

Clara Porset in Mid Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Politics of Designing, Producing, and Consuming Revolutionary Nationalist Modernity

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originally published in: *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

In 2006, Mexico City's Museo Franz Meyer held an exhibition celebrating the furniture designs of Clara Porset y Dumás titled "Creating a Modern Mexico." This exhibition and a growing literature on Porset's work by design historians during the first decades of the twenty-first century have helped establish Porset as the foremost pioneer of industrial and interior design in twentieth-century Mexico.¹ During her lifetime, Porset worked alongside prominent architects such as Mario Pani, Enrique Yáñez and Luis Barragán to design furniture and interiors for projects ranging from public housing to hotels and private homes. Porset also wrote articles about design in prestigious Mexican architectural and artistic publications such as *Arquitectura México* and *Espacios* and oversaw a 1952 exhibition of 'good design' for Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Institute of Fine Arts, INBA). Perhaps most notable about Porset's role in Mexico's postrevolutionary architectural and cultural scene is that she stood virtually alone during the 1940s and 1950s in calling for the need to develop industrial design as integral to Mexico's economic and cultural development.

While not being accorded as high a profile as the architects alongside whom she worked, Porset did enjoy significant prestige during her lifetime as a modern furniture designer and was never entirely forgotten following her death in 1981. Since 1988, Porset's legacy has been celebrated through the bi-annual *Premio de Diseño Clara Porset* contest for female designers which began with funds allocated from Porset's estate. This competition is run by the Centro de Investigaciones de Diseño Industrial (Centre for Industrial Design

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Research, CIDI) in Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) where Porset taught industrial design from its creation in 1969 until close to her death. The CIDI's library is also now named in her honor.

Despite such recognition, relatively few Mexicans ever owned a piece of Porset-designed furniture or read her thoughts on the importance of good design. Porset herself expressed frustration in private correspondence about her lack of success in securing support from the state or industrialists for her mission to promote the development of industrial design in Mexico. Rather than her practical impact on how Mexicans actually lived, however, it is precisely this gap between the modernist utopianism and socialist politics that drove Porset's work and her practical experiences in postrevolutionary Mexico that makes her life and work a revealing object of study for cultural historians of twentieth-century Mexico.

Drawing on approaches from cultural, architectural, and design history, in this article I show how Porset's life and work provides a window into the connection between transnational politics, nationalism, and the development of new ideas about culture and modern living in twentieth-century Mexico. In using a semi-biographical focus on Porset to shed light on broader processes and systems of signification, I am influenced by historian Christine Hatzky's research on Cuban communist Julio Antonio Mella. As did Hatzky with Mella, by looking at Porset's work and observations of postrevolutionary Mexican politics and society, I aim "to link the microscopic interpretation with the macro-region of structures that individuals produce and create, that they transform or reinforce."² As well as the importance of studying how 'ordinary' people live, in interpreting how new cultural ideas emerge and evolve I concur with historian Lois Banner regarding the value of "assessing cultural leaders and icons who articulated cultural understandings," such as Porset.³ I further agree with Banner regarding the biographical method's potential for approximating cultural

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

anthropologist Clifford Geertz's method of the "thick description" based upon interpreting and understanding small facts relating to individuals or communities as speaking to larger issues and contexts.⁴

One larger context about which Porset's life and work proves revealing is the cosmopolitan/nationalist dialectic that was central to the construction of new ideas of Mexico's authentic cultural identity tied to postrevolutionary nation and state building projects. It was primarily Porset's experience in transnational anti-imperialist political networks in Cuba and the United States that facilitated her relatively quick and successful integration into the cosmopolitan artistic and intellectual scene of Mexico City during the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940). To illustrate how this occurred, I begin by looking at the context of Porset's 1935 arrival in Mexico City as a political exile from Cuba who had been educated in the United States and France. Porset's transnational political and artistic development sheds new light on the circulation of artists, writers, and political radicals through the circum-Caribbean region including Mexico from the 1920s through to the 1940s. Her trajectory also shows the role of hub cities as sites of political and artistic cross-pollination between individuals who helped shape new ideas of Mexican culture.

Studying Porset's concern for the production of utilitarian objects for Mexican homes further opens up the possibility of exploring the interaction between postrevolutionary Mexican cultural production and the politics of consumption within the nascent interdisciplinary study of consumer culture in modern Mexico.⁵ Porset's work as a designer and advocate of industrial design was unique in attempting to translate a conception of the political and cultural project of the Mexican Revolution into utilitarian household objects and an approach to interior design. While there is some scholarly work dealing with the political context of postrevolutionary Mexican architecture, interior and furniture design has been

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given relatively little attention.⁶ This lack of attention reinforces an established tendency in architectural history to 'feminize' and dismiss as frivolous interior design, while treating as 'masculine' and therefore worthy of serious consideration the work of architects.⁷ As well as correcting this bias, I propose to advance the literature on Porset's role in Mexican architectural and artistic history by more seriously considering the political context of her work than has previously been attempted.

Faced with the methodological challenge of a lack of existing sources detailing the exact production and sale of her furniture, I use Porset's published articles and previously unexamined private correspondence to outline her ideas about design. Drawing upon Renato de Fusco's "four-leaf clover" theory of design culture and the literature on Mexico's cultural and political history during the 1940s and 1950s, I examine Porset's failure to find support for the mass production, sale, and consumption of her furniture. To better understanding the reception of Porset's furniture, I conclude by contrasting Porset's relative lack of success in designing interiors for the Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán (President Alemán Urban Centre, CUPA) public housing complex to her success designing for private clients in the exclusive Mexico City neighborhood of the Jardines del Pedregal. This approach offers a fresh perspective on the formation of new cultural and social values in Mexico reflected in the evolving consumer culture of the rapidly urbanizing Mexico City of the 1940s and 1950s.

Porset and the Circum-Caribbean Pathway to Mexico

Clara Porset was born in 1895 in Matanzas, Cuba the daughter of conservative Spanish politician and Matanzas provincial governor Adolfo Porset e Iriarte. As was common for Cuba's wealthier families during this period, the Porsets lived between Cuba and the United States during her youth.⁸ The Porset family had particularly strong connections to New York

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

City, where Clara Porset was educated at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Manhattanville Academy from 1911 to 1914. Porset's formal training in art, architecture, and design also began in New York City, where starting in 1925 she studied at Columbia University's School of Fine Arts and the New York School of Interior Decoration. She further studied in Paris from 1927 to 1929 at the *École de Beaux Artes*, Sorbonne, and in the atelier of architect Henri Rapin.⁹

Returning to Cuba in late 1929, Porset quickly established her credentials as an authority on design and architecture as well as a member of Havana's elite intellectual and cultural circles. She showed a particular affinity for functionalist design, showcasing work by architects such as Robert Mallet Stevens, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier and modern design trends from France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia to Cuban readers in the magazine *Social* from 1930 to 1933.¹⁰ During this period, Porset also worked as an interior designer in Havana and lectured on the need to adapt international trends in modern design to Cuba's culture, tropical climate, and architectural traditions.¹¹

It is uncertain exactly when Porset became involved with groups opposing Cuba's Gerardo Machado regime (1925-1933). The educated middle and upper class circles to which Porset belonged that gathered around publications including *Social* and cultural institutions such as women's intellectual and cultural institution the Lyceum were characterized by antipathy toward Machado and the broader political realities of Cuba's increasingly dictatorial and economically dependent post-1902 "First Republic."¹² Paris was also a hub of anti-Machado activism among Cuban students as well as of anti-imperialist activism amongst Latin American students, artists, and intellectuals during Porset's time in the city and it may have been here that she first became politically active.¹³ The first published account of Porset's opposition to Machado emerged in late October 1932 in U.S. newspaper reports of

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Porset taking refuge in the British embassy during a wave of repression against the Machado regime's opponents.¹⁴

There is a growing but still limited literature on political networks and the forms that transnational solidarity activism took in the Western Hemisphere and particularly the circum-Caribbean during the inter-war period.¹⁵ People of various nationalities guided by a diverse array of political ideologies from communism to liberalism participated in these networks, bound together by overriding ideas such as Pan-Americanism and anti-imperialism. Political cooperation across national borders often promoted cross-pollination through which people operating in different national and political contexts learnt from one another, with political activism frequently extending into the sphere of artistic production.¹⁶ Hub cities such as New York City were particularly fertile environments in which this cross-pollination took place.

