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## Design age dawns for Latin America

From Mexico to Chile, a new generation is combining traditional craftsmanship with contemporary ideas

By Nicole Swengley. From Art Basel Miami Beach daily edition  
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Latin America is fast becoming a hotspot for contemporary design, so it is timely that the first US museum exhibition to scrutinise this trend coincides with Design Miami, where the latest collectible limited-editions from south of the border are being unveiled.

"New Territories: Laboratories for Design, Craft and Art in Latin America" at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), New York (until 6 April 2015), surveys new artistic trends, traditional influences and cross-disciplinary practices in a number of emerging design hubs, including Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil, Santiago in Chile, Buenos Aires in Argentina, Caracas in Venezuela, San Juan in Puerto Rico and Mexico City. "We realised that this was a particularly exciting moment in Latin American design, with the emergence of a younger generation," says Lowery Stokes Sims, the exhibition's chief curator. "There's also a coalescing of interest in historical design from Latin America that is being translated into exhibition projects, particularly in New York City, at the Americas Society and the Museum of Modern Art."



Otomi Indians created the fabric for "Tenango de Doria", 2011, a version of Valentina Gonzalez Wohlers's "Prickly Pair" chairs

### Collectives

A number of recently formed collectives are pushing frontiers forward, among them the Carrot Concept, which was founded by six designers in El Salvador in 2012 and presented ten contemporary designs (chairs, tables, lamps and bookshelves) at Wanted Design, a show held during the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York in 2013. And Two Squared Studio, a Puerto Rico-based collective, ambitiously showed at Milan's Salone Internazionale del Mobile in the same year.

Such initiatives aim to emulate the trailblazing Estudio Campana, founded in 1983 by the São Paulo-based brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana, whose internationally acclaimed work is in permanent collections including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Masters of reinvention, the brothers combine waste and scrap materials (such as rubber hosepipes, string and furry toys) with advanced technology to create eye-catching furniture. Their design process makes a virtue of the poverty affecting many in their home city. And collectors are willing to pay top dollar for their limited-edition designs; a "Teddy Bear Banquete" chair, 2004, sold for \$68,500 at Phillips, New York, in 2012.

### Artisans

Another trend is the collaborative approach between designers and local artisans practising traditional crafts. Mexican designers, including those

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working overseas, are at the vanguard. "There's a realisation that we can and should look to our own traditions and craftsmen and link them to the present," says London-based Valentina Gonzalez Wohlers. She commissioned Otomi Indians from Hidalgo to create fabric for the "Tenango de Doria" version, 2011, of her "Prickly Pair" chairs, while her "Blooming Branches" lamps, 2013, were cast from twigs by ceramicists in Mexico City.

Similarly, the Mexican designer Liliana Ovalle, who is part of London's Okay Studio, linked up with Colectivo 1050°, a group of traditional potters in Oaxaca, to create limited edition "Sinkhole" vessels, 2013, inspired by urban cityscapes. Made from open-fired red clay suspended in an oak frame, they are available from Gallery Libby Sellers in London. Meanwhile, the designer Raul Cabra, who runs Cabra Diseno, a San Francisco-based, multi-disciplinary design company, set up Oax-i-fofnia, a creative collaboration between artisans from Oaxaca and design students from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. The project began as an academic exercise but has evolved into the production of contemporary objects such as jewellery, clay vessels and imaginative lighting.

"Welcome to the Jungle", a show of Pedro Barrail's work at Cristina Grajales Gallery, New York (until 19 December), reveals how the designer, who is based in Asunción, Paraguay, works with the Pai Tavytera people by commissioning them to "tattoo" his furniture with patterns chronicling traditional mythology and contemporary motifs, as seen in designs such as "Tattoo Stool", 2008.

Grajales also represents Alexandra Agudelo, a Colombian artist whose one-off, irregularly edged, silver vessels are inspired by artisan traditions, and Gloria Cortina, a Mexico City-based interior designer and artist who works with local workshops to create pieces like the "Mathias" brass coffee table, 2014. Another artisan championed by Grajales is Hechizoo, a weaving atelier in Bogota, Colombia, founded by Jorge Lizarazo. The studio creates textiles, rugs and wall hangings in which organic fibres are integrated with metallic and nylon filaments, allowing the material to filter and reflect light while adding an architectural sense of structure.

