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ABSTRACT

To talk about the pioneers who founded a profession as design in Latin America, is also to talk about an environment complicated by the rejection and a lack of understanding which doesn’t privilege innovation or aesthetic renovation of the products used by society in daily life; even more complicated was when the actors facing this situation were women. This was the case of Clara Porset in Mexico and Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil. Both during the years 1930 through 1940 starting their work as emigrant women escaping from an adverse political climate and achieving in such a short time a historically transcendent professional success.

This will be enough to confirm why lately the figure of both pioneers have grown to an international level, but in this text there will be emphasized also the spirit who lead their work defending an activism in pro of social and cultural values.

Clara Porset did it conceiving furniture and chairs inspired in concepts originated in popular culture, and today are the best example of modern design, but she also was a woman who practiced an important activism defending her particular ideology to support a design with a social character through its political affiliation, through print, conferences and a promotion which concluded with her participation in the famous contest Organic Design celebrated in 1940 organized by MoMA, in New York, and the exposition El Arte en la Vida Diaria, opened in the Fine Arts Palace in México City, 1952.

Lina Bo Bardi, also developed an outstanding work designing furniture, and her architeconic work left a deep mark into brazilian culture; but also, her integration with the society through her activism reflected in exhibitions, publishing, scenography, and cultural programs in benefit of popular communities, taking her to be recognized as an exceptional professional woman and promoter of social initiatives.

In this text is analysed the impact and originality of the activity of both extraordinary women, icons of Latin American design, facing a complex surrounding frequently adverse.

WOMEN DESIGN PIONEERS IN LATIN AMERICA. CLARA PORSET AND LINA BO BARDI: ACTIVISM DIRECTED TO SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES.

To speak of the pioneers who founded the design profession in Latin America is tantamount to speaking of circumstances made complicated by the rejection or misunderstanding of a system where aesthetic innovation and renewal of products used by society on a daily basis were not favored. This situation became even more complicated by the women who decided not to surrender to the role they were assigned by a cultural system ruled by norms, establishing for them an education with limits and very strict social goals which, in general terms, was confined to raising them for marriage and childbearing.

The Western world has not since long begun to acknowledge the significance of the professional work of some women who in the 20th century carried out an extraordinary body of work, worthy of transcendence in the history of design culture. This, however, has been perhaps an untimely
recognition, because of their having lived in the shadow of also extraordinary men who, given the circumstances of the time, eclipsed them and left their rightful acknowledgment by society pending, even after their death.

Suffice it to mention some names to reveal the importance of these facts: Lilly Reich behind Mies Van der Rohe; Charlotte Perriand in the shadow of Le Corbusier; Lucia Moholy behind László Moholy-Nagy, and Aino Marsio behind Alvar Aalto.

Just a few couples among design pioneers revealed themselves early on as an emotionally and professionally balanced binomial personality: Charles and Ray Eames, Robin and Lucienne Day or Josef and Anni Albers. They knew how to work in harmony and mutual respect and were acknowledged as professional couples by their society and by the greatest in the history of design. Pioneers of product design in Latin America in the first half of the 20th century were scarce. As mentioned, producers of industrialized consumer goods refused to invest in new designs, living off copies or the authorized reproduction of the goods they marketed. Development of utilitarian objects with accessible technology and low production rates, such as furniture, thus became the option for design enthusiasts. It was not rare for furniture to be handcrafted in small series or developed as a single prototype to satisfy a customer.

If we add to this the fact that a great number of pioneers were linked to architecture, it may be understood why the creation of furniture
integrated to inhabitable spaces prevailed in the origins of industrial and product design. If men who engaged in this activity were counted, it was exceptional to find women such as those whom I discuss in this text.

I will talk about Clara Porset in Mexico and Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil. Both began their work in the 30s and 40s as immigrant women running away from an adverse political climate and both achieved in a short time a professional success that has gone far in history. Both designers always revealed similar ideological profiles in the meaning they imprinted on their projects, as well as admiration and respect for the cultures that gave them the opportunity to share their talent with the communities that had accepted them after their arrival.

For a better appraisal of their work, we need to delve closer to understand why they were as they were and why they deserve the historical worth they have today.