Arriving in New York City in November 1932, Porset effectively integrated into these circum-Caribbean networks that stretched upward to New York from the Caribbean basin.¹⁷ The main US groups with which Porset was involved were the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the International Committee for Political Prisoners, both of which adopted a pacifist and anti-imperialist stance. Having been connected to these groups through her Havana social circles, while in the United States Porset was called upon to provide the perspective of women under Machado in public speeches and press interviews.¹⁸ Porset also participated in activities organized by Cuban-led exile groups, including those gathered around Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz in Washington, D.C.¹⁹

Porset's political views appear to have definitely turned toward the left during her time in the North-Eastern United States. In January and February 1933, Porset proved a popular guest at meetings organized by the WILPF at small venues such as suburban homes in the Philadelphia area where the group had close links to the Quaker religion. By August of that

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

year, however, correspondence between the WILPF's Ellen Starr Brinton and Esther Crooks details increasing unease about the political literature Porset was reading and her support for armed revolution in Cuba.²⁰

When she returned to Cuba in September 1933 following Machado's overthrow, Porset remained deeply involved in left-wing political activism. Correspondence at the WILPF archives including that between Brinton and Kathryn Tyrrell of the Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America provides mostly second-hand accounts of Porset's political activities during this period. However, there was no ambiguity about her Communist affiliation by 1935.²¹ In one letter, Brinton noted that Porset "is now affiliated distinctly with the Communist party, but has a beautiful apartment, teaches in a progressive school, and designs modern furniture for luxury homes."²² This account by Brinton is suggestive not only of Porset's political evolution, but of the resulting tension between Porset's work as a prestigious furniture and interior designer working primarily for wealthy clients and her socialist politics. This tension persisted throughout her career and was more broadly characteristic of Mexico's left-wing artistic scene during the 1940s and 1950s.

In Cuba, Porset remained integrated into regional political networks in which ideological lines were also not always clear between, for example, liberal and communist strands of anti-imperialism.²³ The WILPF correspondence shows how exiles and activists were circulating through these networks during the early 1930s, with Havana forming part of a well-established route of politicized travel between New York City and Mexico City. The U.S. activists who encountered Porset were travelling along this route and Porset's name and address were circulated among them as a local contact in Havana.

As historian Michael Goebel noted, the circulation of politically active intellectuals, artists, and activists within metropolitan centers such as New York City and Paris provided

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

not only an opportunity for political training and cross pollination. This process of movement and circulation in itself "became an engine of ideological change" that resulted in new forms of nationalist and anti-imperialist politics on the periphery.²⁴ In Porset's case, her journey from Cuba to Mexico via New York City provides a clear case study of the role of political networks and hub cities in connecting individuals and shaping broadly shared political values. These values, in turn, were reflected in the intellectual and artistic scene of Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s and resulted in cultural production that was often militantly nationalist in form but strongly cosmopolitan in practice.

Arriving in the Brown Atlantis

Porset was again forced into exile following her participation in university and technical college strikes during March 1935 in Havana against the Carlos Mendieta government (1934-1935). This time, she travelled in the other direction along the political tourist trail from New York City toward Mexico City. Porset arrived during the Cárdenas administration, which involved mass worker and peasant mobilization, an extensive reorganization of the Mexican political system, and government tolerance and at times closeness with the left. By the time of the March 1938 oil expropriation, Cardenismo and the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) created that same year appeared to many on the left to represent an opportunity for a genuinely anti-imperialist political and economic project and a challenge to the framework of the bourgeois society.²⁵

The Mexico City into which Porset arrived was also in the midst of a boom of cultural and intellectual activity that drew inspiration from the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). Historian Mauricio Tenorio Trillo has described this period as a "cosmopolitan Mexican summer" that lasted from the 1920s into the late 1940s when international radicals and

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

progressives congregated in Mexico City.²⁶ During this time, the imagination of Mexico City as a uniquely invigorating space for debating radical politics, art, and culture was firmly rooted in visions of Mexico's indigenous ethnic and cultural authenticity.²⁷ This circumstance led Tenorio Trillo to further label the visions of Mexico City held by such artists and intellectuals as a heavily racialized "Brown Atlantis." According to Tenorio Trillo, their construction of Mexico City was inherently paradoxical, an "extremely cosmopolitan, but... militantly nativist" space where intellectuals and artists dreamed of a rural and indigenous authentic Mexico amidst the trappings of a modern city.²⁸

While remaining active in Mexico's cultural scene and participating in ventures such as the S neca publishing house founded by Spanish Republican exiles in 1939, during her first five or so years in Mexico City Porset's design work was largely eclipsed by her political activities.²⁹ Initially, Porset spoke on behalf of those opposing the Cuban government. Porset's first known public engagement in Mexico City was a seminar in July 1935 on "Relations between the United States and its Near Neighbors" organized by the Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America, a U.S. organization.³⁰ In August 1935, Spanish writers Mar a Teresa Le n and Rafael Alberti who were reporting to the Comintern on the political situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, noted in a letter to Cuban poet  ngel Augier in Havana that Porset was to speak about Cuba at the upcoming Mexico City meeting of the Alianza de Defensa Intelectual (Alliance of Intellectual Defence).³¹ This was a Mexican group, formed as an anti-fascist front by prominent Mexican artists and intellectuals including poet Carlos Pellicer, writer Salvador Novo, composer Silvestre Revueltas, and painter Rufino Tamayo.³² Beginning in 1937, Porset also taught a course on Revolution and Counterrevolution in Cuba at the School for Foreigners of the Universidad Obrera de M xico (Mexican Workers' University) founded by towering figure of Mexican Marxism, Vicente Lombardo Toledano.³³

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Porset's experiences in Mexico City during the late 1930s reflect the highly politicized and transnational nature of cultural production in Mexico's capital during this period. Central to Porset's deeper integration into Mexico City's artistic and political milieu was her membership in the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, LEAR). The LEAR brought together artists, writers, intellectuals, and architects in a group that articulated the link between cultural production and anti-fascist and anti-imperialist political work characteristic of circum-Caribbean political networks.³⁴ Porset quickly held important positions within the LEAR, being listed as a member of the editorial committee in the first issue of the second series of the LEAR's magazine *Frente a Frente* in March 1936. Porset's earliest known Mexican associates such as artists Leopoldo Méndez and Pablo O'Higgins were also LEAR members.³⁵

The connections Porset made through political and artistic groups including the LEAR led to her earliest offers of work as an interior designer for the government's Instituto de Enfermedades Tropicales (Institute of Tropical Diseases) and a bookstore and café for the Editorial México Nuevo.³⁶ Porset was also exposed to debates within the LEAR over the role of architecture and functionalism in the context of postrevolutionary Mexican state and nation building.³⁷ Furthermore, the associations Porset made through the LEAR drew her toward the *indigenista* and revolutionary nationalist aesthetics that were to guide her signature furniture designs.

