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# Change

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The Great Indoors

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# King Comfort

In the tenth in our series on designers who've earned their spurs, Sergio Rodrigues talks about modernism and easy chairs in his native Brazil.

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Photos Leonardo Finotti

**T**he names of certain designers are irrevocably tied to the objects they've made. When Brazilians hear 'Sergio Rodrigues', for example, they instantly think of the Mole armchair (later known as the Sheriff chair). But Rodrigues is definitely not a one-trick designer. At 85, he can look back on 60 years devoted to the design of no fewer than 1600 pieces, from furniture to houses.

Trained as an architect, Rodrigues has been involved in a reconceptualization of Brazilian design since the 1950s and in the construction of the country's modernist capital, Brasilia. His designs are neither simplistic nor nationalist, however. Although Rodrigues takes a characteristically Brazilian approach to his work, he imbues his projects with universal qualities and garners worldwide success by placing beauty and comfort above rigid functionalist principles.

Rodrigues's Mole chair (*mole* is Portuguese for 'soft') is not only a 20th-century design icon but also an incredibly comfortable seat. Its sturdy wooden frame and cushiony leather-clad upholstery extend an insistent invitation to slouch.

In addition to demonstrating the designer's craftsmanship and aesthetic sense, the chair is acclaimed by critics and users as the physical translation of a more informal and relaxed attitude towards life. 'Relaxed' also describes the beautiful Rio de Janeiro studio where *Frame* talks – while slouching, of course – to the man himself. **I can't imagine Sergio Rodrigues fading into retirement.**

**What have you been doing lately?** In 2000 I began adapting some of my 1600 designs for industrial production. Originally, they were manufactured traditionally, in a semi-artisanal way. For this new venture, I selected pieces like the Lucio chair and the Oscar armchair, two Brazilian design icons.

**If I'm correct, these chairs were named after Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, two of the Brazilian architects behind plans for Brasilia.** Yes. I paid them homage, and

both chairs were used to furnish Brazil's modernist capital. During the city's construction in the late 1950s, Brazilian design began to attract a great deal of interest. Because officials of the Itamaraty [Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Relations] wanted to show Brazilian design to foreigners, the government was a source of considerable demand for furniture. Established designers of the younger generation who were active at that time – such as Joaquim Tenreiro, José Zanine Caldas, Jorge Zalszupin and I – had not been working with industrial manufacturers, strictly speaking, but we had to increase production figures. To fill all the new orders, in 1955 I founded Oca – an organization that included a gallery and store in Rio de Janeiro, as well as a factory-workshop in São Paulo.

**In the language spoken by Brazil's indigenous tribes, oca means 'house'.** The word exemplifies my attitude towards design. Since the beginning, I've tried to explore Brazil's roots by using materials like the solid tropical woods that are so abundant here.

**You closed Oca in 1977. Why have your designs been off the market for so long?** After closing Oca for administrative reasons, I couldn't find a manufacturing partner. My furniture was still available, but only on a small scale. I was producing pieces here and there, under commission.

The market was packed with old-fashioned furniture and copies of foreign pieces. At the time, manufacturers said my work – semi-artisanal furniture made from good materials – was too complicated and too expensive to produce. In my opinion, they were merely merchants who wanted to make quick money without investing in suitable equipment. Only now are Brazilian entrepreneurs opening their eyes and seeing furniture as *objets d'art*.

**Who's had the privilege of working with you on the adaptations you mentioned?** I'm collaborating with a young Brazilian entrepreneur, Gisele Schwartsburd, ...

**'We humans have an urge to create'**



Veteran designer Sergio Rodrigues enthroned – on his Aspas chair from 1962 – in the courtyard of his Rio de Janeiro studio.

Rodrigues made his name with the chairs made from local tropical hardwood in which his studio abounds – like Diz (left) from 2001 and Kilin (right) from 1973.



DOMINA OU CALA.  
NÃO TE PERCAS.  
DANDO AQUILO QUE NÃO TENS.

