



‘I was born looking at shapes’

Design doyenne Kukas tells Aimee Farrell how her bold sculptural jewellery springs from her experiments with geometric form

Main: Maria da Conceição de Moura Borges, known as Kukas, photographed for the FT by Matthieu Salvaing

Right: Kukas gold and silver pendant with glass, April 2023, POA, kukas.pt, part of the ‘A Tribute to Geometry’ exhibition



“As long as I’m alive, I have to create,” says jeweller Maria da Conceição de Moura Borges (known simply as Kukas). Speaking on the phone with the help of a translator from the sitting room of her Lisbon apartment – a maximalist interior in the Lisboa Pombalina district that has been her home, and creative epicentre, since the 1970s – Portugal’s dowager of avant-garde jewellery is in an ebullient mood.

For more than six decades she has created geometric and sculptural designs that elevate jewellery to wearable works of abstract art. Now 95, she has spent the past year preparing for her latest exhibition – the first in the 112-year history of Lisbon’s National Museum of Contemporary Art to be dedicated to jewellery, and composed almost entirely of new work – and is as prolific today as ever.

“Kukas was the first to create a new language of contemporary Portuguese jewellery that opened the way for those that followed when she began designing 60 years ago,” says the museum’s director, Emília Ferreira. “The materials she mixes, the way she works with shapes and the way she works with the light, using stones with opacity and transparency, is sculptural and unexpected. These are not quiet pieces for those who want to be understated or discreet.” However bold her aesthetic, in person Kukas is coquettish, infinitely curious and preternaturally full of energy, says Ferreira. “She’s an educated woman with an educated gaze who made us see jewellery with fresh eyes,” she says.

Born in 1928 in Beira Baixa, a rural region of central Portugal, Kukas was raised largely by her two aunts, and spent summers on a working farm, in close communion with nature and a menagerie

‘These are not quiet pieces for those who want to be discreet’

of animals, including her donkey Joana. “I lived in a world *avant la lettre*,” she says of her liberated existence, which allowed her imagination to roam freely and set the bohemian tone for her creative life. As a child, Kukas was a consummate hoarder, stashing everything from old magazines to Coke cans, to transform into little creative maquettes. “I was born looking at shapes,” she says.

Her words, spoken in rapturous, gravelly tones, are etched with emotion that runs the gamut from laughter to tears; she gesticulates as she recounts stories of her early days. Immaculately turned out, she never wears jewels when she’s working but will always add a brooch or a ring whenever she leaves the house. For her collectors, Kukas’s jewels can often serve as a shield: conversation starters with the power to mask social anxiety. When the Portuguese abstract expressionist painter Maria Helena Vieira da Silva’s Kukas ring no longer fitted her, she displayed the striking piece at home, framing it in a Perspex box like a much-loved work of art.

Today, from the bedroom of her second-floor apartment in a beautiful 19th-century block in the richly ornate Portuguese Manuelino style, Kukas draws inspiration from the silhouettes she continues to see in her mind’s eye. Rather than sketching, she begins every piece with the same miniature models she constructed as a child. Taking an old box or a sheet of paper, she will begin cutting and assembling geometric forms to make a 3D composition.

“At the beginning, I’ll never know what I’m going to make,” she says. “It could become a vase, a ring or a pair of earrings — that’s what I spend all of my time trying to find out.”

Kukas’s creative odyssey began in late 1950s Paris. After sampling everything from ceramics to sculpture and life drawing, she studied interior design at the *École Supérieure des Arts Modernes*, before completing an internship in art education at the Louvre. There she was befriended by modernist painter Marc Chagall, and became immersed in a group of émigré Portuguese abstract artists that included Lourdes Castro and José Escada, all of whom were escaping the conservatism of the political dictatorship back home.

When Kukas returned to Lisbon, she worked as an interior designer to support herself, while experimenting with painting silks and ceramics, including plates, candlesticks and vases, which she sold at the Lisbon store of the pioneering female artist Menez. It was in 1962 that, unable to find what she wanted, she made her first piece of jewellery — a gold ring with an irregular surface like contorted honeycomb — as a gift for her aunt Eugenia. More baroque in style than her subsequent designs, it marked the start of an exuberant creative chapter. Kukas took her jewellery maquettes to small artisanal workshops, including that of master goldsmith António Jordão, to bring them to life. Not used to the sheer experimentalism of her designs, she says, they would instruct their artisans to do the worst job they could, and “make it like a Picasso painting” to achieve the unconventional look she craved.

