

MASP, the Bardis and design in Brazil

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In the historiography of Brazilian design, the creation of the IAC MASP, in 1951, only to be abruptly discontinued in 1953, is considered a date of particular relevance to the institutionalization of design as a discipline in Brazil. However, the sheer scope of the Museum's contribution to the field during the administration of Pietro Maria Bardi (from the Museum's foundation in 1947 up until 1989), alongside his wife, Lina Bo Bardi, is still not fully appreciated. This contribution is not limited to the creation of the Institute, but extends to the extraordinary number of exhibitions—over a hundred in all—devoted to design over the course of Bardi's forty-two year tenure at the Museum's helm.

It is the contribution these exhibitions made to creating and consolidating the field of design in Brazil that concerns the present paper, which originated from lines of enquiry pursued during a broader doctoral research project that drew from primary sources in the MASP Archive in order to map, identify and analyze the Museum's design-oriented exhibitions.

The importance of these exhibitions as a constitutive element in the development and consolidation of design as a field of knowledge first became apparent to me while researching for my master's degree dissertation.¹ At the time, the aim was to contribute to the historiography of the discipline by garnering a broader understanding of the meanings contained in the notions of "industrial design" and "design" as these appeared in the literature, teaching institutions, and exhibition discourses. However, the sheer volume of texts was far greater than expected and the focus of the dissertation was on pinpointing relevant aspects in the change of nomenclature by analyzing the written production.

This decision meant there was a gap that needed filling, and I returned to it in my doctoral thesis, which approaches these exhibitions as important reflections of the thought of a time and the discourse favored by the institutions. They are, therefore, extremely important sources of information on the prevailing ideas about the field during that period. Analysis of the exhibitions' main themes and, more importantly, the intentions behind them constitutes an original methodology for compounding the historiography of design, as it enriches the general

¹ See: CARA, Milene. *Do desenho industrial ao design: uma bibliografia crítica para a disciplina*. São Paulo: Blucher, 2010.

panorama about the field by recovering the Museum's original vision of it, which was at variance with the general tenor of the debate in the latter half of the 20th Century, especially in Brazil.

Despite the opportunism of both parties in the encounter between Assis Chateaubriand and Pietro Maria Bardi that led to the founding of the Museum², the initiative was a breath of fresh air for the São Paulo and Brazilian scene. The number of exhibitions on design revealed a singular understanding of the artistic relevance of the field, which, at the time, was largely identified with industrial design. Throughout his years in charge of the museum, Pietro Maria Bardi defended an expanded view of art that was based on the presupposition that art is the result of its environment, and therefore encompasses all the countless artistic manifestations of a culture, design included.

This conviction was of particular importance to the field, especially because a considerable contingent of those engaged in the debate in Brazil at the time and in coming decades endeavored to draw clear borders between art and design as a means of asserting and consolidating the discipline. We need only recall how Tomás Maldonado's appointment as head of the Hochschule für Gestaltung in the German town of Ulm in 1954 laid the bases for the school's rationalist orientation and pursuit of a universalist utopia wholly independent of the circumstances of context.³ This same template was used for the ESDI established in Rio de Janeiro in 1963, in turn derived from a plan drafted by Maldonado during a visit to Brazil in 1956⁴ and originally intended for the MAM RJ. This perspective, which was only natural for a discipline eager to emancipate itself from other fields and to ensure its place within the industrial world, and the professional designer's acceptance into environments predicated upon more rational logics, would change in the coming decades, especially in the face of changes to those same logics.

"Differentiating between a greater and a lesser art makes no sense at all"⁵. Bardi's vision of an art without subdivisions or hierarchies opened space for design in various activities at MASP. By accepting design as an important element in culture as a whole, as an essential feature of the configuration of everyday life and, therefore, as a reflection of the multi-faceted complexity, aspirations and attitudes of a society, in a sense, and differences notwithstanding, MASP anticipated the anthropological vision of the discipline that largely underpins how it is seen today.

The museum opened to the public on October 2, 1947, occupying four floors of the *Diários Associados* building on Rua 7 de Abril. The first exhibition in the "Artes Industriais"⁶ series, the *Exposição da Cadeira*, the brainchild of Lina

2 MORAIS, Fernando. *Chatô - O Rei do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1994.

3 LEITE, João de Souza. "De costas para o Brasil - o ensino de um design internacionalista". In: *O design gráfico brasileiro: anos 60*. MELO, Chico Homem de. p. 266.

