

found itself. O'Donnell recaptures the origins of those debates, plugging nuance back in in order to rescue art from the indeterminacy of multiple theoretical perspectives. That is the purchase of intellectual history, a genre whose relative absence from the field of art history, O'Donnell proves, is in desperate need of remedying.

- 1 C. Oliver O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern American Mind*, Pennsylvania, 2019, p. 67.
- 2 O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates*, p. 118
- 3 O'Donnell, p. 189
- 4 O'Donnell, p. 92

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.2396-9008.058](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.058)

'In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury', Art Institute of Chicago, 6 September 2019 – 12 January 2020. Catalogue: Ed. Zoë Ryan, Yale University Press, 2019, 236 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300247053, \$40.00.

Daisy Silver

A recent exhibition held at the Art Institute of Chicago offers a new perspective on Mexico's place in modernism. Curated by Zoë Ryan, 'In a Cloud' showcases an international group of creatives, including Ruth Asawa, Cynthia Sargent, Anni Albers, Lola Álvarez Bravo and Sheila Hicks to stage a narrative of Mexican design based on their relationship to the

linchpin Cuban designer, Clara Porset. Within the exhibition, Mexico is cast as a looming seventh protagonist and an international draw during the first half of the twentieth century. In its curation, 'In a Cloud' excels at mapping the fluidity of art movements through a web of archival materials which provide snapshot insights into the artists' careers. Drawn from Porset's maxim that 'there is design in everything', even 'in a cloud, in a wall, in a chair', the exhibition title bridges the diverse range of these artists' practices through their comparably inclusive and decidedly modernist approach towards their source material.¹

The first encounter staged within the exhibition space is with a row of Porset's signature Butaca chairs. In the 1940s and 1950s, Porset re-worked the design of the historic type, perceiving Mexico's design future – and its national character – as deeply tied to its particular 'handcrafts' legacy.² Predicated on Bauhaus ideals, Porset experimented with local materials and construction techniques stressing functionalism. The breadth of Porset's investigations are evidenced by the range of prototypes on show, fabricated variously with endemic leathers and plant fibres.

From its early recording in colonial inventories in the seventeenth century, the Butaca's lineage has been one of adaptation. The chair's shape and low height has been attributed to wooden pre-Columbian high-back seats, while its rigid structure and wooden joinery is connected to sixteenth-century Spanish royal chairs. Different permutations of the Butaca exist throughout Latin America as it adapted to local craft through Spanish trade routes. In its assimilation, Jorge Rivas Pérez argues that the Butaca was 'stripped of the symbolism' of a state or ritual chair and became merely

a resting chair.³ Yet, its accrued cultural and stylistic lineage lies latent in its form. Given principal attention within the exhibition space, Porset's Bauhaus-spirited translation of this perennial Latin-American seat carries over unfiltered into the tone of the curation.

The somewhat eclipsed genealogy of the Butaca within the display demarcates certain curatorial limitations. In its informal presentation, 'In a Cloud' struggles to provide the breadth of information necessary to surpass a superficial examination of multiple, complex design lineages. The exhibition strategy relies heavily on juxtapositions staged between the ancient objects of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection and the mid-century works. One of Porset's Totonac chairs, for instance, sits alongside third-century Nayarit and Late Classic Veracruz ceramic figurines, all exhibiting a similar squat stance and earthen tones. The Totonac chair is representative of Porset's creative method, consisting of eliminating decorative elements in favour of streamlined designs. Nearby a Chupícuaro terracotta figure is set directly in front of three of Albers' weavings. Though markedly different in material composition – hand-built ceramic versus woven linen on cotton – the near parallel geometric designs and umber tones insist upon the objects' stylistic kinships. Key to the exhibition's narrative therefore is its charting of the artists' sources located in ancient patterns of ornamentation.

The curation succeeds in bridging these practices' comparable disregard of a perceived hierarchy between high and vernacular art. Ryan writes that the geometries of ancient sculptures, appearance of archaeological sites and the patterning of textiles offered 'a universal visual language' for the artists' pursuit of a modern form of expression.⁴ Rather than replicating their sources, the

artists saw ancient motifs as a starting point for new compositions. For Albers, Asawa and Hicks, ancient weaving techniques provided a new vocabulary of form and design. The exhibition's case-study format and informal arrangement however, allowed little room for an in-depth reading into any particular artist. Yet, its method of comparison interestingly revealed how design histories are consumed and reinterpreted by modernism. Each work's shedding of its associations confirms its displacement from the sphere of the past. This is supported by Álvarez's floor to ceiling cybernetic photomontages of workers layered with machine apparatuses that permeate the exhibition space and frame each artist's practice in a contemporary context of industrial progress. This prominent curatorial addition lends an appearance of innovation to the ground against which the artists' objects in fact appear more traditional.

