

Cosmopolitan Folklore, or the Negotiation of Difference

Luis M. Castañeda, Syracuse University

The relationship between folkloric materials and forms and universalist modern languages was one of the central questions in twentieth-century design in the Americas, perhaps particularly so in Mexico. While the roots of this often controversial relationship can be traced back much earlier in the century, the mid-twentieth-century witnessed a series of responses to it, which ranged widely within and beyond the realms of abstraction, experimental approaches to traditional materials, as well as theoretical and discursive articulations. This paper presents this panorama of negotiations, focusing on the work of figures like Michael van Beuren, Mathias Goeritz and Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, but positioning their key interventions within a broader horizon of national and international developments.

Brazilian "ready-made" design

Rodrigo Queiroz

Between the 1950s and 1980s, the Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi recognizes in the popular Brazilian context a peculiar condition that allows us to understand the foundations of a creativity coming from a society full of contradictions.

A weak handcrafted basis, linked to a poor industrialization process makes Lina Bo call the attention to a popular specific production, featured for handling industrial residues discarded by the consumer society, as oil cans, which are transformed into articles as mugs and lamps. Objects that were once trash are converted into others and get a new function, but the material that originated the new object is still recognizable.

Lina Bo Bardi's perception captured the essence of a creativity typical of backward societies, recognized for the strangeness and fascination by a foreign look. This is an operation close to a "ready-made": an object is removed from its context and its original utility and displaced to take another function.

This peculiar sense of creativity, resulted from a culture of necessity, seems to identify a particular aspect of Brazilian contemporary design, starred by professionals such as the Irmãos Campana.

The Campana's most known objects, invariably furniture for home, are consisted of parts whose value is not in the design itself, but in the frequent use of materials manufactured for other purposes, such as stuffed animals, plastic hoses and drains, now turned into parts of armchairs or tables handcrafted on request, in a simple assembly process unrelated to any technological and industrial development.

The subliminal meaning of this creative procedure confirms a Brazilian behavior trace nicely received by the foreign imaginary, which explains a place on the international design and art circuit took by Irmãos Campana, but also by artists like Vic Muniz, Ernesto Neto and Beatriz Milhazes.

The Bardi House: Betwixt and between

Zeuler R. Lima, Ph.D.

The presentation will address the genealogy of the design and building of Lina Bo Bardi's own house in São Paulo, Brazil, highlighting the cultural and historical ambiguities among different interpretations of modernity.

Del arte al diseño: MoMA's design intersections with Latin America

Patricio del Real

This talk juxtaposes two key moments, 1932 and 1972, in MoMA's engagement with modern design in its contact with Latin America. In 1932, with the seminal "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" and its companion book *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*, the nascent Department of Architecture sought an alliance with Mexican muralism that played out in the modern functionalist interior. This early association—today largely forgotten—was fully staged at MoMA in

1933 in the exhibition “Color Reproductions of Mexican Frescoes by Diego Rivera,” only to reveal the adaptability of an emergent International Style in the fight for hegemony of a modernist aesthetics. Forty years later, in 1972, the Department of Architecture and Design organized “Twentieth Century Industrial Design,” a comprehensive exhibition that was meant to tour Latin America. This exhibition aimed to complete the 1932 ambition of projecting a pure and hegemonic vision of design for the modern world, and was ultimately destined to remain in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as the nucleus of the first permanent design collection in South America. By juxtaposing these two key moments in MoMA’s understanding of “modern design,” I aim to examine the museum’s implicit and explicit engagement with the region.

Michael van Beuren. Design for a modern Mexico

Ana Elena Mallet

Michael van Beuren arrived to Mexico for the first time in 1937. Upon his arrival he understood the historical moment of the country and noticed the raise of a Mexican middle class that was avid to embrace the modern styles. With Klaus Grabe, a former classmate from the Bauhaus, he founded Domus, a furniture company specialized on well-designed modern low-cost furniture that became later a big factory. The arrival of Frederick van Beuren — Michael’s brother — in 1947 was crucial for the firm’s development, which name changed then to Van Beuren SA de CV.

This presentation is focused on Michael van Beuren’s work as a design entrepreneur and promoter of social change in a transforming country that was searching for modernity. His utopian dreams ended up being a collective reality: affordable good design in order to improve the quality of life.