4 Ibidem. p. 275.

5 Words spoken by Pietro Maria Bardi at the inauguration of the 1st Salão da Propaganda at MASP. In: "Propaganda da Propaganda", *Diário de São Paulo*, 05.12.1950.

6 *Exposição cronológica do desenvolvimento das formas da cadeira no Museu de Arte. Folha da Noite*, 16.09.1948.

Bo Bardi in collaboration with the architect Giancarlo Palanti, Dr. G. Giacomini and the painter Eurico Camerini, opened on September 14, 1948. MASP's first exhibition devoted to the discussion of an object of everyday use, it was mainly didactic in nature, examining the chair from the technical, aesthetic and historical perspectives.

The initiative was supported by the São Paulo press association, which ran notes in its periodicals belonging to *Diários Associados*, encouraging people to lend any old chairs, catalogues, drawings or models they may have had, in short, anything that might further the study of this pivotal item of furniture⁷. The show was structured into two parts, one dedicated to explaining the technical and historical processes of chair manufacture through texts and images, and the other an exhibition of actual chairs.

Research conducted at the MASP Archive revealed that the intentions and aims of many of the exhibitions the Museum held during this period were set out in typed documents in Portuguese of unspecified authorship. However, most of these documents were Portuguese translations of handwritten texts in Italian, which would lead us to believe they were the work of Pietro Maria or Lina Bo Bardi. These papers are extremely relevant, as they give us an insight into the aims and thought behind the initiatives⁸.

In short, the document on the *Exposição da Cadeira* presents the initial aim of organizing the chair in historical terms, through an evolutionary approach, followed by an enumeration of the difficulties of selecting the models most representative of each of the many styles, as well as the technical aspects of each exhibit and the importance of the right angle for sitting. Finally, the exhibition would defend a notion of the "morality" of the object, arguing that the created thing should serve as an expression of its time, revealing, through the choice of material, technique and aesthetic expression, the essential elements of an age. True to this philosophy, the document ends by lauding the modernist exhibits as contemporary responses to the challenges of the day, with special reference to Charles Eames' groundbreaking molded plywood chair, an example of which was lent to the exhibition by the architect Rino Levi.

It is interesting to note these aspects, as many accounts of the *Exposição da Cadeira* in the literature place a possible emphasis on the Thonet chair. In fact, the Thonet chair was in the exhibition, and the documents do mention it as a first, hybrid attempt at serial production⁹. However, it would be a mistake to limit the exhibition's aims to that consideration, because the museum's broader conception of the arts, which included objects of everyday use, was already clear from the title of the series – "Artes Industriais" (Industrial Arts). This series also included exhibitions on graphic design and fashion; in other words, all the areas of project and production with which design deals today.

7 Museu de Arte – *Exposição da Cadeira*. *Diário de São Paulo*, 26.03.1948.

8 Part of the document found in the Archive is transcribed in the thesis: CARA, Milene Soares. *Difusão e Construção do Design no Brasil: o Papel do MASP*. PhD Diss. São Paulo, 2013.

9 *Ibidem*. pp. 40.

We are mentioning the Exposição da Cadeira of 1948/49, and the series of eight exhibitions dedicated to objects, graphic design, crafts and fashion held over a short span between 1948 and 1951, because these initiatives attest to the Museum's interest in presenting an expanded vision of the art field and the importance of everyday objects by highlighting their aesthetic, technical and historical attributes. The decision to start with the chair, such a widely used and readily recognizable item, was fundamental to instilling the perception that the choice of everyday articles is never insignificant, but rather an important act, insofar as the object not only services our functional and decorative needs, but also meets the demand for coherency with the most varied aspects of our time.

Among the many initiatives, from the ball gown commissioned from Salvador Dalí as the closing showpiece of the Primeiro Desfile de Costumes Antigos e Modernos to the confection of a whole collection of Brazilian fashion at studios set up inside the Museum, it is worth recalling what the designer Alexandre Wollner had to say about the exhibition Vitrine das Formas, held in 1950 as part of the "Artes Industriais" series, as his words corroborate this expanded concept of art and the need to underscore the importance of objects of everyday use.

