

In 1957 Porset received a commission to design outdoor furniture for the Pierre Marqués Hotel in Acapulco. Mexican architect Luis Barragán consulted on the project's garden design. Industrially produced and made of natural fibers and lightweight iron, the furniture was showcased at the Triennale di Milano that same year. The pieces eventually found their way into the gardens of notable residences in Mexico City, including that of architect Juan Sordo Madaleno. The examples displayed here are contemporary reeditions crafted by Mexa, a furniture company in Guadalajara, with the support of the Clara Porset archive at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Exhibition Title
2024 Crafting
Modernity:
Design in Latin
America,
1940–1980

Label Format
Regular

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Last Updated
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8:07:21 PM

Updated By
Jackie Neudorf

In 1940 MoMA launched a competition for designers throughout the United States and Latin America, sponsored by major department stores. Designers were challenged to submit entries that exemplified curator Eliot Noyes's concept of "organic design," namely, the "harmonious organization of the parts within the whole, according to structure, material, and purpose." The "intelligent and imaginative" use of designers' local materials and techniques was also encouraged. Winners were awarded manufacturing and distribution contracts as well as had their designs featured in the 1941 MoMA exhibition *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*.

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“I make ceramics, and I want to put ceramics in their place. My search is not that of a sculptor because I look for texture, color, and form,” Seka once said. The artist studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, before relocating to Paris and eventually Caracas, where she established a pottery workshop. She initially focused on utilitarian objects, including furniture, crafted from low-fire glazed earthenware. Seka experimented with various glazes and textures as well as incorporated folk art and pre-Columbian motifs, such as figures wearing feather headdresses, into her work. In the 1960s she shifted to fine arts, largely making non-functional objects.

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Trained in fiber art, de Amaral blurs the distinction between art, design, and craft in her abstract tapestries. She combines horsehair, wool, linen, cotton, and precious metals—primarily gold leaf—in her work, blending influences from modernism, Colombian craft traditions, and pre-Columbian art. She initially pursued architectural drafting in Colombia before continuing her education at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. *Cuatro Paisajes*' tactile, three-dimensional tapestry of wool and horsehair in earthy tones represents the Colombian landscape. For de Amaral, “landscape is nothing more than an extension of the fabric, a mantle that covers the earth.”

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A sculptor and furniture designer, Zitman founded the modern furniture company Tecoteca in Caracas in 1952. In doing so, he aimed “to produce a uniquely Venezuelan form of furniture based on critical studies of contemporary Venezuelan lifestyles, the materials involved, and the specific functions assigned to each element.” This dining chair emerged from a request by architect Fruto Vivas to furnish Club Táchira, which Vivas designed, in Caracas. Inspired by artisans in the state of Aragua who work with natural fibers, Zitman utilized woven enea, a plant native to Aragua that grows close to bodies of water, for the chair’s backrest and seat.

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Jackie Neudorf

Montiel, of the Wayuu people, emerged as a key figure in the revival of traditional textile techniques in Venezuela from 1960 to 1980. In his workshop, situated in the desert city of Paraguaipoa, Montiel crafted his tapestries directly on fabric laid out on his worktable or on the floor. Using cardboard cutouts, he arranged shapes and colors, then transferred the prepared fabric onto wooden frames for weaving. His tapestries depicted flora, fauna, and themes from Wayuu culture and traditions in vibrant colors that created a striking contrast with the arid landscape. In the 1960s Montiel’s creations embellished countless Venezuelan homes.

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Jackie Neudorf

“Nothing I saw in Chile is Chilean except for folk art,” wrote Lincoln Kirstein, who served as MoMA’s consultant on Latin American art, in a 1942 article highlighting Quinchamáli pottery. Originating in Chile’s Ñuble region, this pottery is deeply rooted in pre-Columbian traditions and was historically practiced by women. The manufacturing process involves a smoke-firing method that gives the pottery its distinctive black color. Blanco Núñez was based in Oaxaca, another region with a tradition of women ceramicists. Núñez fused utilitarian and artistic elements with her distinctive *pastillage* technique, applying surface treatments to clay to craft intricate and textured designs.

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Jackie Neudorf

Matta was trained as an architect, briefly working in the studio of Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier in Paris. However, Matta’s evolving interest in painting drew him into Surrealist circles. He ventured into furniture design for this collaboration with Italian designer Dino Gavina, bringing with him his architectural knowledge and artistic sensibility. Named after his wife, Malitte Pope, this fanciful design is made up of polyurethane organic shapes that, when stacked, form a sculptural arrangement that serves as a room divider. When deconstructed, it transforms into a versatile set of furniture—a two-seat sofa, three seats, and a footrest.

