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Luz García Neira

University of São Paulo, design.textil@uol.com.br

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The Tropical Myth and Brazilian Textile Design

Luz García Neira¹

design.textil@uol.com.br



Figure 1. The current and popular imaginarius about Brazilian printed textiles.

Source: Revista Manchete (1960s).

Historical background

The Brazilian textile industry was one of the first to be established in the country even during the colonial period. At first, it was devoted to weaving sacks used for packaging products in Brazil and also for the production of coarse fabrics for the garments of slaves.



¹ Universidade Anhembi Morumbi, São Paulo, Brazil

² These conclusions were reached during the author's PhD research entitled *Printed textiles in Brazil, from origin to originality* held at the Universidade de São Paulo in 2012.

In the Charter of 1785, the Portuguese Government forbade Brazil from producing fabrics regarded as being of fine material. In that epoch, this edict may have been justified as a necessary means of preventing manpower required for farming from being diverted to an industry that could not provide any wealth for the Portuguese kingdom. However, today it is believed that a possible means of industrialising the colony could have brought better chances of securing independence because, in reality, there was not enough local consumption to produce fabrics of a better kind.

The first changes were apparent at the beginning of the 19th Century when following the arrival of the Portuguese court that was in flight from the Napoleonic Empire, a consumer market was established. This comprised more sophisticated products, which could not be catered for by national manufacturers who were only capable of producing cloth for slaves and for sacks in general. As a result, from that time, textile production and trade was divided into two sectors: “fabrics for the poor” were produced by Brazilian industry, while the classes that were “more favoured by fortune”, were only supplied with foreign textiles, above all, English and French. This sharp division left a definitive mark on the opinion of Brazilians about national production and until today, signs of its downgraded status still survive.

It was only following the proclamation of the Republic (1889) that industrialisation began to be seen as necessary for the modernisation of society and its economic independence. However, production inside the country remained almost entirely devoted to cheap fabrics because the majority of the population was rural or working-class, or in other words, regarded as poor.

When the 1st World War affected imports, this led to an over-production of cheap textiles and a shortage of good quality products; as a result, the Government began to think about investing in the production of textiles of an intangible quality. There was a need to compete with foreign products that were traditionally superior in terms of class and distinction, because they were associated with luxury and beauty. In view of this, the ideal argument that was used to attract the interest of the consumer who despised national production began to be based on an appeal to national sentiments and required the consumer to become involved in the progress of the nation by becoming consumers of Brazilian textiles.

Political objectives and artistic creation: the origins of the tropical myth.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, cultural movements of great importance have begun to view Brazilian subservience not only in terms of foreign production but also the European model of professional conduct and the imitation of foreign artistic creation. It has been a period when national symbols are being acclaimed and the Indian and mestizo regarded as Brazilian heroes. In particular, the geography of the country is being praised for its wealth of flora and fauna, as well as the grandeur of its sheer size, features that implicitly referred to the Brazilian people, or rather the general public. There are countless examples of this eulogizing of ‘Brazilian roots’ and these can be found in the musical, artistic and literary productions that have appeared since then. (Figure 2.)

Getulio Vargas (1882-1954), who was intermittently President of the Republic from 1930 to 1945 and from 1951 to 1954, was aware that in bringing features of Brazilian culture within the political discourse, he was endowing the public with a national character. In other words, he was sharing with all Brazilians the responsibility for taking part in the progress of the nation, mainly by opening up industrial development and extending the values of the people themselves to the white, urban middle-class. In this situation, it was necessary to persuade the middle class to show a preference for Brazilian textiles and in describing them, associate them with national Brazilian attributes, above all to our tropical surroundings.

