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# midcentury brazilian furniture

**When a private equity CEO glimpsed the Paris-meets-São Paulo design chic being cultivated by two gallerists, he was smitten, says Kasia Maciejowska. Portrait by Léa Crespi**

A few streets north of Place des Vosges, Paris's oldest square, and steps from the Picasso Museum, James is a gallery comprised of two diminutive floors of minimalist concrete containing intriguing examples of confident modern design. Architect Félix de Montesquiou of DAS Studio was commissioned to treat the space to best set off what it would showcase: bold examples of Brazilian furniture, especially the collectable designs (£15,000-£180,000) that emerged during midcentury modernism's evolution in South America. Key makers include

Joaquim Tenreiro, Sergio Rodrigues, Oscar Niemeyer and Lina Bo Bardi.

Candice Fauchon and Paul Viguier, the gallery's founding couple, both of whom previously worked in fashion, opened the space last year, having moved from renowned Saint-Ouen antique furniture hunting ground Les Puces. The flea market had been the gallery's home since 2012 and was where, three years ago, they met Léopold Meyer, CEO of private equity firm Florac. Although Meyer was already building a collection of art, furniture and ceramics, it was the smart couple behind James who introduced him to

the elegant singularities of the midcentury Brazilians. "They only had six or seven pieces on show but that was it for me," recalls Meyer. "From no exposure, I then started collecting Brazilian design. It felt like a natural step on from the defined lines and natural palettes of Danish design, which I love."

Brazilian designers in the 1950s and 1960s introduced the rich patinas of their native rainforest woods and grasses into modern design, and explored an expanded sense of

scale invited by the vast natural proportions found in South American landscapes. As an architectural history alumnus of Columbia University, Meyer was no stranger to a broad range of design genres, but until recently Brazilian pieces have remained relatively scarce in European galleries and even in the US, following the restrictive export policies that coincided with this prolific design period in Brazil. For the James founders it was this underrepresentation that initially sparked their interest, along with its powerful

**Above: Paul Viguier (far left), Léopold Meyer and Candice Fauchon at James in Paris, with armchairs, chaise longue and folding screen by Joaquim Tenreiro, all from Meyer's collection**

look. "It's straightforward but still feels avant-garde, and that's what we liked about it," says Viguier.

After that first flea-market encounter, Meyer embarked upon a voyage of discovery. "Because I've been based in France it was easy for me to collect European pieces," he explains, "but what's exciting about collecting the Brazilians is that some of the most important pieces can still be found because it's a relatively young market." In April this year, Sotheby's New York sold a Tenreiro sideboard for \$15,000, the upper limit of its estimated value, and a Rodrigues table for \$2,000, while in December 2015 the auction house sold a Bo Bardi chair for \$13,750. "I'm especially drawn to the work of Joaquim Tenreiro," continues Meyer, "because he's really the master among the Brazilian modernists, who were all working at one of those particular moments when design and luxury were aligned."

By Tenreiro, Meyer owns a pair of elegant upright armchairs, a folding screen constructed in panels of dark wood (all pictured on previous page), a Zen-looking floor lamp of stacked cubes from the notable Bloch Editores building (a 1960s building by Oscar Niemeyer, commissioned by the major publishing company, which enlisted Tenreiro and Rodrigues for the furniture) and a showpiece chaise longue (pictured on previous page) in jacaranda with cane, fabric, acrylic and leather. What he loves about the chaise longue, he says, is "the crescent-shaped detail in the base, plus the cane and the leather, which all combine to make it highly unusual."

Fauchon or Viguier call Meyer when they find something they think he'll like, or send him pictures from Brazil by email, and sometimes he drops by the gallery at weekends. "We know we are carefully building a personal collection," says Viguier, "so we don't push, we suggest." Both dealers and their client seem to be in tune about which pieces stand out. All three are in their 30s, in the midst of creating stylish homes for their young families, and have a shared sensibility for examples of investment modernism that sit stylishly in a contemporary living space.

Meyer and his wife's style is sleek with touches of retro glamour, pops of colour and playful details. "I'm planning a Scandinavian-style winter garden," says Meyer of the room in his Paris house that will be covered in trellis and whose windows open onto the garden, "where I'll be putting some of my key Brazilian pieces." Some of these works use chunky block shapes that give them a macho quality, such as the screen and chaise, but others, like the armchairs, look delicate with gentle tapering and swooping curves.

At their country retreat in Normandy – a modernist space with concrete ceilings – Brazilian chairs blend with Danish and French modern

furniture, all within a pared-back palette of neutrals and naturals. Meyer adds that his children know which chairs to sit properly on. "They have developed a healthy respect for which are the important pieces."

Fauchon and Viguier visit Brazil five or six times each year, meeting with individuals and dealers. "There's a lot of travelling and it's a real treasure hunt," says Viguier. That quest has taken them all over the country, taking in auctions, galleries and private collections.

Alongside Tenreiro, the names that James sources include Sergio Rodrigues, Oscar Niemeyer, Lina Bo Bardi and Jorge Zalsupin. The gallery presently has a Cadeira de Três Pés from 1949 by Tenreiro (his well-known three-legged chair) in five tropical hardwoods (jacaranda, roxinho, pau-marfim, imbuia, cabreuva) at a guide price of £180,000. Just under a third of that investment is the price of one of the maestro's Recurva chairs, dating from around 1960, in jacaranda



From top: jacaranda, leather and brass Andorinha coffee table, from about £22,000, by Jorge Zalsupin. Jacaranda and underpainted glass Giz de Alfaia table, about £80,000, and jacaranda and woven cane Recurva chairs, about £50,000 each, all by Joaquim Tenreiro. Marine plywood, fabric and leather MASP chair by Lina Bo Bardi, about £18,000



**"The James duo only bring home those Brazilian examples they feel will pass the strictest Parisian edit"**

and woven cane; the matching Giz de Alfaia table in jacaranda and underpainted glass (all pictured above) costs around £80,000. By comparison, Zalsupin's Andorinha coffee table (pictured top), also made in the 1960s, in jacaranda, leather and brass, is more accessible from around £22,000. Bo Bardi's 1948 MASP chair (pictured below) in marine plywood, fabric and leather comes in at around £18,000.

"All the designers we source really bring their own character to the genre," explains Viguier. "We're currently focusing a little more on Tenreiro now he's becoming accepted as one of the 20th-century design greats," he continues. "He is to Brazilian design what someone like Giò Ponti is to Italian design." It's perhaps these European reference points that are drawing knowing eyes to collecting the likes of Tenreiro, Niemeyer, Rodrigues et al right now.

Not only does this suit the James duo, but it is doubtless being cultivated by them, as the Paris-via-São-Paulo look is where their niche really lies. They only bring home those examples they feel will pass the strictest Parisian edit. Fiercely refined themselves, and plugged into the fresher side of Paris's fashion and design scenes, they are suitably placed to judge. "We do notice that the Brazilians appeal to the same collectors who like French art deco," says Fauchon, "because they have a similarly chic look." Collectors like Meyer, who want striking modernist objects that fit with contemporary life. ♦  
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