

Organic Design, MoMA 1940. The Breath of Modernity Arrives in Latin America

Abstract

In 1940 MoMA New York Museum, called the country's designers to present their best furniture designs inspired in the new trend of organic design. Also, for the first time, designers of another twenty Latin American countries were invited to participate in a contest with the hope they would reflect the identity of their region through forms and materials to express their progress in design and that could even be commercialized in the United States.

This text analyzes the group of participants, shows the progress of design in each of their countries, the prize expectations, and the subsequent events which showed the reality and the possibilities of USA and Latin America.

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Received : November 2014

Approved: August 2014

Key words: Hegemonic history, micro history, modernism, design pioneers.

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Resumen

En 1940, el Museo de Arte Moderno de Nueva York convocó a los diseñadores del país a presentar los mejores diseños de mobiliario inspirados en la nueva tendencia del diseño orgánico. Asimismo, por primera vez, se convocó a diseñadores de veinte países Latinoamericanos a participar en el concurso, esperando que reflejaran la identidad de su región a través de formas y materiales que expresaran su avance en el diseño, y que incluso pudieran comercializarse en los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: historia hegemónica, microhistoria, modernismo, pioneros del diseño.

Este texto analiza al grupo de participantes, muestra el progreso del diseño en cada uno de sus países, las expectativas del premio, y los hechos posteriores que mostraron la realidad y las posibilidades de USA y Latinoamérica.

Introduction

Why analyze a design competition that happened 72 years ago in a country like the United States of America, and challenge what historians have written about this fact so far?

In principle, it has to be done to elucidate why a country like the United States of America, a model of capitalist production in the mid-twentieth century, called for all Latin American countries to participate in a design competition through a major cultural organization such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. At that time, industrial conditions were very different, and, apparently, in Latin American countries, no professional designer was able to compete in the same circumstances as designers in the United States.

Such an analysis should be done to learn both about the performance of those professionals who competed and about the consequences of this historic event, now mentioned in almost every history book on modern design in the Western world. However, the case of American designers has always been studied, but never, until now, has the one about the participants in the twenty-one American republics been analyzed. The first impression leads us to believe in an attitude of superiority and disdain, but having promoted the call shows an inclusive position; therefore, the event poses a series of questions about a documented and contextualized moment in time, which allows us to establish a historical scheme that may be closer to reality, in view of the tensions and contradictions that a modernization process of design in the Americas raised.

The historical fact

In 1940, the young Museum of Modern Art in New York launched a call for a design competition, named Organic Design in Home Furnishings, which was aimed at discovering a group of designers capable of creating a “useful and beautiful living environment for contemporary life in terms of furniture, lighting and textiles” (A. A. Rockefeller Albums The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York). The idea of the contest, originated from the initiative of Eliot Noyes, a disciple of Walter Gropius –founder of the German Bauhaus school–, who had recently been hired by the Museum of Modern Art as the first director of the new Department of Industrial Design. In the competition catalog, Noyes defined the terms of the competition by stating:

[...] a design may be organic when there is a harmonious organization of the parts within the whole, according to structure, material, and purpose. Within this definition, there can be no vain ornamentation or superfluity, but the part of beauty is none the less great –in ideal choice of material, in visual refinement, and in the rational elegance of things intended for use. (Noyes, 1941, second lining)

Likewise, Noyes defined the terms that the museum had set by agreeing sponsorship of the contest with Bloomingdale's, the biggest department store in New York City, and eleven other major retailers in various parts of the United States, in addition to the sale and promotion of winning designs, which would be produced by several manufacturing companies participating in the project (Bruce, 2006, p. 66).

