the threads that bind

IN HIGH-RISE SÃO PAULO, 21ST-CENTURY MAKERS ARE RECLAIMING THE CITY'S CRAFT HERITAGE

BY CATHERINE BALSTON. PHOTOGRAPHS BY DREW ESCRIVÁ

São Paulo skyscrapers. *Opposite*: designer Luly Vianna making lace in her studio













From left: São Paulo cityscape; street art in Santa Cecília; Feira na Rosenbaum. *Opposite, clockwise from top left*: Rua Mateus Grou; Luly Vianna at Rendeiras da Aldeia; Feira na Rosenbaum; Cabana Crafts; chef Onildo Rocha at Terraço Notiê restaurant; Foz







As I sit with the women lacemakers in the ancient whitewashed Jesuit mission in Aldeia de Carapicuíba, and listen to them talk, time slows. Hands fly backwards and forwards from scissors to needles to pencils. Reams of cotton thread are transformed into the tiny knots and loops of renda renascença, a lace that originated in Renaissance Europe and came via colonisation to Brazil where it developed its own style in the northeastern states of Paraíba and Pernambuco, from where these Paulistas migrated. In the late-afternoon heat, the square of Aldeia de Carapicuíba is deserted apart from a few dogs panting in the shade of the bright white and blue dwellings. This is a world away from the modern apartment blocks São Paulo is known for.

"I used to cut sugar cane back home in Pernambuco," says Aliane Lindolfo da Silva, a member of the Rendeiras da Aldeia lacemaking group since it began in 2006. "Most of us didn't know how to read or write." What began as a literacy project evolved over time into a needlework meet and then lacemaking, taught to the women about 15 years ago by a lacemaker who learnt the technique as a child growing up in Pernambuco. I admire one of their creations, a white dress for a little girl hanging on a rail in the corner of the room. The geometric web took three to four months to complete and reminds me of a map, charting the stories stitched in as the women talked while they worked. The dress is one of the group's own designs, which they sell at major fairs in São Paulo such as Feira na Rosenbaum – now a national launchpad for emerging makers. They have also collaborated with Brazilian fashion designers such as Luiz Cláudio Silva, whose brand, Apartamento 03, has taken their lace to the catwalk at São Paulo Fashion Week.

"Learning to make lace has meant a huge change for all of us," chimes in Márcia Mesquita, one of the group. "Some of the lacemaking communities in the northeast do not see the value in their work any more. But lacemaking has empowered us to say, 'We make something important.' We want to give this art form to the world."

When I moved here in 2008, knowing very little about the city, I was blown away to discover all four corners of Brazil present in some shape or form: the food, the music, the accents of the people I met. It was not an obvious place to look for craft, and it still isn't to the naked eye. It's a city that announces itself in concrete and glass, in traffic and ambition and a relentless forward motion. For much of the 20th century, it was defined by what it could produce at scale – cars, coffee – rather than what was made slowly, by hand. But the turn of the millennium brought a shift in perspective. "At the end of the 1990s, things began to change in Brazil with a revitalisation of our crafts," says Adélia Borges, a historian, author and curator of the shop at Masp – the São Paulo Museum of Art – which sells craft and design objects from across the Americas. "It was a revolution. We had this colonial view that handmade things weren't important, that it was peasants' work."

