

THE NEXT NEW THING

Smart money is betting on Brazilian furniture BY ERNEST BECK



MAN ON A MISSION

Paolo Bacchi, above, the president of Artefacto International, plans to open six new stores in the U.S. selling Brazilian furniture.

For most people, Brazil conjures images of scantily clad samba dancers and hedonistic vacations. But when the American designer Michael Jansen thinks about Brazil, he sees an abundant supply of fine woods, skilled craftsmanship and low-cost production facilities—everything that is needed to manufacture pieces for Urban Tribe, his home-furnishings company.

That's why Jansen is thinking seriously about shifting a portion of his production outsourcing from China, which is now the world's furniture powerhouse, to the lesser-utilized Brazil. "I've seen better and better products coming out of Brazil in recent years," said Jansen, whose company sells what he calls "primitive, elegant and sophisticated"

furniture, including items like a lamp made of coconut husk encased in resin and a solid cherry end table inlaid with onyx.

Artefacto, a Brazil-based company that exports contemporary Brazilian design to America, is growing at a rapid pace. After opening its first American store in Coral Gables three years ago, Artefacto last year expanded to Palm Beach and this year to Georgetown in Washington, D.C. The line of furniture ranges from sleek steel and exotic wood tables to what the company calls "romantic rattan." They also make and sell white-leather sofas for \$3,000 to \$12,000.

Unlike smaller importers who work with a limited number of designers and independent studios, Artefacto is one of Brazil's biggest

furniture makers, with a 25-person design department and a 400,000-square-foot factory outside of São Paulo. After arriving in the United States, goods are kept in Artefacto's huge warehouse in Miami, which was built as part of a strategy to ensure quick deliveries and immediate availability to American consumers.

MADE ABROAD

Michael Jansen designed the Dragon Chaise, made in China. Brazil is on his radar.

Paolo Bacci, president of Artefacto International, said the company competes with Italian manufacturers but manages to keep prices moderate because of lower labor costs in Brazil. What's more, Artefacto skips distributors and middlemen by selling through its own showrooms. "We're not the cheapest, but we have the best relationship between cost and quality," said Bacci, who plans to open six new stores over the next three years in Manhattan, Boston, Atlanta and Chicago.

Brazilian companies are ramping up furniture exports to the United States. Overall imports to the United States of Brazilian-made furniture rose 20 percent in the first half of 2005, to \$238.4 million, compared to the same period a year before, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

One São Paulo studio to watch is Barauna (www.barauna.com.br), run by the architect Marcelo Ferrez. Barauna specializes in minimal, highly refined pieces that celebrate the beauty of wood yet are based on indigenous designs. The hip New York store R 20th Century, known for fostering careers, will begin carrying Barauna's work this year.

To be sure, China remains the primary source for furniture sold in America. Over the past decade much of the American furniture industry relocated production there, taking advantage of the country's low wages and rapidly expanding capacity. In the first half of 2005, the U.S. Department of Commerce reported, Chinese furniture exports to the United States rose 13 percent to \$5.1 billion. Still, Brazil is now garnering attention as a reliable, closer-to-home alternative for high-end design firms. For Jansen, whose design business is based in India, Brazil offers a quicker route to Urban Tribe's showrooms in eight American cities, including the Judith Norman showroom at DCOTA in Dania Beach.

Right now Jansen sends his designs to several factories in China; from there, finished goods are shipped by sea to clear customs in Los Angeles, and then overland to New York. He figures the long

haul is about twice as expensive as shipping directly from Brazil.

Another advantage of Brazil, Jansen said, is the availability of wood supplies in a country rich with forests and tropical species like the trendy, chocolate-brown walnut known as ipe, which has recently soared in popularity.

Besides an advantageous location and excellent shipping links, several other factors are propelling the emergence of Brazil as a furniture source. Trade relations between the United States and Brazil are generally good, which means there's little chance of a trade war erupting and the imposition of special duties and tariffs, as sometimes happens with China over trade imbalances and charges that the Chinese are dumping products on the American market.

For Reeta Gyamlani, a co-founder of Farrago Design, a New York-based home-furnishings company with an environmentally friendly line of furniture and accessories, one reason to look south was her discovery that Brazilians have a flair for contemporary design.

When she first started scouring the world for manufacturers, Gyamlani investigated Vietnam, India, China and Indonesia as well as North Carolina as possible sites to produce Farrago's three collections. Farrago says it merges "lifestyle and a commitment to the environment," and features items such as the Raeth console table, which is made of 3,000 camel bone chips. Farrago's Nerine table uses salvaged railway ties and sculpted metal.

After trying to get her line produced in the Far East, Gyamlani switched all her production to Brazil. "Brazilians understand contemporary design," she said.

Despite concern among environmental groups about the depletion of the Amazon rain forest, American designers are learning to work with renewable woods and in ways not destructive to the environment. But can the sleek designs sold by companies like Farrago really be called Brazilian?

Roberta Schilling, a 34-year-old Brazilian who is based in Miami, has a different idea: cultivate local artisans to create furniture that



THE PEAK

At design 05, Christina Grajales sold this rosewood table by the master Brazilian artisan Joaquim Testeiro for \$150,000.

reflects Brazil's colonial past. Her company, Roberta Schilling Collections, sells heavily painted armchairs, hutches, tables and the like made of recycled wood from old barns and farmhouses in Brazil. Decorated with colorful trees and birds, these pieces—in what Schilling calls the European Colonial style—cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000 at stores like Neiman Marcus and Anthropologie.

Each year, Schilling heads to Brazil a half-dozen times to seek out small studios and independent producers and suppliers who specialize in antique reproductions. She works closely with them to create the line, which draws on the country's craft and woodworking traditions. "I would never think of manufacturing in China or anywhere else," Schilling said, noting that her company provides jobs for more than 1,000 people in Brazil.

Carlos Junqueira, a native of São Paulo and president of Espasso, a furniture company based in Long Island City, New York, concentrates on importing contemporary Brazilian designers like Carlos Motta and Hugo Franco. Junqueira, who will soon move his New York operation to Tribeca, and who also has a showroom on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, imports individual pieces that are produced in the designers' ateliers. The multiethnic style, Junqueira said, is "contemporary, organic and very sophisticated."

When he started Espasso two years ago, hardly anyone was doing modern Brazilian, said Junqueira, who was previously in the coffee-importing business. "There was a niche to show a different Brazil," he said. "Nobody had a clue that we even had design in Brazil." Now business is so good (another showroom in Miami is being considered) that Junqueira has formed his own company in Brazil to handle logistics, customs and shipping.

Expect to see more and varied Brazilian wares in shops over the next few years. Americans are warming to what Bacci of Artefacto calls "a touch of Brazilian spice," from handcrafted antique reproduction pieces to cutting-edge, limited-edition design. But remember too that a country that produced the great modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer has a long history of contemporary design.

Cristina Grajales, a decorative arts advisor in New York, said that during the recent design.05 event in Miami she sold a Brazilian rosewood dining table she considers a masterpiece by the highly regarded Brazilian designer Joaquim Tenreiro, who died in 1992. The price for what Grajales called this "classical and sensuous" table was a cool \$150,000. ■



BRAZILIAN BORN
Roberta Schilling designs in Miami and has the work done in Brazil. Her company is known for its references to Brazil's colonial past.

LAID BACK
Below, Carlos Motta's Parati Armchair, from Espasso in New York. Far left, the Souffle chair from the Earth line, by Farrago, available in New York at Design Lush.

