2015 Designer of the Year. With de Zanine and his contemporaries, a bright future for Brazilian design seems assured.

The cover of Brazil Modern features Sérgio Rodrigues' Tonico armchair (1963), with original upholstery and leather cushion. Photo courtesy of The Monacelli Press

Beyond Chairs

Brazil Modern, copublished in March with R&Co, doesn't limit itself to chairs. Instead, it offers historical

context, biographical information and more than 400 photos of a wide range of 20th-century furniture.

"Brazil is perhaps one of the last – if not *the* last – great discoveries of 20th-century furniture," Meyers says in the introduction. As Chen goes on to explain, the fact that the country's midcentury designers aren't as well-known as Eames or Breuer, say, is the result in part of its isolation during the dictatorship, the relatively small production scale, and the difficulties in exporting tropical woods that could warp in drier climates and which eventually grew scarce. (An international trade agreement restricts the sale and transport of products made from endangered woods.)

But there are signs that these designers are finally getting their due. In recent years, companies such as Etel Interiores and LinBrasil have started reissuing pieces, substituting sustainable woods when necessary. Early this year, Wade Terwilliger, president of Palm Beach Modern Auctions, reported that interest in Brazilian design was growing. And in May, Espasso, a gallery devoted to vintage and contemporary Brazilian furniture, opened its fourth location, in Miami. (The others are in New York, Los Angeles and London.) The reputation of Brazil's modernist furniture may finally be catching up to its architecture.

TELL US...

Do you have a favourite iconic chair? Share your chair love in the Comments below!