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Jackie Neudorf

In Chile between 1971 and 1973, under Salvador Allende's government, a team of Chilean and German designers led by former Ulm School of Design professor Gui Bonsiepe developed projects for nationalized industries. Part of their work was to design everyday objects, with the aim of imbuing the country's material culture with socialist ideas. The 1973 military coup d'état against Allende (supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency) abruptly halted this public project, leaving most designs unrealized, including this child's chair for kindergartens. The influence of the Ulm School can be seen in the design, which features bright colors and prioritizes cost-effectiveness and durability.

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Blanco designed the Plaka chair from a single piece of plywood, transforming it from a flat board into a three-dimensional object. "The chair is a design object that allows each author to express his or her intentions," he wrote. With the Plaka, Blanco's goal was to craft a folding chair with minimal thickness when closed; he added a hole at the top of the chair so that it can be hung from the wall. The chair's name is derived from the Spanish word *placa*, which translates to "plane" and is also the term for the type multi-laminate wood the designer used.

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A dynamic couple in artistic and intellectual circles in Bogotá, Mosseri and Hoyos profoundly shaped each other's aesthetics and professional growth. Designed by Mosseri in 1972, their home in the neighborhood of Bosque Izquierdo served as a hub for art and architecture. Mosseri oversaw the interior and furniture design, which included his Cuatroenuno table, while Hoyos displayed her paintings in the home. The geometric architecture of the house and Mosseri's nesting tables, with their right angles and square shape, dialogue with Hoyos's window paintings (like the one on display here).

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Jackie Neudorf

“The first duty of the creator: restlessness,” Leufert wrote in 1985. Based in Caracas, Leufert developed an interdisciplinary approach to art and design over his thirty-year career. He took cues from abstract art in his graphic design and, conversely, from mid-century design in his paintings. Leufert cultivated his artistic practice alongside that of his life partner, Gego, and designed the promotional materials for many of her exhibitions. He further contributed to cultural life in Venezuela in his work as a curator and designer at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas.

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Jackie Neudorf

Trained as an architect and engineer in Germany, Gego immigrated to Venezuela in 1939 to escape Nazi persecution. During the 1940s, Gego established a workshop that made furniture and rugs, among other items. She systematically examined the interplay between line, space, and volume across her visual practice, including in kinetic sculptures. Gego's Loma Verde rug, named after a 1965 condominium building in Caracas designed by Venezuelan architect Jimmy Alcock, features a striking black backdrop adorned with abstract white and brown lines. These lines form parallels within the composition, which, contrasted against the texture of the weave, create a dynamic visual experience.

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6:01:38 PM

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Jackie Neudorf

Arroyo played a pivotal role in integrating ceramics in arts education and transforming the medium from a utilitarian necessity to a means of artistic expression in Venezuela. He participated in a visual movement “whose main characteristic is the concern for form and matter—with total disregard for ornamentation” that also forwarded a “reconsideration of Indigenous pottery, quite underestimated until that moment,” he wrote in 1962. As director of the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas in the 1960s and '70s, he brought international attention to Venezuelan ceramicists, including those with works on view: Cristina Merchán, Seka Severin de Tudja, Tecla Tofano, and Gottfried and Thekla Zielke.

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The work and philosophy of self-taught architect and designer Zanine Caldas remains relevant today, particularly his later environmentally conscious designs. His diverse portfolio spans from affordable, mass-produced plywood furniture to sculptural, sustainable designs. The Namoradeira chair reflects both traditional and modern influences. The name, which means “flirting” in Portuguese, playfully references the chair’s tête-à-tête form. Zanine Caldas translates this nineteenth-century French design into a twentieth-century Brazilian masterpiece by incorporating traditional canoe-building techniques, evident in the carved form. Its rounded base allows sitters to rock back and forth.

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b65e906b

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6:12:42 PM

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Highly functional and sculptural in quality, the Puzzle chair is crafted from twelve wooden pieces and tensioned fabric to achieve ergonomic comfort. Baixas designed it for scalability, emphasizing affordability and easy assembly by eschewing joints and screws in favor of sockets. Despite its initial aim for mass production and potential distribution in supermarkets, technological limitations required artisanal, small-scale manufacturing.