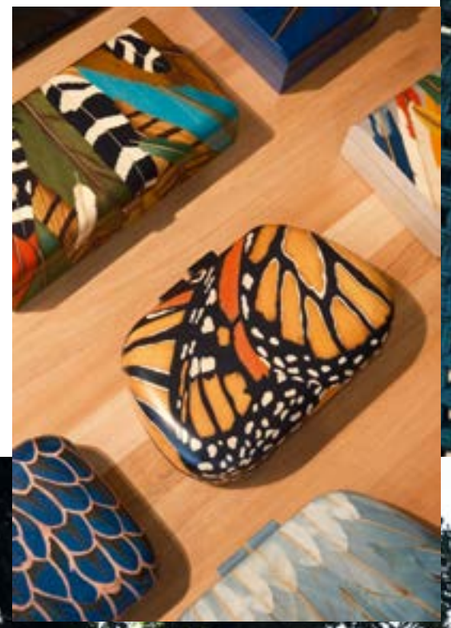
This revolution was not about bringing back techniques and traditions that had ceased to exist, as craft objects had never stopped being made and used, but about them being seen and valued by a much wider audience. What made it so exciting was the dizzying diversity of Brazilian craft: printmaking, lacemaking, ceramics, embroidery, crochet, basket weaving and the sculpting of objects that mirror the flora and fauna of the most biodiverse country on Earth. Wave upon wave of enslaved Africans and immigrants from Europe and Asia brought and then adapted techniques that became deeply rooted in the culture and the identity of the communities across Brazil that they settled in.

I join throngs of coiffed society ladies and stylish players from the art world in admiring a small but beautiful selection of these techniques on display at São Paulo's SP-Arte, one of the leading art fairs in South America, where the Masp shop has had a stand since 2023. It feels



















From left: shirt embroidery at Foz; Maurício Arruda, founder of Mau; Galeria Metrópole. *Opposite, clockwise from top left*: purses at the Masp shop; Catarina Mina clothing; Masp entrance; Maní restaurant; Mau store; Avenida Paulista

pleasingly radical, in a country where craft has long been excluded from the canon of "high" art, for pieces of embroidery and lace, baskets and small wooden sculptures to now be displayed near to million-dollar artworks by the likes of modernist icon Tarsila do Amaral.

Over the past decade Borges has transformed the Masp shop into a destination in its own right, one that draws visitors almost as much as the museum's exhibitions or the award-winning food at its restaurant, A Baianeira. It seems apt for craft to be put on a pedestal here, given Masp's connection with Lina Bo Bardi – the architect who, in the late 1950s, designed the now-iconic museum with its hulking glass box that floats above the street on four red concrete pillars that perch alongside one of the city's main avenues. "Lina Bo Bardi came to Brazil in 1946 from postwar Italy and was amazed by the country's craftwork," explains Borges. "She travelled to Bahia in the northeast, the poorest region in Brazil, and saw that, even in the most miserable conditions, we had inventiveness, a capacity for creation."

Bardi's views went against late-20th-century Brazil's mainstream zeitgeist, which sought to move on from manual traditions – considered a relic of a backward past – towards future-facing, machine-led progress that incorporated new technologies and materials. The universal forms of modern design couldn't be further from the values imbued in craft, in which objects are shaped by the lives and landscapes of those who make them. As Borges says, "We're not just selling objects, we're selling stories of a plural, diverse and inclusive Brazil."

The boom in craft stores is a relatively new phenomenon, with each label on each beautiful object a window into a place and its people. Artiz, Feira na Rosenbaum, Projeto Terra and Floresta no Centro are among the best, the latter two for their partnerships with close to 100 of Brazil's Indigenous peoples or individuals, who have been transforming seeds, fibres and feathers into utilitarian and decorative objects for millennia.

"Brazil is a powerhouse of technique, knowledge and natural materials when it comes to craft," says Luly Vianna, a São Paulo designer whose work I first came across – and couldn't resist buying – years ago at Artiz, the shopfront for Artesol, an NGO that has been a game-changer in mapping and strengthening Brazilian craft traditions and fair trade practices. Vianna works with communities of artisans all over the country on projects that marry her contemporary aesthetic with traditional techniques, co-creating in a way that empowers communities and brings their work to new audiences. Her latest project is with Rendeiras da Aldeia – they are making a collection of place mats and introducing coloured threads into the lace.

