



Ferraro



EXPORTS OF IMPORT

The Maresca sisters purvey a distinctly Brazilian brand of Modernism, in the form of lean hardwood furniture and vibrant textiles by mid-century designers and artists, all displayed within an eye-catching mews house in west London. In this carnival of colour, Charlotte Edwards gets a taste for the tropics. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

Opposite: Genaro de Carvalho's untitled petit-point tapestry of c1960 is typical of his work in depicting the flora and fauna of his native Bahia. Top: the Maresca sisters inherited the Pataxó feather crowns from their grandmother. The abstract tapestry is c1970 by Jean Gillon. Sergio Rodrigues designed the jacaranda 'Tonico' chair, 1955, and the 'J. Hirth' chrome lamp, 1965; the 'JZ' tea trolley of 1959 is one of Jorge Zalszupin's most celebrated designs



Top: foliage-like forms escape from the frame in Odetto Guersoni's walnut 'Biombo' screen, 1960. The painting, *Mother and Child*, 1969, is by the sisters' aunt, Claudia Prada. Above left: not everything is modern Brazilian – in the studio's dining area, Nao Tamura's 'Flow[T]' lights for Wonderglass hang over a Habitat table and Hans Wegner chairs. Above right: a gouache-on-paper study for a geometric tapestry by Rubem Dario Horta Bittencourt



Top: the green wool cords woven through Norberto Nicola's *Meandros*, a sculptural tapestry of 1987, represent the liana vines of the rainforest. It hangs over Oscar Niemeyer's 'Rio' rocking chaise longue, 1978. Above left: a 1960 untitled tapestry by Genaro de Carvalho has butterflies and plants hiding in the tangle of apparently abstract imagery. Above right: these two gouache studies are for tapestries by the Romanian-born architect and designer Jean Gillon





Opposite: Genaro's c1960 tapestry *Pequeno Girassol da Infância* ('Small Childhood Sunflower') is reminiscent of Miró. Above: a tapestry by Rubem Dario Horta Bittencourt is spread over the bed in one of the studio's two bedrooms; it is rendered in the 'Brazilian point' technique devised by another mid-century weaving pioneer, Madeleine Colaço. A petit-point tapestry by Jean Gillon hangs on the wall. The 'Senior' armchair, c1960, is by Jorge Zalszupin



CECILIA AND ELENA Maresca use the finest Milano salami to tempt their dachshund Gulliver – of lilliputian stature but broodingnagian spirit – into position for the photographs at their studio. (Readers can see for themselves that this was not entirely successful.) Born and brought up in Genoa, immaculately dressed and impeccably connected, the two sisters are the very model of Italian design dealers. They could have chosen to establish their new business, Maresca Interiors, which occupies a mews house in west London, as a showcase for the Italian Modern pieces that are their birthright. Instead, the studio's square white rooms are filled with mid-20th-century furniture and artefacts from Brazil, to whose cultural heritage they can stake an equal claim.

Their mother is Brazilian – a sculptor, archaeologist and decorative-arts restorer who arrived in Florence as a student in the late 1960s – and from their earliest childhood Cecilia and Elena visited the country once or twice a year to see their relatives. Back then, of course, their mother's influence was something to be resisted. 'We grew up with her restoring the façades of churches and taking us to antique markets all the time,' says Cecilia, affecting a teenager's eye-roll. Elena remembers being taken to work at Genoa's Museo d'Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone, where their mother is a specialist in Japanese lacquerware. 'She'd make me clean a little mask with a brush. I'd be like, "Mum, can I go and play with my friends?" and she'd say, "No!" I thought, right, I'm going to be a lawyer.'

As it turned out, neither of them exactly rebelled in their choice of career: both moved to London, where Cecilia worked in fashion PR for a decade while Elena became an interior designer. But it wasn't until Cecilia moved to Brazil with her own family five years ago that she had something of an awakening. 'When you grow up in Italy, you have all this beauty around you, non-stop,' she says. 'Every single Italian has that highly developed aesthetic sense; it's ingrained. But mine only came out when I was living in Brazil. I never thought I had it in me.'

