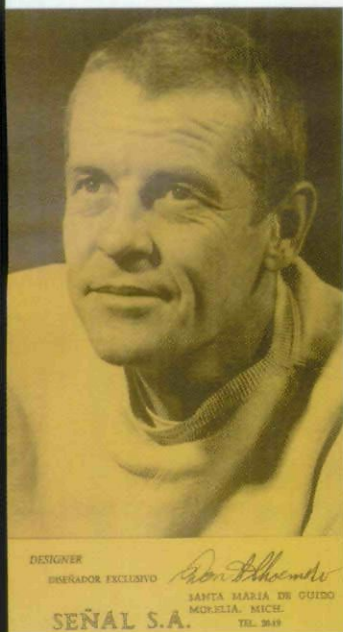


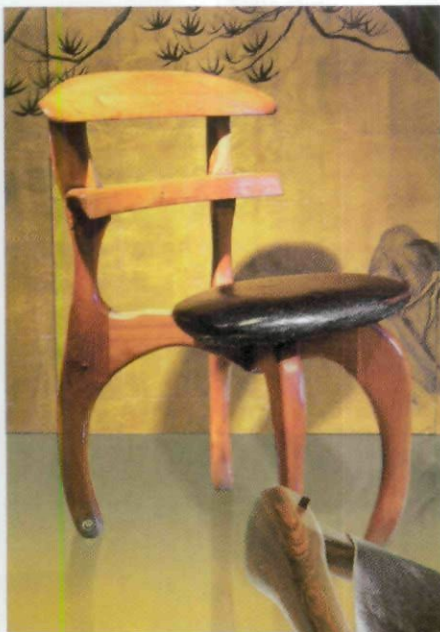
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the thrill of rediscovery

Brazilian modernists, step aside—connoisseurs are crazy about Mexico's Don Shoemaker



DESIGNER
DISEÑADOR EXCLUSIVO *Don Shoemaker*
SANTA MARÍA DE GUISO
MORELIA, MICH.
TEL. 3649
SEÑAL S.A.



Clockwise from top left: The designer in a publicity shot, circa 1970. A knock-down chair with a leather-covered seat. A 1960's knock-down armchair in rosewood and leather.

There is considerable reason to think that Mexican modernism could become *el proximo gran paso*, the next big thing. As interest swells, Don Shoemaker is riding the wave. He's not yet a household name, but his work is turning up at top auction houses and galleries, at blue-chip prices.

Shoemaker was a typical Mexican modernist in at least one respect: He was born elsewhere. Modernism in Mexico, like its neighbor to the north, is a hybrid. (Scratch a mid-century American designer, and you have a European designer—or at least one trained by a European designer.) Shoemaker, for his part, left Chicago in 1948 for the hills west of Mexico City. There he remained, producing quirky and sculptural chairs and tables, a host of accessories, and, later, the stack-laminate tables and desks he will probably be best known for. All were crafted from solid tropical woods, exotic back then and some now extinct.

His name has reemerged in a big way only in the past several years. When the Wright auction house held its very first sale, in 2000, one of his chairs in rosewood and leather was listed simply as an American craft design from the 1960's, a correct description as far as it goes. The turning point came in 2007 with two discoveries of material from his studio, Señal. Mike Diaz of Chic by Accident, a

leading Mexico City gallery, found the first cache in storage. The trove included Shoemaker's own stack-laminate desk as well as his personal tool cabinet—

to Diaz, the best piece. A dining set, nesting tables, and a pair of lounge chairs with ottomans were part of the second cache, which surfaced at a former U.S. diplomat's estate sale in Dallas and was promptly snapped



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF REFORM GALLERY; COURTESY OF CHIC BY



Clockwise from top left: The inset top of a stack-laminate table. Rosewood, teak, and walnut parquetry on a tray. A catalog, circa 1970, for Shoemaker-Hill, a short-lived alliance with Dallas businessman TY Hill. An executive desk, circa 1975.

up by the local gallery Sputnik Modern. Eventually, pieces found their way to such top U.S. dealers as Blackman Cruz, Downtown, Reform Gallery, and Sebastian + Barquet.

