

Arti/san/design

María Wills

Of course I am an artist, because when I sleep, I dream and I imagine things, and I want to make what I see the next day, because everything around me is a source of inspiration, especially nature.

For a Kuna, the way of seeing the world is art. The way of understanding water or rivers is that there is no way of knowing the art to see or the art not to see, because in your way of life, from birth to death, it is art.

Cebaldo de león Inawinapi

Cultural production in Colombia has been characterized by separating art from crafts. Following categories that come from guild ordinances and laws established in the 18th and 19th centuries, manual and artisanal work was regulated by ideologies that limited its impact within the fine arts, since it was understood as inferior work and associated with folk culture, as opposed to high culture. These codes, which have permeated the present, are completely questionable, since art—from modern to contemporary—is in many cases imbued with the materiality and visuality found in the creations of native people and country folk. This cue proposes hybrid creative fields, where there is a permanent exchange of both ancestral and contemporary, and indigenous and mestizo knowledge, and which embrace a material and immaterial production that claims creations filled with interwoven knowledge.

In these works, the notion of culture is rethought, since it is unthinkable today to conceive a world without the links, appropriations, and re/presentations that arise from exchange. *Ñambi crusadukuna* or crossed paths is the concept proposed by the Ingas as a sign of contact and mutual appropriation of aesthetic elements that are part of a cultural negotiation. The controversy exists because ethical flaws arise from extractive systems that, detached from the principles and values of a specific ethnic



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group, degenerate and simplify their symbolic complexities. The works in this section blur the notion of foreigner/colonizer often imposed or appropriated. On the contrary, they generate lasting links that facilitate exchanges of mutually beneficial knowledge, empowering communities with direct agency in determining how their culture should evolve in the 21st century.

Multiple modernities

In the 1960s, Marta Traba was quite critical of so-called Americanisms, which she called “provincial desires”. In 1983 she stated, during one of her television shows, that there are cultured artists and craftsmen as opposed to folk ones. This stance marked modernity in Colombia and served to create a false consensus and systematic impositions. Traba undoubtedly promoted great artists who conversed with the pre-Columbian and the native through their painting and sculpture, but she excluded other possible modernities that claimed more pluralistic and less hegemonic perspectives. Many artists were inspired by the country's traditional crafts, yet because these were considered “primitive”, they were excluded from the modern label. In this sense, appropriating the primitive was modern, but being “primitive” was not.

By sowing doubt, we aim to question what has been learned, thus deconstructing certain codes that uphold the categories of art and positioning artisanal creation in a way that recognizes its absolute authenticity and value. With the aim of avoiding operating within the exclusive dichotomy of the modern versus the artisanal, this modernity proposed in Colombia becomes porous and advocates for the understanding of creations that reclaim what is ours; what is native and what is folk, without exclusions that define one or another tradition as “poor” or less significant.



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Living art

Architects, sculptors, painters, all of us must return to manual work [...]. Let us establish, therefore, a new brotherhood of artisans free of that arrogance that divides social classes and that seeks to erect an insurmountable barrier between artisans and artists.

WALTER GROPIUS

The “Living Art” project has worked hand in hand with Artesanías de Colombia (Colombian Handicrafts), an entity created in 1964 to preserve traditions and crafts, as well as to support development that dignifies the work of the country's artisans.

This section presents works co-created by contemporary artists and artisans through an exchange of knowledge that, beyond a purpose (whether utilitarian or not), focuses on the understanding of aesthetics as seen from an equal standpoint. The aura of a single author is blurred in favor of pieces where the main focus is collaboration and collective work. This could be called good creation, where the art is felt from an artisanal point of view, allowing it to flourish in minga, that is, the indigenous tradition of community work, where the main value is reciprocity.

Several artists, such as Juliana Góngora, Susana Mejía, Matías Quintero and Ramón Laserna, have collaborated on an ongoing basis with indigenous artisans. These include Rodrigo López, from the Cubeo ethnic group; artisans from the Masipai workshop (wise people), from the Koreguaje community; the grandfather of medicine Adriano Figueroa Piranga, from the Chai'bajü clan; and Tomasa, Kathy, and Kasia from the Uitoto ethnic group. Together they come up with proposals that highlight ancestral knowledge, the value of living matter, plants and the land, as well as the contemporary uses that are given to them.



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This process results in an exchange in the appreciation of what is considered fine arts, to vindicate learnings that are not taught in academia, nor do they belong to school curricula, but which are an essential part of Colombian identity.