But Noyes did something else, which took the competition objectives of the museum to extremes, since among other things, from its inception in 1929, this organization had been founded in order to "[...] promote and to develop the study of modern arts and their implementation in manufacturing and practical life" (Pulos, 1988, p. 68). Therefore, in addition to attracting the best designers in the United States, he also decided to take the invitation beyond its borders. He asked designers living in twenty-one Latin American countries to participate in the competition. However, considering the asymmetry that might have existed due to industrial development and cultural-aesthetic modes of expression between his country and the rest of the invited nations, the competition was divided into two independent sections. As for the second, "[...] the purpose of the Latin American contest was not primarily to procure designs for production in this country, but to discover designers of imagination and ability and bring them to New York to observe and study the work being done here" (Noyes, 1941, p. 39).



Figure 1. Organic Design Contest catalog, 1941 (Clara Porset Archive, UNAM, Museum of Modern Art).



Figure 2. Industrial Design Competition for the 21 American Republics. Catalog, 1941 (Clara Porset Archive, UNAM, Museum of Modern Art, NY).

The objective was met because the museum received proposals from seventeen countries. While, in the United States, the proposals put forward by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen went beyond the expectations of the call. They presented a set of chairs for the *Seating for a Living Room* section of the exhibition, solving the problem of generating organic forms, but accomplishing such a challenge by means of innovative technology, which allowed for a light structural shell consisting of layers of plastic glue and wood veneer molded in three-dimensional forms that had not been created until then, thus, in a novel manner, integrating the legs of the seats presented by means of a strong resistance accessory-free structure (Jackson, 1991, p. 36).



Figure 3. First place winner chairs, contest Seating for a Living Room. (Museum of Modern Art NY, catalog).



Figure 4. Prototypes of Charles Eames y Eero Saarinen. (Museum of Modern Art NY, catalog).

As a result of the call to Latin America, five awards were given: two projects to Mexico, one to Brazil, one to Argentina and one to Uruguay. The contrast with the invitation specified to the United States lied on the emphasis given to the inclusion of raw materials found in each home country, particularly those which had not been used so far. Also, handcrafting was allowed. This clearly showed evidence of the existing vision regarding the state of production in Latin America, but it raised the future possibility and hope of furniture designs being marketed, at least in New York City. The integration of the winners was quite unusual because three former students from the Bauhaus school –before it was closed– were competing for Mexico: young Michael van Beuren, Klaus Grabe and Morley Webb; all working in Mexico on the initiative of Van Beuren, who had decided himself to accept the design and production of furniture in Acapulco since 1936, and later in Mexico City. Soon, Grabe and Webb returned to the United States, where they pursued a career in design, but van Beuren decided to stay in Mexico for the rest of his life, becoming a successful businessman in the furniture industry. They presented a *chaise longue* that certainly stood on the issue of organizational design; it was made from natural materials endemic to Mexico.

The other award to Mexico was given to a *sui generis* couple formed by Xavier Guerrero and Clara Porset. Guerrero was a prominent Mexican painter who worked with the famous Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and, because of his family, he was also familiar with interior design. Clara Porset, Cuban born, arrived in Mexico in 1936 and developed her career there until her death, creating extensive work based on a design that addressed almost all modern styles, including organic design. Porset, disciple and a friend of Josef Albers and Hannes Mayer, combined the development of both, craftsmanship and mass production. For the first time in Mexico, her designs received royalties from a firm called DM National.

The project presented during the MoMA competition was created by the couple, but only on Xavier Guerrero's name, as Clara, for personal reasons –as she mentioned during an interview years later– was unable to register. They presented a set of furniture that “[...] was conceived as peasant furniture, to be made of pine with webbing of *ixtle* on the cot and chair. The wall case has screening of jute in the sliding doors and at the end” (Noyes, 1941, p. 40). Porset and Guerrero were the only participants who did not follow the organic style expected, but they were distinguished for having used natural fibers and integrating the set they presented.

The Brazilian project was designed by Bernard Rudofsky, Austrian architect who, before the contest, lived in the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, for three years, so he was able to register on behalf of this country. He presented a furniture set made out of a wood and metal structure, incorporating fiber fabrics such as jute, caroa, and hemp. After the contest, Rudofsky remained in New York, where he resided until his death. He had a close relationship with the MoMA through exhibitions and publications on design for decades.

