

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Transformed by Mexico, Six Women Broke Barriers Between Art and Design

Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Sheila Hicks, Clara Porset and Cynthia Sargent came for inspiration, and stayed.

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CHICAGO — They lived or worked in Mexico from the 1930s through the 1970s. Some were friends, some mentors, some colleagues. But all of their work, ranging from photography to furniture to weaving to sculpture, was transformed by their time there.

The exhibition “In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury,” simply but beautifully presented at the Art Institute of Chicago’s Modern Wing, highlights the work of six women: the Cuban-born Clara Porset, the Mexican Lola Álvarez Bravo, the German émigré Anni Albers, and the Americans Ruth Asawa, Cynthia Sargent and Sheila Hicks (who at 85 is still actively working with fibers).

Politics affected the geographic and artistic trajectories of all six, but they also influenced the curatorial decision to make the exhibition about many women rather than one.

“In the beginning people said, ‘Why don’t you do a show on Clara Porset?’” Zoe Ryan, the lead curator, said. Ms. Ryan, who worked with the consulting curator Ana Elena Mallet and the research assistant Valentina Sarmiento Cruz, added, “We have tried hard to move away from the singular heroic figures.” Ms. Porset herself has often been in the shadow of the heroic figure of the Mexican architect Luis Barragán; the low-slung Butaque chairs in his own Instagram-famous house are by Ms. Porset.

From the beginning of their careers, these women worked collaboratively, and created opportunities to support the work of others. The exhibition's odd and unwieldy title was inspired by an illustrated spread in the catalog for Ms. Porset's influential 1952 exhibition, "Art in Daily Life: Well-Designed Objects Made in Mexico," with black-and-white images of a cloud, a wall, the sea, and the sand. You have to take a moment to let it sink in. (I overheard one of the museum guards quietly reading the quotation off the wall: "'In a cloud ... in a wall ... in a chair. There is design in everything.' That's so true," she murmured. "I like that.")



Lola Álvarez Bravo, "Anarquía arquitectónica en la ciudad de México (Architectural Anarchy in Mexico City)," about 1954. She was one of the few women photographers working in the country during this period. Center for Creative Photography; via Art Institute of Chicago

Anni Albers, "Study for Camino Real," 1967. Encouraged to visit Mexico by Clara Porset, she was inspired by Zapotec ruins like those at Monte Albán for the abstract triangular motifs that turn up in her textiles and screenprints. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A wall by the entrance shows a set of six photographs, taken by Ms. Álvarez Bravo for the exhibition "Art in Daily Life," which included printed fabrics by Ms. Sargent alongside new industrial design and significant works of folk art all made in Mexico.

"Mexico in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, was like Paris, everybody was there," Ms. Ryan said. "It was a real robust environment for creative thinking." Mexican artists beyond the muralists were creating important new work, and international designers were coming for inspiration, and staying to learn. Ms. Álvarez Bravo, who frequently documented Ms. Porset's furniture, interior design and curatorial projects, is represented here by wall-size reproductions of her 1940s and 1950s photomontages. These collages read as commentary on the pace of modernization in her Mexico, overlapping brains with computer innards and workers' bodies with lines of new cars.

At a time when immigration from Mexico often dominates the news cycle, here we see immigration to Mexico. Ms. Hicks went to escape a North American art world in which “textiles were not seen as academic, as intellectual,” Ms. Ryan said. Mexico, by contrast, had (and has) a “highly developed thread culture,” according to Ms. Hicks. Ms. Albers, Ms. Asawa and Ms. Sargent were also drawn to the country’s weaving traditions. Ms. Albers visited the country 14 times, starting in 1935, and the curators credit a visit to the Zapotec ruins at Monte Albán for the triangular motifs that turn up in her prints, wall-hangings and commercial fabric for Knoll. “Everyone at the Bauhaus was searching for this abstract visual language,” Ms. Ryan said. “By the time they go to Mexico they are like, ‘These people have been modern for millenniums!’”

Ms. Asawa, who was born in California to immigrants from Japan, took two trips to Mexico. The first, in 1945, was to study craft and included a class with Ms. Porset, who then encouraged her to go to Black Mountain College, the experimental school in Asheville, N.C., where Josef and Anni Albers taught after fleeing Nazi Germany. Ms. Asawa was herself at loose ends at the time; interned with her family from 1942-43, she had studied as a teacher, but anti-Japanese sentiment prevented her from using her training. She decided instead to study art.