Threads

The place of textiles as a creative space has involved the crossover between art and artisanal craft, reflecting the need to cultivate a hybrid field, not only from a perspective of form but also questioning gender issues, given that it is traditionally understood that women are the ones who practice and carry out work such as weaving, tapestry, and sewing. For example, in the piece *Nay strap (Weaving Me)* by the artist Misak Julieth Morales, weaving is recognized as a way of claiming the feminine, but also as a space that allows binary codes about masculinity and femininity to be overcome.

In addition, weaving in peasant and indigenous traditions is a metaphor for social processes. It represents a community's journey, while the knots, wefts, and warps guarantee the continuity of an ancient wisdom that arises from thinking with the hand, and which in turn manifests through feeling, from the heart. The symbolism embodied in textiles represents a sustainable link between humans and their natural environment. They allow us to return to our origin: the thread being a metaphor for time. They help us to connect the ancestral with the contemporary, as well as to carve paths that lead to places where otherness is reconfigured.



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Pioneers of textile art

During the 1950s, functional design was promoted within the framework of a program created at the Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca – Higher Education Center – in which important figures of architecture and art, such as Hans Richter, Alberto Arboleda, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, and Dicken Castro, taught courses. Several of the pioneers of textile art in the country were trained here, including Graciela Samper de Bermudez, Marlene Hoffmann, and Olga Ceballos de Amaral.

Subsequently, Ceballos and Hoffmann traveled to Cranbrook Academy, in Michigan, where several European artists had emigrated. In addition to spreading theories of the Bauhaus school, they explored art along with design in all their utilitarian possibilities and, through this, the field of decorative arts that complemented architecture.

In Colombia, each of these women achieved important milestones to promote this practice, such as creating the Department of Textile Art at the Universidad de los Andes (Olga de Amaral), or directing and empowering artisans from the site of the recently founded Artesanías de Colombia (Colombian Handicrafts) (Graciela Samper de Bermúdez). They also founded textile art spaces and workshops, such as Xue, Casa Amaral, and the Marlene Hoffmann Gallery. Their work highlights the need to decenter modernity to include material cultures such as peasant cultures, delving into the territory to understand raw animal materials, such as wool or horsehair, and their uses, primarily in Boyacá.

Graphic design

Pre-Columbian art is contemporary art from a conceptual and form point of view.

ANTONIO GRASS



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The shapes and patterns present in pre-Hispanic art have served as inspiration and have therefore been studied by various designers who found in their symmetrical forms and geometries a perfect synthetic iconography, which was an unquestionable reference, beyond any foreign formation. It could even be said that one of the fundamental pillars in the history of modern graphic design in the country was the aesthetics of the native peoples.

The historian Eugenio Barney Cabrera, who introduced the first graphic design classes at the National University of Colombia in 1962, was one of the key figures when considering that the parameters for the construction of a history of national art should start from its own, non-Western qualities. From their perspective, the product of indigenous cultures was an artistic object.

Through his work, the artist and graphic designer Antonio Grass questioned the sharp division that exists between the disciplines of visuality. Active since the 1960s, he created spaces where graphics, painting, and native cultural identities could come together and converse with the mythical and the magical. From there, he investigated sacred forms such as the circle, present in a multitude of archaeological and ethnographic objects in the country, and also paid tribute to the sacred faces of the Muiscas, Guanes, Calimas, Quimbayas, Sinúes, Taironas, and indigenous people of the Tamalameque, Cauca, Tierradentro, San Agustín, Nariño, and Tumaco cultures, in one of his most recognized books: *Los rostros del pasado (The Faces of the Past)* (1972).

Grass was, in turn, a student of David Consuegra, one of the most prominent precursors of graphic design in the country. The two carried out important research projects promoted by the Gold Museum, including Consuegra's book *Ornamentación calada en la orfebrería indígena precolombina (Openwork Ornamentation in Pre-Columbian Indigenous Goldsmithing)* (1968). The book is one of the first approaches in which a formal analysis of the “works” of the Muisca and Tolima peoples is proposed, and in which they are credited for formal values of art by describing that one had an impressionist vision, and the other, expressionist.



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Another figure worth highlighting is Antonio Caro. This artist, a pioneer in the use of conceptual practices, worked with acronyms, icons, and symbols that commented on the Colombian national imagination. Using these, Caro proposed important reflections that approximate graphics and advertising, while exalting emblems of the country's indigenous cultural practices, such as corn, salt, and annatto.



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