Jewellery — or certainly the traditional, opulent designs typical in Portugal at the time — had never interested Kukas. “It was pure bourgeois ornamentation,” she says. “There was no notion of linearity or geometry. The material value [of the stones] counted more than the creativity.” Using shells, pearls and semi-precious stones, for her it was more about the aesthetics of the materials. She was in a loose collective of creatives centred around

Café A Brasileira, including fado singer Amália Rodrigues and painters Nikias Skapinakis and Almada Negreiros, who encouraged her to stage her first show. Held at the *Diário de Notícias* gallery in Lisbon in 1963, it was a sellout and her work struck an immediate chord. Kukas went on to exhibit across Europe and the Americas, later establishing her own series of Lisbon jewellery showrooms, and selling everywhere from Colette in Paris to Barneys.

She describes her minimalist jewellery as “art in transit”, and her creations often have an armour-like quality — her rings have been compared to a “fortress for the finger”. The goal of these geometric jewels, she says, is to evoke a sense of “synthesis” or harmony — which translates into the way Kukas chooses to live. When she bought her apartment, “it was a filthy hole but with a spectacular view”, she says. Over the years she has slowly renovated the interior to create a haven of tranquility amid what has become one of Lisbon’s most visited quarters.

Kukas’s home is scattered with the silvery interior objects she has been forging since she started out in jewellery. There are large hexagonal flower pots, globular butter dishes, pyramidal cups and sculptural vessels in brass and nickel-plated brass dotted among a colourful array of art and antiques. Like her jewellery, these pieces are marked by their strength and sense of reinvention. “When Kukas first showed her work in the 1960s, it completely broke with convention,” explains Filipa Fortunato, a champion of Kukas and a close family friend who, with her husband António Falcão Costa Lopes, runs Casa Fortunato, an architecture and interior design practice, and a boutique hotel in Alcácer do Sal. “Everyone else was still trying to emulate the jewels of kings and queens.”

As a child, Fortunato recalls visiting her grandparents’ summer house in Sesimbra, a bold concrete structure whose decorative scheme was conceived by Kukas. “It was the most modern home I’d ever seen,” says Fortunato, who is curating the jeweller’s latest exhibition with Ferreira. “We know that jewellery has always been something important that’s worthy of display in a museum, we know that these are artistic objects, but to see them addressing the contemporary language is something different entirely,” says Ferreira. “It took Kukas to bring Portuguese jewellery into the 20th, and now the 21st, century — and 60 years for her work to reach the museum.”

On show in Lisbon are chunky gold geometric cufflinks; double-rings whose sculptural forms are constructed in gold and silver; baroque pearl-embellished brooches; and earrings shaped like delicate spoons decked with spiky-petalled flowers all cleverly staged in a bijou onyx black room that recalls a jewel box. Kukas draws on everything from agate to rock crystal as the building blocks of these highly imaginative new works.

For the show’s opening-night dinner, which took place on her 95th birthday, Kukas looked resplendent in a canary yellow blazer with a silver “K” brooch. The dinner realised a long-held dream to celebrate the beauty of geometry at the museum. Kukas celebrated surrounded by artists, collectors and friends, most of whom wore her unapologetically bold, architectural jewels. ●

‘A Tribute to Geometry’ runs until August 27, museuartecomtemporanea.gov.pt/en

Her rings have been compared to a ‘fortress for the finger’



Opposite: Kukas silver gilt pendant with glass, March 2023, POA, kukas.pt, part of ‘A Tribute to Geometry’

Clockwise from right: Kukas wearing a one-of-a-kind silver ring of her own creation, made in 2021; the maximalist interior of Kukas’s Lisbon apartment; Kukas at home; a 1977 portrait of Kukas in Rio by painter Luis Casais, all photographed for the FT by Matthieu Salvaing



Artisans were told to make her designs ‘like a Picasso painting’