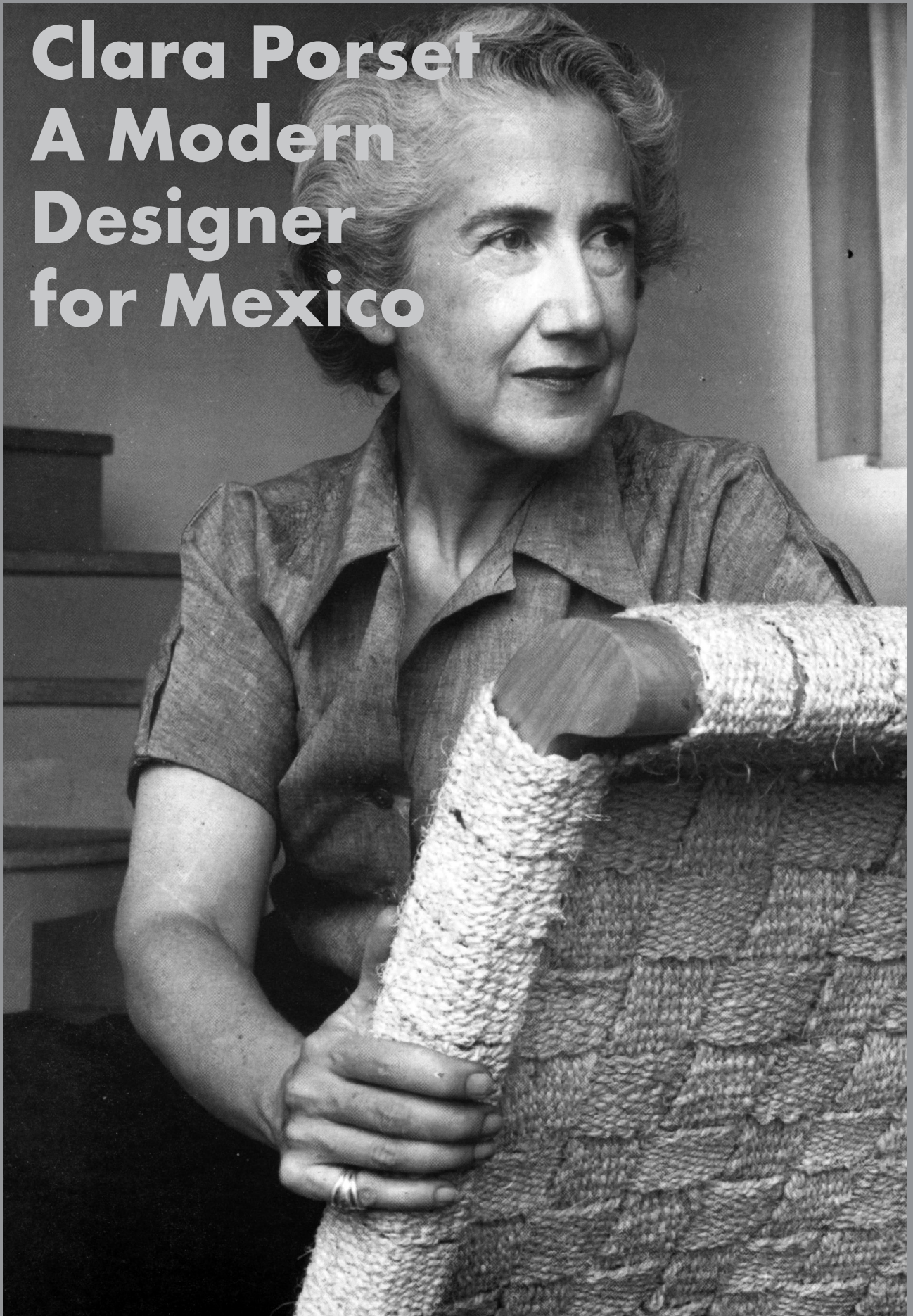


# Clara Porset A Modern Designer for Mexico



The idea of design came about, following various approaches, at the end of the 1920s in the last century. The design and production of furniture and household appliances, as part of the work of a specialist, is an experience that evolved from the Bauhaus and wanted “to serve in the development of present day housing, from the simplest household appliance to the finished dwelling”<sup>1</sup>, as Walter Gropius explained in 1927 in the Principles of Bauhaus Production. Other architects like Hugo Haring, in 1927, talked about “objects that are on the one hand works of art, and on the other are intended for use”<sup>2</sup>, while 24 architects headed by Le Corbusier founded the CIAM in 1928 and sated “the need for a new conception of architecture that satisfies the spiritual, intellectual and material demands of present day life”.<sup>3</sup> This was the atmosphere laid out by the avant-garde movements in Europe when Clara Porset arrived in Paris to pursue her graduate studies in art and architecture.

