

Olga Fisch

Habitar el Ecuador

Olga Fisch (Budapest, 1901 – Quito, 1990) was a multifaceted figure: artist, designer, collector, merchant, and traveler. Her curiosity and charisma, combined with her keen eye and instinct, highlight her as a key figure for the study of design and applied arts in 20th-century Ecuador. This exhibition is a first approach to her work, focusing on carpet design, the most prominent axis of her production, as she created around 60 designs between 1940 and 1990.

This story begins on June 2, 1939, when the artist arrived on the coast of Ecuador with her family aboard the ship Orduña. At 38, Olga already had rich experience in the artistic field, which allowed her, the same year she arrived, to join the School of Fine Arts in Quito as a Graphic Arts teacher and connect with the circle of artists and intellectuals. Fisch had trained as a ceramist in Vienna under the tutelage of Vally Wieseltier, a designer at the Wiener Werkstätte, and had studied drawing and painting at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. Her creative practice was thus influenced by European currents such as German expressionism, the new objectivity, the Bauhaus, as well as popular, ancestral arts and traditions, and the natural world.

Creative Worlds

Her creative process was closely linked to collecting, traveling, and commerce, reflecting her ability to reinterpret motifs found in objects from her collection. Fisch's work is grouped into three creative worlds. The first is Popular Arts, which gathers motifs found in costumes and elements of popular festivals, as well as everyday objects, fabric decorations, and traditional clothing. This includes the largest body of work by the artist, which can be divided into two sub-worlds: the Andes, featuring designs from 1940 to 1990 like Hunt, Wedding, Hummingbird, Condor, Pony, Indians, Belt, Salasaca, and Curiquingue; and the jungle, with notable designs like Pilche, Jíbaro, Shuar, Idol, Mocahua, and Shipibo. The second world is Natural, expressing her European heritage and fascination with Ecuador's biodiversity. This led to designs like Caracas, Cartucho, Georgia, Roses, Chonta, Higuera, Bamboo, Pastaza, and Galápagos.

The third world is Ancestral, where she reinterprets the ancient cultures that inhabited the territories of Europe and Ecuador. For example, the artist designed the motifs Cavern and Horns based on the study of the cave paintings of Lascaux; while the ceramic production of pre-Hispanic cultures of Ecuador inspired carpet designs like Carchi, Quevedo, Stamps, Snails, and Tunchuan.

The Jíbaro design marked the beginning of the iconic Folklore store by Fisch. The visit of Lincoln Kirstein, advisor to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), to Fisch's house in Quito in 1942, was the first catalyst. Kirstein was captivated by a small floor rug designed by the artist and by the bark of a tree – known as llanchama – painted with motifs from the Shuar people (formerly known as Jíbaros) from her collection. Kirstein asked her to reinterpret these motifs in the requested rug, and Olga accepted the order for three hundred dollars, paid that same day. With the money from the rug made for MoMA, she founded the Folklore store in 1942, in its first location on Tarqui Street.

At Folklore, her creations coexisted with those of other artist-craftsmen, prioritizing and promoting local and national production over foreign trends. This vision boosted the economy and recognition of Ecuadorian artisans, in addition to valuing the cultural richness of the country, becoming a reference for home decoration among the wealthiest classes. In 1952, Fisch inaugurated Folklore on Colón Street, in a modern house designed by Otto Glass, a Czech architect residing in Ecuador. The upper floor housed her residence, and the ground floor, the store and workshop.

That same year, she received a request to produce two rugs for the United Nations headquarters in New York, which the government of then-president Galo Plaza Lasso wanted to offer as a gift. The chosen design was Jíbaro, the same as the rug sent to MoMA.

Additionally, in 1955, three rugs with the Carchi design were integrated into the United Nations collection. They were almost 9 x 8 meters and were commissioned by the National Council of Presbyterian Women of the United States.

Production and Commerce

Since the 1940s, Ecuador experienced a notable boost in tourism and small-scale artisanal industry, especially in the textile sector, through the introduction of new production methods. As part of diplomatic initiatives to expand markets for Ecuadorian handicrafts, Fisch appeared numerous times in magazines, TV shows, and stores in the United States, especially in New York.

Her work, alongside Ecuadorian artisans, was framed in this context and aimed to introduce and perfect weaving and dyeing techniques. One of her innovative contributions was the incorporation of the Persian double knot in carpet making, which increased their durability. A distinctive feature of many of her carpet designs is the relief motifs, adding depth to the pieces.

As a craft merchant, she established close ties with artisans from Tigua, in the province of Cotopaxi, valuing the high quality of paintings on drums made with sheep skins. She proposed expanding their work to painting on canvases to open new commercial opportunities.

Research and Circulation

In the 1960s, along with other committed artists and researchers, Fisch helped found the Ecuadorian Institute of Folklore in Quito. In the mid-70s, she played a key role in creating the Inter-American Center for Handicrafts and Popular Arts (CIDAP) in Cuenca.

In 1975, she inaugurated her ethnographic museum at the back of Folklore, a space dedicated to exhibiting and preserving pieces related to Ecuador's popular arts. One of her most notable achievements was "A Feast of Color," an exhibition of her collection of Corpus Christi dancers' costumes, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution. This traveling exhibition toured the United States and Canada between 1981 and 1984. In 1985, she donated this collection to the Central Bank of Ecuador, and the same year she gave several pieces of her popular arts collection to CIDAP.

Olga Fisch's legacy, intimately linked to her life journey, reflects an artistic vision enriched by interculturality, accompanied by a particular sensitivity to local artistic expressions. Her contribution is decisive in relation to the preservation and promotion, both locally and internationally, of Ecuador's popular art.

Giada Lusardi
Curator