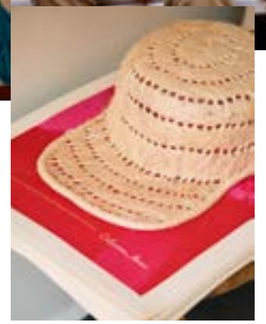
"People nowadays don't just want to buy an object. They want a story, they want to feel part of something human and they want to bring that feeling into their wardrobe or home," says Vianna from her Jardins workshop not far away from high-end store Dpot Objeto where her work is sold. In a few days she'll be headed to Xingu Indigenous Park in the Amazon to work with Asurini and Araweté women who live nearby. She's part of a growing movement of contemporary designers partnering with artisans and selling their work in São Paulo. "Like it or not, São Paulo is the unofficial capital of Brazil. It's a showcase for fashion and trends. When craft is valued in São Paulo, it becomes valued elsewhere. And the artisans start to value their skill in a different way."

THE BOOM IN CRAFT STORES IS A RELATIVELY NEW PHENOMENON, WITH EACH LABEL ON EACH BEAUTIFUL OBJECT A WINDOW INTO A PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE









From left: view from the Rosewood São Paulo rooftop; Feira na Rosenbaum; Cabana Crafts founder Manu Rodrigues; Catarina Mina cap. *Opposite, clockwise from top*: Dpot Objeto; Maní dish; pool at the Rosewood; sculpture and stained glass window there; Pulso Hotel Faria Lima

A few blocks away from Vianna's workshop in the hip Pinheiros neighbourhood, where up-and-coming chefs, mixologists and baristas come to try out their first ventures, a cluster of boutiques on Rua Mateus Grou is redefining Brazilian fashion. They're rejecting shopping malls – a radical choice in a city that's always been hooked on them – and revering an artisanal approach. Brands such as Misci, Catarina Mina, Foz and Reptilia are the new generation on São Paulo Fashion Week's catwalk, and all a stone's throw from each other on the same street.

"Designers such as Foz and Catarina Mina have come from the northeast and are bringing this love of all things artisanal, but in a contemporary way," explains Vianna. Foz is run by young designer Antonio Castro, from Maceió, capital of Alagoas state. His compact boutique is a work of art, with tiny birds perched on clothes rails, all sculpted from wood by artisans in Ilha do Ferro, Alagoas. "We see craft as being more than just handmade. It's cultural heritage and popular culture, and so we try to incorporate elements of that into prints and other aspects of the collections," says Castro.

He tells me stories of rendendê embroiderers in Entremontes, known as Brazil's embroidery capital, and artisans who weave palm fibres in Pontal do Coruripe, both in Alagoas. A lucky few can even travel there with him: since 2023 he has hosted an annual expedition for a small group of his best customers to tour the craft communities he works with. "I got tired of explaining. Now I want to show people – where things come from, how they're made, how long they take," he says. "Craft culture, it's not something you can keep; it changes with time. Preserving it means finding ways for these skills to continue existing, safeguarding their integrity without stripping out their identity and, instead, expanding their horizons."

It's a view shared by revered architect and designer Maurício Arruda, who evangelises about not preserving culture in aspic. "When we think about Brazil, we risk getting stuck in modernist Brazil and the Brasília of furniture designer Sérgio Rodrigues. It's a legacy we love and respect, but it is more than 60 years old. Or we risk getting stuck in a coastal Brazil that's rustic and full of natural fibres," he says.

I visit his new shop, Mau, in Santa Cecília, a cool but rather scruffy neighbourhood in the centre of the city that's fast replacing Pinheiros as ground zero for new creative ventures. He shares the space with two other entrepreneurs: Rio fashion label Retropy and Cuscuz da Irina, a café-restaurant specialising in northeastern dishes. "We all share this vision of Brazil that is maximalist by nature, that is colourful, resilient, handmade and diverse," says Arruda. The trio's Brazilian Maximalist Manifesto is writ large on the wall outside the store, a proud shout of joy for a Brazil that comes in many guises.