It was the furniture that triggered it: those seductively curved, low-slung chairs and tables in rare Brazilian hardwoods, especially sweet-smelling jacaranda – as warm, smooth and rich as melted chocolate, often with the dark striations of the sought-after 'spiderwebbing' or 'landscape' grain. Designers of the 1950s and 60s such as Sergio Rodrigues and Joaquim Tenreiro drew both on indigenous weaving traditions and on colonialist caned furniture in their use of strung or woven elements in leather and rattan, while their more geometric or linear designs were borrowed from the Bauhaus. 'All those influences mixed with the typical Brazilian character – that laid-back, joie-de-vivre spirit,' enthuses Cecilia. 'And the designers were relaxed in the way they approached the design process too, because there was no pressure to industrialise it. They were left on their own to create something unique.'

She began to form her own collection just before international interest boomed. 'I was amazed that this beautiful furniture was not being recognised,' she says. 'But then Brazilians prefer anything that comes from abroad; they always have. They have a bit of a complex, maybe, about feeling far away from it all. They also like everything to look shiny and new. When I started to collect these pieces, they were almost cheaper than contemporary furniture.' On her return to London, she and Elena decided to open an interior-design studio together; dealing in Modern Brazilian furniture was a natural step, and now makes up '50 per cent of what we do'.

A number of galleries and dealers have helped put Brazil's Modern furniture on the map over the past decade, but Cecilia's latest discovery has taken Maresca Interiors into more uncharted territory. In partnership with Graça Bueno, director of Passado Composto Século XX, an influential design gallery in São Paulo, the sisters are now promoting work in tapestry by artists roughly contemporary with Rodrigues and Tenreiro. Genaro de Carvalho, or just Genaro – as with Brazilian footballers, one name often suffices – is considered the first and foremost of these. A relatively short-lived but astonishingly prolific artist, born in 1926 in the northeastern state of Bahia, he trained under André Lhote and Fernand Léger in Paris, where he encountered the work of the great French postwar tapestry revivalist, Jean Lurçat. Encouraged by Lurçat, who visited Bahia in 1954 and admired the younger artist's enormous murals depicting regional festivals and rain-forest plants, Genaro translated his peculiarly Brazilian visual language into tapestry, infusing his designs with imagery inspired by the country's flora and fauna. The Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado, who immortalised Genaro and his wife and muse, Nair, as characters in his books, wrote that the 'tropical sensuality' of his tapestries 'could only come from Bahia, and from no other land'.

Genaro's work was mostly made flat, hand-embroidered by local artisans, with only a few pieces woven in petit point on upright looms. Jacques Douchez and Norberto Nicola, who founded a tapestry studio together in 1957, developed their ideas on the loom at first, making their predominantly abstract compositions themselves. 'There's great footage of the two of them weaving side by side with their cigarettes in their mouths,' Cecilia says, laughing. The pair went on to create dramatic sculptural work inspired by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buic and other key figures of the European fibre-art movement of the 1970s. 'But theirs was a completely different style,' Cecilia insists. 'The colours are much more vibrant; the inspiration of nature is so strong. Nicola in particular incorporated the imagery and techniques of indigenous craftsmanship – things like feather headdresses.'

With Graça Bueno assisting them in securing and authenticating their tapestries, many of which have never before left the artists' family collections, the Marescas are hoping to find an enthusiastic European audience for pieces that remain as vivid as when they were made. Surprisingly robust, rarely in need of extensive conservation and – with the exception of some of the larger works by Douchez and Nicola – easy to transport, the tapestries are also less likely to be bound up in the export restrictions that can hamper the shipping of Modern Brazilian furniture. What's more, Cecilia points out, although they are almost all unique, they are still much more affordable than paintings. 'People are starting to look at tapestry not as the poor sister of painting, but as art in itself,' she says. 'For these artists, weaving was the best way to express themselves. These are their masterpieces.' She leans in a little closer to a Jean Gillon tapestry that almost seems to flicker like flames. 'It's like having a moving wall. The more I look at it, the more I find in it' ■ *Maresca Interiors. Ring 020 3143 5874, or visit marescainteriors.com*



Opposite: the appearance of winged insects in Genaro de Carvalho's tapestries – this one, c1960, is called *Alicenas, Borboletas e Mariposas* ("Alicenas", Butterflies and Moths) – is thought by some to allude to his fragile health. He died in 1971, at the age of 44. Above: as Cecilia Maresca arrives at their news studio with another tapestry, her sister, Elena, hangs Norberto Nicola's *Germination* at the window. The 1956 'Oscar' chairs are by Sergio Rodrigues