One day I saw a window display full of Egyptian and Aztec pottery and, stuck in among a host of other antiquities, was an Olivetti typewriter. I went to talk to Flávio Motta, who was Bardi's assistant, and said: "I think someone forgot a typewriter in the display..." Bardi was intrigued that someone would say that and came to explain to me that a typewriter was no different from an earthenware pot in its day: an object of use, part of the culture of a primitive group, just as the typewriter was an element of ours. It was then that I began to notice such things¹⁰.

Though there has been neither the time nor the opportunity to explore the full scope of the origins of this discourse – a task for future research – it is worth noting that the practice of placing objects from centuries past alongside the wares of today – an approach that was key to this first series of didactic exhibitions – reinforces the anthropological view of the discipline as material culture.

We know that the projects for these exhibitions predate the arrival of Pietro Maria and Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil and, in addition to the presence and collaboration of the Italian poet and artist Emilio Villa (whose artistic activity was rooted in philological studies) on the museum's early activities and the founding of *Habitat* magazine, both themes deserve ample investigation in order to correctly identify the origins of the discourse MASP was proposing.

During this four-year period (1948-51), it is important to mention the Exposição Max Bill of 1951, on which the literature in the fields of art and design has made manifold analyses¹¹. My only addition is to contend that analyzing this initiative in isolation can lead to a shrunken interpretation of the role MASP played in promoting the modernist project. The fact that Max Bill's sculpture

10 STOLARSKI, A. *Alexandre Wollner e a formação do design moderno no Brasil: depoimentos sobre o design visual brasileiro/ Um projeto de André Stolarski*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005. p. 37.

11 AMARAL, Aracy. *Arte Construtiva no Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia Melhoramentos; São Paulo: DBA Artes Gráficas, 1998. pp. 29-46.

Unidade Tripartida took the Grand Prize at the 1st Bienal de São Paulo not long after the MASP exhibition certainly reverberated among up-and-coming professionals, artists and designers, as this crowning of the modernist language also revealed its conformity to the process of industrialization then getting underway.

However, if seen within the wider context of the Museum's activities, the affirmation of a Germanic model as the aesthetic language most appropriate to the development of design in the country was made through a broader and more complex set of initiatives than the defense of any one discourse. In the light of this set of activities, of which design was a theme, MASP defended the notion of the modern artist as a subject who mastered the techniques and materials of his time, not necessarily as the one who adopted the formal modernist vocabulary. That is precisely what made the institution a pioneer in embracing a range of exhibition activities whose discourse favored the development of an industrial output couched in a knowledge of the technical, aesthetic and historical traditions of the country as a means toward developing something truly original.

Compared with those early years, there were fewer exhibitions related to the field between 1952 and 1967, most likely because Lina was busy designing the Museum's new premises and because of the years she spent in Salvador (returning in 1964) directing the MAM-BA and revitalizing the Solar do Unhão. We can therefore infer from the diminished number of initiatives related to the field during the period the architect was absent from São Paulo that the emphasis placed upon it during those initial years was largely the result of the importance Lina Bo Bardi ascribed to design, or industrial design, as it was still called at the time.

In 1969, the Museum held its first major exhibition at its new home on Paulista Avenue, to which it had moved the year before. The exhibition *A Mão-do-Povo Brasileiro* was inspired by Lina Bo Bardi's travels in the northeast of the country, and its intent was to rekindle the debate on the relationship between art, crafts and industry and have it cast in a new light on the country. By giving the exhibition top billing at the inauguration of its new building, MASP proposed a new perspective on Brazilian industrial production, which was undergoing rampant expansion for an economy subsidized by foreign capital during the dictatorship, installed in 1964.

The exhibition presented a broad range of wares produced by Brazilian popular art in order to highlight the need to take stock of pre-artisanal craftwork through a thorough understanding of the traditions, objects and customs of the population. The main aim of this and many other exhibition initiatives in the late 1980s was to inventory a repertoire of national culture from which Brazilian industrialization could draw support in attempting to find the model most appropriate to the development of a more original production, one better-suited to Brazil's specific needs.

It was in the 1960s that the historiographies of architecture and design received new contributions that were more open to considering the weight of

the achievements of the modern movement¹². The limits of the modern project's utopia are revealed by its crisis of rationality, insofar as the body of abstract and purportedly universal formulations supported by industrial production proved incapable of reducing social inequalities.