Foreground: Hanging wire lobed sculptures by Ruth Asawa. Drawn to the artistry in Mexican looped-wire baskets that she encountered in Toluca, she made sculptures with this wire technique. Background center: Cynthia Sargent's "Bartok" carpet. Art Institute of Chicago

On Ms. Asawa's second trip, in 1947, she taught art to children and adults in Toluca. In return, local artisans taught her what they knew: weaving wire into baskets to hold eggs. After much practice, what began as functional baskets — the exhibition includes a long oval one that she gave to Ms. Albers, who used it for mail — became bubbles, or continuous lines of connected orbs, or nested shapes, light enough to hang from the ceiling but solid enough to hold a corner. Ms. Asawa's drawings from the period show lots of undulating lines, as if she's working out the shapes on paper that she will eventually draw in the air with wire.

The least-known artist in the exhibition is Ms. Sargent, boldly represented by two hooked rugs from her Music Series, named "Bartok" and "Scarlati." She was a brilliant colorist, aligning pink and red, olive and turquoise, in loop and lozenge shapes that dance across the woolly expanses. Ms. Sargent also studied with Josef Albers at Black Mountain. She drove to Mexico with husband, Wendell Riggs, and her son in a motor home in 1951. The couple set up their company Riggs-Sargent, which made those rugs as well as upholstery fabrics, textiles for the home, and furniture.

They also founded a market, the Bazaar Sábado, in 1960, promoting their own work as well as that of other designers and craftspeople creating neoartesanía, or neo-craft.

Oddly, the one designer of the six whose work doesn't leap off the walls is Ms. Porset. Although she was the instigator for both this exhibition and the projects and travel that brought these designers together, it is difficult to get a sense of her more ambitious architecturally scaled projects from the photographs and drawings on view. That said, it is wonderful to have the opportunity to contemplate her chunky Totonac chair, designed in the 1950s and upholstered in purple fabric produced by Ms. Sargent and Mr. Riggs, next to a chunky seated Totonac figurine, made by that indigenous Mexican people in the fifth or sixth century. The two objects have the same stance and proportions, making the connection between folk art and modern life absolutely clear.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, left to right, Clara Porset's Butaque chair and Glass Lamp, circa 1957; a child's Butaque chair, circa 1971; Butaque, circa 1955; Cynthia Sargent's "Scarlatti" rug, circa 1958; Ms. Porset's Butaque, circa 1962, and Service Cart, circa 1962. Ms. Porset championed Ms. Sargent's work in her pivotal exhibition, "Art in Daily Life." Art Institute of Chicago

Sheila Hicks, panel, “Learning to Weave in Taxco, Mexico,”  
about 1960. Sheila Hicks; The Art Institute of Chicago

“In a Cloud” pairs well with a second show at the Art Institute, “Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus,” organized by Erica Warren, the museum’s assistant curator of textiles. This exhibition also includes work by Ms. Albers and Ms. Hicks, and offers a separate, sometimes overlapping narrative of postwar design networks that first brought these weaving women — and one man, Angelo Testa — together.

Standout works include Lenore Tawney’s cloudlike “The Bride Has Entered” (1982) and Claire Zeisler’s waterfall-effect “Private Affair I” (1986). These dominating works, made of cotton, linen and hemp, show textile artists still fighting for attention decades after those trips to Mexico. A 1968 quotation from Ms. Albers printed on a platform neatly sums up what they were all fighting against: “I find this great problem that people are so inclined to think of textiles always in this useful sense. They want to sit on it; they want to wear it. And they don’t like to think of it as something that might hang on the wall and have the qualities that a painting or a sculpture has, that you turn to it again and again and that it might possibly last for centuries.”

“In a Cloud,” “Weaving beyond the Bauhaus,” and the Museum of Modern Art’s “Taking a Thread for a Walk,” one of that museum’s reopening shows, all convincingly propose fiber art as an entry into a canon that was long overdue for revision. Even better, they do so without slotting the weaving women into the same old heroic mode. It’s fine to be part of a talented crowd! All great art doesn’t need to be influenced by Europe! It is possible to be both beautiful and useful! There is indeed design in everything.

Through Jan. 12 at the Art Institute of Chicago; [artic.edu](http://artic.edu).