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ICONS

When Modernism Came to Mexico

A new show spotlights six women who helped to make the country a center of cosmopolitan, forward-thinking art.

Lola Álvarez Bravo, 'Untitled Mural for Fábricas Auto-Mex' (1954). PHOTO: CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY/THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA FOUNDATION

By Susan Delson
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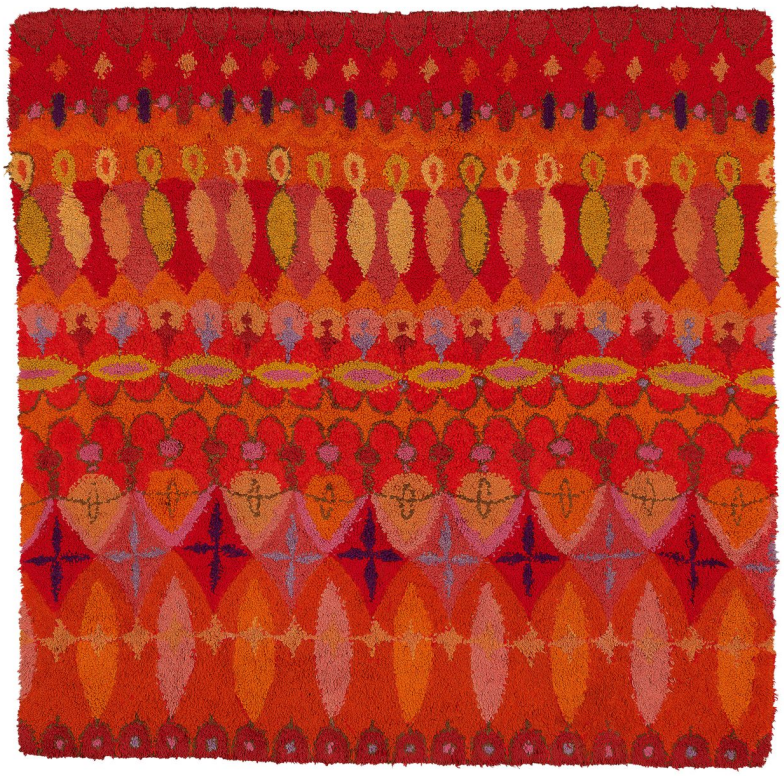
When Clara Porset arrived in Mexico in 1935, she was already a successful furniture designer in her native Cuba. Strongly influenced by European modernism, Porset believed that design could elevate the experience of daily life. She envisioned a homegrown modernism, international in outlook but with a uniquely Mexican perspective. And Mexico—undergoing its own rapid modernization—was receptive ground for her ideas.

"In a Cloud, In a Wall, In a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury," which will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from Sept. 6 to Jan. 12, 2020, presents the U.S.'s neighbor to the south as a center of forward-thinking, cosmopolitan culture. With Porset (1895-1981) as its starting point, the show focuses on international artists and designers of different generations whose time in Mexico transformed their work.

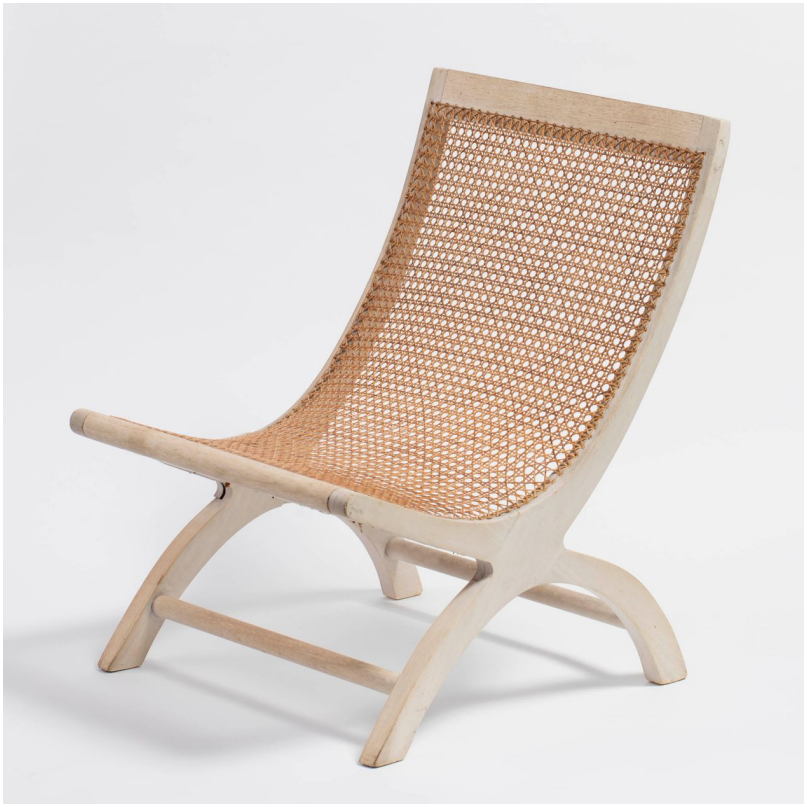
"For me, it was important that we did not tell a story that had already been told," said the show's organizer Zoë Ryan, chair of architecture and design at the Art Institute. Sidestepping iconic figures like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, the exhibition spotlights artists such as Anni Albers and Cynthia Sargent, who, like Porset, experimented with Mexico's rich craft traditions and burgeoning industrial capabilities. The more than 100 works on view range from sculpture, drawings and photography to furniture and textiles, including a selection of Porset's chairs and other furniture, on loan from private homes in Mexico.