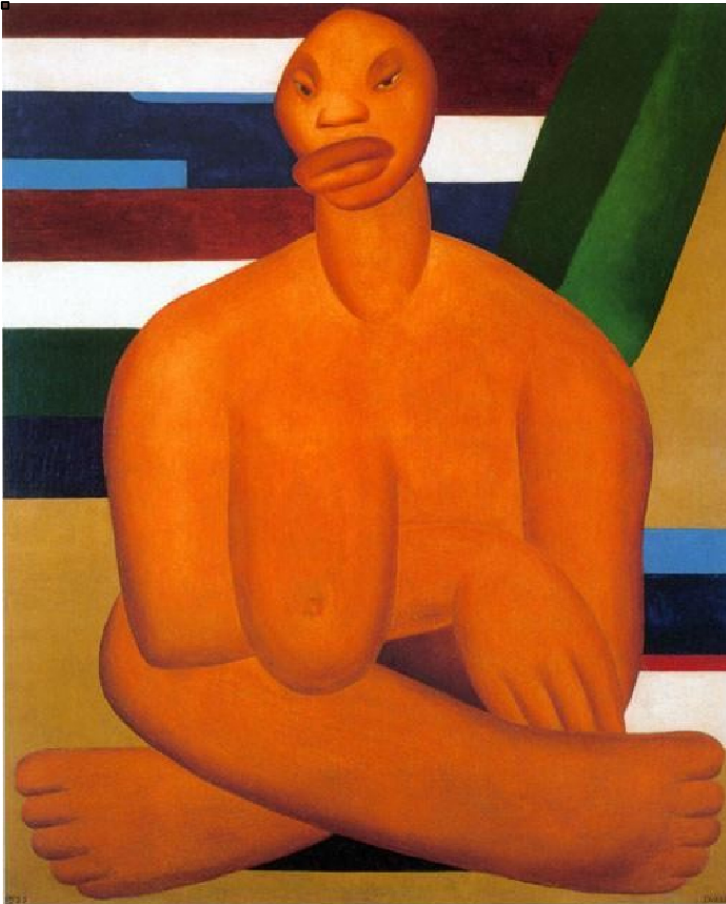


Figure 2, left. Tarsila do Amaral, *A negra (The Black Woman)*, 1923. This painting represents the Brazilian woman and the tropical environment. Tarsila do Amaral said: “I feel myself Brazilian, I want to be the painting of my country” Source: Museu de Arte Contemporânea (MAC-USP)

**Figure 3, right. *If you love Brazil, you work for it!*
Magazines’ advertisements to promote the work in the industry and to link the progress the nation with the development of the industry.
Source: *Revista Têxtil* (1940s)**

Notwithstanding this, in reality, the lack of any tradition in the teaching of applied arts or even the culture of design before the 1950s, made it impossible for there to be any local creations. The growth of industrial printed textile designs began to depend on being able to reproduce foreign designs, in particular English, where on the basis of an ‘original’ design which served as a model, various kinds of technical adjustments were made which gave rise to the possibility of local production. The selection of the type of copied design, with the addition of the necessary adjustments to the technology available and the existing market, led industries to prefer a kind of patterning that was floral, with simple shapes and striking colours, and which could match the use of the word exotic and reflect our nature. Thus, the idea was falsely spread that our creations were devoid of any foreign influences.

Although it is easy to make out the case that after the 2nd World War, in Europe and the United States, printed floral designs became more common in the feminine wardrobe, in Brazil they were labelled as national and as adding to the attributes that verge on exoticism. However, since the findings of this research showed that in fact there was no national creation², it has sought to

² These conclusions were reached during the author’s PhD research entitled *Printed textiles in Brazil, from origin to originality* held at the Universidade de São Paulo in 2012.

understand how design products have acquired a national attribution in their aesthetic aspect, particularly with regard to fabrics.

‘Read to believe’ and the Brazilian prints in the printed media

The nationalistic discourse aimed at encouraging the production of national goods began to gather force in the mid-1930s through the Brazilian press which was censored and controlled by the federal government. In the case of textiles, owing to the rejection of local products by the middle class at that time on the grounds of their well known poor quality, the government realised that there was a need to persuade the public of the positive features of Brazilian products.



Figure 4, left. The American costume designer Edith Head in Brazil. She certificated about the quality and the ‘exotic’ designs of our textiles printed (1950s). Source: Folha de São Paulo.



Figure 5, right. The Brazilian elegance with ‘Brazilian’ printed textiles in a catwalk in São Paulo (1950s). Source: Folha de São Paulo.

