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Brazilian Midcentury Modern Furniture: A Sexier Take on Eames

Seen enough of Eames and Saarinen and Aalto? The furniture out of Brazil in the 1950s, '60s and '70s has similar sensibilities but with a sensuous twist

By JULIE LASKY
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QUESTION: What looks like midcentury modern furniture (organic, informal) and feels like midcentury modern furniture (body-conscious, comfortably unadorned), but isn't designed by a person named Nelson, Aalto or Knoll?

The answer is 20th-century Brazilian design, which appeals to people who love everything about midcentury modern except its yawning familiarity. Uniting the aesthetics of European émigrés with indigenous Brazilian materials and crafts, the work is notable for its low profiles, strong lines and richly colored and grained tropical woods. The native species have names like incantations: jacaranda (Brazilian rosewood), imbuia (similar to walnut), roxinho (also known as purpleheart) and cabreuva (resembles mahogany). Combined with leather and woven fibers, these woods allude to the country's rain forests, gauchos and fishermen's nets.

That some of the woods are endangered and no longer used gives distinction to vintage Brazilian design, as does the relative renown of some of its makers. Joaquim Tenreiro, Sergio Rodrigues, Lina Bo Bardi and José Zanine Caldas lead the pack, yet none is a household name on the order of Charles or Ray Eames.

This may change as Americans gain greater access to Brazilian midcentury designs and acquire more information. Still, this rich period feels like a frontier.

New York designer/architect Mark Zeff sources vintage Brazilian modern from around the world and says he loves the hunt. "The work is stunning and it's hard to find. That's what I like about it," Mr. Zeff said. Among his favorite pieces are curvaceous 1950s armchairs by Italian-born Brazilian designer Giuseppe Scapinelli (1891-1982).

Chicago architect Jeanne Gang, currently working on an expansion of the American Museum of Natural



NAMELESS BEAUTY | Designer Damon Liss loves the unattributed Brazilian midcentury chair (facing forward) in this New York apartment as much as the Lina Bo Bardi armchair (foreground), not least because the 'nameless' piece cost a fraction of the identified piece. *PHOTO: TREVOR TONDRO*

History in New York, once listed Mr. Rodrigues's Diz armchair—a squat, undulating piece that looks like something the Eameses might have done had they spent more time in Rio—among her favorite things.

Stoking interest in these designers is "Brazil Modern: The Rediscovery of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Furniture," by Aric Chen. Due from Monacelli Press next month, the book is co-published by R & Company, a



Sergio Rodrigues. From \$4,000, Espasso, 212-219-0017
PHOTO: ELISEU CAVALCANTE.

Tribeca gallery that sells works by Messrs. Tenreiro and Rodrigues and their contemporaries. More than a pretty coffee-table compendium, "Brazil Modern" includes serious scholarship. Among other things, we learn that Brazil wood wasn't named after the country but that Portuguese traders named the country after "pau-brasil," a species of native tree they harvested for its dye. Mr. Chen also writes of the international notice conferred on Brazilian designers with the creation of the modern capital of Brasília, in 1960, and the isolation that followed when a military dictatorship came to power in 1964, sharply reducing exports for 20 years.

Much has changed. This spring marks the expansion of Espasso, a gallery in Manhattan's Tribeca district devoted to vintage and contemporary Brazilian furniture. Founded by Carlos Junqueira in 2002, Espasso has branches in Los Angeles and London. In May, Mr. Junqueira will open a fourth store, in Miami's Ironside district.

One of Espasso's specialties is authorized re-editions of classic designs. In 2014, Mr. Junqueira worked with ETEL, a brand in Brazil, to reintroduce two dozen pieces by Jorge Zalszupin and Oscar Niemeyer, including the famed Rio rocking chaise, from 1978, which Mr. Niemeyer designed with his daughter Anna Maria.

"We've always loved Brazilian furniture, we've specified it for years," said New York designer Damon Liss of both vintage and contemporary pieces. "Overall it blends seamlessly with almost any interior aesthetic," he added.

Decatur, Ga., designer Perry Walter says he admires how the decorative wood grain of Brazilian furniture pops in rooms with neutral palettes, rendering the décor unique.

Mr. Liss said he's not a stickler about attribution of vintage furniture. A "nameless" 1950s piece can be as beautiful as any known Zalszupin. "When people say 'unattributed,' I'm excited not disappointed," he noted. "I get it for a third of the price. It doesn't make me like the piece less."

But market experts point to factors that complicate collecting of Brazilian design, starting with the material that is its soul. When pieces made of tropical wood are transplanted to a drier climate, they can warp, a particular concern with vintage works, which weren't constructed for export.

For this reason, among others, Mr. Junqueira takes a strong interest in young Brazilian designers: He can help them develop furniture that travels. "The biggest portion of our business is contemporary," he said. "They are the continuation of the midcentury masters."

Included in his stable is Carlos Motta, whom he identifies with the "organic" tradition of Brazilian modern, emphasizing the texture of raw, reclaimed wood. The furniture of Claudia Moreira Salles, by contrast, has "more lean lines and delicacy." Next month, he will show nine original pieces by Brazilian architect Arthur Casas, among the more minimal and horizontal of the younger modernists. Five of the works are produced in a Brooklyn factory from American walnut, to eliminate importation headaches and reduce the carbon footprint of shipping.

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São Paulo design historian and curator Adélia Borges said young Brazilian modernists, like their forebears, revere wood but are more considerate of the environment, using sustainably harvested or recycled material. Several are working to industrialize design without sacrificing the quality or personality of handcrafting. Ms. Borges mentioned Jader Almeida as one example. Schooled in manufacturing processes since his teens, Mr. Almeida, now in his early 30s, recently began selling his furniture in the U.S. through Artefacto Home, in Aventura, Fla.

Mr. Junqueira believes the younger generation also shows a genuine interest in comfort, which was not always a priority. "With some of the midcentury furniture you cannot watch TV for more than half an hour," he said. An exception was Sergio Rodrigues. If his cat slept in a chair prototype, he knew it was comfortable. "If the cat didn't sleep," Mr. Junqueira explained, Mr. Rodrigues said, "Let's change something."