

Hot seat: Espasso traces the evolution of Sergio Rodrigues' iconic 'Mole' chair

DESIGN / 30 MAY 2017 / BY TIFFANY JOW



New York gallery Espasso has launched an exhibition celebrating Sergio Rodrigues' most iconic piece, the 'Mole' chair (1957). *Photography: Eliseu Cavalcante*

Rio de Janeiro-born Sergio Rodrigues (1927–2014), the father of modern Brazilian design, prioritized a principle that flew in the face of mid-century design: comfort. His singular vocabulary – playfully thick, solid structures that unashamedly took up space with cavernous seats in permanent recline – reflected a recognizable Brazilian identity, and put the country on the furniture design map for the first time.

His most iconic piece, the 'Mole' Armchair (1957), is a picture of Rodrigues flair. Its tufted, oversized leather cushion is slung low over a grid of leather straps, which hang hammock-like from a rounded jacaranda frame. Accompanied by a like-minded ottoman, the 'Mole' ('soft' in Portuguese) was awarded first prize in Cantu's 1961 International Furniture Competition, and added to MoMA's permanent collection in 1974.

This month, on the occasion of the chair's 60th anniversary, New York-based Brazilian furniture gallery Espasso celebrates Rodrigues' legacy with an exhibition devoted to his work, and 60 limited-edition 'Mole' chairs, inspired by Rodrigues' original design – now no longer in production. Each made-to-order piece features an imbuia frame and is produced in collaboration with the Sergio Rodrigues Institute and LinBrasil, a manufacturer dedicated to producing the designer's work.



The 'Mole' armchair by Sergio Rodrigues

'The Mole is one of the most important chairs in Brazilian design,' says Carlos Junqueira, Espasso founder and Rodrigues' long-time friend. 'When you sit in it, you don't want to get out. It's like a big hug.' Junqueira noted Rodrigues' sketches of the chair, depicted in his signature cartoon strip-worthy style. One features a man blissfully sprawled out in a 'Mole', his right leg draped over the armrest (a Google image search reveals Rodrigues often mimicked the position when photographed in the chair).

On view through 16 June, the exhibition unpacks each phase of the Mole's evolution. Following the original armchair, Rodrigues created a slightly larger version with longer, floppier arm cushions now known as the 'Mole Sheriff' armchair (1961). The 'Moleca' armchair (1963), a smaller, lighter version of the 1957 design, followed. Espasso will also present other significant Rodrigues designs, including the 'Mocho' stool (1954), 'Oscar' chair (1956), 'Diz' armchair (2002), and 'Benjamin' chair (2013), the final piece he designed.

While rooted in traditional Brazilian culture, Rodrigues' furniture was at the forefront of mid-century design – an achievement for which he's often not fully credited. Rodrigues, who trained as an architect, opened one of the first modern furniture shops in Curitiba and was Oscar Niemeyer's interior designer of choice for his buildings in Brazil. Like Niemeyer's structures, Rodrigues' furniture arched and curved. Each object, usually made from native materials, expressed discernible wit, charisma, and joy.

Though his work was deeply personal, Rodrigues was also a practical man. 'He always said that a cat would sleep in a chair if it's comfortable,' Junqueira remembers. 'He had a cat, and it was always sleeping, so his chairs were good.'

<https://www.wallpaper.com/design/espaso-celebrates-sergio-rodrigues-mole-chair-60th-anniversary?iid=sr-link1-198934>