"Recent economic growth in Latin America has provided the freedom to experiment and think more carefully about architecture, art and design," Grajales says. "Many artists and designers are keen to go back to their roots and history, exploring various techniques with artisans and bringing them into the 21st century."

The desire to use indigenous craft techniques to create contemporary objects is an imperative for Eddie Figueroa Feliciano, a Puerto Rican designer and member of Two Squared Studio collective; Puerto Rican vernacular building traditions, for example, inspired his modular storage system "Zanco", 2011. A darker side, however, is inspired by daily street life. David Elia of Design da Gema, a Monaco-based Brazilian designer, references drive-by shootings in his "Stray Bullet Chair", 2011, and "Bulletproof Side Table", 2013.

## Modern icons

Cultural identification is also achieved by reworking and infusing iconic designs with local nuances. Leo Capote, a São Paulo-based designer, pays homage to Eero Saarinen's "Tulip" chair, 1956, Verner Panton's "S" chair, 1967, and Arne Jacobsen's "Egg" chair, 1958, in his "Porcas" series of chairs, 2013, made from recycled industrial nuts. Similarly, Bernardo Mazzei, a Venezuelan designer, reimagines a classic low chair by the Finnish designer Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) as a traditional Venezuelan easy chair in his aluminium-framed, woven leather "Anauco Aalto", 2011.

Giving a local twist to a legacy design creates a dialogue with the past while rooting it firmly in the present. Some designers, however, fully embrace an experimental future. Chilean-born Sebastian Errazuriz, based in Santiago and New York, creates surprising, engaging pieces like the "Porcupine Cabinet", 2010, which has quill-like slats that can either lie flat or open out in various configurations; "Metamorphosis", 2010, has branchy, plywood shelves that echo a book's origins. Meanwhile, 20,000 outward-facing bamboo skewers on the "Magistral Chest", 2014, offer a commentary about security. Errazuriz's first solo museum show at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (until 12 January 2015) is a marker of how Latin American designs are starting to make waves globally.

## Sustainability

Environmental considerations are a central concern for designers such as Mexico City-based Emiliano Godoy, who combines sustainability with artistic collaboration. His “Knit” chair, 2004, in FSC-certified birch plywood, entered the permanent collection at MoMA in 2012. Made from natural, biodegradable materials, it adapts to the user’s body and movements.

Through his manufacturing company, Pirwi, which recently opened a showroom in Milan, Godoy works with established and emerging designers to produce pieces in sustainably sourced birch, such as the “Centipede” benches, 2009, designed by Hector Esrawe. Among the younger collaborators are Daniel Romero, whose “Maroma” storage unit, 2008, is inspired by a traditional Mexican toy, and Brenda Vertiz, who has worked with Zapotec craftspeople in Oaxaca.

“There’s a growing confidence in most areas of Mexican design; people are looking less to other countries and are reinterpreting their own heritage,” says Pablo Igartúa of the Mexico City-based atelier Paul Roco, which he runs with Rodrigo Berrondo, creating handmade furniture from Central and South American timbers. Last year, they drew on indigenous inspiration to kit out Mexico City’s hip new Hotel Downtown with cowhide-covered dining chairs, sofas upholstered in Oaxacan wool and tables made from volcanic stone, traditionally used for pestles and mortars.

## Urbanisation

Environmental awareness also extends to urban deterioration. Eduardo Sarabia’s ceramic vessel series “A Thin Line Between Love and Hate”, 2005, conveys a sense of urban dysfunction. Riffing on the heritage of blue-and-white Talavera pottery, Sarabia decorates the vessels with contemporary Mexican imagery including marijuana leaves, rifles, skulls and pin-up girls.

Meanwhile, an interesting cross-fertilisation between contemporary urbanisation and traditional porcelain techniques is displayed by a São Paulo artists’ collective—Herbert Baglione, Felipe Yung, Thais Beltrame and Alexandre Cruz (known as Sesper). The group collaborated with Paris-based Antoine Carboué of Les Crayons Noirs to produce a series of graffiti spray cans made of Limoges porcelain, the numbered, limited-edition “Bombe X Famiglia” series.

Urban decay is also highlighted by Carlos Garaicoa’s “Fin de Silencio”, 2010—tapestries that recreate crumbling pavements in Havana, Cuba. Wrapping social and political commentary into contemporary design is, as MAD’s show suggests, perhaps one way of reclaiming deteriorating civic spaces.