Porset taught Pellicer's Art History course at the National University without pay in 1937 in order to enable Pellicer to attend the International Writers' Congress in Defense of Culture in Valencia, Spain. In her personal correspondence with U.S. progressive author Waldo Frank, with whom she formed a close relationship during his January 1937 attendance of a Mexico City LEAR congress for which she was on the organizing committee, Porset

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

spoke of the experience of preparing this course as revelatory. Specifically, the experience introduced her to and sparked her enthusiasm for Mexico's pre-Hispanic artistic heritage that had been absent from her education in Havana, New York City, and Paris.³⁸

In 1938, Porset married artist Xavier Guerrero who was born in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila in 1896 and to whom she remained married until his death in 1974. Another LEAR member, Guerrero was strongly involved with the Mexican Communist Party and left-wing and anti-fascist artistic groups such as the Taller de Gráfica Popular.³⁹ Guerrero was furthermore a foundational member of the postrevolutionary Mexican muralist movement and deeply immersed in the cultural project of developing what historian Rick López describes as a postrevolutionary "aesthetic reorientation" of Mexican identity through the discovery or recovery of authentic national cultural expressions rooted in indigenous and folk traditions.⁴⁰ Guerrero's personal and artistic identity was profoundly shaped by the revalorization of indigenous artistic traditions during the late Porfirian and post-revolutionary period. The artist claimed 'pure' indigenous ancestry, changed the 'J' of his first name for an 'X' as an indigenizing and nationalist gesture, and at times used the pseudonym 'Indio' for his work in political publications.⁴¹ Collaborators such as muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros similarly described Guerrero as being of pure indigenous heritage, with Siqueiros noting that Guerrero told him "I am of pure Toltec origin, because my parents were from the Valley of Mexico and a place close to the pyramids of Teotihuacán."⁴²

Porset's relationship with Guerrero thus drew her further toward the indigenista reimagining of Mexican culture and likely increased her knowledge of Mexican materials and furniture construction techniques. Guerrero had experience and education in carpentry and furniture construction, and indeed won one of four continental prizes in the 1941 Organic

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Design for Home Furnishing competition at New York City's Museum of Modern Art over a design submitted by Porset.⁴³ Furthermore, Porset's relationship with Guerrero effectively tied her to Mexico due to Guerrero's strong belief in the Mexican Revolution as a cultural and political project.⁴⁴ During the subsequent decades, Porset only briefly returned to Cuba to visit family members, deliver lectures, and, from roughly 1961 to 1964, work on various projects for the revolutionary Cuban government. Most of her energies were instead dedicated to promoting new ideas of modern living in Mexico rooted in a synthesis of international modernist and Mexican revolutionary nationalist aesthetics.

Revolutionary Modernism

In the production of new ideas of *mexicanidad* following the Revolution, Mexican cultural producers often worked symbiotically with foreigners from the United States, the Caribbean, and beyond to, in López's words, "sift through, synthesize, and reinforce particular aspects of the postrevolutionary nationalist discourse."⁴⁵ Porset's transnational artistic and political formation resulted in an approach strongly attuned to the cosmopolitan and anti-imperialist political currents that influenced this project to define a revolutionary nationalist Mexican culture. In her work, Porset synthesized international functionalist and Mexican artisanal designs while in her writing she adopted a language that echoed the scientism, rationalism, and realism embraced by Mexican Communists.⁴⁶

The definition of a new national architecture was part of the broader postrevolutionary process in which artists, intellectuals, and politicians seeking to define the meaning of the Mexican Revolution identified a variety of cultural forms for revision and adaptation.⁴⁷ Just as artists including Guerrero, Rivera, Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco rejected European academicism in painting, for postrevolutionary Mexican architects the neo-classical styles

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

and lavish public architecture of the pre-revolutionary Porfiriato came to represent the excesses and non-egalitarian characteristics of the Porfirian era.⁴⁸ However, it was not until the 1930s that functionalism began to emerge as a semi-official architecture of the Revolution supported by the state as it expanded its physical infrastructure across Mexico. This embrace was in part due to advances in technology and new building materials such as structural iron and steel and reinforced concrete.⁴⁹ Enthusiastically adopting these new materials and technology, a new generation of politically committed architects such as Raúl Cacho, Juan O’Gorman, and Enrique Yáñez promoted functionalism both as the most promising architectural response to meeting the country’s pressing social needs and an appropriately rational and austere representation of the modernization promised by the Mexican Revolution.⁵⁰

As art historian Luis Castañeda notes, a major challenge in Mexican design projects within the context of postrevolutionary nation and state building was the need “to embody Mexican cultural specificity while remaining in tune with universalizing and internationally palatable modernist trends.”⁵¹ During the 1930s and 1940s, architects such as O’Gorman and Yáñez increasingly rejected a strict functionalism, embracing techniques such as plastic integration of mostly indigenista artwork and sculpture into their structures to create a uniquely Mexican revolutionary modern architecture.⁵² Porset attempted a similar reconciliation within the interiors of Mexican homes. Emphatically rejecting the notion of a homogenous international aesthetic of beauty, function, and modernity, Porset wrote in U.S. magazine *Arts and Architecture* in 1951 that “I design chiefly for Mexicans and strive to produce shapes, as adequate as I may, for their specific conditions of living and their active needs which are also specific.”⁵³ To a Mexican audience, Porset argued in 1952 that, as was already occurring in architecture, Mexico needed to draw on its unusually rich history in the plastic arts to give Mexican industrial design its own unique character.⁵⁴

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Porset saw interior design as instrumental in leveling class and cultural differences and promoting shared social and cultural values. She argued that "on what one sees and hears in childhood, on where and how one learns, plays, eats, and sleeps during those early years depends the type of man which this child will necessarily become. Even in the case of adults, when the mental and physical physiognomy is already far more set, the environment maintains its critical role as a transformative element and often has the power to change even hereditary factors."⁵⁵ Taking this into account, Porset aimed to combine native Mexican materials and construction techniques with a functionalist emphasis on simplicity in design and the use of industrial techniques of mass, affordable production.

Porset's vision of authentic Mexican aesthetic values reflected what historian Ricardo Pérez Montfort describes as the postrevolutionary intellectual's conception of the archetypal Mexican as "rural, provincial, poor."⁵⁶ Her signature item of furniture was the butaque chair, which she reworked and refined during her career using different designs and materials. Porset described this chair as perhaps the ultimate mestizo piece of furniture, arriving from Spain and being absorbed and adapted to life in Mexico by local artisans to such an extent that it became a genuinely nationalist and popular Mexican cultural expression.⁵⁷ Another signature Porset design was a chair based on statues from the Remojada or Totonac culture of the contemporary state of Veracruz. This latter chair was called the escultórico or sillón totanaca and for this piece Porset enlisted the help of Guerrero to contribute his artistic sensibilities - particularly his strong affinity for indigenista aesthetics - to the design.⁵⁸

Porset further selected predominantly rustic, natural materials for her furniture. For Porset, such design considerations were not merely aesthetic. Rather, as she explained regarding a series of affordable pieces of furniture she designed for a high-rise housing complex in Mexico City, Porset selected materials such as palm and tulle weavings and

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Mexican pine and red cedar woods because they would provide an extra psychological affinity between the inhabitant and the furniture due to the "regional Mexican character they have."⁵⁹

Revolutionary Realism and Art in Daily Life

The period during which Porset was most active and successful as a designer took on an aura and has subsequently been dubbed by scholars as a 'Golden Age' beginning in the early 1940s and lasting through the 1950s. Characteristic of the notion of a Golden Age is mass cultural production in cinema, consumer culture, television, and tourism based around shared assumptions about cultural belonging and political stability under the patriarchal postrevolutionary state.⁶⁰ As the country rapidly urbanized, architects and modern architecture took on significant symbolic status in Mexico as representative of the country's rapid modernization under the guidance of the president and revolutionary state. For example, popular illustrated magazines such as *Hoy*, *Mañana*, and *Siempre!* frequently featured almost fetishistic photo essays showcasing the glass and concrete functionalist facades and modern interiors of major new public buildings such as hospitals, schools, or high density housing during the 1940s and 1950s.⁶¹