It is in the interests of the government to bolster the image of the nation, stimulate the consumption of national textiles and replace imported goods but mainly, to persuade the public that progress and modernity have finally arrived in Brazil. However, it is difficult to know if the public really believed in these values and features; the trade barriers imposed on the imports of textiles were so restrictive that it is likely that there had been a considerable increase in the consumption of Brazilian textiles by the middle class. The extent of their attraction to national textiles needs to be investigated further in a future analysis.

The public relations expressed by the government in press reports not only proclaimed the real quality of national products and their association with economic progress but above all, that Brazilian textiles had an original design which suited Brazilian women and for this reason, proved to

be very appropriate. Thus, it could be inferred that Brazilian textiles had an original national design and above all were entirely original.

In view of what has been briefly set out here, the Brazilian textile industry had not only lacked a stimulus which could enable it to develop new fabrics in the course of its progress but also there was no artistic and industrial training which could have supported training schemes in Brazilian textile design. As well as this, if there had been production in pre-Colombian textile creations with their own language, they would have been obliterated by the climate of colonial subjugation which we were subject to at that time. Hence it must be asked what features the national textile products could claim for themselves, when account is taken of the basic assumptions underlying the origin and identity of a production design.

Throughout history, it has been found that there are very clear criteria for this production of feelings which, in the case of Brazil, has not been respected: either design caters for a specific consumer profile with identified needs or it is subservient to an ideology (largely political) or finally, it seeks to uphold a theoretical assumption about design or the arts that was being defended at that particular time. Another more remote possibility is the revival of a kind of handicraft production that is linked to the heritage of the country.

Hence since it is clear that Brazilian textile goods of the period could not support any of these causes, it must be asked in what direction the sense of nationality was being marked out for textiles since it was noted that, in general terms, the national production has always been similar to that produced in the most technologically advanced countries. Since Brazil maintained commercial relations in this area, the phenomenon was easily explained by the procedure of developing the products that had been established.