By Louise Noelle

Clara María del Carmen Magdalena Porset y Dumas was born in Matanzas, Cuba, on May 25, 1895.<sup>4</sup> She had a privileged childhood that disembodyed in her attending Manhattanville Academy high school in New York from 1914 to 1918. Her natural restlessness and interest in art and design led her, in 1925, to study at Columbia’s School of Fine Arts in New York. She then decided to further her studies in France, between 1928 and 1931, where she attended both *La Sorbonne*, for a course in aesthetic, and the *École des Beaux Arts*, for architecture and art history classes. At this time she pursued her interest in furniture design in the atelier of Henri Rapin<sup>5</sup> where she took on lessons and practical experience.

It is interesting to highlight the date of her arrival to Paris: 1928. It was in that precise year when Mario Pani started his architectural studies in the *École des Beaux Arts*, a circumstance that provided them with a common architectural background for their upcoming professional rapport. Also, it must be noted that it was the year of the CIAM Declaration at La Sarraz, where the controversial Le Corbusier was the leader of an important group of members of the above mentioned organization, making the French city an important place for new and challenging outcomes.

After her European journey, Porset returned to Cuba and started her professional work as an interior and furniture designer for homes and diverse establishments. At the same time she participated in the foundation of the Cuban Institute of Architects and started teaching at the *Escuela Técnica* for women.

But there was still one experience lacking in her quest

for knowledge in the field of what we now call Industrial Design: the Bauhaus. She got in contact with Walter Gropius to study under his guidance, but unfortunately it was 1933, the year that the school was dissolved.<sup>6</sup> Luckily he recommended her to look up Josef Albers who had moved to Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, to teach his famous *vorkurs*. When Porset decided to leave La Havana due to her opposition to the dictator Guillermo Machado, she signed up at Black Mountain College to attend the courses and started as a result a long lasting friendship with Josef Albers and his wife Anni. No doubt she benefited from the rich artistic life of the college. It must be added that her acquaintance of Hannes Meyer—Dean of the Bauhaus and founding member of CIAM<sup>7</sup>—as she sought exile in Mexico in 1936, closed the circle of her learning and allowed for yet another important friendship.

Upon her arrival to Mexico, her inclination towards socialism set in motion a series of relationships with organizations such as the *Liga de Artistas y Escritores Revolucionarios*, LEAR (League of Revolutionary Artist and Writers), and its prolongation as the *Taller de Gráfica Popular*, TGP (Workshop of Popular Graphics), founded in 1937. In this workshop that flourished under the leadership of its founder Leopoldo Méndez and which Hannes Meyer joined in 1941, Porset met Mexican painter Xavier Guerrero (1896–1974) who became her husband and with whom she often collaborated. Her long life commitment with the Cuban independence, the force that initially drove her out of Cuba, made her go back in 1959 after the triumph of the Revolution, to establish the first school of design in that country. It is interesting to note that the establishment of this institution is contemporary to the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* or Ulm School of Design, funded in Germany under Max Bill in 1957. In 1965, when she came back to Mexico, besides a successful personal ca-

< Clara Porset. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.



Figure 1. Interior design and furniture of the Pani House in Acapulco, **Mario Pani** and **Enrique del Moral** architects, 1952. Photo by Guillermo Zamora, Louise Noelle Archive.

reer, she had an important connection with education in the School of Industrial Design of the National University (UNAM).<sup>8</sup>

The recognition of her Cuban work and her personal talent understanding local conditions, served as an important starting point for her work in Mexico. Whilst there she took on a series of collaborations with relevant architects of the Mexican Modern Movement, designing furniture that was perfectly suitable for their projects, which included houses, offices and hotels. It is important to note that most of the time her inspiration comes from the vernacular, a fact apparent in the furniture specially meant for the Mexican tropical climate. Some of her most recognized and celebrated works were the ones made specifically for the houses of Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral in Acapulco and Cuernavaca in the 50s<sup>9</sup> [figure 1]. Both architects approached her to work on the furniture of buildings that called for relaxed and tropical furnishings.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Pani published her work in his magazine, *Arquitectura/México*, on several occasions.<sup>11</sup> She was also close to Enrique Yáñez, who invited her to

participate in the successful 1952 exhibit “*El arte en la vida diaria*” (Art in Everyday Life) [figure 2] at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. By 1957, she also participated in the interior design of Yáñez’ own house, located in el Pedregal de San Ángel. Other Mexican architects that invited her to work with them on specific projects include Guillermo Rossell and Honorato Carrasco for the Chrysler factory project (1953), Juan Sordo Madaleno for the *Cine París* (1954) and Max Cetto for the Hoechst laboratories (1955). Also there are pictures of her chairs in the Shulman House (1952), by Raphael Soriano.