The Mexican left-wing circles in which Porset moved were generally supportive of the increased private and public investment in manufacturing and industrialization encouraged by the post-World War II Mexican administrations and accelerating under President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952). From the perspective of the left including Mexican Communists, a capitalist transformation of Mexican society was desirable if not necessary to increase Mexico's economic and political autonomy, lessen its subordination to U.S. imperialism, and help the country to abandon its semi colonial status.⁶² In keeping with this perspective, Porset

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

argued in the pages of *Arquitectura México* and *Espacios* during the 1940s and 1950s not for the preservation of artisanal techniques of furniture production. Instead, she called for the development of industrial design as an integral component of the Mexican state's broader industrialization project.⁶³

In Porset's view, the economic forces unleashed by the state-led acceleration of Mexico's economic development would inevitably lead to greater industrial rather than artisanal production of household items. This held both great promise but also posed great risks for Mexico's distinct cultural identity. Porset therefore called on state cultural organizations and technical schools as well as private patrons of the arts to manage the transition between artisanal and semi-industrial or industrial production by preserving popular arts, supporting the development of industrial arts, and promoting a popular mentality that erased divisions between expressive and utilitarian arts.⁶⁴ The good design which Porset hoped would result from this effort signified one that satisfied in one coherent object the double human need for function and beauty while stripping away non-essential elements to embrace simplicity. Such design would, in Porset's view, result in "the raising of general living standards, bringing efficiency and art into the daily circumstances of everyone."⁶⁵

Given her continued close attention to Soviet politics and culture, Porset's attempts to adapt traditional Mexican designs and materials to international modern design principles appears influenced by the socialist realist method. This method was described by architectural scholar Catherine Cooke as a "constant pursuit of new syntheses between those elements of tradition... and of its own period... which are considered ideologically progressive within the culture at its current state of socialist development."⁶⁶ As well as articles from U.S. architecture and design magazines, Porset's surviving scrapbooks at the CIDI feature articles from the *Boletín de Información de la Embajada de la U.R.S.S* issued by the Soviet embassy

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

in Mexico City detailing the post-World War II Soviet approach to art and architecture. In particular, socialist realism - first adopted by the USSR's Communist Party Central Committee in 1932 and broadly described as a style "socialist in content, national in form" – provided a counter-point for Porset and socialist Mexican architects to the functionalist design promoted by U.S. industrialists and state cultural organizations.⁶⁷

Reaching the peak of her career within the context of the early Cold War when battles between the United States and Soviet Union were often fought in the sphere of cultural production, Porset was very clearly aligned with the Soviet Union. During the 1940s, Porset served as an associate director of the monthly publication of the Asociación de Amigos de la URSS (Friends of the USSR Association) and participated in social events organized by the Soviet embassy in Mexico City.⁶⁸ Porset's allegiance to the Soviet Union continued into the 1950s, when she attended the pro-Soviet World Assembly for Peace in Helsinki in 1955. After the Assembly, she travelled onward to the Soviet Union, Georgia, and China as a guest of the Soviet government agency the VOKS, or All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.⁶⁹

The term 'formalism' had been adopted in the USSR in the 1930s to describe Western modernist design as a manipulation of form devoid of social content, promoted particularly by the United States and connected to capitalist imperialism.⁷⁰ In Mexico, Porset also strongly rejected formalism in design. In a 1953 article for *Espacios*, for example, Porset argued that the ornament-free, 'pure' functionalist modern design in the United States stemmed from the United States' lack of a plastic tradition as rich as that of Mexico. Porset thus warned against the dangerous generalization of a notion of beauty that was in reality particular to the United States, rhetorically asking if "by rigidly boxing design into an aesthetic concept that comes to us from other parts and other circumstances, are we not impeding its development amongst

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

ourselves and turning [design] into a sterile formalism?"⁷¹ In an earlier draft, Porset indeed began her article by warning against formalism and offered a strident critique omitted from the published version of distorted images in Hollywood films showing an "American way of life" involving housing characterized by comfort and excess.⁷²

The most cohesive expression of Porset's beliefs regarding good design, good taste, and the ability of both to raise popular living standards in Mexico was the exhibition she developed for the INBA titled *El Arte en la Vida Diaria* (Art in Daily Life). This exhibition premiered in April 1952 at Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes before moving to coincide with the VIII Pan American Congress of Architects in October of that year at the new Ciudad Universitaria campus for the UNAM.⁷³ Porset's exhibition featured a selection of artisan-produced items such as furniture, fabrics, and utensils that Porset gathered from different parts of Mexico, placed alongside examples of well-designed industrially produced household items.⁷⁴

As she had in her articles, through the exhibition Porset promoted the need to develop a new relationship between man and machine and, particularly, the recognition of the machine's ability to produce expressive values so that "in Mexico, useful and beautiful objects would be produced manually and mechanically with the same extraordinary sensibility that has for centuries resulted in such beautiful manual forms."⁷⁵ Porset envisioned this exhibition as the first of many that would encourage artists, designers, and industrialists to work together while at the same time promoting good taste among the general public when selecting articles for everyday use.⁷⁶

The cultural significance of Porset's approach to *El Arte en la Vida Diaria* is best understood when it is compared to the 1921 *Artes Populares de México* (Popular Arts of Mexico) exhibition which provided the general template for representing popular art in

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

postrevolutionary Mexico.⁷⁷ Porset's husband Guerrero had worked alongside one of the most prominent foreign participants of Mexico's cosmopolitan summer, U.S. writer Katherine Ann Porter, as a lead curator of this exhibition of Mexican folk art as it was reworked, expanded and travelled to Los Angeles in 1922.⁷⁸ The curators of both the 1921-22 and 1952 exhibitions attempted a nationalist aesthetic education of Mexico's middle and upper classes. In both exhibitions, organizers gathered representative examples of popular art from different regions of Mexico and privileged utilitarian objects produced for domestic use in rural communities.

However, while *Artes Populares de México* focused on preserving and promoting Mexico's popular arts, *El Arte en la Vida Diaria* aimed at evolving and adapting them to modern living through the use of industrial technology.⁷⁹ In this sense, Porset's 1952 exhibition fully embraced postrevolutionary notions of a distinct Mexican culture as charting Mexico's route to economic and technological modernity and promoted an aesthetic synthesis between postrevolutionary visions of the national culture rooted in a synthesis of indigenous, peasant, and folkloric cultural forms and international ideas of modernity. The aesthetic of modernity was, according to Porset, simplicity "as the substance of the special type of beauty of today."⁸⁰ As Mexican architects had done since the 1930s, Porset in the exhibition catalogue rejected functionalist puritanism in favor of blending foreign influences ranging from Le Corbusier's functionalism to Frank Lloyd Wright's organic design with postrevolutionary Mexican aesthetics.⁸¹ In doing so, Porset attempted to shape a uniquely Mexican consumer culture built around affordability and efficiency as well as national cultural and economic independence.

