

Brazilian Fashion Designers

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Abstract

A new generation of Brazilian fashion designers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have gained an international profile with conceptual designs that challenge Western presuppositions of what constitutes “Brazilian-ness.” While earlier Brazilian fashion innovators tended to copy and edit Western fashion designs, emulating Western conceptions of beauty and good taste, the work of designers such as Alexander Herchcovitch, Ronaldo Fraga, Karlla Giroto, Jum Nakao, Isabela Capeto, Carlos Miele, and Tereza Santos contests the stereotypical tourist’s view of Brazil as a tropical paradise, and references the darker, quotidian aspects of Brazilian life. The establishment of São Paulo Fashion Week in 1996 and Fashion Rio in 2000 have provided a mechanism for these designers to achieve new heights of international visibility and commercial success. As previous commentators have demonstrated, all fashion designers are informed, however subliminally, by human contact with the international environment, whether in a geographical, economic, political, or cultural sense. These forces are all interrelated yet at the same time modified by an individual’s epistemological knowledge, and a designer’s own understanding of the points of contact between such subjects. Covering much of eastern South America, Brazil is the fifth largest and most populous country in the world. Contemporary Brazilian fashion design reflects the richness of Brazil’s history (which has included huge influxes of immigration from Europe, Asia, and America following the abolition of slavery in 1888), as well as its geographical, racial, and cultural diversity.

Covering much of eastern South America, Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world in terms of geographical area and population. The rich history of Brazilian fashion is one of exchange and appropriation, a complex process by which Brazil, since its founding by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, has absorbed but also reinterpreted diverse influences stemming from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the United States. All fashion designers are informed, however subliminally, by human contact in and with their surrounding environment, whether in a geographical, economic, political, or cultural sense. Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade used the term “anthropophagy,” or cannibalism, to refer to Brazilians’ distinctive ability to devour and assimilate other cultures in order to create a quintessentially Brazilian cultural product. Andrade is relevant to a discussion of a new generation of Brazilian fashion designers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, whose work is receptive to international influences but nevertheless deeply rooted in Brazilian social and cultural consciousness.

Alexandre Herchcovitch, Isabela Capeto, Jum Nakao, Carlos Miele, and Ronaldo Fraga are not the only Brazilian fashion pioneers, but they are distinguished from their predecessors in that they are sufficiently distanced from recent history in Brazil (the authoritarian military dictatorship of 1964–1985) to engage freely and confidently in a sartorial discourse with the past. Fashion is a force that thrives on novelty and change, continually harking back to the past, through historical quotation and the rewriting of themes, as it seeks to relate to contemporary concerns. These five designers have achieved international commercial success for their innovative and creative designs. This is a result in part of improved political stability and economic growth in Brazil, demonstrated by the stabilizing of the Brazilian currency, the Real, and increased trade and investment with the rest of the world, which have provided the conditions for these designers to emerge and flourish.

Brazilian fashion underwent profound changes in the early 1990s under the administration of President Fernando Collor de Melo, who lifted restrictions on foreign manufactured goods. With imports being freely allowed into Brazil, specialization in the national fashion industry was imperative if Brazilian industries and companies were to rival foreign competition. Huge investments were made in modernizing production to maintain high standards while reducing costs. In the early twenty-first century, the clothing industry was contributing over 5 percent to the Brazilian economy. The rapid growth in telecommunications and the possibilities offered by the global marketplace have also played a part by providing the means and channels of communication for these designers to achieve international recognition. Designers and international consumers are easily and inexpensively connected to one another in the early twenty-first century generating sales and recognition throughout the world. At the same time Brazilian consumers, who are continually exposed to international tastes and trends, are becoming more critical and demanding regarding fashion produced in Brazil.

Aside from economic growth and the rise of the Internet and digital technology, major fashion events held seasonally in Brazil have helped to amplify and consolidate Brazilian fashion. They provide a platform for new trends and work to demonstrate the consistency, content, and depth of the Brazilian fashion system to international consumers. Phytoervas Fashion, a contest for new talent that adhered to international fashion seasons, took place in São Paulo in 1994. Morumbi Fashion Week followed, later renamed São Paulo Fashion Week, which was established in 1996 as a sequence of shows drawing attention to new Brazilian designers. São Paulo Fashion Week has since developed into the largest fashion event in Latin America and the fifth largest in the world—following London, Paris, New York, and Milan—attracting over 120,000 visitors annually. According to the creative director of São Paulo Fashion Week, Paulo Borges, “In a country like ours, which is as big as a continent, we need a trendsetting center if we want to expand our overseas trade. We have to be able to show the same power and infrastructure as other major fashion-producing countries.” Fashion Rio was launched in Rio de Janeiro in 2003 and offered a counterpoint to São Paulo Fashion Week by focusing on beachwear, providing Brazil with an event representative of its own culture that would appeal to a wider sector of national and international buyers.

