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Brazil

Brazilian beauty goes beyond blond

MONDAY, 25 JULY 2011
19:17



RESTINGASÊCA, Brazil — Before setting out in a pink S.U.V. to comb the schoolyards and shopping malls of southern Brazil, Alisson Chornak studies books, maps and Web sites to understand how the towns were colonized and how European their residents might look today.

Tais Araújo just finished a run as the first black female lead in the coveted 8 p.m. soap opera slot. Ms. Araujo, left, poses with Victor Wagner on the set of an earlier Brazilian soap opera, 'Xica Da Silva.'

The goal, he and other model scouts say, is to find the right genetic cocktail of German and Italian ancestry, perhaps with some Russian or other Slavic blood thrown in. Such a mix, they say, helps produce the tall, thin girls with straight hair, fair skin and light eyes that Brazil exports to the runways of New York, Milan and Paris with stunning success.

Yet Brazil is not the same country it was in 1994, when Gisele Bündchen, the world's top earning model, was discovered in a tiny town not far from here. Darker-skinned women have become more prominent in Brazilian society, challenging the notions of Brazilian beauty and success that Ms. Bündchen has come to represent here and abroad.

Tais Araújo just finished a run as the first black female lead in the coveted 8 p.m. soap opera slot. Marina Silva, a former government minister born in the Amazon, is running for president. And over the past decade, the income of black Brazilians rose by about 40 percent, more than double the rate of whites, as Brazil's booming economy helped trim the inequality gap and create a more powerful black consumer class, said Marcelo Neri, an economist in Rio de Janeiro.

Even prosecutors have waded into the debate over what Brazilian society looks like — and how it should be represented. São Paulo Fashion Week, the nation's most important fashion event, has been forced by local prosecutors to ensure that at least 10 percent of its models are of African or indigenous descent.

Despite those shifts, more than half of Brazil's models continue to be found here among the tiny farms of Rio Grande do Sul, a state that has only one-twentieth of the nation's population and was colonized predominantly by Germans and Italians.

Indeed, scouts say that more than 70 percent of the country's models come from three southern states that hardly reflect the multiethnic melting pot that is Brazil, where more than half the population is nonwhite.

On the pages of its magazines, Brazil's beauty spectrum is clearer. Nonwhite women, including celebrities of varying bodytypes, are interspersed with white models. But on the runways, the proving ground for models hoping to go abroad, the diversity drops off precipitously. Prosecutors investigating discrimination complaints against São Paulo Fashion Week found that only 28 of the event's 1,128 models were black in early 2008.

The pattern creates a disconnect between what many Brazilians consider beautiful and the beauty they export overseas. While darker-skinned actresses like Juliana Paes and Camila Pitanga are considered among Brazil's sexiest, it is Ms. Bündchen and her fellow southerners who win fame abroad.

"I was always perplexed that Brazil was never able to export a Naomi Campbell, and it is definitely not because of a lack of pretty women," said Erika Palomino, a fashion consultant in São Paulo. "It is embarrassing."

Some scouts have begun tepid forays to less-white parts of Brazil. One Brazilian designer, Walter Rodrigues, recently opened Rio Fashion Week with 25 models, all of them black.

But here in the south scouts still spend most of their time hunting for the next Gisele, and offer few apologies for what they say sells.

Clóvis Pessoa studies facial traits that are successful on international runways and looks for towns in the south that mirror those genes.

"If a famous top model looks German with a Russian nose, I will do a scientific study and look for cities that were colonized by Germans and Russians in the south of Brazil in order to get a similar face down here," Mr. Pessoa said.

Dilson Stein, who discovered Ms. Bündchen when she was 13, called Rio Grande do Sul a treasure trove of model-worthy girls. A year before discovering Ms. Bündchen, whose parents are of German ancestry, he found 12-year-old Alessandra Ambrosio, now famous for her Victoria's Secret shoots.

Today, younger scouts like Mr. Chornak have taken up the mantle. With catlike quickness, he jumped from his chair and strode up behind a tall girl with a hooded sweatshirt. "Have you ever thought of being a model?" he asked a 13-year-old with light blue eyes and pimples.

The girl smiled, her metal braces glimmering.

Later, Mr. Chornak pulled up at a school where the director, Liliane Abrão Silva, showed off albums from school beauty contests. She allows scouts to visit during class breaks.

"Since I got to this school, five have left for São Paulo to become models," she said. "The girls who do not have money to go to university will have to stay here and work in the fields."

The next morning, Mr. Chornak studied the girls returning with red lollipops from recess. "There is nothing special here," he declared.

At another stop, Mr. Chornak staked out a school in Paraiso do Sul (population 8,000) with the tools of his trade: business cards, camera, measuring tape and a notebook.

The bell rang and students streamed out. Mr. Chornak stopped a tall, skinny blond girl. Within seconds he was fluffing her hair and taking her measurements, directing her to pose against the wall.

Mr. Chornak also drove to Venâncio Aires, where a billboard heralded "the land of the Fantastic Girl," alluding to a television show that featured a local girl.

At a small tobacco farm he visited Michele Meurer, a blue-eyed 16-year-old discovered while riding her bicycle to school. Timid and shy, she cried profusely the first time she went to São Paulo. The next time, she lasted six days before Mr. Chornak sent her home.

Her mother, who grew up speaking German, had never left the town until the São Paulo trip. They live in a four-room house with chickens and dogs. Michele keeps the freezer in her room for lack of space.

Mr. Chornak counsels Michele to use sunscreen while working in the fields and to watch her diet. Bursting with pride, her father enrolled her in English classes in case she went abroad.

"I want to give them a better life," Michele said tearfully of her parents.

Recently, she went to São Paulo again, where Mr. Chornak put her in a three-bedroom apartment with 11 other girls. Two weeks before São Paulo Fashion Week, Michele packed up and left.

"I am very disappointed that Michele gave up," Mr. Chornak said. "I invested a lot in her."

Myra Domit contributed reporting.

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