FERNANDO PESSOA

## Sergio Rodrigues

1927 Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

1952 Graduates from the University of Brazil's Architecture and Urbanism School

1953 Founds furniture company Móvel Artesanal Paranaense with Italian brothers Carlo and Ernesto Hauner

1954 Designs the Mocho stool, inspired by traditional Brazilian milking stools

1954 Works as design consultant in São Paulo, where he meets Gregori Warchavchik and Lina Bo Bardi

1955 Founds Oca: a workshop in São Paulo and a gallery-cum-store in Rio

1956 Designs the Lucio armchair and the Oscar chair

1957 Designs interiors for Brasilia, together with Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer

1957 Designs the Mole armchair, later known as Sheriff

1958 Organizes Móveis como Objeto de Arte, an exhibition at Oca

1961 Wins Italian award for Sheriff at Concorso Internazionale del Mobile

1963 Founds Meia Pataca for the production of a line of affordable furniture

1973 Designs the Kilin armchair

1975 Wins award for Kilin and for his oeuvre from the Institute of Brazilian Architects

1991 Retrospective at Rio's Museum of Modern Art

2000 Collaboration with Lin Brasil aimed at getting his work back on the market

Work by Sergio Rodrigues has been exhibited in cities worldwide, including Buenos Aires, London, Stockholm, Brussels, New York and Madrid. His designs have won numerous awards.

... who comes from a family with strong ties to furniture-making. She was quite unhappy – and so was I – that my pieces had been out of production for almost 20 years. In 2000 she set up Lin Brasil, a large company focused on getting my designs back on the market. Besides my former collaborator, Fernando Mendes, Gisele is the only person licensed to produce my pieces, which are being sold worldwide. Our partnership has meant a renaissance of my work.

**What was the Brazilian design scene like when you started in the 1950s?**

Most of those who were designing furniture had been trained as architects. Some had been born in Europe, such as John Graz from Switzerland and Gregori Warchavchik from the Ukraine. Another member of this generation was Tenreiro, who worked in Brazil but was originally from Portugal. Although Tenreiro's work showed traces of what European designers were doing at the time, I consider him the first furniture designer in this country to make a real change towards a new and specifically Brazilian design.

I place myself in the context of change that occurred right after World War II, when Lina Bo Bardi began working in Brazil. That's when Pietro Maria Bardi and Carlo Hauner, two other Italian architects, were also working here. I call this group the 'Italian Mission' to

differentiate it from the 'French Mission', which arrived in Brazil at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, having been invited by the Brazilian emperor to found an art school in Rio. Members of the Italian Mission designed the first pieces that were based on a modernist language.

**Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Brazilian design has benefited from an intense exchange of ideas and practices among national and foreign professionals. The realization of**

**Brasilia, which accelerated design production, seems to have led to a sort of nationalized view of design.**

**Please tell us about your involvement in Brasilia and in the resultant design scene.** Initially, Niemeyer invited me to design some interiors for the houses of congress. I even travelled to New York to observe how a building like the one occupied by the United Nations worked. But later I was told that if I wanted to join the group of architects who were building Brasilia I would have to live there. I couldn't do that. Having just founded Oca, I had many

commitments in Rio. I continued to design furniture for Brasilia, though, commissioned either by Niemeyer or the Itamaraty. One example is the large office table I designed for the ministry offices. Their earlier tables had been in a sort of rococo style, not at all like the modernist architecture of the buildings. My original solution for ...



As well as chairs, his studio is full of Brazilian art and poetry.

**Sergio Rodrigues**  
4 comfy pieces



Kilin (1973) uses the designer's favourite combination of tropical wood and leather.

Oscar (1956) is a modernist take on the traditional cane chair.



Lucio (1956) is probably Rodrigues' closest approach to minimalism.



Mole (1957) - aka Sheriff - remains his best-loved design.