## Repurposing

Repurposing materials is a shared focus among contemporary Latin American designers. For example, the São Paulo-based designer Rodrigo Almeida redeploys humble brushes in “Servant Lamp”, 2013, from his “Slaves” series, while vintage belts bind his “Cintura Shelf”, 2009. Coletivo Amor de Madre, also based in São Paulo, collaborated with Studio Swine (the Anglo-Japanese design duo Alexander Groves and Azusa Murakami) to create stools from recycled aluminium tins, while the Caracas-based artist Rolando Peña turns oil barrels into seating.

Redundant sheet metal from the production of Brazil’s discontinued 10-cent coins is repurposed in the “Moeda Chair”, 2010, created by Rio de Janeiro-based Zanini de Zanine for his Studio Zanini line of sustainable designs, while reclaimed timber beams from colonial houses are incorporated into other environmentally friendly creations, as a retrospective of his work at the Museu Oscar Niemeyer and Mercado Moderno in Curitiba, Brazil, revealed in 2013.

Recycled plastic bottles are the material of choice for the Mexico City-based French designer Thierry Jeannot. Working with local craftsmen and employing disadvantaged people to collect rubbish, Jeannot adds value to recycled materials through the design process. Glamorous creations like the sparkling “Green Transmutation Chandelier”, 2010, and limited-edition “Morning Star” coffee table, 2014, both of which feature in MAD’s show, question preconceived ideas about luxury and the value of materials.

**Where to see it: on display at Design Miami this week**

Design Miami's tenth edition shines a spotlight on contemporary and historic work by Latin American designers. New work by Pedro Barrail unveiled at Cristina Grajales Gallery includes "Levantate y Anda Bar Stool", 2014 (\$10,000), made from *paraiso*, a wood native to Paraguay that is "tattooed" by a native Amazonian tribe, plus the designer's steel-framed "Chiaroscuro" chair and low table, 2014 (\$15,000 each), which has porcelain tiles featuring striking photo-collages of construction sites. A new rug woven with nylon and bronze filaments, 2014 (\$20,000), by Hechizoo, a weaving atelier based in Bogota, Colombia, is also at Grajales's booth, along with Alexandra Agudelo's silver vessel, "Cactus Redondo Grande", 2014 (\$20,000), and New York-based Chilean designer Sebastian Errazuriz's "Wave" cabinet, 2014 (edition of eight; \$72,000). Made from lacquered Baltic birch, the cabinet's tambour-like top and façade can be configured in various positions.

Chicago-based Volume Gallery's booth displays new, handmade textiles by the Los Angeles-based designer Tanya Aguiñiga. Raised in Tijuana, Mexico, Aguiñiga's one-off designs successfully amalgamate unusual ingredients, such as the denim, thread, salt and rice used in Support, 2014 (price on request).

Galleria O from Rome is showing "Lina", 2014, a new sofa by the São Paulo-based designers Fernando and Humberto Campana, in gilded bronze and mohair wool velvet with an intricately detailed back (edition of three; €150,000 plus VAT). Another of the siblings' eye-catchers is "Attacco", 2014, a sculptural vessel in bronze and silver with intriguing decoration resembling a medieval bestiary (edition of three; €12,000 plus VAT).

Historic Latin American design is highlighted at R & Company's stand (prices on request), with a pine chair designed in the 1980s for the SECS-Pompeia Center, São Paulo, by Lina Bo Bardi, Marcelo Ferraz and Marcelo Suzuki, a 1980s prototype of the "Frei Egidio" chair by the same group of designers, and a folding chair with a jacaranda frame and leather seat designed around 1950 by Bo Bardi for Studio de Arte Palma, Brazil.

Work by Joaquim Tenreiro is also well-represented at R & Company's booth, in the form of a circular, glass-topped dining table in jacaranda dating from around 1954 (\$350,000), a set of 10 upholstered, curved-back chairs in jacaranda (\$150,000) and a sofa in jacaranda with a cane seat and back, all dating from the 1950s. There is also a glass-topped coffee table in pau marfim (ivory wood) from the late 1940s or early 1950s, a pair of wall-mounted, jacaranda shelves with lighting from the 1950s and a pair of upholstered lounge chairs with ebonised wood bases dating from around 1960.



Leo Capote's "Tulip Bolts Chair", 2013. Photo: Marcelo Stefanovicz

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