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Mexican designers emerge from the shadow of the US

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Trailblazers mix rich heritage with modern aesthetic in battle to change belief that 'foreign is better'



The New Territories exhibition featuring designs by DFC, including the Rosario mirror (\$5,750), at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York

With its proximity to the US, fragmented infrastructure and cultural insecurity, Mexico's design industry has long been overshadowed by its dominant northern neighbour. And yet, with increased economic growth, an emerging pride in its own skills and talent and a desire to look as much to the east and west as it does to the north, Mexico is an increasingly interesting player in global design.

By tapping into the country's rich cultural heritage, artistic traditions and craft-based skills, Mexican designers are carving out their own niche by taking elements of traditional culture and updating them with a contemporary, global aesthetic.

“We are in a process of defining what Mexican design really is,” says Héctor Esrawe, one of the country’s leading designers. “It is not a consolidated movement and we have a lot to work on.”

“To capture the essence of Mexican design, it is necessary to understand the territory, its identity and the local techniques that have been forged over time,” adds Jorge Medina Robles, co-founder of architectural design firm Muro Rojo. “Without these features, you would lose the sense of continuity and authenticity. But it’s also necessary to consider the influence that globalisation has brought us.”

Esrawe and Robles are part of a growing group of architects and designers who have picked up where mid-century trailblazers such as Luis Barragán, Clara Porset and Arturo Pani left off. Barragán and his ilk came to the fore at a time when Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who was born about 90 years after the end of Spanish rule, were redefining national identity. Today’s designers face a similar challenge as they try to establish their voices in the face of enormous cultural influence from the US.

“Mexicans aren’t very good at buying unique Mexican design,” says Richard Eagleton, who lived in the country for several years, founding design brand Fabrica México while there.

“The market for good design is tiny as there’s a very small group of people who can afford it — and the people who can tend to buy international brands.”

Hoping to change this culture of *Malinchismo*, the ingrained belief that “foreign is better”, are curators such as Ana Elena Mallet and Marion Friedmann, who are working hard to build platforms for designers both domestically and abroad.



Yellow Cage, by Gala Fernandez, £1,750, marionfriedmann.com

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New Territories, the first American museum group exhibition dedicated to contemporary Latin American design, has just finished at the Museum of Arts and Design. Meanwhile, this year’s

WantedDesign show in Manhattan featured several Mexican brands including Feltum, which specialises in contemporary felt works, La Tlapalería, a collection of young designers working with artisans, and Territorio Creativo — an initiative supported by Design Week México — take part.

Furthermore, as part of the Year of Mexico cultural initiative in the UK, the Victoria and Albert Museum and London Design Festival have commissioned Mexican architect Frida Escobedo to create an installation in the V&A's John Madejski Garden.

And Tane, the Mexican heritage silverware company, is collaborating with London designer and brand consultant Bodo Sperlein this September to launch one of its first collections outside of Mexico.

From beakers to tea sets, the objects will be a reinterpretation of traditional materials such as silver and wood for a more 21st-century look.

Conversely, overseas designers such as Gala Fernández, the Spanish-born co-founder of Piopio Design Labs, are moving to Mexico to work.

“I call it the ‘Berlin Factor’,” she explains. “The cost of living in Mexico is relatively inexpensive and it’s attracting an increasing number of foreigners, which leads to the cross-fertilisation of ideas and methods.”

Designers such as Fernández, a founding member of Abierto Mexicano de Diseño (Mexico City Design Festival) and New York-born Maggie Galton exemplify this trend. Galton’s eponymous range relies on work with indigenous and mestizo communities to create contemporary handcrafted products such as woven rebozos (traditional shawls), clay bowls and hand-etched lacquer trays using native techniques.

With such a rich heritage, it’s unsurprising that many Mexican designers are also working with indigenous communities. Based in Oaxaca, Colectivo 1050° is a group of designers and artisans that produces modern ceramics. Meanwhile, internationally acclaimed designer Ariel Rojo was inspired by an aerial view of Mexico City at night to create his “Foco Rojo” rug, depicting both the city and the notion that a new idea is born in Mexico every minute.



Stack buffet side table

Cecilia León de la Barra, inspired by the forms, colour and techniques of Mexican culture, has gained attention overseas, as has Emiliano Godoy, whose Knit chair, fashioned from plywood “knitted” together with rope, is part of the permanent collection at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Both collaborate with manufacturer Pirwi, which works with local designers, using traditional craftsmanship, technology and sustainable materials to create pieces such as Field, a table inspired by terraced rice fields and designed by Héctor Esrawe, and APC, a chair made from renewable resources, designed by Godoy.

Such pieces display a new emphasis on quality and originality that has historically been lacking in Mexico. “One of the biggest challenges for architects and designers in Mexico is to continue the pursuit of creating a language of our own without falling into clichés,” says Muro Rojo’s Jorge

Medina Robles.

“We have to care more for . . . the import/export situation, being competitive and maintaining the standards that are in other regions of the world, and at the same time be the best option for the local market.”

“Mexican designers increasingly value their own heritage and roots, and want to create a unique language with those tools,” says Marion Friedmann, a London-based curator with an interest in Latin America.

“Many designers develop projects in unison with craftsmen, often giving them full credits as co-creators. They are proudly presenting their co-workers and are often deeply interested in preserving those skills and workshops that often are in danger of extinction.”



Clay pots

Additionally, if President Enrique Peña Nieto’s plans to boost trade ties with China come to fruition, the design industry could benefit as a whole new Asian market opens up.

“Mexico shouldn’t be the factory of the US,” says an animated Eagleton. “It should be the exporter to the world. And in some areas like aerospace it is doing that brilliantly and actually generating a knowledge economy. What’s important is production can happen anywhere, so you can maintain rural communities who have the opportunity to be thinkers and designers rather than makers. If you can do that, it has to mean a sustainable future both for Mexico’s rural economies and Mexican design, and that’s very exciting.”

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Slideshow photographs: Felix Friedmann; Fernando Etulain

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