Modernism without Redemption

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

During the 1950s, Porset reached the peak of her career working alongside many of Mexico's most high-profile architects such as Barragán, Yáñez, Pani, and Enrique Del Moral on private homes and commercial projects. She designed furniture and interiors for venues including the Cine París, Churubusco Country Club, and Chrysler offices in Mexico City and the Pierre Marqués hotel in Acapulco.⁸² Porset's recognizably modern and distinctly Mexican furniture and interior design complimented the aesthetic models established by Mexican artists, architects, state cultural institutions, and tourist promotion since the 1930s. These models have been described by cultural historian Eric Zolov as "cosopolitan-folklórico," formed according to a "complex cultural dialectic... in which referents of 'cosmopolitan' progress and 'folkloric' authenticity served as signposts for interpreting a new vision of Mexican nationhood."⁸³

A *New York Times* report on a 1947 showcase of Porset's designs at the Manhattan store of furniture firm Artek-Pascoe demonstrates how Porset's approach successfully embodied this cultural dialectic for external observers. Porset's pieces were approvingly described as "unpretentiously modern," having "little trace of the traditional native style but at the same time represent the work of a Mexican designer."⁸⁴ This 'Mexicanness' was mostly communicated through the use of natural materials such as "woven basketry for cabinet door fronts or open lattice frames for a bed [that] suggest a tropical origin."⁸⁵ In terms of design, only a variation on Porset's signature butaque chair was described as "clearly betray[ing] its Mexican heritage," however this, too, was 'modernized,' by replacing traditional materials with printed fabric.⁸⁶

Despite not being produced for the U.S. market, Porset's furniture received further favorable coverage in U.S. publications such as the *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, *Interiors*, and *Arts and Architecture*, and she attracted the particular attention of influential

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

California-based architectural writer Esther McCoy.⁸⁷ Further afield, in 1957 Porset was awarded a silver medal for a chair she designed for the Mexican company D.M. Nacional at the Milan Triennial in Italy.⁸⁸ On one level, then, Porset's furniture was read by foreign observers as successfully mediating between the need to communicate the universally modern and the specifically Mexican. However, if Porset brought art into the daily life of Mexicans during this decade, it was only into the lives of very few.

To more fully understand how Porset's furniture was produced and consumed in Mexico during this period, historian of architecture and design Renato de Fusco's "four-leaf clover" (*quadrifoglio*) approach is useful. The first of four interrelated elements driving the design process according to de Fusco is the project, which refers to the forces that stimulate a designer to undertake their work and the schools and intellectual debate that shapes how they undertake it. The second element is the industry involved in converting design into material reality, or its production. Thirdly, de Fusco identified the sale or means of communication and distribution through which objects reach the public and thus become part of popular tastes and imaginaries. Finally, design is driven by the process of consumption whereby the public buys and legitimates the work of designers by making it part of their daily lives.⁸⁹

Porset's artistic sensibilities would appear well suited to Mexico of the 1940s and 1950s. The modernist design aesthetic was increasingly championed by Mexican publications aimed at the home consumer market that promoted consumption based on an idea of teaching consumers "the art of good living."⁹⁰ This model of good living suggested an urban lifestyle centered on a home that was modern, healthy, and comfortable. During the late-1940s, interior design, still often called interior decoration, started receiving significant coverage in Mexican women's magazines and newspapers that offered readers an aesthetic education in

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

international trends in modern interior design and thus the aesthetics of modern living and consuming.⁹¹

However, as architectural historian Anahí Ballent argues, that modernist aesthetics only became the dominant paradigm of 'good taste' promoted by the Mexican mass media once its association with Cardenismo and left-wing ideology gave way to one with the modernization programs of subsequent governments based on industrialization and consumerism as well as U.S.-influenced images of the good life. This policy shift became increasingly pronounced as the Alemán administration moved toward a less interventionist stance in areas such as price controls and the distribution of essential products.⁹² The Mexican state henceforth promoted the idea that Mexico's industrialization and the stimulation of domestic consumption would ideally be driven by private industry acting under the guidance of a state that established priorities for Mexico's economic development.⁹³ These priorities included stimulating consumer demand, with this consumption in turn connected to the modernization of daily life for Mexicans and stimulating Mexican industry to manufacture household objects such as furniture and electronic appliances that were necessary to fulfill this vision of modernity.⁹⁴

The Mexican state symbolically tied industrial capitalist development to the fulfillment of the goals of the Mexican Revolution through the notion that an increasing availability of consumer goods and Mexico's growing urbanization were evidence of rising living standards. This was held to represent the state's fulfillment of the Revolution's promise to bring social justice and modernity to Mexico.⁹⁵ However, the design of consumer products was accorded relatively little attention by state officials. Instead, the state promoted the *Hecho en México* (Made in Mexico) label, which had been compulsory on products manufactured in Mexico since 1929, as a way of nationalizing consumer culture.⁹⁶ Slogans such as "Mexico also produces luxury items... but within everyone's reach" and "a better life in Mexican homes

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

with Mexican products" also featured in advertisements from the department store El Palacio de Hierro and the Industria Eléctrica Mexicana (IEM) company, respectively, during the late 1940s.⁹⁷ However, Mexican industry aimed in its production and promotion to match visions of comfort and progress received mostly from outside Mexico.

Such visions were promoted in the press and at events such as the *Feria del Hogar* (Home Fair) that took place annually in Mexico City's Auditorio Nacional from 1956 to 1976 in which manufacturers demonstrated new products for use within the home.⁹⁸ The state encouraged the integration of artisanal products into the fair during the early 1960s, but as decorative complements to industrially produced goods that accorded to an international style of modern design.⁹⁹ Mexican furniture manufacturers such as H Steel and Domus who displayed their products at the *Feria del Hogar* and supplied major department stores produced such items which may have been "hecho en México." However, the aesthetic values of this furniture was inspired by particularly Nordic and U.S. furniture designs, such as in the case of Domus' *Danesa* (Danish) furniture line.¹⁰⁰

In this environment, Porset struggled to find support from either state-funded educational institutions or private industry to promote and manufacture distinctly Mexican, mass produced, and affordable furniture. During the 1950s, Porset was indeed critical of Mexican industrialists who, despite Mexico having produced some of the richest and most varied popular art in the world, she felt had mostly done "nothing more than produce objects that end up being repulsive for their lack of respect for function and the material of the form."¹⁰¹ According to Porset, most Mexican industrialists preferred to produce inferior copies of foreign designs than develop a distinctly Mexican approach to industrial design.

In the catalogue for *El Arte en la Vida Diaria*, Porset complained about the poor response she received from industrialists whose participation she had mostly failed to secure

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

for the exhibition. Echoing the socialist realist denunciation of formalism in design as serving capitalist imperialism, Porset framed her frustrations by reference to foreign influence. She recounted the experience of meeting a foreign plastics manufacturer who dismissed the exhibition as a waste of time. Porset further recalled a conversation with a Mexican representative of a foreign manufacturer of metal furniture and utensils, for whom she used a derogatory term for Mexicans who left the country and became Americanized when referring to him as "speaking in *pochó*."¹⁰² Such executives, Porset argued, did not consider as relevant to their companies' work the cultural pursuits of the Mexicans who were making them rich.

Porset had been able to work with the Mexican state on one major project that approximated a vision for Mexican industrial and interior design informed by her socialist politics. This project was the ambitious Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán (CUPA) housing project built for public employees by the Director of Civil Pensions in Coyoacán, Mexico City. Designed by Mario Pani, the CUPA opened in 1949 with 1,080 apartments spread across a group of six buildings - the tallest of which rose 13 stories and formed a zigzag shape at the center of the complex - alongside recreational and commercial facilities.

Pani drew inspiration for the CUPA from Le Corbusier's designs for public housing such as la Ville Radieuse in Marseilles, France and the CUPA became the model for a series of high-density housing projects in Mexico City over the 1950s and 1960s dubbed *multifamiliares*.¹⁰³ The CUPA project, which included the integrated design of apartments, furniture, and public facilities also drew on the Neue Frankfurt social housing projects in Germany led by architect Ernst May during the mid- to late-1920s.¹⁰⁴ As part of this project, Porset was hired to design low cost furniture especially suited to the interior spaces of the apartments to be offered for sale to the complex's new residents.

Much to Porset's dismay, the vast majority of the CUPA's residents either could not afford or did not want to purchase the complete sets of Porset-designed furniture. Roughly a year after the CUPA's opening and despite the complex's success in attracting new residents, only 108 of the complex's apartments had been furnished.¹⁰⁵ Porset expressed disappointment that the residents seemed resistant to good design and her efforts to promote a 'cultura de vivienda.' According to Porset, "although the families who moved to the Multifamiliar in Coyoacán could have had furniture, crockery, and textiles in the scale and character of the architecture that would house them, a large number of them preferred to bring to the apartments – out of an apparently inextinguishable habit – as many bad and old things as they had or, in other cases, a new and bad collection in which ostentation hid poverty, or so they think."¹⁰⁶ In short, the residents of the CUPA proved resistant or indifferent to both the modernist rationalism and the revolutionary nationalism that Porset sought to inject into their daily lives.