Overall, the narrative of 'In a Cloud' presents a compelling appraisal of the intersections of art and design in mid-century Mexico. The exhibition's greatest strength lies in its more expansive view of modernism, shown to be reliant on, and articulated by, the context in which it was conceived. Whilst 'In a Cloud' would benefit from attendance to the historicity of the artists' sources to form an even bolder account of the past, it importantly offers a re-evaluation of Mexico's specific contributions to modernism.

- 1 Clara Porset, *El arte en la vida diaria: Exposición de objetos de buen diseño hechos en México*, Mexico City, 1952, p. 13.
- 2 Ana E. Malet, Staci Steinberger, "'Fertile Ground': Design Exchanges between Mexico and California, 1920–1976" in Wendy Kaplan (ed.), *Design in California and Mexico 1915–1985: Found in Translation*, Los Angeles, p. 183.
- 3 Jorge F. Rivas Pérez, 'Transforming Status: The Genesis of the New World *Butaca*' in Donna Pierce

- (ed.), *Festivals & Daily Life in the Arts of Colonial Latin America, 1492–1850*, Denver, 2014, p. 119.
- 4 Zoë Ryan, 'There is Design in Everything', in Zoë Ryan (ed.), *In A Cloud in a Wall in a Chair*, exh. cat., Chicago, 2019, p. 25.

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.2396-9008.059](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.059)

'Morandi, Balla, de Chirico and Italian Painting 1920–1950', Tornabuoni Art Gallery, London, 12 February – 18 April 2020. Catalogue: Tornabuoni Art Gallery, London, 2020, 176 pages, hardback, £20,00.

Chiara Traversaro

'The drama of modern painting consists in not giving up on the modern, but trying to infuse it with the eternal [...]; in disentangling the essential, which is simple and immutable, from the tangle of complex and fleeting impressions'.¹ With these words, art critic Margherita Sarfatti introduced Novecento: a large group of painters, including Mario Sironi, Ubaldo Oppi and many others, exhibiting their works at the *First Exhibition of the Italian Novecento* in Milan in 1926. The group aimed to reinvigorate the Italian artistic scene by rejecting the 'ephemeral' qualities of previous avant-gardes, instead creating a new 'modern classical' art. Through this apparent paradox they conceptualised an art that would be simultaneously modern while looking at the Italian art historical tradition, embracing figuration and solidity.

The exhibition at Tornabuoni Art Gallery presents some works by painters who had been part of Novecento, arranged around the three themes that appeared at the 1926 exhibition: still life, landscape and the representation of the female figure. One has the perception of an a-temporal 'classicism' emerging from the arrangement of the exhibition at Tornabuoni and yet, the stylistic diversity of the works on display reveal the eclectic approaches of the Novecento artists to the concept of 'modern classicism'. What distinguishes this show from the 1926 exhibition, however, is that the works on display encompass a 30 year range and the majority of them date from the 1940s and 1950s, not from the 1920s and early 1930s – roughly the years of Novecento. If, on the one hand, this curatorial choice seems detrimental to the temporal specificity of the works on display, subsumed as they are under the framework of the Novecento 1926 exhibition and ideas, on the other hand, it actually complicates narratives through unexpected juxtapositions while altering temporalities, encouraging visitors to reflect on the artistic legacy of Novecento.

The first room, for instance, is dedicated to still lifes and landscapes and offers interesting comparisons. De Chirico's *Natura Morta* [Still Life] (1930) creates a jarring juxtaposition to Filippo de Pisis's *Vaso di Fiori in un Interno* [Vase of Flowers in an Interior] (1945), which sits next to it. The precise draughtsmanship and shading in the former is highlighted by the vaporous yet restrained brushwork in the latter. De Chirico's apples and grapes on a crumpled white tablecloth, with touches of white paint marking the reflection of light, rival the still lifes of the seventeenth century, and appear at odds with de Pisis's patchy strokes, which seem still indebted to a more 'Impressionistic' language. Three still lifes by Giorgio Morandi are hung