In Brazil, industrial design would only gain solid shape once the industrialization process accelerated under fresh impetus from the State, especially in the 1950s, a period in which greater resources were plied into the consolidation of a consumer goods industry. Industrial acceleration fuelled by USA capital closely associated the field with the modern project as promoted by the United States, which, for De Fusco and other historians, led to a partial diffusion of the German model, which was prioritarily formal and, more importantly, stripped of its utopian or social component.¹³

The exhibition *A Mão do Povo Brasileiro* was not the institution's only initiative toward the systemization of popular Brazilian culture. The Museum also hosted a solo exhibition of furniture by José Zanine Caldas, in 1975, after an earlier show at MAM RJ, and, in 1981, a controversial exhibition of carnival costumes by the Pérola Negra Samba School. That same year, attending a request from the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, the exhibition *A Mão do Povo Brasileiro* was reprised under the title *Arte Popular do Brasil* during a visit by some international advisors from the MoMA.

In 1982, for the inauguration of SESC Pompéia (restored and converted by Lina Bo Bardi), MASP developed the exhibition *O Design no Brasil – História e Realidade*. Once again, hundreds of the most varied objects produced by popular crafts were presented in a further contribution to the consolidation of Brazilian popular/folk culture. At the time, many critics labelled Lina's initiative nostalgic and sentimental. MASP helped promote the popular experience in many ways: exhibitions and partnerships with government and private initiatives throughout the 1980s, up until 1989 at least, when Pietro Maria Bardi stepped down as conservator-director and was replaced by Fábio Magalhães.

If the year 1969 is a milestone for the institution and for design as a discourse, at the heart of the new building's inaugural exhibition, it was the previous year – 1968 – that Assis Chateaubriand, a journalist and founder of the *Diários Associados* and the Museum itself, passed away. Chateaubriand's death forced Pietro Maria Bardi to seek support elsewhere, namely from the FIESP, and this was reflected in a number of exhibitions devoted to industrial produce, both foreign and Brazilian production.

Pietro Maria Bardi did not just turn opportunely to the business community to raise funds for the Museum, but decided to draw upon the Brazilian economic conjuncture as a whole, with its pro-industrial development discourse, eagerly encouraged by the desire to obtain a favorable trade balance, with an expanded market for Brazilian exports. One of the recurrent demands in the debate on

12 NESBITT, Kate (org.). *Uma nova agenda para a arquitetura: teórica (1965-1990)*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006.

13 FUSCO, Renato de. *Storia del Design*. Bari, 1985.

design at the time was the need to enhance the international competitiveness of Brazilian products. Bardi availed of the context, will host a series of initiatives at the Museum intended to deepen the dialogue with the moneymen behind the industrial community and draw attention to the importance of developing Brazilian industrial output and the discipline of design as key strategies in obtaining a competitive foothold in the international marketplace.

It was against this backdrop that the Museum organized a series of exhibitions on the industries of various countries. From 1965 on, these ran in parallel with those focused on the aesthetic, technical and historical perspectives of the field of design as based upon popular tradition. The first of these, entitled *Desenho Industrial Sueco*, with an initial showing at MAM RJ, featured ten display cases full of industrial artifacts. As the 1970s began, the debate grew more intense, with exhibitions of this sort being held on a yearly basis, starting with *Desenho Industrial da Escandinávia* in 1970, followed by *Desenho Industrial da Argentina* in 1973, and *A Ideia Braun*, in 1974. Records show that other exhibitions ran that same year, such as those on *Teatro dos Modernistas* and the *Bauhaus*. In 1975 was held the exhibition *Desenho Industrial Italiano* and in 1976, the *Desenho Industrial Finlandês* one. The exhibition *Firma Itália – Arte, Cinema, Gráfica, Publicidade, Televisão e Comunicação Industrial Italiana* opened in 1977, followed, in subsequent years, by *Exposição de Móveis Inovator, Itália – um país modelado pelo homem*, *A Arte do Automóvel*, *Exposição de Design Finlandês* and the important exhibition *Produto – Forma – História – 150 anos de Design Alemão*, in 1988.

It is important to note that the debate on industrial design within MASP began to trail off as of 1980. This was perhaps because of the creation of the Industrial Design Center, in conjunction with FIESP/CIESP in the late 1970s, but it would also have had a lot to do with the prevailing economic turmoil, especially after the second oil crisis of 1979, as the State set planning aside in order to focus on maintaining a balanced exchange rate and containing rampant inflation.