Probably the best known of Porset’s collaborations, is the one with Luis Barragán: she designed various chairs for the residences he built, most noteworthy the ones known as “Butaque” and “Miguelito” [figures 3a, 3b]. The “Butaque” [figure 4], a type of chair found in the Mexican and Caribbean rural dwellings that Luis Barragán used in the houses he designed, became a famous design and has even led to wrongful attributions to the architect. Porset contributed as well with a good number of garden, lounge and pool chairs and tables for the Hotel



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Pierre Marqués, where Barragán designed the gardens; the manufacture of the above-mentioned furnishings, was undertaken by Industrias Ruiz Galindo [figure 5].

It must be pointed out, that alongside these important commissions, Porset also tackled designs suited for the less privileged. By 1940, she participated with Xavier Guerrero in "Organic Design for Home Furnishing", a competition organized by MoMA in which she obtained one of the four prizes with a collection of what she called "rural furniture".<sup>12</sup> It is also the case of the furniture designed especially for the small apartments of the first Mexican Modern housing unit by Pani, the Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, CUPA (1949), where she took into account the cost of the materials as well as the size, suitability and multipurpose of the furnishings; tables, desks, chairs, beds and cupboards, achieved a perfect balance and assimilation with Pani's architecture, making it is possible to say that we find here an integration, the one Le Corbusier called "a coherent whole". In these designs we find two different sets of basic fixtures, directed at a diverse clientele, the first one related to the Modern Movement and the building itself, the second one taking into account traditional concepts.

As she stated in her article "*¿Qué es el diseño?*" (What is Design?)<sup>13</sup>, after World War II Mexico was shifting from handicrafts to industrial processes in various fields, including that of home furnishings, where industrial design became central. This signaled the importance of enabling cultural institutions, such as museums, to divulge the qualities of good design, and proper schools to foster this type of approach. For Porset the necessary and



3a



3b



4

Figure 2. Exhibit "*El arte en la vida diaria*" at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 1952. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.

Figure 3a. Chairs of the Prieto López House, **Luis Barragán** architect, 1950. Photo by Louise Noelle.

Figure 3b. Chairs of the Gálvez House, **Luis Barragán** architect, 1957. Photo by Louise Noelle.

Figure 4. Butaque. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.

beneficial bond between art and industry proclaimed by Hugo Haring and Le Corbusier<sup>14</sup>, amongst many others, needed to be further clarified in order to understand and explain "What is design?" That is why materials are so intrinsically important for Porset, as is their relationship and participation into what she called the fostering of a Mexican industry. Furthermore, the rapid changes of 20<sup>th</sup> century society in developing countries was a substantial part of her concern, looking to find a balance between tradition and modernity [figure 6].

The form and materials evolved in several pieces of furniture still copied in the present times. Some of her chairs

take inspiration in Caribbean and Mexican examples, profiting from the diversity of lumber and other natural elements as wicker and cotton. In other cases, metal bears the frame, but always in perfect harmony with organic elements, that maintain the sensuality and richness of her designs. Simplicity was for her the principal virtue of Modern design, with comfort and functionality integrated to the plastic emotion as an added value. Then, the final ideal was to make these furnishings available to all.

Clara Porset obtained throughout her life various prizes and recognitions, as is the case of the wicker chair that garnered an award in the Milan Triennial of 1957; it is a

Figure 5. Garden chairs and tables for Hotel Pierre Marqués in Acapulco, 1956. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.



very simple chair and stool, made of wicker over a metal frame, which punctuates her interest in artisan fabrication after a careful design [figure 7]. She also participated in the exhibits "El objeto cotidiano en México" (1969), and "Diseño en México, retrospectiva y prospectiva" (1975), both in the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. By 1971 she was awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Fine Arts, for her role as pioneer of industrial design in Mexico.

