

Waxing Brazilian

WHY MODERNIST DESIGN MAVENS ARE FLYING DOWN TO RIO.

Just when you thought the design world had run out of modernist stars, get ready for furniture by 20th-century Brazilian designers. Not Oscar Niemeyer, whose designs are already highly collectable, but names like Sergio Rodrigues, Joaquim Tenreiro and José Zanine Caldas.

"I don't think there's another place in the world with this number of good designers who are still relatively unknown," says Zesty Meyers of R 20th Century in TriBeCa, which has organized an exhibition of the work of Rodrigues (which closes on Nov. 17), to be followed by shows on Zanine and Tenreiro.

"I was amazed by the low-tech aspect of Brazilian design," says Dennis Freedman, the creative director of W magazine and an avid collector of late-20th-century furniture, who recently acquired seven sculptural pieces by Zanine. Brazilian modernism first flowered in the work of architects like Lúcio Costa and Niemeyer, but while much of their work followed the clean-lined International Style, there was a sensuality that didn't quite fit the modernist canon.

Furniture design followed the same course. The Mole chair (also known as the Sheriff Chair), designed in 1957 by Rodrigues, an architect who is still working at 77, is an antidote to modernism's painfully planar seating. Structure is revealed in Flintstone fashion, with oversize pegs, wedges and bolts holding together the framing, and cushions flopping over the edges of seats and armrests. Tenreiro (1906-1992), a Portuguese-born woodworker, was one of the first to introduce simple design to the Brazilian market, as well as the first to use woods like jacaranda and imbuia. Indigenous forms and materials also interested Zanine (1918-2001), who had been a master model builder for architects like Costa and Niemeyer, and who would salvage fallen timber and rework it into organic shapes — like his sofa made from massive logs that has the primitive elegance of a Brancusi sculpture. "All the Brazilian furniture feels like that," Meyers says. "Like it's alive. Like it's growing out of the ground." ALASTAIR GORDON



A Mole sofa by Sergio Rodrigues, with a coffee table and chair by Joaquim Tenreiro, at R 20th Century in New York.

INTO THE WOODS



Importing midcentury furniture from Brazil can be a headache, from the question of authenticity to the condition in which

a piece arrives (the change in climate from South to North America can wreak havoc on wood) to problems getting through customs. Would-be collectors might do better with one of the following dealers:

R 20th Century is a leading purveyor of Brazilian. Among the gallery's offerings are a vintage Rodrigues Mole chair (the legendary designer George Nelson is shown sitting in one, left, in a 1965 photo), \$12,000, and matching sofa, above, \$30,000. 82 Franklin Street.

Espasso, a hangar-size space in Long Island City, is dedicated mainly to contemporary

Brazilian furniture, though there is a fair amount of midcentury work there, too. The owner, Brazilian-born Carlos Junqueira, has a seasoned eye. His treasures include eight jacaranda-wood dining room chairs by Rodrigues, \$1,200 each. (718) 472-0022.

For more examples, visit **Cristina Grajales**, a 20th-century decorative-arts expert in SoHo with both a private gallery and a consulting business. By appointment only; (212) 219-9941.

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