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6:00:04 PM

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Jackie Neudorf

Boccará was one of only six women to graduate from the architecture school of the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1945. She later relocated to Mendoza with her then husband, César Jannello (whose “W” chair is on view nearby), teaching ceramics at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo. In 1957 Boccará founded her own ceramics company, Colbo. Made from red Andean clay with white-glazed interiors, her early tableware was characterized by sensual, organic forms. In the 1970s Colbo’s product line expanded to include tiles as well as customized silk-screen-printed items.

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Reinbolt’s embroidered tapestries are visual narratives of her childhood memories of the Bahian countryside in northeastern Brazil. Growing up, she was exposed to forms of artistic expression like pottery and lace-making by the women in her Afro-Brazilian family. In 1949 she began working as a cook in the home of Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares and her partner, American writer Elizabeth Bishop. During this time, Reinbolt crafted intricate “wool paintings” using cotton waste and dozens of needles, arranging thread like brushstrokes on a canvas. Though she worked her entire life as a domestic servant, she continued to make art.

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“There is Tenreiro’s spectacular chair, perfectly crafted, beautifully shaped, on which one would prefer not to sit, in order to stand back and admire it for its own sake,” remarked Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa in 1961. Tenreiro’s three-legged chair exemplifies the Brazilian vocabulary of modernism, incorporating local materials like jacaranda wood, which allows it to withstand the particularities of the climate. Organic forms and curved lines seamlessly adapt to the contours of the human body. Tenreiro championed craftsmanship, such as that of traditional woodworking, over the “large-scale production of inferior articles.”

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De Barros cofounded Unilabor—a furniture factory and workers’ cooperative—in São Paulo in 1954 with Dominican priest João Baptista Pereira. Considering design a driver for societal change, they aimed to “transform the workforce’s relationship with work by changing work’s brutal, oppressive, and ultimately alienating nature.” Unilabor implemented an egalitarian system, practicing profit sharing and collaborative decision-making. The Unilabor desk features a lightweight iron structure and a white Formica top and drawers. The furniture design reflects de Barros’s emphasis on industrial production, employing stripped-down geometric forms and modest materials.

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Jackie Neudorf

“The garden is, it must be, an integral part of civilized life; a deeply felt, deeply rooted, spiritual and emotional necessity,” said landscape architect Burle Marx. His asymmetrical plans featured native vegetation, colorful pavements, and free-form bodies of water. Burle Marx designed Ibirapuera Park in collaboration with Oscar Niemeyer, a fellow Brazilian architect with whom he’d previously worked on several landmark projects. Niemeyer’s freestanding structures, characterized by their bold combination of elementary geometric forms, are in constant dialogue with Burle Marx’s sinuous landscaping.

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An artist and architect, Goeritz was commissioned to design a gallery in Mexico City in 1953, resulting in the Museo Experimental El Eco. He envisioned the space as a “penetrable sculpture”—a total work of art that would blend architecture, sculpture, and other art forms. This multidisciplinary project also reflected ideas Goeritz wrote about in his 1953 manifesto “Emotional Architecture,” in which he posited architecture not merely as utilitarian but as a conduit for art, emotion, and spirituality. The Eco chair, which he designed for the museum, similarly transcends functionality, existing at once as a piece of furniture and as a sculptural object.

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5:47:36 PM

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Jackie Neudorf

The Alacrán chaise lounge gained international acclaim after it won one of five prizes awarded to Latin American designers in an inter-American competition held by MoMA in 1940; winning entries were featured in the exhibition *Organic Design in Home Furnishings* (1941). Its design was influenced by principles of the Bauhaus, where van Beuren and Grabe both studied. Reproducible and easy to assemble, it combined simple, clean lines with Mexican elements such as Primavera wood and woven natural fibers. Around 1940 in Mexico City, van Beuren, Grabe, and Webb established the first industrial design factory, Domus, which provided an emerging middle class with innovative and avant-garde furniture.

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5:46:47 PM

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The term *butaque* refers to a low, curved chair with a wooden frame and seat traditionally made of animal skin; different versions can be found throughout Latin America. It first emerged in Venezuela in the sixteenth century and borrows elements from pre-Columbian chairs known as *duhos* as well as from the X-form folding chairs that Spanish colonizers brought to the Americas. Porset saw the butaque as a reflection of Mexico's complex cultural identity. For her iconic design, she experimented with dimensions, materials, and ergonomic adjustments to adapt the chair to modern comfort and interiors.