Porset in large part blamed this failure on the government, reinforcing her contention that the state should play a central role in educating Mexicans in appropriate modes of consumption. In the case of the CUPA, Porset argued that the government "did not even think to convince" residents to furnish their homes the furniture she had designed especially for the apartments.¹⁰⁷ Porset also felt that the manufacturer failed to give the collection the necessary publicity and production that it would have needed to reach a wider public. This meant the her low cost furniture designs "remained the property of few individuals, neutralizing in this way the social projection they could have had, that I always wanted them to have."¹⁰⁸

Porset did not design furniture for Pani's next multifamiliar, the Centro Urbano Presidente Juárez, which opened in Colonia Roma in 1952. For the interiors of this complex, Pani's architectural firm simply produced interior sketches of potential design schemes

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

featuring chairs and couches from the catalogue of the New York City-based Knoll furniture company and items which reflected furniture produced by Mexican manufacturers inspired by modern Nordic and Italian designs.¹⁰⁹ The following year, Porset summed up the furniture that dominated the Mexican market as being "pseudo-modern furniture... The majority copied from the worst of what is produced in the United States according to an exclusively commercial criteria... products that pervert design and the public valorization of it."¹¹⁰ This left the bulk of Mexicans "to furnish their houses with what they most frequently find in the marketplace: industrial furniture of the lowest quality and worse taste, if that is possible, however at a disproportionately high cost."¹¹¹

A notable example of where Porset did succeed in finding a market for her furniture during the 1950s is the most prominent showpiece of mid-century Mexican private domestic architecture: the Jardines del Pedregal. This development also provides a striking example of the commodification of the cultural production stemming from Mexico's cosmopolitan summer as a signifier of political progressiveness and cultural sophistication rather than an egalitarian pathway to modern living for the majority of Mexicans. The Jardines was overseen by Luis Barragán in collaboration with architect and artist Max Cetto and carved into the lava fields to the south of Mexico City starting in the late 1940s. The residential development's promoters specifically harnessed nationalist imagery to turn the apparent disadvantage of the barren and rocky volcanic landscape into an asset. The Jardines del Pedregal was symbolically framed as a uniquely visceral representation of the connection between Mexico's primordial roots symbolized by lava of the volcano Xitle and its modern present demonstrated by the architecture of the houses constructed upon it.¹¹²

In this sense, there was a natural correlation between Porset's design aesthetic and the concept that guided the Jardines del Pedregal. Barragán consulted with pioneer of

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

postrevolutionary aesthetics and self-proclaimed volcanologist Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr Atl, when drafting his vision for the development. According to Barragán, it was Pellicer whose Art History course Porset had taught in 1937 who had first urged him to explore the region in 1940.¹¹³ Diego Rivera further wrote a "Prerequisites for the Organization of the Pedregal" published in the newspaper *Novedades* in October 1949 which was reflected in Barragán's approach to developing the site.¹¹⁴

Porset designed furniture and interiors for houses in the Jardines del Pedregal such as the Casa Prieto (1949), Casa Bernardo Quintana (1956), and Casa Yáñez (1958). She also served as a guest presenter on several episodes of a television program called *El Pedregal... Su Casa... Y Usted* (The Pedregal, Your House, and You) that used nationalist and modernist aesthetics as a marketing tool.¹¹⁵ Usually presented by architect and *Espacios* editor Guillermo Rossell de la Lama, this program ran on Channel 2 during 1953 and 1954 with a format that promoted the Pedregal by way of an aesthetic education of its viewers. The program showcased and explained the work of prominent international and Mexican modern architects alongside interviews with leading Mexican artists and cultural figures including Rivera and Dr. Atl on issues such as plastic integration.¹¹⁶

The carefully curated interiors of the Pedregal houses on which Porset worked are suggestive of how revolutionary nationalism was commodified and consumed by those who wished to mark their class and cultural distinction through an appropriation of the popular and folkloric. According to anthropologist Néstor García Canclini, particularly characteristic of consumer culture in Mexico and Latin America more broadly is the subsistence of a vast area of traditional production and consumption in fields such as artisanal goods that were meaningful not only for their producers, but for significant groups of modern consumers. However, García Canclini recognized an inequality in the degree of appropriation and

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

differences in how artisanal goods are consumed between, for example, those who appreciate them for their symbolic connotations and those that incorporate their aesthetic into daily life through a 'cultivated' recognition of the highest quality traditional arts.¹¹⁷

Perhaps Barragán's greatest success in developing and promoting the Pedregal was his skillful manipulation of this dynamic of cultural consumption to create an aura of political progressiveness, cultural sophistication, and good taste around the development. In 1949, the architect offered financial incentives to entice prominent attorney Eduardo Prieto López to move his family to the Pedregal and used the Casa Prieto that Barragán designed with Cetto as a demonstration and lure for the relatively rich, successful, sophisticated, prominent, and respectable residents he hoped to attract.¹¹⁸ In crafting an image of Pedregal living, Barragán consulted with artists Jesús Reyes and Mathias Goeritz on layout and color schemes for the house's interiors. As Porset had largely failed to do with residents of the CUPA, Barragán also convinced Prieto López to dispose of his old furniture and furnish the house with new, specially designed pieces inspired by traditional Mexican furniture designs and on which Barragán and Porset collaborated.¹¹⁹

How Porset herself saw this dynamic of consumption playing out was that "good design has been restricted to the extremes of the economic scale – a wealthy, cultivated class and peasants who were largely outside the consumer economy." What Porset described as "the bulk of poor workers and professionals," meanwhile, made do with bad design "that they accept because their taste had been prostituted by the mediocre propaganda of the commercial press, radio, and cinema."¹²⁰ These dynamics were reflected in Porset's own success and failures as her interior and furniture designs became prized by the relatively culturally and economically elite residents of the Jardines del Pedregal who knew how to read the signs of revolutionary modernism while remaining mostly ignored by those of the

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

CUPA.¹²¹ A further indication of how Porset's furniture was consumed by the late 1950s is contained in a publication promoting Acapulco's luxury Pierre Marqués hotel (1957) that highlighted Porset-designed outdoor furniture for the hotel as "conversation piece furniture."¹²²

As a manifestation of Mexican culture and society at mid-century, the Pedregal captured an increasing disconnect between revolutionary nationalism as a political and cultural discourse based upon notions of social justice and national autonomy and the realities of Mexico's social, economic and political development.¹²³ By 1956, houses in the Pedregal, most with private swimming pool, cost between 400,000 and 1,000,000 pesos at a time when only 1.5 percent of Mexicans earned more than 3,000 pesos a month and 87 percent earned less than 1,000 pesos.¹²⁴ Amongst the Pedregal's residents on whose homes Porset collaborated, however, was the committed socialist architect Enrique Yáñez, who justified his move to the Pedregal as being "due to the stimulation that the environment produced as a work of nationalist expression."¹²⁵

Yáñez's subsequent defensiveness is telling in how it reflects the symbolic evolution of the Pedregal tied to changing interpretations of the material realities that lay beneath the optimistic façade of Mexico's Golden Age. Beginning in the late 1960s, authors writing about Mexico's political and economic evolution since the 1940s began to cite the Jardines as a symbol of the hypocrisy of a political, intellectual, and business class who publically professed 'revolutionary' values but whose power and privilege rested on foundations of persistent inequality, corruption, and authoritarianism. According to such authors, the neighborhood of choice for such figures was the Jardines del Pedregal.¹²⁶

The ostensibly revolutionary artistic production of the cosmopolitan Mexican summer became inextricably part of Mexico's unequal economic and political development during the

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

post-Cardenista decades. Art historian Mary Coffey, for example, notes that "despite the vitality and innovation of mural art in the 1920s and 1930s, it reached its apogee in the decades following World War II" when public and private patronage of murals as didactic supports or ornamentation increased precisely as official rhetoric drifted away from the revolutionary social justice of Cardenismo and toward the virtues of capitalist development and cosmopolitan internationalism.¹²⁷ Art historian Rita Eder has similarly argued that the portraits Rivera painted for bourgeois clients for significant sums provide "a kind of X-ray image of a new class at the very moment it was coming into existence, a class that acquired wealth through the onset of industrialization, and employed 'the Mexican' as a cosmetic element, a facial paint which was the exclusive fashion of film stars, politician's wives, and a few intellectuals."¹²⁸ Porset's furniture and interiors for individual clients such as those in the Pedregal provide a similar snapshot of how this new class curated their Mexicanness as well as their progressiveness in their homes, offices, and places of leisure.