... this table - a single drawing of a piece I'd had in mind for some time - was accepted without debate or alteration.  
**We can't talk about your successful career without mentioning one of your first designs, the Sheriff armchair. How do you explain such success?** I like to say that I am my own client: I do what I think I have to do. My work has certain characteristics, which I maintain without feeling that I have to justify my choices or make compromises to please other people. This attitude and my sense of resolution emerged from the situation surrounding the Sheriff armchair. I designed the first Mole armchair, Sheriff's predecessor, in 1957 and displayed it for the first time in 1958, during an exhibition at the Oca store. The armchair was not well received at first, and only a few pieces were sold. People accustomed to chairs with delicately turned legs found it hard to accept an armchair with a sturdy wooden frame, an oversize cushion and thick leather straps.

The chair was on display at the store for a long time. It was Carlos Lacerda, then governor of Rio, who convinced me to send the chair to a competition in Italy. In 1961 the Sheriff armchair received first prize at the Concorso Internazionale del Mobile, in Cantù. My competitors - 400 designers from 27 countries - were using new, first-class materials like aluminium. Working with wood, I submitted a chair that was no surprise to the jury. So why was my chair chosen? Because it was sturdy, large, comfortable and completely different from what anyone else was doing at that time. For five years I had been furnishing modernist buildings with modern Brazilian furniture - and I had been, and still am, promoting Brazilian design my whole life.  
**Did you receive more recognition back home after winning the award in Italy?** Validation from abroad was necessary back then. Stories like the one about Sheriff are not rare. A design piece that was successful abroad invariably found success on its return to Brazil. Nowadays, I see more awareness among Brazilians who value beautiful, useful, simple pieces. Prospects have improved.

**One modernist motto - form follows function - reflects rather rigid principles, which govern what should be designed and how it should be done. When historicizing design, we realize that Brazilian designers gave these European principles a personal - or perhaps I should say**

**'national' - twist. Sheriff is a great example of this. How would you explain the essence of your designs?** When applied to furniture, the term 'functional' usually represents a series of qualities, mostly operational ones. If a chair is comfortable and possesses all the requirements of good design but lacks beauty, it's little more than a joke. Something's missing. To achieve the highest standard in furniture design, you must combine beauty with comfort and practicality. If you sit on a chair and it hurts, one of its main functions has failed. An acquaintance of mine wrote that when a cat sees a comfortable chair it will jump on it, but the cat who tries a Bauhaus chair slips and falls.

I want to include beauty *and* comfort in my work. Clement Meadmore, who considered Sheriff one of the best seats of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stressed that my work is not just comfortable but also looks comfortable. He likened Sheriff to 'a millionaire that wears faded jeans'.

**Today's design graduates face big challenges. They live in a world of changing relationships - I'm thinking of objects, resources, consumption and so forth. What advice do you have for beginning designers?** In this case, I have to agree that less is more. I believe designers should focus on the creation of objects that need a minimum of production but have a maximum of beauty and comfort, along with other basic requirements. Cost-efficient

fabrication demands an optimization of resources. Think of a chair, which is, in essence, four legs, a seat and a backrest. Why should the designer make another chair? Because we humans have an urge to create. At the same time, though, we have to take economic considerations and environmental issues into account.

**Of the younger generation, whose work do you admire and why?** The Campana brothers, because they believe in what they do. They do not compromise, do not fear the critics, do not fear rejection. Some of their excesses, like armchairs and sofas made of stuffed animals, are funny, playful. Their greatest merit is the belief they have in their creativity. You see it in my work, too. Whether from the 1950s or the 2000s, the pieces I've designed continue to be contemporary. Despite the 50-year gap, my designs remain faithful to my way of thinking and acting. Be faithful to your principles - that's my professional philosophy. \_

[sergiorodrigues.com.br](http://sergiorodrigues.com.br)

**'If a cat jumps on a Bauhaus chair, it slips and falls'**



Rodrigues reclines on a Mole sofa (above), while a selection of his designs stands to attention (below).