Clara Porset Dumas (1895-1981) was born in Cuba. She majored in arts and architecture in New York and Paris. Not content with her education, she first managed for Josef Albers, the renowned former professor of the Bauhaus school, to be her instructor at Black Mountain College in the United States and afterwards a long-life magnificent friend. Her passion for architecture and design in face of the mediocre expressions prevailing in material culture, and a nature that always led her to express her repudiation for the oppressive governments of Cuba, gave her no choice but to take refuge for a time in the United States and to head in 1936 to a post-revolutionary Mexico, experiencing the intense cultural reform directed to the leftist ideology promoted by president Lázaro Cárdenas.

The space Clara found in what would become her new homeland was favorable to begin a professional body of work directed to promoting a new discipline, industrial design, which was just
starting to take its place in the world and which was practically unknown in Latin America. Because she was a cultured woman and the only one with great professional capability to manage interior design and furniture design, she quickly became the nucleus of a whirlwind of creativity, starting with the fortunate relation with whom she later became her husband, painter Xavier Guerrero, as well as with the great muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and prominent architects of the Mexican School, such as Juan O’Gorman and Luis Barragán. Her best influence, however, which she acknowledged as such in her education, was her friendship and ideological interaction with the former director of the Bauhaus School, Hannes Meyer, who lived in Mexico from 1939 to 1949 with his wife Lena. Likewise, the multitudinous generation of exiled intellectuals and writers who arrived in Mexico, fleeing from Europe, with whom she had a close relationship, acted as a source of knowledge and encouragement to consolidate her professional activities. Among them, Anna Seghers, one of the most important German narrators in the 20th century —who arrived in Mexico to elude Nazi persecution— became Clara’s best spokeswoman and friend and gave firmness to Clara’s principles in her new surroundings.

Clara was an activist in every sense of the word. From the ideological point of view, she knew how to express herself the same by writing, by lectures or in the street; she was for several years a militant for the Mexican Communist Party, the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers and the Association of Friends of Communist China. The peak of her activism took place during the Cuban Revolution in 1959. She immediately volunteered and left to Cuba where she worked almost four years with the support of Fidel Castro and under the guidance of Che Guevara designing furniture for schools and cultural and service institutions, as well as planning what would be the first school of Industrial Design in her country.
Nonetheless, her ideological standing is not what bears up the historical image with which she is identified today. Her professional activity and far-reaching projects are what place her as one of the great design personalities in Mexico and Latin America. Being awarded two international prizes, one of the five continental awards in the Organic Design contest in 1941—the legendary competition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York—and the silver medal of the 1957 Milan Triennial, made her appear as a renowned professional. Clara, however, always restless and unsatisfied with the acceptance of design in society, was a constant activist in the promotion of design and innovations within the system.

In 1952, after much convincing, Clara participated in the exhibition Art in Daily Life: an exhibition of good-design objects made in Mexico, which would be the first design exhibition in Latin America. Presented in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, it displayed the best manufacture, with her work standing out, together with that of Michael van Beuren. This former Bauhaus student had also arrived in Mexico in 1936 and spent the rest of his life designing and producing furniture of excellent quality, often in association with Clara Porset.

The designs of this design pioneer are today seen as the result of inspiration taken from the best of Mexico’s cultural tradition, to achieve an evolved piece of furniture, like the so-called butaques, —with its exquisite design—a design Clara experimented with for more than fifteen years to eventually accomplish her best project. Although her body of work reveals a diversity of products, trends and goals, she developed a thousand different commercialized projects throughout her career that constitute a sample of the styles consolidated in the first half of the 20th century, combined with a social purpose to reach society as a whole. Clara Porset pleased the privileged, among which she enjoyed great prestige, to use their profits for the unprotected, laborers, workers, and the middle class striving for a better quality of life.
Clara completed her professional practice at the end of the 60s and devoted the rest of her life to teaching, without losing her activism and her attitude towards the lack of concern of systems which never quite get the importance of design and innovation for the better development of citizens, as Clara so often said:

“...It is obvious that bringing good design to the young Mexican industry is a very difficult task, as well as an important one. Difficult as everything that involves a new cultural and evolving drift. This makes us realize that we are facing the urgent need to develop a crusade of good design in the industry, to which it is necessary to firstly integrate all of those who have already assimilated the importance industrialization has for the country—and its diversification within it—as a means to increase economic resources, to raise the standard of living of our people and to strengthen their national independence.”

(Porset, 1950)

Ten years after the arrival of Clara Porset, Achillina di Enrico Bo, better known as Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), came to America to live in Brazil in 1946, with her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi, an art critic and historian, leaving behind the violence and persecution of a fascist regime ultimately devoured by its own ambitions.