As Brazilian fashion designers have begun to gain recognition through fashion events, the creative, manufacturing, and professional education systems in Brazil are also starting to mature in all aspects of the industry, from pattern making and styling to marketing and PR.

Alexandre Herchcovitch

Alexandre Herchcovitch was one of the first internationally acclaimed Brazilian designers. He has shown collections in London, New York, Paris, and São Paulo, and opened stores throughout Brazil, United States, Europe, and Asia. Herchcovitch became known for his avant-garde and technologically sophisticated designs, which responded to the stereotypical tourist's view of Brazil as a tropical paradise consisting of Carnival, samba, and idyllic beaches. As fashion historian Valeria Brandini has pointed out, his conceptual designs reference the darker, quotidian aspects of Brazilian life such as the streets, the favelas, prostitution, poverty, gang behavior, and alternative nightclub culture.



Models display Alexandre Herchcovitch's spring/summer 2013 collection at São Paulo Fashion Week. He is known for his conceptual designs that reference the darker, quotidian aspects of Brazilian life such as prostitution and alternative nightclub culture. Victor Virgile/Getty Images.



A model in dark lipstick wearing an intricate lace dress in black by Alexandre Herchcovitch for his spring/summer 2013 collection at São Paulo Fashion Week. Yasuyoshi Chiba/Getty Images.

Herchcovitch was born in 1971 in São Paulo, an eclectic and cosmopolitan city that he claims represents his global design ethos: “I think my work reflects what São Paulo is but they are not specific to São Paulo ... what São Paulo helped me to do was design clothes for the whole world.” His drive to innovate and experiment has enabled him to find inspiration in unexpected forms and technologies; for his fall/winter collection of 2004–2005, for instance, he used liquid rubber from Amazonian rubber trees to fashion intricate hand-painted patterns that framed the female form, emphasizing the hips and bosom, and falling around the body almost like lacework. Dresses were accompanied by hats of black, abstracted fruit, giving a dark, surrealist twist to brightly colored, Carmen Miranda-style headwear, in the process turning Western presuppositions of what constitutes “Brazilian-ness” upside down.

Herchcovitch's interest in fashion and his insight into the way that the flow of fabric could frame the body stemmed from his childhood experience of growing up in the lingerie store owned by his mother, where he would occupy himself playing with the fabric, fasteners, bindings, and zippers. His mother was also responsible for teaching him the rudiments of pattern making and sewing. The son of Polish immigrants, Herchcovitch was educated at an Orthodox Jewish School before going to the University of Santa Marcelina in São Paulo in 1990 to study fashion. According to Herchcovitch, "Having grown up in an environment that was very closed only made me more curious about what was going on in the world outside of school."

He began his career creating costumes for famous transvestites such as Marcia Pantera, a celebrated figure in São Paulo's gay and alternative nightclub culture, and has since become infamous for breaking the rules of commercial fashion in Brazil. As Brandini has explained, Herchcovitch "went out of the way to create bizarre and unusual clothes that exposed ugliness, age, physical handicap, and pain ... [he is] one of the first Brazilian designers to generate an awareness of fashion in the Latin world based on Brazilian culture." An example can be seen in the Brazilian Color Chart, created in summer 2003 by Herchcovitch's fashion stylist, Mauricio Inaes, to coincide with São Paulo Fashion Week's theme of "Brazilian culture." The chart presented a series of photographs detailing the different skin tones and distinguishing features (scars, body hair, and other imperfections) of individual Brazilians. The aim was to articulate the racial and ethnic diversity of the Brazilian population through association with the theme of color in fashion, highlighting the unique identity of Brazilian fashion in which individuals, groups, and everyday life are integrated.

