



THE MEX BIG THING

The heat is rising in Mexican design, with a buzzing contemporary scene and the hip modernism of its midcentury masters fuelling desire among international collectors. Emma O'Kelly reports

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rugs, and dining chairs (\$650) covered with a thick cowhide normally used on the classic Equival chair. "It feels like we are now happier to reference our own culture rather than looking at what's going on abroad, which is great because we have an incredibly rich visual history to draw upon," says Berrondo.

Mexican designers abroad are also turning to their homeland for inspiration. José de la O is a graduate of Design Academy Eindhoven and, after four years in the Netherlands, returned to Mexico this year to head up an arts institute in Veracruz. He and London-based industrial designer Valentina González Wohlers collaborated on a foldable piece inspired by the famous rocking chairs from the city of Tlacotalpan. The result is The Chair That Rocks – Urban or City Style, made from cedar with linen (£978), leather (£1,140) or vintage Mexican printed fabric (£1,068). This has led to a full-blown The Chair That Rocks project, which sees Studio José de la O link designers and students with craftsmen in Tlacotalpan to make pieces that can be produced in the area and stimulate its economy. De la O himself has designed the first, The Standard Rocking Chair (\$750, pictured on previous page), in conjunction with cabinetmakers Oscar Prieto and Oscar Montalvo.

"There are so many indigenous communities practising dying crafts," says González Wohlers. "We need to work with them to keep them alive." Last year, she commissioned Otomi Indians from Hidalgo to create the fabric for the Tenango de Doria version of her Prickly Pair chairs (from £2,400), which fuse French rococo shapes with those of the nopal cactus. Meanwhile, her Blooming Branches lamps (from £400), based on twigs taken from a forest in Hereford, were cast by ceramists in Mexico City. "There is so much to explore in Mexico. In the past, it was difficult to succeed unless you went to the right schools and knew the right people. The best stores were filled with Italian design, which the older generation tried to emulate. Now there is a realisation that we can, and should, look to our own traditions and craftsmen and link them to the present."

Much of this craftsmanship is being incorporated into covetable, limited-edition pieces. Mexican designer Liliana Ovalle is part of London's Okay Studio, and this year she hooked up with Colectivo 1050°, a Mexican group making high-quality ceramics in Tlapazola, Oaxaca. Their limited-edition Sinkhole vessels (example pictured above right, £900), made of black clay and inspired by spontaneously formed geological craters, have already been exhibited at Depot Basel.

London gallerist Marion Friedmann, who specialises in Latin American design art, says, "When I first went to Mexico three years ago I was stunned by the country's sophistication and talent. There are exceptional designers there and no one in Europe really knows about them," she says. To date, she has launched Transmutation 1, a chandelier made of recycled bottles by French-Mexican designer Thierry Jeannot (£16,800), who has lived in Mexico for the past 16 years, and Foco Rojo, a rug by Ariel Rojo (pictured on previous page, £5,760). Rojo is a prolific designer, academic and vocal design activist within his country. "The creative industries contribute significantly more to Mexico's GDP than the agricultural sector. Ours is an industrialised country, but we have amazing craftsmen," he says. With this in mind, he collaborated with Mexican rug-maker Obadashian to produce Foco Rojo. Based on aerial photos of Mexico City by night, it forms a limited edition of 20



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(plus three artist's proofs).

Friedmann is convinced that Mexico – and Latin America more generally – is a creative conquistador in the making: "Designers in Europe, be warned. There is a huge power coming from that area." Europe may only just be waking up to Mexican designs, but dealers and collectors in the US are tuned in to what's happening south of their border. Alongside the buzzing contemporary scene, interest in Mexican modernist furniture from the 1930s to the 1960s is snowballing. After the 1910-1920 revolution, Mexico – with its mix of Marxist ideology and *mexicanidad* (what it means to be Mexican) – was seen as an incubator of modernist thought. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were at the height of their powers, adored by the surrealists in Europe; bauhaus refugees, including Hannes Meyer, Michael van Beuren, Josef and Anni Albers and Klaus Grabe, immigrated to Mexico as they fled the Nazi regime. In turn, Mexican designers such as Arturo Pani, Pepe Mendoza and Francisco Artigas were inspired by the coolly rational style of Europe's best and brightest.

Paulo Peña Salcedo, co-owner of Mexico City's ADN gallery, explains, "The modernist movement in Mexico happened in a way that was unlike

anywhere else. It was deeply rooted in tradition – which sounds like a contradiction – but designers of the time incorporated very traditional colours, shapes, materials and techniques into their work. The result was a rich, sensuous and expressive form of modernism."

Relatively little was known of this golden age until 2003, when academic and curator Ana Elena Mallet was invited to explore the archive of Clara Porset, a Cuban-born designer who settled in Mexico in the 1930s. Porset found inspiration in the country's crafts and ancient Mesoamerican sculpture, as did Americans Don Shoemaker and Michael van Beuren. Today, they are seen as pioneers of the movement, and Porset's Butaque chair usually sells for at least \$5,000.