As of that moment, Lina began a new life in a very different context to that of her past in Italy, her country of birth, although without forgetting the principles which she had put to test in the fateful years of World War Two, when she displayed her enormous activity along two lines that reflected her feelings and defined her ideology. On one hand, she began a body of work that would further the analysis and divulgation of architecture and design with the integration to the team of Gio Ponti, director of the Milan Triennal—the first event that promoted design at an international level—and founder and director of the legendary journal Domus since 1928.

From 1941 to 1945, Lina supervised the activities that helped keep this renowned architecture and design journal in circulation—still today an international publication—while collaborating with the Italian Communist Party, operating at the time underground. As if this were not enough, she was also the founder of the journal A Cultura Della Vita, together with the great architecture theoretician and historian Bruno Zevi. At the end of the war, Lina arrived in Brazil and was immediately enthused with the possibility of building a new world for a new people which, in her own words, was not contaminated by arrogance and money.
With her husband’s support and a welcome reception in the cultural circles and among government officials, she was able to begin developing important projects in São Paulo, and later in Salvador de Bahia, such as the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) and the Museu de Arte de Salvador de Bahia (MAM/BA). She not only became the director of both museums but also displayed an escalating activism to help those who most needed to be integrated to culture and to improve their standard of living. This is why her architecture coexists and blends with furniture design, museology, education, and theater and cinematography production. Her admiration for all handcraft expressions made her the best promoter of Bahian art and led her to establish an influential relation with painters, sculptors, engravers and drafters, as well as with several groups from the performing arts.

The modifications she made to achieve a notable change in what she called theater architecture in the Oficina and Polytheama theaters of São Paulo are an example of her creativity. Unfortunately, her deep relationship with the community of Salvador de Bahia was cut off by the military coup that made her return to the city of São Paulo, where she remained until her death, working for official structures, entrepreneurs and organized civil groups. In the words of Italian researcher Aniello Angelo Avella, “Communism did not signify affiliation to a certain model of State organization, but the struggle against any and every means of oppression.” (Avella, 2009)
In 1977 she began what would perhaps be her best collective project in the city of Sao Paulo, the SESC Pompeia, a center for culture, leisure and sports for the residents of the barrio, using the abandoned building and land lots of an old barrel factory that the community had previously attempted to use for its own benefit. Reusing old structures and combining them with a vertical multi-story structure to practice sports, Lina Bo Bardi managed, in Aviella's words, “for her poor architecture, as she used to call this kind of projects, to become a means to devour popular culture and a combination with the boldest avant-garde solutions.” (Avella, 2009)

With her architecture, Lina promoted “a New Humanism. She often argued that architecture has been subjected to an alleged scientific rationality which is not only alien to the true problems of men, but also to their desires and dreams. She was also of the opinion that an “idealistic technocracy” had come to dominate architecture, acting as a field that was completely alien to daily human life.” (De Souza, 2001)

The work of Lina Bo Bardi in furniture design was likewise outstanding. She always conceived furniture design as what it is: the necessary and harmonious complement for architecture in its interior context. In 1948, in remembrance of a project that had been cut off, which her husband had started in Italy, the couple set up the Studio de Arte Palma— together with architect Gian Carlo Palantini— as a productive unit devoted to carrying out the design and construction of furniture for modern architectural projects. The purpose was, as Lina used to punctuate, to re-educate the public’s taste and, with it, to free it from speculator upholsterers as well as from furniture storeowners and decorators who were in control of the market. (Leon, 2005)
with her arrival in Brazil but was also imbued with a vast cultural syncretism and a social commitment that she took upon herself as a task that lasted throughout her 45 years of experiences in her new homeland.

It is interesting to see how these two women, Clara Porset and Lina Bo Bardi, separated by years and distance, and who never met, built similar lives through their achievements, through their enthusiasm for innovation in design and architecture, and through the passionate defense of their ideals, which ultimately gave sense to their work in the face of a sometimes hostile and sometimes indifferent environment to the far-reaching work of professional women who dared go beyond the limits imposed by their time.

Both bequeathed experiences and projects that shaped the realm of design in Mexico and in Brazil, and both are today renowned founders of design whose production is studied to bring to light a work which has rightly placed them as two influential personalities in the history of design in Latin America.

The critical exercise of architecture and design by Lina Bo Bardi began in Italy during the turbulent years of World War Two, and not only continued
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