Ronaldo Fraga

Fashion designer and self-taught illustrator Ronaldo Fraga has also established himself internationally, although rather than reference the less salubrious aspects of Brazilian culture like Herchcovitch, he uses vibrant color as a means of self-expression. Born in Belo Horizonte in 1966, he was educated in fashion design at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais—the first fashion course in Brazil, which was initiated in 1985. On graduating, Fraga won a competition and was awarded a place on a postgraduate course at Parsons School of Design in New York. He studied millinery at Central Saint Martin's School of Art and Design in London before returning to Brazil in 1996 to establish his eponymous label. In 2001 he participated for the first time in São Paulo Fashion Week, and has since presented two collections every year. In addition to selling his clothing in his own two stores, and in thirty other stores throughout Brazil, he lectures at universities throughout the world, most recently at the conference "A Tale of Three Cities, Contemporary Brazilian Fashion in England" held at the London College of Fashion in November 2012. He is the author of a book entitled *Fashion, Clothes and Time: Drummond Selected and Illustrated by Ronaldo Fraga* (2006), which examines the modernist Brazilian author Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Fraga was awarded the Cultural Merit Order by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture in 2007 for having contributed to the richness of Brazilian culture.



Ronaldo Fraga's spring/summer 2013 collection was inspired by soccer as an avenue for the establishment and affirmation of Brazilian cultural identity. Fraga received criticism in Brazil for the gray wigs sported by models at São Paulo Fashion Week, which activists argued were responsible for perpetuating negative racial stereotypes concerning Afro-Brazilian hair. Ricardo Bufolin/Getty Images.

A cursory glance at Fraga's work might seduce viewers with its carnivalesque color palette, yet his inventive and original collections raise awareness of important cross-cultural concerns. His designs draw on local fabrics and clothing styles as a means of exploring Western representations of Brazilian identity, questioning how such constructions intersect with the dynamics of everyday life in Brazil. As he has explained, fashion is for him a means of searching for a "cultural reaffirmation and [the] construction of the identity of a people ... I try not to deny my identity; it will appear in everything I do." His fantastical creations, rich in pattern and embellishment, are part of a complex process of storytelling through which he fashions silhouettes and shapes that disrupt the stereotypical image of Brazil as a place of sensuality, and the female Brazilian body as an object of sexual desire. According to Fraga,

“First it was like a protest against this export-like sensuality that Brazil does and I question. It is somewhat cruel for a woman to fit herself into some specific shapes and postures as if they were unique to Brazilians.”

He has a preference for natural fabrics, in particular silk and cotton, because they are appropriate for the tropical Brazilian climate but also characteristic of his native Minas Gerais, which has historically been linked to cotton production. His method of draping these natural materials over one another, privileging texture over body shape, lends these simple fabrics elegance and sophistication while expressing his critical view of the way that Brazilian women’s body contours and sensuality have repeatedly been exploited by both the Western and Brazilian media.

Fraga invests his design process with environmentally sustainable and socially conscious practices, and is involved in a number of projects with rural artisan groups such as Gatas Bordadeira (from the city of Passira in the northeastern state of Pernambuco), with whom he has worked since 2005. He has commented: “I believe there is an immediate need to close that gap that exists between designers and artisans in Brazil ... I think much of our identity in Brazil is handmade.” The Portuguese word *gambiarra*, which has no English translation but is used colloquially throughout Brazil to refer to a makeshift contraption or improvised solution, is exemplified by Fraga’s adaptation and reinterpretation of local art and craft concepts into catwalk pieces. *Gambiarra* is believed to be a direct result of the unpredictability of everyday life in Brazil, in which things often do not occur as planned, requiring Brazilians to be inventive, agile, and to have an innate capacity to improvise.

His fall/winter collection of 2011 in bright blues and oranges referenced pop art, inspired by Brazilian artist Athos Bulcão and architect Oscar Niemeyer (who was responsible for the modernist capital city Brasília, which was planned and developed in 1956). His spring/summer collection of 2013, showcased at São Paulo Fashion Week on a catwalk made up as a soccer field, complete with makeshift bamboo goalposts. It featured full skirts, loose T-shirts, jackets, and pants in a patchwork of soccer-like hexagonals and pentagonals, with lace-up elements and logo-print graphics executed in contrasting blocks of monochrome and neon. As Fraga has explained on his blog, his inspiration for the collection stemmed from his interest in soccer as an avenue for the establishment and affirmation of Brazilian cultural identity: “I am overwhelmed by the passionate and romantic soccer of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, by the soccer played on grassless fields and their handmade uniforms. By bold colors and graphic stripes. By particular stories that illustrate a time when soccer in Brazil was synonymous with passion, art, and magic.”

Carlos Miele

Like Ronaldo Fraga, self-trained fashion designer Carlos Miele is well known for his collaborations with Brazilian artisans, working with women in favelas or indigenous communities to establish cooperatives that ensure fair-trade wages for their creations, and utilize authentic materials and techniques such as patchwork, stitching, crochet, and leatherwork. Whereas Fraga deconstructs the Brazilian female form, Miele celebrates it, in a manifestation of different textures, layers, prints, and colors inspired by Brazil’s lush natural landscape and motivated by “the freedom with which Brazilians relate to their bodies.”

