

Brazilian furniture

Exceptionally beautiful, increasingly rare – “mid-mod” pieces by stars of architecture and design are the ultimate collectibles, says Jenny Dalton



From left: rosewood credenza by Novo Rumo, £3,950, from Decoratum. Jacaranda-framed sofa and three-legged chair in five different types of Brazilian hardwood, both by Joaquim Tenreiro, prices on application, from R 20th Century

While Brazil has long been known for many things – samba, footballing finesse, extreme epilation – in more recent years it has begun to establish a reputation for its furniture design, specifically of the mid-20th century. Sergio Rodrigues, Joaquim Tenreiro and Percival Lafer are no longer names of total obscurity beyond design circles. Rodrigues has again become an in-demand designer, and Tenreiro's work featured at this year's Design Miami/Basel on the stand of R 20th Century gallery.

To those for whom Brazilian “mid-mod” furniture is not a relative novelty, the spotlight on the country's design output has been a long time coming. Carlos Junqueira, owner of Espasso gallery in New York and LA, which has just opened a London satellite, started selling pieces by these design greats in 2002. “At first I did not know how people would react because there was no demand back then. I just found the designs beautiful.” Ten years later and the curvaceous, rare solid-wood (often jacaranda) benches, tables and chairs by Rodrigues, Tenreiro and Zanine Caldas can sell for up to \$70,000.

Dealer Allan Ress, principal of London gallery Decoratum, began offering pieces for sale after he and gallery CEO Jeff Salmon discovered Brazilian design for themselves over a decade ago. “Our CEO has a personal interest in that his partner is Brazilian and he has travelled extensively to Brazil. What he realised is that original Brazilian design is finite. Strict regulations relating to the use and export of certain species of wood mean that some early pieces can never be recreated or repeated.”

What sets Brazilian mid-mod apart is that in the postwar period in the west, mass-market forces were coming into play. “America, and Europe too, became

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corporate,” explains Zesty Meyers, director of R 20th Century gallery. “The likes of Cappellini and Kartell or Herman Miller and Knoll couldn't afford to make products at that price level for individuals. In Brazil, however, there wasn't really a middle class. The wealthy had works designed for their houses in Rio, and their houses in the mountains, and then their cousin's house, and so on. This makes a huge difference when you're talking about the quality of pieces coming out of Brazil.” Particularly, says Meyers, as many European designers who landed there after the war, such as Jorge Zalszupin from Poland, were the equal of those who went to the US and became figureheads of the modernist movement.

Diverse beginnings, maybe, but there is a “common denominator” among Brazilian designers of the postwar period. “They are great *artesanos*,” says Elena Foster, wife of architect Lord Foster, and founder and CEO of publishing company, Ivorypress. “They understand how the materials speak, from the wood to the straw or metal or leather, and they work with them easily, effortlessly, with a great elegance.”

The Fosters have over the years bought a number of key furniture and

accessories designs, including chairs, chaises, bar furniture and cutlery from galleries such as Espasso and R 20th Century. It is an interest that began with Norman Foster's research into Brazil's iconic architect Oscar Niemeyer and his creation of utopian towns and buildings in 1950s Brazil, most notably Brasilia. After a number of visits to architectural destinations there, including the President of Brazil's house in the capital, they have watched the market grow.

“It is great that the phenomenal generation of designers who created magnificent pieces during the 20th century, and the living ones who now continue the tradition, are being recognised internationally,” says Elena.

Although the market has risen considerably since the arrival of such pieces into the US and UK, Meyers maintains there's still some way to go to its maturation. There are fine-quality designs around, like the pair of 1958 black leather armchairs by Lafer recently sold by Silvia Nayla on Westbourne Grove, but Meyers and other dealers recognise the bigger problem in the future may be guaranteeing good stock.

According to Ress, the Brazilians themselves “have finally woken up to the

fact that what they have in their own backyard is world-class design that compares favourably with the very best that Italy, France and the Scandinavian countries can produce”. Which means, inevitably, “that supplies of good Brazilian design will reduce; buyers will look to expand their collections; and demand will increase as more people become aware of this unique market. Short supplies and greater demand can only lead to one thing: higher prices.”

Berlin-based dealer Uwe Mönnikes, of Zeitlos-Berlin gallery, argues that the era has an emotional as well as commercial pull: “Brasilia and modernist Brazilian architecture is a myth for design lovers. We all want to have a testament to these golden years in the form of a piece of furniture at home.”

PR director Zoe Kuipers and fiancé photographer Marco Walker recently bought a Jorge Zalszupin blue table from Vera da Silva, at DaSilva Interiors, for £5,000 because of its wow factor:

“We've never seen anything else like it – understated it's not. We will always find a place for it wherever we are living.”

Similarly for Elena Foster and her husband, who very much use their pieces by Tenreiro and Lina Bo Bardi: “They are part of our family life. We are not interested in their market value. They are part of our aesthetic treasures that we love to live with.”

Others are likely to be enticed as the boom in knowledge of all things Brazilian spreads. Says Ress: “Brazil's economy will no doubt continue to grow, fuelling demand. Combine this with the world's spotlight falling on Brazil over the next four years with the football World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016, we believe that all things Brazilian are going to be even more popular.” ♦