While she reached the peak of her professional success during the 1950s working mostly for individual clients, Porset's private correspondence reveals an increasing alienation from her work. As early as 1950, Porset wrote to friend and Cuban intellectual José Antonio Portuondo in Havana regarding her articles and designs, stating that "the result of what I do (to the point of exhaustion) is known by the copy editor or, when I design, by the odd snob."¹²⁹ After visiting the Helsingborg Exhibition 1955 (H55) exhibition of modern design in Sweden and the workshop of Danish furniture design Finn Juhl in Copenhagen en route to the Helsinki World Assembly for Peace in 1955, Porset reflected in a letter to Guerrero about how her work for individual clients was impacting the quality of her design. Porset reported that "seeing all this, I realize – without false modesty – how very far in our furniture we have been above all the others who make furniture in Mexico, or at least they say they make it. And I say 'have been' in past tense because I also think I have left behind the simplicity and

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

purity of the early times due to the need to make furniture splendid so that the bourgeois [client] will accept it. A genuinely damaging concession."¹³⁰

In April 1956, Porset wrote to communist German author Anna Seghers with whom Porset developed an enduring friendship during Seghers' exile in Mexico City during the 1940s. Porset described being overcome by a malaise that had been preventing her from working following her return from the Soviet Union and China the previous year. Suffering "a sentimental reaction against the way I work", Porset expressed a desire "to do anything that would get me out of the daily contact I must have with people I do not respect and for whom it is painful to give the best that I can do."¹³¹ Porset, however, lamented in another letter to Seghers that she and Guerrero were increasingly dependent on her income due to Guerrero's disinterest in the commercialization of his art.¹³²

Revolution in Porset's home country of Cuba appeared as the new beacon for the left in Latin America in 1959 and Porset wound down her practice in Mexico to work on projects in the country that served as the new beacon for the left in Latin America.¹³³ While Porset's temporary return to Cuba did not end her career in Mexico, this move effectively ended her high-profile role as a designer and advocate for the development of industrial design in Mexico. In 1964, disagreements over the supervision of a Cuban design school she was tasked with creating led to her permanent return to Mexico.

In 1966, Porset wrote to friend Martha Dodd who was still in Cuba, lamenting that "I am working with little interest. I have tried to get into industry – as [an] industrial designer – but I have not succeeded."¹³⁴ Again working for individual clients, Porset found little had changed since *El Arte en la Vida Diaria* twelve years earlier. According to Porset, "industrialists are still in the stage in which they stick to plagiarism in design, considering it more profitable than having original designs for it saves the fees of the designer."¹³⁵

Conclusion

Porset arrived in Mexico as a left-wing political exile and remained involved in socialist politics throughout her life. She was an engaged member of the international group of artists, writers, and intellectuals who circulated around the circum-Caribbean and gathered in Mexico City from the 1920s through the 1940s. These individuals imagined themselves involved in an anti-imperialist, popular political project based on an affirmation of Mexico's distinct national culture and the country's political and economic modernization. In conjunction with local artists and intellectuals who identified with the Mexican Revolution and anti-imperialist and socialist causes, they played an important role in crafting a new vision of Mexican revolutionary nationalism that was at once militantly nativist and inherently cosmopolitan.

By the late 1940s, however, the Mexican state, media, and industrialists promoted a program of economic development in part based on encouraging nationalist consumption that aimed at replicating standards of modernity and comfort exemplified by the United States. The message delivered to Mexico's growing middle classes through events such as the *Feria del Hogar* was that consuming Mexican meant buying products manufactured in Mexico that met standards of modernity in design and function that came from elsewhere. The Mexican state, meanwhile, promoted the idea that the production and consumption of such goods and the ascension of more Mexicans into the middle class represented the fulfillment of the Revolution's promise of social justice. An examination of Porset's work, writings and private correspondence shows how revolutionary nationalist cultural production was drawn into this system of consumption as a signifier of class and cultural distinction.

Randal Sheppard: "Clara Porset in Mid-Twentieth-Century Mexico: The politics of designing, producing and consuming revolutionary nationalist modernity, *The Americas* 75/1, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 349-79.

Despite producing designs that received significant praise in Mexico and abroad, Porset was ultimately unable to find support from the state or private industry for bringing nationalist aesthetics into the design of utilitarian household objects aimed at a mass market. The case of the Pedregal's expensive single-family homes accessible only by automobile provides a particularly vivid case study both of the market for her designs and of the ease with which a post-World War II U.S. ideal of suburban living could be blended with the nativist aesthetics of revolutionary nationalism. Porset's work can, on the one hand, be appreciated for capturing the postrevolutionary and modernist utopianism as well as the socialist politics that infused Mexico's cultural and political development during the 1930s into the 1940s. Its consumption also, however, proved symptomatic of the gap that emerged between the idealism that fueled this political and cultural scene and the realities of how Mexicans actually lived by the 1950s under a political and economic model with which the cultural production of the cosmopolitan Mexican summer was inextricably intertwined.

- 1 Jorge R. Bermúdez, *Clara Porset. Diseño y cultura* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2005); Museo Franz Meyer (ed.), *Inventando un México moderno. El diseño de Clara Porset* (Mexico City: Turner, 2006); Oscar Salinas Flores, 'Clara Porset Dumas. Raíces del diseño,' in *De la Escuela de Verano al Centro de Enseñanza para Extranjeros. Memorias del 75 aniversario*, Miguel Ángel Castro, ed., (Mexico City: UNAM, 1999); Oscar Salinas Flores, *Clara Porset. Una vida inquieta, una obra sin igual* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001).
- 2 Christine Hatzky, *Julio Antonio Mella (1903-1929). Una biografía* (Santiago de Cuba, Editorial Oriente, 2008), p. 30
- 3 Lois W. Banner, "AHA Roundtable Historians and Biography: Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114: 3 (June 2009), p. 584.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 580; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 3–30
- 5 Steven Bunker, "First Approaches Toward Understanding Mexico City's Culture of Consumption," *Journal of Urban History* 36: 1 (January 2010), pp. 111-115.
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- 11 For an edited selection of Porset's contributions to *Social* including her 1931 lecture 'La decoración interior contemporánea. Su adaptación en Cuba,' see Bermúdez.
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20 Ellen Starr Brinton to Esther Crooks, August 15, 1933, Swarthmore Peace Archives (henceforth SPA), DG: 043 WILPF, Box 17, Committee on the Americas: Correspondence of Brainerd with persons re: foreign affairs: C-G, 1934-1937.

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22 Ellen Starr Brinton to Katherine Terrell, February 28, 1935, SPA, DG: 051 Ellen Starr Brinton Papers, Box 1, Cuba: Correspondence with H. Portell Vila, 1935 and others, 1933.