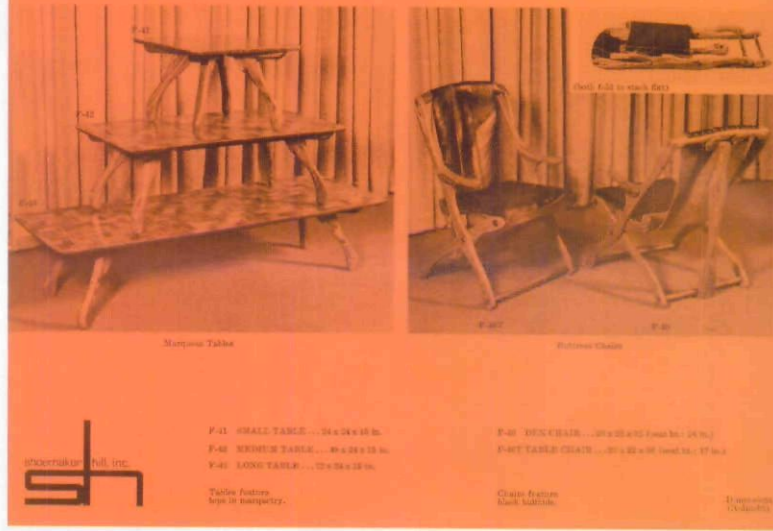
Not much information about Shoemaker is in print. His self-published catalog from the 1970's indicates that he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago before leaving to serve in World War II, resuming his studies afterward in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. "We came to love Mexico because of the people, the natural setting, and the age-old skills in so many of the arts," he and his wife, Barbara, wrote in the catalog's introduction. "Settling down here in Santa Maria, a charming little village in the hills overlooking the beautiful old city of Morelia, we started the manufacture of furniture and other wood products designed by Don. What started as a little factory in our patio has grown to the point where today we employ more than a hundred skilled craftsmen." With a facility that size, a retail shop close by, and a second shop in Puerto Vallarta, Shoemaker clearly became an important part of the economic and cultural fabric of his adopted home.

A conversation with Diaz, who lived for a while near Shoemaker's house, added colorful and important details to the story. Shoemaker was apparently a POW during the war and returned to Chicago shell-shocked. When he settled in Santa Maria as a bit of a proto-hippie, he had some success fabricating belt buckles from wood and jade. He later purchased woodworking machinery back in the U.S. On the west coast of Mexico, he bought stocks of rare tropical wood. He was producing wooden furniture and accessories by the early 1950's, and he would pursue that occupation, aside from a break to grow orchids, until he died in 1989. Diaz also mentioned that Shoemaker was an heir to the Kool-Aid fortune. The inherited money suggests that he plied his craft because he wanted to, lending further credence to any statement about his fascination with Mexico.

The picture of Shoemaker that emerges, literally, in a photo taken

DESIGNS IN "AMBER ROSEWOOD"

(Shoemaker's interest in the luxurious Rosewood, governed in the natural tones of the wood, of course.)





Clockwise from top left: The parquetry top of a 1960's rosewood box. Don Shoemaker's own tool cabinet, circa 1958. A dining table, circa 1965, in stack-laminate cocobolo wood. A rosewood folding table from the 1970's with a marble top added later. Rosewood bookends. A folding chair in rosewood and leather.



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around 1970 is of a man comfortable in his own skin.

Gone is the traumatized or rebellious youth. He's been replaced by a confident and purposeful adult, a man who seems to have found what he was looking for in the place he chose to look for it. His immersion in Mexican culture is evident in his sculptural, sinuous early furniture hand-carved from solid wood. Often folding or knock-down for tourists to carry off, the pieces appear in catalogs and family photos—displayed both inside and outside the Shoemaker house: on large floor tiles, against stone walls, amid flora. Modern as the designs are, they blend in seamlessly.

Providing a powerful insight into why this is so, Blackman Cruz founder David Cruz, who grew up in Mexico, describes Morelia as a beautifully preserved colonial-baroque town, replete with a cathedral.

Shoemaker's swelling and tapering forms have a certain baroque flavor, although with doses of Antoni Gaudí and American swagger thrown in.

Also apposite, Díaz refers to Shoemaker's "bone chair." This all-white prototype sling chair, still in the Shoemaker family collection, taps into the more brutal aspects of pre-Columbian cultures or perhaps the folk traditions of the Day of the Dead.

The bulk of the Señal output consisted of folding chairs and rockers, plus matching ottomans, with names such as Sloucher and Swinger; demountable dining chairs and tables; parquetry-topped, mission-simple tables; and a host of bookends, cruciform candlesticks, and marquetry boxes and trays. Far more limited in quantity, the intensely constructed stack-laminate desks and tables can be as rakishly geometric as a Mayan ruin. Or maybe a Mayan ruin on acid. Reform's owner, Gerard O'Brien, notes that a prominent Mexican newscaster used to sit at one, on air. They're tours de force of concept and execution.

How much commercial appetite there is for the knock-down pieces remains to be seen. Also undetermined is how many more of them are liable to turn up, say, in thrift stores in Dubuque. The stack-laminate pieces have a more secure future. O'Brien positively rhapsodizes about them, likening them to Wendell Castle.

Already selling for north of \$40,000, they possess the cachet and wow factor, along with the scarcity, to continue trending upward—and to carry custom pieces and the better accessories along. The verdict? *Compra Shoemaker ahora. Buy Shoemaker now.* —Larry Weinberg