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Jackie Neudorf

Arroyo embraced the Caribbean butaque chair as an ideal form for modern seating rooted in vernacular design traditions. Arroyo's and Clara Porset's butaque chairs (the latter is on view nearby) both use local materials, such as natural fibers and native woods, which are inherently suited to their climates. Arroyo explained that his chair has "wooden slats that have been shaped to accommodate the human body. The space between the slats provide ventilation even when a cushion is used." He and Porset aimed to resist influences from outside Latin America, reflecting their shared commitment to preserving national identity through innovative design.

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Situated in Jardines del Pedregal, a residential area in a former volcanic zone in southern Mexico City, architect Enrique Yáñez's family residence fused modern architectural principles with the surrounding terrain. Made of glass, cement, and volcanic rock, the house exemplified the pre-Hispanic revival architectural style, which emerged in Mexico in the late nineteenth century and had a resurgence in the 1930s. Porset designed the furniture, including the Totonaca chair, which was inspired by a Totonac (an Indigenous people based in eastern Mexico) ceramic from Veracruz, in which a figure sits on an *icpalli*, a type of wood and wicker chair.

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“The idea was to have a house that sheltered physically from wind and rain, but participating in poetry and ethics, which can be found even in the storm,” said Bo Bardi of the Casa de Vidro, her residence of forty years. Completed in 1951, the house is located on a sloping site in Morumbi, a hilly neighborhood in southwestern São Paulo. Bo Bardi’s design uses glass, concrete, and pilotis, which elevate the main part of the structure. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows provide views of the surrounding trees, embodying Bo Bardi’s commitment to harmonizing architecture with the environment.

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In her design for the Tripé de Ferro chair, Bo Bardi prioritized adaptability and the sitter’s comfort over a fixed, rigid form. Her steel and leather chair, which features three legs and a hammock-style seat, embodies simplicity and leisure. In the inaugural issue of *Habitat*, an art and architecture magazine Bo Bardi cofounded in 1950, she wrote: “Aboard the river boats [*gaiolas*] that ply the rivers of the north, the hammock is, as everywhere in the country, both a bed and a seat. Its perfect adherence to the shape of the body, its undulating movement, make it one of the most perfect instruments of repose.”

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In the early 1950s artist, critic, and art historian Alfredo Boulton remodeled an eighteenth-century vacation home overlooking the Caribbean Sea in Pampatar, Margarita Island, Venezuela. The design, which fuses pre-Hispanic, colonial, and avant-garde architectural styles, was realized using traditional construction techniques. Boulton conceived of the Casa Pampatar as a total work of art, carefully considering every detail. He adorned the space with modern art, including a specially commissioned mobile by American sculptor Alexander Calder and a mural by Venezuelan painter Alejandro Otero. The residence, which was furnished with Miguel Arroyo-designed butaque chairs, became a hub for artists, intellectuals, and socialites.

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Between 1943 and 1945, Amancio Williams and Delfina Gálvez designed Casa sobre el arroyo as a private residence for composer Alberto Williams, Amancio's father. Elevated on a concrete arch over a small stream, the house appears to float, integrating seamlessly with the landscape. According to Williams, "The way this house achieves the free plan is different from the way Le Corbusier attempted. . . . In this work, structure, form, and quality are a unity." Williams's innovative use of concrete and glass reflects his commitment to experimentation. Most of the furniture, including the chairs, armchairs, railing matting, doorknobs, and lighting fixtures, were designed by Williams.

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César Jannello's "W" Chair in the bedroom of Le Corbusier's Maison Curutchet, La Plata, Argentina, 1955. Courtesy Acervo Fundación IDA, Fondo César Jannello

Jannello first crafted the "W" chair in 1944 for use at the construction site of Casa sobre el arroyo in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Originally braced by three legs, it was later adapted into a more rigid, four-legged version for added stability and ergonomic support. The chair's organic form and structural integrity eschew traditional anchors, relying on the elasticity of steel. Like the B.K.F. and the Tripolina before it, the "W" chair features a curved leg design. It gained prominence when it was used to furnish Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's Maison Curutchet in La Plata, Argentina, in 1953.



Lina Bo Bardi lounging in the Bowl chair, c. 1950s. Photograph: Francesco Albuquerque. Courtesy of Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi

Bo Bardi's approach to design and architecture was centered around the concept of "humanizing art." Guided by this philosophy, she conceived the Bowl chair according to the proportions of the human body. It features a four-legged steel frame and semi-spherical seat, which allows the sitter to adjust their reclining angle. In 1953 Bo Bardi's design gained prominence when it graced the cover of the US magazine *Interiors*, with the designer herself as the model. The accompanying article described the chair as "womb-like" and a "cuddle bowl."