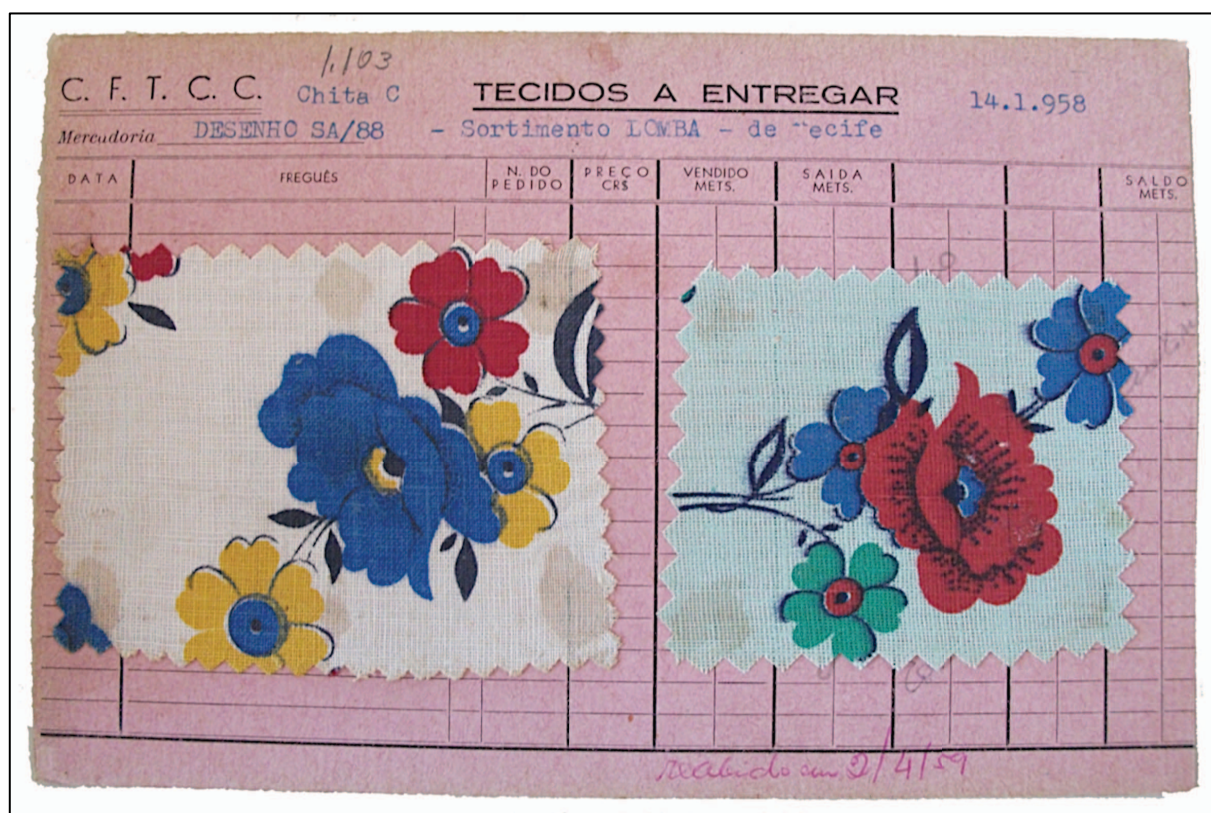


Figure 6. Production card by an important textile industry in Brazil. In the left, the original design and, in the right, the 'original' and 'national' fabric (1950s). Source: Museu Decio Mascarenhas

In view of this, it is clear that the media discourse resorted to the same ideological assumptions, which had already been employed and explored in Brazilian social thinking. This included the plastic arts since the beginning of the 20th century, regardless of the significant capacity of the visual compositions or their legitimacy. At the heart of the argument conducted by interested parts, can be found the rationale that, during the period under study, the textiles that are in fact a product of national industry (produced in Brazil by a Brazilian workforce and using local raw materials, although depending on a predominantly imported technology) and are not subservient to foreign domination. In fact, they can be shown to have their own aesthetic and reflects our needs and our way of life.

From the standpoint of the ‘producers of discourse’ this aesthetic was achieved – and here the word is used in its strict sense, and because in a nationalistic discourse, it should be realised that there was a symbolic struggle to establish its validity – by the fact that we were no longer dominated by foreign ‘reference points’. This allowed us to achieve a creative autonomy because we already possessed the modern technical conditions for production, which freed us from the need to depend on imports. Thus, underwent a period of modernity and progress (before the 1920s), which can be explained in all its artistic expressions, such as literature, the plastic arts, the cinema and music.

However, if it can be stated that all the strength of national feeling was concentrated in verbal discourse and not in the visual expression of printing – at least on the basis of its proclaimed originality and authenticity, it would be incorrect to assume that this discourse came about at random. Despite being closely aligned with what was produced in other countries, the floral and joyful prints produced in Brazil, could easily serve as proof of what was stated in this regard. In the light of this, textiles can have a double media effect due to their ‘image nature’; in themselves as a support for ‘aesthetic information’ and through them, when industry, the press and the government demand that a positive image should be stamped on Brazilian industrial production.

Conclusion

It might seem paradoxical to impute tropical origins to an industrial product in a country anxious to be regarded as modern but this was not the discourse of economic and cultural autonomy that these feelings could arouse in the public. The idea of going back to their roots, seemed to be a way for Brazilian people to recapture their autonomy and even their nationality.

At no time was it necessary for people to carry out a discourse to prove their origins or the identity of textile goods. This is because until today the idea that floral textiles are and always have been Brazilian has become widespread and represent both an identity and a complex nation in terms of social and ethnic factors. It is in this sense that it is believed that restoring a possible pre-Colombian origin associated with untouched flora and fauna, has a great importance in allowing the country to play a role in the modern world, where developed countries claim they are nations with their own identity.

Finally, it is evident that textiles can thus be interpreted as forming the basis for a discourse constructed independently of the images that they refer to. This suggests that the nationality attributed to the printed textiles is ‘discursive’ rather than plastic and that it appeals to both the inner and outer concepts of the kind of expressiveness being analysed here. This research study has attempted to demonstrate that there is no uniform plastic solution that is able, in practice, to fix a Brazilian style in terms of textile printing and that, in reality, the idea of a ‘tropical pattern’ is much more than a myth – because it lends support to the belief – than an empirically verifiable reality.



Figure 7. Images of national cotton in the Brazilian Press (1940-1960).
Source: Luz García Neira

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