23 As Michael Goebel has further noted, anti-colonialism and internationalism were central elements of the Communist movement of the 1920s, promoted by the Comintern through an idiom Goebel describes as "transnational solidarity." Michael Goebel, "Geopolitics, Transnational Solidarity or Diaspora Nationalism? The Global Career of M.N. Roy, 1915-1930," *European Review of History* 21: 4 (September-October 2014), p. 485.

24 Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, p. 13.

25 This tolerance if not closeness with the left marked a significant shift from the repression of particularly the communist left by the Mexican state during the preceding Maximato (1930-1934) period. Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 47-48; Adolfo Gilly, *El Cardenismo, una utopía mexicana* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2001), pp. 322-323.

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27 Rick López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 19-20.

- 28 Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), p. 166.
- 29 Clara Porset to Muriel Rukeyser, October 25, 1939, The Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, Muriel Rukeyser Collection of Papers 1920-1976, Manuscript Box.
- 30 This was a group with which Porset had also been involved during her first exile in the United States and that grew out of sympathetic US historian Hubert Herring's engagement with postrevolutionary Mexico during the 1920s. The Committee's annual Mexican seminar ran from 1926 to 1941. With over 1,500 participants by 1939, the seminar aimed to promote greater cultural and intellectual understanding and cross-fertilization between the United States and Mexico. "Tenth Seminar in Mexico: Program," *Three Americas* 1: 5 (October 1935), p. 50; Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), pp. 73-74; López, p. 106.
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- 32 Fernández Montes, p. 15.
- 33 Flores Flores and Fernández Flores, p. 209; Universidad Obrera de México, *Universidad Obrera de México* (Mexico City: Universidad Obrera de México, 1939), p. 56.
- 34 Francisco Reyes Palma, "La LEAR y su revista de frente cultural," *Frente a Frente, 1934-1938* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios del Movimiento Obrero y Socialista, 1994), pp. 5-6.
- 35 Clara Porset to Waldo Frank, May 10, 1937, The Kislak Center, University of Pennsylvania, Waldo Frank Papers, Box 22, Folder 1262; Clara Porset to Waldo Frank, May 27, 1937, The Kislak Center, University of Pennsylvania, Waldo Frank Papers, Box 22, Folder 1262.
- 36 Porset to Frank, May 10, 1937; Clara Porset to Waldo Frank, July 28, 1937, The Kislak Center, University of Pennsylvania, Waldo Frank Papers, Box 22, Folder 1262.
- 37 During the LEAR's January 1938 conference, for example, architects Alvaro Aburto, Ricardo Rivas, Luis Cuevas Barrena and Raúl Cacho supported a functionalist embrace of new technologies and materials in architecture as, particularly in a country with such pressing social needs as Mexico, there was no room to get carried away with "sentimentalist" concerns with aesthetics to the detriment of technical considerations nor to waste public money on superfluous decoration. Ramon Vargas Salguero, "Las reivindicaciones históricas en el funcionalismo socialista," in *Apuntes para la historia y crítica de la arquitectura mexicana del siglo XX: 1900-1980*, vol. 1, Alexandrina Escudero, ed. (Mexico City: Secretaria de Educación Pública, 1982), p. 108.
- 38 Flores Flores and Fernández Flores, p. 209; Porset to Frank, July 28, 1937.
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- 40 López, pp. 15-16.
- 41 Regarding the historical evolution over the use of 'X' versus 'J' in Mexico, see Ignacio Guzmán and Luis Núñez Gornés (eds.), *La equis de México. Historia de un debate ortográfico*, (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2017). Juan Rafael Coronel Rivera, "De Piedra Completa," in Sánchez Soler et. al, eds., pp.19-23.
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- 63 Clara Porset, 'Arte e industria,' *Arquitectura* 29 (October 1949), p. 227.
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- 67 Porset's scrapbooks feature a selection of Mexican adaptations of these principles, such as an undated newspaper article outlining O'Gorman's rejection of functionalism in favor of "realism" in architecture. Guerrero was further a collaborator in the publication *Arte Público* published by the Frente Nacional de Artes Públicas which dedicated its first issue in October 1952 to the construction of the new Ciudad Universitaria. The publication denounced "formalism" in the work of artists including Carlos Mérida and Rufino Tamayo, and established as its second of three goals published on the front page as being "To encourage the progression of this MEXICAN MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL ART, a movement national and popular in essence [and] of a realist intention in form, that today is the target of a reactionary political-aesthetic offensive, to a more advanced stage of the corresponding historical age, that is, to the stage of SOCIALIST REALISM in Mexico." *Arte Público*, 1: 1 (15 November, 1952), p. 1; Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 49.
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- 74 Clara Porset, "El Diseño en México," p. 14; Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America, 1930-1960* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 62-84.
- 75 Porset, 'El Diseño en México,' p. 17.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 López, p. 61.
- 78 Delpar, pp. 135-136; López, pp. 79-80.
- 79 Pioneer of the postrevolutionary aesthetic reorientation of Mexican culture, Dr Atl (Gerardo Murillo), indeed decried contemporary efforts to evolve popular arts into modern forms in the 1921 exhibition's expanded catalogue. López, p. 92.
- 80 Clara Porset, "¿Qué es el diseño?," *Arquitectura* 28 (July 1949), p. 173.
- 81 Alfonso Pérez-Méndez and Alejandro Aptilon, *Las Casa del Pedregal, 1947-1968* (Mexico City: Editorial Gustavo Gil, 2007), pp. 14-15; William J. R. Curtis, "The General and the Local: Enrique del Moral's Own House, Calle Francisco Ramírez 5, Mexico City, 1948," in Burian (ed.), pp. 115-117; Hernández, p. 236.
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- 88 Mallet, "Los alcances del diseño," pp. 83-84; Agnoldomenico Pico, ed., *Undicesima Triennale: Milano 1957* (Milan: Stampa, 1957), p. 238.
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- 92 Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home! Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 38.
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- 96 Moreno, p. 29.
- 97 Ballent, p. 55.
- 98 Ibid., p. 58.
- 99 For example, in the early 1960s, the Mexican government's Endowment for the Development of Arts and Crafts did encourage the participation of artisans from towns such as Olinalá, Guerrero and Uruapán, Michoacán in the Feria del Hogar where they could make contact with urban wholesalers, consumers, collectors, and exporters. López, pp. 186-187; Anne-Lise Piétri-Lévy, *L'Objet Dénaturé. Art Populaire Fonction Sociale et Orientation Commerciale* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1991), p. 193.
- 100 Ballent, p. 56; Mallet, "Pioneros del gusto," p. 325-400; Ana Elena Mallet, *La Bauhaus y el México Moderno. El diseño de Van Beuran* (Mexico City: Arquine, 2014), pp. 76-89.
- 101 Clara Porset, "Arte e industria," p. 226.
- 102 Porset, "El Diseño en México," p. 15.
- 103 Enrique X. de Anda Alanís, *Vivienda colectiva de la modernidad en México. Los multifamiliares durante el periodo presidencial de Miguel Alemán (1946-1952)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2008), pp. 242-246; Fraser, pp. 56-61; Hernández, p. 267.
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- 130 Clara Porset to Xavier Guerrero, June 19, 1955, Archivo Clara Porset, Centro de Investigaciones de Diseño Industrial, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- 131 Clara Porset to Anna Seghers, April, 2, 1956, Archivo Clara Porset, Centro de Investigaciones de Diseño Industrial, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- 132 Clara Porset to Anna Seghers, Undated (ca. 1956), Archivo Clara Porset, Centro de Investigaciones de Diseño Industrial, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- 133 Her first major task in 1960 was designing furniture for the Ciudad Escolar Camilo Cienfuegos designed for 5,000 students in the Sierra Maestra. Salinas Flores, “Xavier Guerrero,” p. 163.
- 134 Clara Porset to Martha Dodd, May, 27, 1966, Martha Dodd Papers, 1898-1990, Library of Congress, Correspondence, circa 1928-1990, Box 8.
- 135 Ibid.