The grandson of Italian immigrants to Brazil, Miele was educated in business at one of the most prestigious business schools in Latin America, the Getulio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo. He then turned his attentions to performance art and museum installations before becoming interested in fashion. In 2002 he established his own label, Carlos Miele, the characteristics of which are daring color combinations, clingy silhouettes, plunging necklines, hemlines split to the thigh, and highly structured women's wear. His second label, Miele, established in 2006, has a focus on women's ready-to-wear in more casual designs that are lower priced but still incorporate cutting-edge technology and traditional Brazilian handiwork. He also has a premium brand of denim called M. Officer, designed and produced in Brazil for an international market.

Miele is known for his involvement with the Rainforest Foundation in 2008, when he invited supporters—including Scarlett Johansson, Brazilian actress Alice Braga, and Diana Picasso—to design limited-edition T-shirts, the proceeds of which were donated to preserve the Amazon and protect its indigenous inhabitants. Miele has shown at London and New York fashion weeks and his clothes can be purchased in thirty countries, from department stores such as Harrods and Harvey Nichols in the United Kingdom, and from his flagship stores in São Paulo, Paris, and New York's Meatpacking District, which he designed with architect Hani Rashid of the architectural practice Asymptote. He has dressed celebrities such as Sandra Bullock, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jennifer Lopez, Beyonce, Heidi Klum, Eva Longoria-Parker, and Alicia Keys.

Miele contributes an individual vision to global fashion, transforming uniquely Brazilian sources of inspiration into contemporary designs: "I design for a contemporary woman who represents a link between a global audience and a Brazilian perspective." He frequently incorporates handcrafted design elements drawn from traditional Brazilian folklore and culture with twenty-first-century technology, establishing a dialog between the natural and artificial, organic and modified, national and international, to challenge preconceived Western ideas of what constitutes high fashion, as well as to reconstruct Brazilian influences for new audiences. Miele has a talent for dramatic presentations: his spring/summer collection at the New York Fashion Week of 2011, "Immersive Landscape," transformed the catwalk into an artificial natural paradise in which vibrant images of flora and aquatic fauna were digitally printed onto elegant caftans made of cheaply produced artificial materials such as chiffon and viscose.

Isabela Capeto

Fashion designer Isabela Capeto is gradually expanding her company into a globally recognized design house, at the same time as she is designing and producing innovative collections. She attended the Academia di Moda in Florence, and on graduating in 1993 worked for a number of fashion houses such as Maria Bonita and Lenny in her native Rio de Janeiro. She launched her label, Isabela Capeto, in 2003 and opened her atelier in the Gavea district of Rio de Janeiro. Since 2003, Capeto has shown her collection in the Paris showrooms every six months.



A model poses in a brightly colored, heavily embellished wool creation by Isabela Capeto for her fall/winter 2010 collection at São Paulo Fashion Week. FotoArena/Getty Images.

She has described her target consumer as the modern international woman, free of the stresses of living in a metropolis, who wants to live in harmony with her surroundings. Her production processes feed into this domestic ethos: they are labor-intensive, using skilled seamstresses and natural fibers to create garments that exude delicacy, evoking simple and subtle sensibilities. Capeto made her debut at Fashion Rio in 2004 and São Paulo Fashion Week in 2005, and launched the new line, Isabela Capeto Kids, in 2008. Her clothes can be bought in twenty countries throughout the world, in well-known department stores such as Barneys and Jeffrey in the United States, Browns in the United Kingdom, Colette and Le Bon Marché in France, Barneys in Japan, and Harvey Nichols in the United Arab Emirates.

Capeto has a unique method of designing her collections. She is inspired by museums and galleries, and each of her romantic, feminine designs can be understood as a work of art in its own right: handmade, embroidered, dyed, appliquéd, and heavily adorned with lace, sequins,

bows, tulle, and other elements of traditional dressmaking. Capeto has explained her design process: “Choosing a theme is the first thing I like to do. After that, I always organize a trip to see, learn, and experience the theme as much as I can. I also read and learn from books, artists, pictures, memories of places, food I have tasted, and people I have met.” This mix and match style characterizes much of her work, in which she throws together various sources with irreverent abandon, embodying a love of fabric and the blending of numerous geographical and historical influences from Brazil and Europe. Her work references the vibrant colors and lush exuberance traditionally associated with Brazil while seeking affiliation with international fashion trends and tastes, in terms of silhouette and form, to articulate the contradictions between nationalism and internationalism, the local and universal.