However, rather than address the overall context in Brazil at the time, and its relations with the debate going on in the field of design, our aim here is to look at one relevant aspect of the exhibitions dedicated to industrial output. These exhibitions at the Museum would seem to have a lot more to do with how Pietro Maria Bardi saw the development of Brazilian industrial design than with Lina's perspective, which was more concerned with popular traditions as a model for authentic production tailored to real national necessities.

The exhibitions dedicated to the industrial object reflected the relationship between design and industry through the promotion of design as an area of expertise that was essential to product competitiveness. Where Lina wanted to explore a language better suited to our techniques and materials in search of a development model for design in Brazil, Bardi wanted to reflect the relations between art and industry and art and design, and, from the point of view of aesthetic languages, achieve greater approximation with a plurality of languages that was proper to the international debate that raged from the 1960s on—a period fraught with struggles against authoritarianisms of every order.

Bardi shared a vision of the relationship between art and industry that was very similar to the model promoted by Olivetti, whose experience and industrial model presented a vision unrivalled in the history of western industrialization, especially during that period. The Museum's relationship with Olivetti can be seen from a series of initiatives undertaken in the 1960s, specifically in 1966, when the company entered into close collaboration with the Museum, starting with the exhibition *Coletiva Olivetti*. This exhibition presented works by Brazilian artists inspired by visits to the Olivetti factory in Guarulhos, São Paulo, and it sparked debate on the theme of the arts in our modern technological civilization. In 1972, Olivetti's sponsorship enabled the Museum to bring to Brazil the exhibition *Push Pin Studio*, the US office of Milton Glaser and Seymour Chawst. *Push Pin Studio's* authentic production attracted a great deal of international interest due to its wide variety of styles and techniques, in-tune with the plurality of post-modern, contemporary society. *Push Pin's* work signaled a rupture with schools like the Bauhaus and Ulm, where rigid rules of conception had prevailed. In 1976, Olivetti and the Museum returned to the debate on the relationship between art and industry in the exhibition *Os Artistas e a Olivetti*, which featured the collection the company had amassed over the many years in which it operated in Brazil.

In order to understand Bardi's relationship with, and admiration for, the Olivetti model, we must first take some lines to discuss the role the company played in the industrial context of the period, and the significance this had. In the industrial world, Olivetti anticipated a vision of modernity-as-image by promoting product design and its communication. It was also one of the first companies to embrace a notion of social responsibility, investing heavily in its production units and valuing its human capital. The company did not limit itself to building an image that was exclusively associated with economic and technological development, but broadened its scope, embracing a whole modern industrial culture in which human development was a theme on a par with any other in the Olivetti vision. We can see from the space Bardi allotted to the company at the museum and in his writings¹⁴ that he saw promising prospects for Brazilian industrial development in the Italian industrial model in general, and the Olivetti model in particular.

However, in light of the precedence given to the rationalist German model in the debate on the development of design in Brazil, especially by the educational institutions, these other possible forms of development for design in Brazil were given the short shrift. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the existence of these other ideas and interlocutors in order to avoid restrictive lamentations about what design in Brazil should have been, but never was, and to garner a more realistic understanding of the complex web of factors involved in the development and consolidation of this field.

This paper does not purport to be the final word on the contribution Pietro Maria Bardi and Lina Bo Bardi made to the development of design in Brazil, but only to underscore the range and originality of the ideas that pervaded MASP's exhibitions and activities, particularly given the less than propitious circum-

14 BARDI, Pietro Maria. "Design italiano, exemplo para o Brasil", *Senhor*, 13, 1979. p. 112.

stances for accelerated industrial development at the time and the fledgling cultural environment in which they arose.

The notion of art which the Museum championed, and which included design, and the original perspectives on Brazilian industrial development, whether through a mapping of popular Brazilian culture or the relationship between art and industry, are extremely important if we are to understand the institution's relevance to the debate on the field of design and society in general. The lamentable state in which the Museum finds itself today contrasts starkly with its initial vocation and underscores the urgent need to recognize the museum needs for rehabilitation and the historical role MASP played and the contribution it made, not only to design, but to the most varied fields of knowledge, and to São Paulo society as a whole.

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