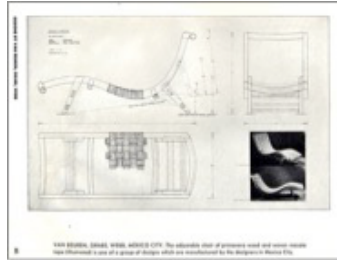


Figure 5. Winner project of Van Beuren, Grabe and Web (Catalog Museum of Modern Art, NY. Clara Porset Archive, UNAM).

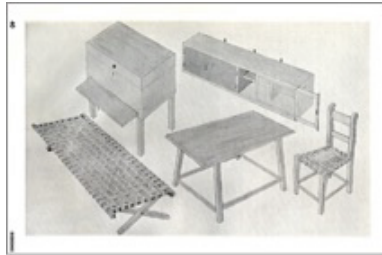


Figure 6. Winner project of Guerrero and Porset. (Catalog Museum of Modern Art, NY. Clara Porset Archive, UNAM).

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From Argentina, architect Julio Villalobos won, also with a *chaise longue* proposal that integrated wood and textiles only used by farmers in the north of his country. The last award winning participant was Uruguayan architect Román Fresnedo, recognized for a pair of seats structured with rattan wood, metal tubes, and leather strips, which apparently competed against the best organic style designs from the United States and Europe. However, it is not possible to know today if they could have offered the comfort and functionality expected by the market.

The MoMA was generous by managing the purchase of the materials from each country of origin that were needed to build the winning projects, or by importing the already-made prototypes for display. However, that was when information about the participation of Latin America began to disappear.

Consequences

The Organic Design in Home Furnishings competition had a very wide course in newspapers and magazines of local and national delivery, and the catalog publishing the results had a circulation of 10,500 copies, a huge distribution at that time. The center of interest was on the prize-winning design projects from participants residing in the United States, mainly those by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, which soon were a success for the modern Western world for their contributions in the application of new technologies and ergonomic adaptations in the structure of their seats. Virtually, none of the pictures in the exhibition of the winning products in the MoMA shows the designs of Latin America; instead, a large area was spent in order to show the development of the most famous new seating concepts in the previous two decades, beginning with those of the Bauhaus and ending with those of Eames and Saarinen. This interest is complemented in the catalog, by using texts and photographs, with a detailed analysis of the manufacturing process of the winning team's chairs. The expectations were not mistaken. In the following decade, those designers showed their talent by incorporating innovations into the world of design with the use of fiberglass reinforced plastic, and the combination of plastic, metal and upholstery to generate some of the most renowned design concepts worldwide.

Beyond the scope of Latin American participation, we would have to review the repercussions of the contest due to the entry of Latin-American products in U.S. markets. The first thing to note is that several participants were architects, who did not really make a living doing furniture design, so, after the event, both Julio Villalobos and Román Fresnedo returned to their usual occupation. As I said, Bernard Rudofsky remained in New York, and later, he was renowned for his work as a professor, as a censor of the cultural system, curator and writer in different parts of the world.

The only winners who continued the design of furniture were those from Mexico. Michael van Beuren, founded Domus, a furniture company that survived for more than half a century. Through this firm, he developed a large number of products which embodied a combination of early Bauhaus learning and traditional techniques and materials of the country that had welcomed him, leaving an imprint on the history of design in Mexico, which, until recently, had not been documented.



Figure 7. Clara Porset (Clara Porset Archive, UNAM).



Figure 8. Plate DOMUS of Grabe and van Beuren, applied to their furniture. (Photo by Oscar Salinas).