Cynthia Sargent, 'Bartok' (ca. 1955-60). PHOTO: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

As a point of departure, "In a Cloud, In a Wall, In a Chair" explores an influential exhibition that Porset organized in Mexico City in 1952: "Art in Daily Life: Well-Designed Objects Made in Mexico." Presenting factory-made kitchens alongside woven baskets and other artisanal objects, Porset argued for a vision of Mexico that gave equal weight to craft and industry, tradition and modernity.

Porset's friend and collaborator Lola Álvarez Bravo (1903-93) is the only Mexican-born artist in the Chicago show. Álvarez Bravo's most striking works are her photomontages: Pieced together from disparate sources, they create a propulsive vision of a rapidly industrializing nation. Some were made as magazine covers and illustrations, but others were intended as décor for government and industrial buildings—including a 1954 mural that has been digitally reproduced for the Art Institute show. Originally sited in the boardroom of the automobile company Fábricas Auto-Mex, the untitled, 24-foot-long mural features a bare-chested, Adonis-like worker emerging from a dynamic outpouring of auto parts, machinery and modern architecture.



Clara Porset. 'Butaque Chair' (ca. 1955-56). PHOTO: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Anni Albers and her husband, artist Josef Albers, fled Nazi Germany in 1933. They found a haven at Black Mountain College, a new experimental school in North Carolina. Before leaving Cuba, Porset had invited Josef Albers to lecture there in 1934, and the following year the three met again in Mexico, on the first of many trips by the Alberses.

Trained at the Bauhaus, Anni Albers (1899-1994) was already acclaimed for her modernist weavings. In Mexico, she found that the abstract geometric forms she was working with were nothing new; in fact, they'd been part of Mexican culture for thousands of years. The exhibition traces the country's enduring influence on Albers's art—in woven works like "Red Meander" (1954) as well as the machine-made 1968 wall hanging that she designed for the Camino Real Hotel.

Like Albers, Sheila Hicks (b. 1934) was drawn to Mexico's traditional weaving practices and what she called its "highly developed thread culture." But Hicks's experiments pulled her away from the modernist grid that Albers favored and at times from the loom itself—as with "Falda," an intricate sculptural work made in 1960. "Learning to Weave in Taxco, Mexico" has a traditional tight weave, but even here Hicks experimented, pulling threads from the circular motif at the center and letting them hang as if to suggest sun rays. "Any good weaver would look at this and say, I don't think this lady knows how to weave," she later said.

For Ruth Asawa, Mexico also suggested new creative possibilities. In 1947, while teaching art in Toluca—40 miles southwest of Mexico City—Asawa (1926-2013) learned a looped-wire technique used by local craftspeople in making baskets for eggs. That technique became the basis of the sculptural works that defined her career. The exhibition features some of Asawa's earliest experiments with looped-wire construction, including rarely seen sculptures from private collections.

In her rug and textile designs, Cynthia Sargent was inspired by Mexican folk art, including a painting style typical of the Guerrero region. But she shrewdly named the rugs in her "Musical" series after European composers, appealing to the cosmopolitan tastes of upscale Mexican clients and visiting Americans. Like Porset, Sargent had a keen interest in combining local craft traditions with a modernist sensibility. With her husband and a business partner, Sargent (1922-2006) launched a series of entrepreneurial ventures that promoted artisanal work—including the Bazaar Sábado, a weekend market of high-quality crafts that continues to this day, nearly 60 years after its founding.

For all six artists, "the work resulted from a complex dynamic of cultural learning and exchange," Ms. Ryan said, raising issues that the exhibition also explores: "Who holds the power in these processes? And who benefits?" She added that Asawa, Hicks and Sargent made a point of crediting the craftspeople they worked with, and all six "shared a fundamental belief in the importance of arts and culture to an evolving society" like midcentury Mexico. In return, she said, Mexico "transformed how they saw the world."

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