In LA, galleries such as Blackman Cruz are fuelling a desire for Mexican modernism all along the West Coast.

"Pani is supremely hip right now," says Blackman Cruz co-founder David Cruz. "His pieces are quite beefy and work well in generously proportioned Californian houses. He lived abroad and was heavily influenced by 1940s France, but he changed styles regularly, so his works are very versatile." Cruz grew up in northern

From top: Pirwi birch Los screen, \$1,740, by Héctor Esrawe. Fábrica México mahogany Ala A bench seat, £1,995. Liliana Ovalle and Colectivo 1050° clay and oak Sinkhole No 3 Botita vessel, £900



Left: Clara Porset's iconic 1959 Sala Totonaca sofa, recently sold by ADN

through our more everyday objects we want to highlight contemporary design as something worth investing in."

Godoy speaks for many when

he says, "I used to know all there was to know about design in Mexico. In the past five years, I've realised I'm completely ignorant. Every week I discover a new, amazing designer, project or studio. The amount of talent in Mexico right now, among every age group and discipline, is really humbling." +

Mexico and travels back to his homeland regularly to seek out pieces from the likes of Porset, Pani and Mito Block, mainly from private estates. "They can be hard to find. With designers such as Luis Barragán and Porset, I have to be very clear about the provenance, since there are few authentic works left."

"Most pieces have either disappeared or are abroad," agrees Javier Carral, owner of Trouvé gallery in Mexico City. ADN recently sold Porset's Sala Totonaca – her iconic lounge suite (sofa pictured above) – to a foreign collector for a sum that, although undisclosed, broke a Mexican-design price record in the process. Salcedo reckons that "Mexican modernism is definitely more popular beyond our borders. I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, it is rewarding to see beautiful pieces in important collections worldwide, but it makes me sad not to see collectors in my country buying Mexican design."

"We still lack a strong design culture. There is no tradition of design in our museums, and it is still divorced from government and business," says Mallet.

She is one of a smattering of individuals trying to encourage Mexicans to buy Mexican and build bridges with industry. Their efforts are paying off. Fábrica México recently secured exclusive rights to reproduce furniture from the archive of modernist architect Pedro Ramirez Vázquez, who died in April. He was one of the nation's great architects, designing museums, expo pavilions and the Equival chair. The collection launches this winter, with enthusiastic government support.

Inspiring home-grown enthusiasm is also the aim of Archivo, a design space owned by architect Fernando Romero and his wife, Soumaya Slim, daughter of business mogul Carlos Slim. For the past five years they have been building a collection of 20th-century design, displayed to the public in a 1950s house in Mexico City. To date, this consists of around 1,500 objects, almost a third of which are Mexican. Shoemaker's Sling chair is there, along with the iconic but unattributed Midwife chair. Archivo director Regina Pozo says, "Our aim is to profile the 1950s as one of the most exciting moments in Mexico – but

BREAKING DOWN BORDERS

ADN, 62 Ave Moliere, Mexico City 11560 (+5255-5511 5521; www.adngaleria.mx). **Archivo**, 4 General F Ramirez, Mexico City 11840 (+5255-2614 1063; www.archivonline.org). **Ariel Rojo**, www.arielrojo.com and see Marion Friedmann Gallery. **Arrolladora Mexicana**, 30 Isabel La Católica, Mexico City 06000 (+5255-185 697; www.arrolladoramexicana.com). **Blackman Cruz**, 836 North Highland Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90038 (+1323-466 8600; www.blackmancruz.com). **Clara Porset**, see ADN. **Colectivo 1050**, +52951-516 1049; www.1050grados.com. **Emiliano Godoy**, www.emilianogodoy.com and see Arrolladora Mexicana and Pinw. **Fábrica México**, +5255-6268 5959; www.fabricamexico.com and see Galería Mexicana de Diseño. **Galería Mexicana de Diseño**, 13 Anatole France, Mexico City 11560 (+5255-5255 0080; www.galeriamexicana.mx). **Gallery Libby Sellers**, 41-42 Berners St, London W1 (020-3384 8785; www.libbysellers.com). **Liliana Ovalle**, www.lilianaovalle.com and see Gallery Libby Sellers. **Marion Friedmann Gallery**, 020-8672 0810; www.marionfriedmann.com. **Paul Roco**, +5255-1163 9142; www.paulroco.com. **Pirwi**, 124 Alejandro Dumas, Mexico City 11560 (+5255-1579 6514; www.pirwi.com). **Studio José de la O**, +52228-858 0061; www.josedelao.info. **Trouvé**, 186 Bis Alvaro Obregón, Mexico City 06700 (+5255-5264 4884; www.trouve.mx). **Valentina González Wohlers**, by appointment, 20 Clifton House, Club Row, London E2 (020-7739 9803; www.valentinagw.com) and see Trouvé.

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