Probably, the most relevant case is that of Clara Porset (Salinas, 2006, pp. 22-23), paradoxically, the only contestant that did not register, as already mentioned. She is the only person in this group that, in the following two decades, undertakes restless professional work that leads to almost 1,300 produced and marketed pro-

jects, and exports her own furniture to the United States through the prestigious Artek-Pascoe firm, founded in New York by architect and designer Alvar Aalto. Also, through his agent and friend, Esther McCoy, who promoted her furniture in magazines such as *Arts & Architecture* and *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, her designs were marketed in the State of California.

Also, Clara Porset was the only Latin American participant, along with her husband Xavier Guerrero, who presented during the following MoMA competition in 1948, *Prize Designs for Modern Furniture* (Kaufmann Jr., 1950, p. 72). For this contest, the call went beyond the Americas; therefore, besides the United States, there were designers from Germany, England, Italy, Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Japan and Mexico.

For the occasion, Porset presented a chair with a continuous structure made out of metal rods and plastic strings for the seat and the back, which then served to develop a set of outdoor furniture that was marketed in Mexico. Although not an award-winning design, it was recognized by appearing in the competition catalog along with professional designers who would eventually be highly praised, such as Robin Day, Ilmari Tapiovaara, Marco Zanuso, and the well known Charles Eames and Marcel Breuer.

Still, in the following decade, Clara Porset continued to promote her work by participating in the 1957 Milan Triennial Exhibition, winning the silver medal for furniture that she had made for the Pierre Marques Hotel in Acapulco (Salinas, 2001, p. 37), but the presence of pioneers of furniture design in Latin America was diluted in the face of the current international environment, which was mainly focused on North America and Europe. What originated such a situation?

In the final analysis, we found a clear contrast between the United States and participating countries from Latin America. If we accept that design practice is

part of the project of modernity, and therefore rests on the development of the capitalist production system, it is from this relationship that the discipline has been marking its own limits; however, the process is not linear, but holistic, and it implies such a degree of complexity that comparing the work of both regions is simply not possible. What happens in developing countries lies on a different reasoning, in line with an industrialized context and a different culture. That is why the design proposals presented were quite different: as for Clara Porset, her designs succeeded in some spaces of American culture only because of her understanding and knowledge of design and production in developed countries, and based on the fact that she had designed products emerged from the cultural foundations of her surroundings. In the case of Eames and Saarinen's proposals, any similar could have come from participants from Latin America, just because they would not have been possible because industries that generated the new technology that enabled the shape and structure of the new designs could only be found in the United States. Surely, Eliot Noyes foresaw the possible future, so he wisely separated the competition into two completely different sections.

Conclusion

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In researching the historical facts of the exhibition of 1940, and trying to document the performance and life of the designers who participated on behalf of Latin America, it is evident from the information obtained (Salinas, 1992) that, in Latin American countries, since the beginning of the discipline in the 60's and almost up to the end of the twentieth century, there was not a serious interest from the local educational and cultural institutions in disseminating and promoting the work of such founders. Only after 1990 did the first design historians begin the task of analyzing existing data in order to build a corpus that would support the theoretical knowledge of the discipline of design. Likewise, only after the early years of this century have the domain of historiography and studies from

other disciplines created the opportunity to link up with design, thus, initiating the construction of those “other histories”, which exceed the contempt of the old imperialist vision and widespread ignorance coming from their own design professionals who were not able to explore their own territory.

If we want to be acquainted with history in real terms, while studying such scarcely-documented cases like this, not only is it important to complement what has been said or what has happened, but it is also important to clarify what has been omitted from original sources of information and testimonies left by protagonists who, after having been analyzed within the context of their historical milieu, allow for new interpretations and better understanding of the mechanisms that drive the emergence of a new history of design; one that helps to overcome the hegemonic history that still prevails.

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Cómo citar este artículo:

Salinas Flores, O. (2014). Organic Design, MoMA 1940. The Breath of Modernity Arrives in Latin America. Revista Kepes, 10, 195-208.