> "WE ALL SHARE THIS VISION OF BRAZIL THAT IS MAXIMALIST BY NATURE, THAT IS COLOURFUL, RESILIENT, HANDMADE AND DIVERSE"

Inside, objects sit side by side in deliberate, unexpected combinations: a hand-carved wooden stool next to a sleek Arruda-designed sofa; locally made ceramics lit by contemporary lamps; bold new designs made with centuries-old techniques. Mau, with its mix of colours, identities and fresh ideas, could not feel further away from the lacemaking ladies of the Jesuit Mission – in time, in spirit, in everything it represents. And yet, the distance between them is precisely what defines São Paulo, a city built on the meeting of people, cultures and traditions, where craft weaves its thread through time and place.











Shop and stay

HOMEWARE

A 30-minute drive west of the metropolitan heart of São Paulo is Aldeia de Carapicuíba, where lacemaking collective **Rendeiras da Aldeia** gather twice a week. Their delicate designs are also sold at the shop at **Museu a Casa do Objeto Brasileiro**. **The São Paulo Museum of Art** (Masp) is worth exiting via the gift shop for its curation of craft from across Latin America, as well as contemporary and industrial design. There are dozens of places to buy traditional crafts: **Projeto Terra** in Vila Madalena was one of the city's first, and has objects not found elsewhere; **Floresta no Centro** is part of an NGO (Instituto Socioambiental) that supports Indigenous communities; and **Artiz** is the storefront for NGO Artesol, which maps and supports artisans across Brazil. Traditional craft sits beautifully alongside contemporary design at a handful of stores where good curation pays homage to a creative and plural Brazil. **Feira na Rosenbaum** is a pioneer, curated by Cris Rosenbaum, whose itinerant design fair travels the country and who has put down roots with a bricks-and-mortar store in Pinheiros. The upscale **Dpot Objeto** in neighbouring Jardins is filled with home accessories made with natural materials transformed by the hands of both top Brazilian designers and traditional artisans. In the creative hotspot of Santa Cecília, architect and designer Maurício Arruda's new homeware shop, **Mau**, celebrates Brazil in all its diverse beauty by blending the new and the old, tradition and invention, a mix he explains in the Brazilian Maximalist Manifesto written on the wall outside.

BOUTIQUES

Going against the grain of the city's obsession with shopping malls, **Foz** and **Catarina Mina** are on the same leafy street in Pinheiros – Rua Mateus Grou – the go-to address for emerging fashion talents. They share a love for craftsmanship and roots in Brazil's northeast, where the founders of both brands grew up. Foz's Antonio Castro collaborates with artisans on colourful, unisex designs. Celina Hissa's distinctive outfits and bags at Catarina Mina are made in partnership with women craftspeople who specialise in crochet, lace and basket weaving. Pleats, frills and feathers give a glamorous touch to the designs by **Marina Bitu**, a brand making waves for its collaborations with makers using traditional techniques. For leather goods – mostly shoes and bags – **Cabana Crafts** is a favourite. Founder Manu Rodrigues worked at Hermès in Paris before setting up her own brand in 2014. She partners with leathersmiths in the south of Brazil, home to gaucho cowboy culture, who make shoes and knitted leather bags, and works with craft communities in the northeast that produce plaited palm-fibre bags with smart leather finishings.

HOTELS

In the heart of upmarket Jardins, the elegant **Hotel Fasano São Paulo** pays contemporary homage to 1930s Italy. Linen, Murano glass vases and Venetian frames are a nod to craftsmanship and the Fasano family's Italian heritage. Italy is also in the fabric of the nearby **Rosewood São Paulo**, set inside a former hospital founded in 1904 by an immigrant (one of about 1.4m Italians who came to Brazil, mainly São Paulo, between 1870 and 1920). The hotel is a celebration of Brazilian creativity, housing hundreds of works by local artists and artisans, many of which were site-specific commissions; interiors are by Philippe Starck. **Pulso Hotel Faria Lima** is a relative newcomer to the city, a short hop from the business district and the bars and restaurants of Pinheiros. Expanses of glass and tropical vegetation connect the street and hotel and fill the soaring lobby with light, and the peaceful rooms are oases of neutral tones and natural fibres.