Jum Nakao

While some parallels clearly exist, Jum Nakao, the fashion designer, engineer, artist, and creative director, is a different type of designer from Herchcovitch, Fraga, Miele, and Capeto. The grandson of Japanese immigrants, he was born in 1966 in São Paulo (the second largest Japanese community in the world), where he currently resides and works. He is a conceptual designer, meaning that ideas tend to take precedence over function. Nakao’s daring collections, which are characterized by austere, minimal design, monochromatic colors, architectural shapes, and the use of unconventional materials such as trash bags or paper, can be seen to reference his Japanese heritage, and the work of designers Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto in the early 1980s. He has produced many projects that are independent of fashion, and exhibited at art galleries and museums internationally, including Musée Galliera in Paris, Momu Fashion Museum in Antwerp, and the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. In July 2012, he participated in “From the Margin to the Edge: Brazilian Art and Design in the Twenty-First Century” at Somerset House, London. He is a seasoned traveler who frequently participates in lectures and workshops worldwide to discuss his creative process.

In the early stages of his career, Nakao was interested in computer electronics but moved into fashion in 1983, which he found to be the ideal medium for his artistic forms of production. Clothing occupies the boundary between people and the world and, for Nakao, provides a means of interfering with reality and everyday life. He worked as a tailor for two years, creating clothes for different body types. This was key to his understanding that “Everybody has a pattern, every defect has a solution—a process where you can, through more organic and straight lines, compensate and create new shapes.” Designing is a form of problem-solving for Nakao and he approaches it in a rational, quasi-scientific manner.

In 1988, he graduated in Plastic Arts at the Faculdade Armando Álvares Penteado in São Paulo and, in 1989, undertook postgraduate studies in the History of Dress at the Instituto de Museologia and History of Fashion at SENAC, both in São Paulo. He was awarded Breakthrough Designer of the Year at the sixth edition of Phytoervas Fashion Week in 1996, and became style director of Brazilian fashion company Zoomp, where he remained for six years. In 2004, he collaborated with Nike to create their JUM NAKAO line.

From the outset, Nakao has sought ways of designing clothing that addresses contemporary concerns and sensibilities, utilizing digital technology and sophisticated handcraft techniques to establish a dialog between thread, pattern, the body, and its surrounding milieu. He applies aesthetic and working practices to examine the very nature of fashion, and his designs have

attracted a critical and discerning international clientele. An example can be seen in the critically acclaimed collection “Costura do Invisible” (Sewing the Invisible), which showcased at São Paulo Fashion Week in summer 2004. Constructed entirely from vegetable paper, Nakao’s haunting and delicate fairy-tale designs were embossed with patterns resembling low and high reliefs, decorated with lace cutouts meticulously cut by lasers, and assembled by hand into intricate origami folds. Elaborate fashion styles from the nineteenth century were combined with black plastic hats inspired by Playmobile toy figures. Despite over seven hundred hours of manual labor and the use of 1½ tons (1 tonne) of paper, following the seven-minute runway performance the models created a sensation by ripping up their garments. Nakao has commented on the collection: “We destroy everything, to show that there is something more important, something much more lasting than what people see and value at first sight.” The designer has said that he was challenging mass-market perceptions of fashion and commenting on the ephemeral quality of fashion. He encouraged discussion and debate amongst the audience by creating something that had numerous interpretative possibilities, and enabled space in the imagination for perception and association. Endowing paper with a meaningfulness usually denied, Nakao’s work, like designs produced by Ronaldo Fraga, is resonant with the notion of gambiarra: more than simply a versatile material with many uses, paper becomes a cultural marker indicating an attitude based on making do with what is readily available.

In 2008, Brazilian Telecommunications Company, Oi, invited Nakao to produce a collection inspired by the history of fashion in Brazil. Describing Brazilian fashion as multifaceted and evading a linear definition, Nakao created a polygonal shaped piece of clothing with many surfaces—onto which he could project images, which appeared distorted and fragmented. The work had many different aspects, each representing a different type of Brazilian fashion. The maxim expressed by Nakao—“To be a good creator, I have to be a good thief of ideas”—is relevant to a discussion of Brazilian fashion, whose strength lies on its ability to assimilate and reorganize references from other cultures, selectively and in its own manner, to produce a distinctively Brazilian culture and art.

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