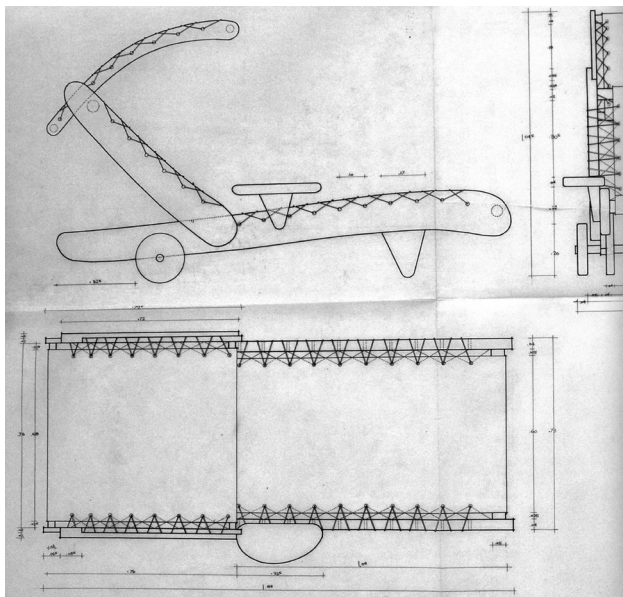


Figure 6. Drawing for the manufacture of a lounge chair with parasol, for the Hotel Pierre Marqués. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.

The boldness, power and success of the designs of Clara Porset and the quality of the results have made possible and essential the appreciation of her work in the light of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her innovations within tradition embody the very ideals of the Modern Movement and at the same time she can be considered as one of the pioneers of Regionalism, taking into account not only the elements for the production of furniture, but the complete scope of total interior design.



Figure 7. Wicker chair that obtained a prize in the Milan Triennial of 1957. Photo from Archivo Clara Porset/Oscar Salinas.

## Notes

1. Ulrich Conrads, "Walter Gropius: Principles of Bauhaus production", *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1970, 95.
2. Ibid., "Hugo Haring: Formulations towards a reorientation in the applied arts", 103.
3. Ibid., "CIAM: La Sarraz Declaration", 109.
4. She died in Mexico City in 1981. For further information see Oscar Salinas Flores, *Clara Porset. Una vida inquieta, una obra sin igual*, Mexico, UNAM, 2002 and Clara Porset's Design. Creating a Modern Mexico, Mexico, Museo Franz Meyer-UNAM, 2006.
5. Henri Rapin, 1873-1939, was a French painter, illustrator and interior decorator; he was very active in the renaissance of the applied arts.
6. *Bauhaus, a conceptual model*, Berlin-New York, Bauhaus Archive-MoMA, 2009.
7. Hannes Meyer, the second Dean of the Bauhaus, lived in México from 1939 to 1949.
8. The Clara Porset Archive is located in this institution.
9. "Hotel Pozo del Rey", "Conjunto de cinco casas", "Villas Monte Mar" and "Casa Sr. Luis R. Montes", *Arquitectura/México* n° 46, June 1954.
10. By Del Moral the House De Yturbe, "Casa en Acapulco", *Arquitectura/México* n° 13, July 1943; by Pani the House Lima, "Residencia

en Cuernavaca", *Arquitectura/México*, n° 37, March 1952; and by Del Moral and Pani, "Hotel Pozo del Rey", "Conjunto de cinco casas", "Villas Monte Mar" and "Casa Sr. Luis R. Montes", *Arquitectura/México* n° 46, June 1954.

11. *Arquitectura/México* n° 28, 29, 32, 37, 62 and 90, published between 1949 and 1965.
12. *Organic Design for home furnishings*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1942.
13. Clara Porset "¿Qué es el diseño?", *Arquitectura/México*, n° 28, 1949. Also relevant is Clara Porset's "Diseño industrial", *Arquitectura/México* n° 90, 1965.
14. See note 2 and Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Paris, Les Éditions G. Cres, 1923.

## Louise Noelle

Researcher at the National University of Mexico (UNAM), author of many publications on architecture and urbanism, and a contributor to numerous architectural magazines. Member of the Mexican Arts Academy, 1991; Honorary Academician of the Society of Mexican Architects and of the Argentinean National Academy of Beaux Arts; member of Icomos, 1993; and Chair of Docomomo México, 2003. In 2010 she was the Chair of the Organizing Committee of the 11<sup>th</sup> International **docomomo** Conference that took place in Mexico City.