

# Clara Porset's Mexico



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<http://www.ihila.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/872.html?&L=1>



In this project, I examine the relationship between political exile and new visions of modernity in post-revolutionary Mexican architecture and design. My research focuses on the life and work of designer Clara Porset who, as well as being a pioneer of Mexican furniture design in her own right, collaborated with many of Mexico's most important functionalist architects in designing interiors of homes and offices. Porset was born in Cuba and trained in the US and France before arriving in Mexico in 1936 as a political exile. In Mexico, Porset was an active participant in radical political, educational and artistic associations. Professionally, Porset was one of the most successful of several political exiles working in the fields of architecture and design in Mexico identified with modernist and functionalist ideals. Such figures brought with them experience of training at foreign institutions, including the Bauhaus in Germany. Alongside their Mexican counterparts, exiles played an important role in shaping both the aesthetic, technical and political characteristics of post-revolutionary modernism in Mexico. Porset was particularly engaged in this collective project of defining a "Mexican" functionalism in interior design. As such, she aimed at blending the universalist political and technical discourses of functionalism with Mexico's intellectual, cultural and political particularities during an era in which the promotion of a distinctly Mexican cultural and ethnic identity was identified by the state and individuals involved in radical politics as important to promoting social cohesion and resisting U.S. imperialism.

Rather than a biography or discussion of one individual's work, this project uses the life and work of Clara Porset as a window on broader interactions between political exile and the economic, political, and social context of Mexico's "Golden Age." On the one hand, I will explore the extensive personal and political networks of Porset to show the creative, political and intellectual milieu of the Mexico City from the 1930s to 1960 in a way that crosses the boundaries of "national" or narrowly sectarian political communities that dominate existing studies of exile. These networks included prominent left-wing Cuban, German anti-fascist and U.S. Cold War exiles. On the other hand, I will situate the designs of Porset within the broader context of the development of modernist design and architecture in Mexico, particularly the politics of functionalism around mid-century. This includes an examination of Porset's collaboration on public works projects with major architects, artists and the state, paying particular attention to how such projects were visually represented in newspapers and illustrated magazines as well as discussed in art and architectural journals. I will also consider how economic forces and technology shaped the development of design and architecture in Mexico. Alternative visions of Mexico - such as those promoted by Spanish exile designers who promoted ornamental and European styles of design - will also be discussed to shed light on how ways of consuming and living reflected different forms of identity. Finally, I will situate this analysis in the transnational context of cultural and political relations between the U.S. and Mexico during the early Cold War through reference to Porset's social connections to US Cold War exiles in Mexico and the reception of her work as a "Mexican" designer within the United States.