

Gustavo Piqueira's Book Covers Show the Creativity (and Cost) of Constraints

The Brazilian author and designer riffs on his process driven by an artisan approach to craft

por Zachary Petit

Gustavo Piqueira will make you wholly rethink book design—and, well, books at large.

After all, the enigmatic proprietor of Casa Rex in São Paulo, Brazil, once created a book in the form of a dining set—the story told in text across napkins, placemats, and coasters, all silkscreened in-house—and once reimaged the Medieval bible for the modern consumerist era, complete with hand-glued bejeweled cover and detailed historiated initials comprised of guns, gas tanks, and cell phones.

The son of an engineer father and a mother who worked in public education, Piqueira majored in architecture at the Universidade de São Paulo. The school didn't have a dedicated design program, and Piqueira had no idea what the discipline was—until he stumbled across it in a lab with photocomposition machines. Piqueira and friends began spending entire days there creating a magazine, and later, visual identities—“just as an excuse to avoid going to architectural structure foundation classes. And then we started to enter visual identity contests...and we started to win the contests.”

The crew opened a studio, which would eventually evolve into Piqueira's current practice in 2010. At its largest, Casa Rex had a London office and employed around 60 people. They took on work for multinational companies. Major agencies sought to acquire them—but then Piqueira had a son, and he didn't want him growing up and seeing his jobless father spending money without seeing the work that went into earning it. (“I thought it would be quite a very bad example.”)

So he dropped the multinational work and vowed to work only for local entities. He closed London and shrank his studio to eight. He says he doesn't make the money he once did—“but I'm happy with the decision.”

One standout of what he does make: books and book covers—his unexpected, innovative approaches and lively color palettes making for some of the industry's best output.

“I prefer sitting alone and thinking,” he says. “I prefer to be like a writer than a movie director coordinating many people. So among all the graphic design products, I think book covers suit me well. It's a very personal thing.”

Asked about the key differences between South American and North American cover design, Piqueira doesn't see them as cultural—but rather economic.

“As you have less resources, sometimes less resources can lead to less rules. And less rules can lead to you finding new ways of doing things, and some freedom.

“It's good as a principle, but has many bad things as collateral effects. So it's a very complicated thing.”

Here, Piqueira walks us through five cover designs born of this fact and others.

1. A Pedra, by Yuri Pires

For this project—the title of which translates to The Rock—Piqueira headed up the stairs from his office to the headquarters of Lote 42, a small publisher run by his friends. When the team collaborates on a book design, they first figure out the absolute lowest-cost version they can produce, from the trim size to colors. They then take the resulting savings and see how the extra budget might be creatively spent using DIY artisanal methods.

“In terms of production, we can make something more sophisticated and different without incurring higher costs,” Piqueira says.

In this case, though, there was zero extra budget.

“So I said, ‘Okay, I need to do something different without a penny left.’”

Lote 42 wanted to invoke a rock in some way, so Piqueira used a vice and carbon paper to quite literally print a rock onto each book—a concept that readers were delighted to be able to do themselves at the A Pedra launch event.

“If you look at the history of Brazil or South America, everything that we see as our cultural heritage, it was born from mixtures—and also for the lack of information or lack of ways or lack of money, lack of something,” Piqueira says. “The most important things in Brazilian culture, they all were born from the lack of something. I’m not saying that it’s good ... but I think it’s an important way of seeing things.”



2. Pinturas de Guerra, by Ángel de la Calle

When creating the cover of a graphic novel like *Pinturas de Guerra*, Piqueira feels it's only polite (and practical) to involve an artistic element from within the book. But this one proved tricky, given it's a fictional narrative involving multiple real-world painters who escaped Latin American countries under military dictatorships.

"The visual universe was too big," Piqueira says. Unable to simply pick a single artist or scenario to embody the entire story, "I decided to create one image that wasn't exactly mimicking any of them and wasn't exactly directly referencing any of them, but has a Latin America '70s feeling—with violence. Something that's expressive and violent."

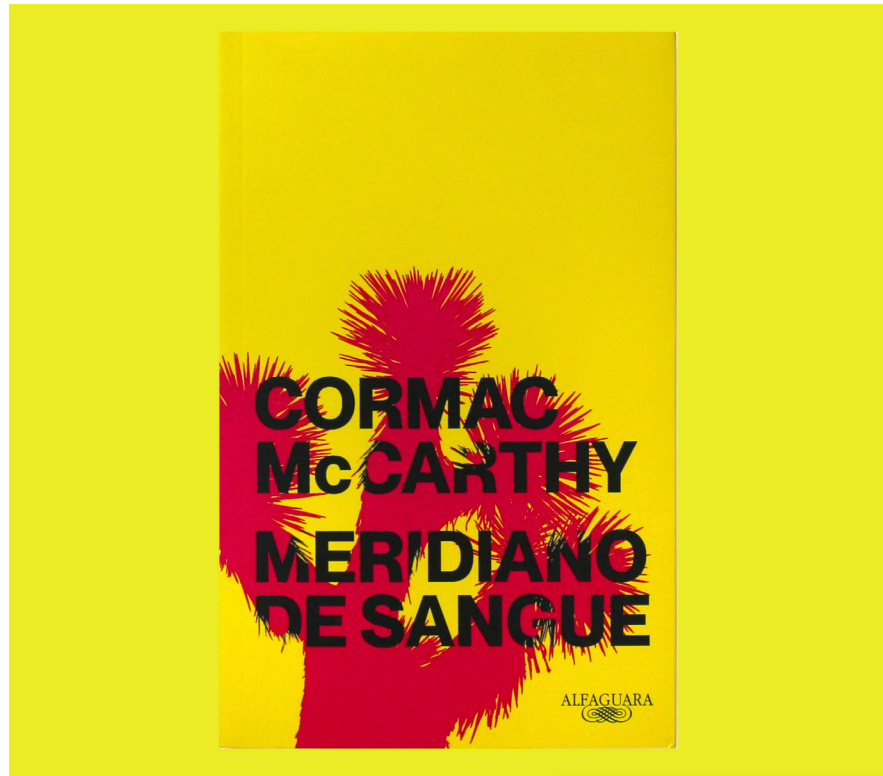
He used an image from the book—the sack—as the head for a figure. He then drew the rest manually, and notes that he also has a letterpress and other tools in his studio strictly for practical reasons: "I don't need to commission everything."



3. Meridiano de Sangue, by Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy's brutal Western is a classic, and Piqueira believes that for something to be considered such, it must still somehow be resonant and relevant today. For this cover—the most straightforward of the collection featured here—and for all such “classic” titles he works on, Piqueira avoids elements that anchor the story in a particular timeframe or scenario.

Instead, he turned to the environment: the desert. He seized upon the spiky, aggressive form of the Joshua Tree—and went with a striking, pervasive yellow, evocative of the blinding, all-encompassing sun.



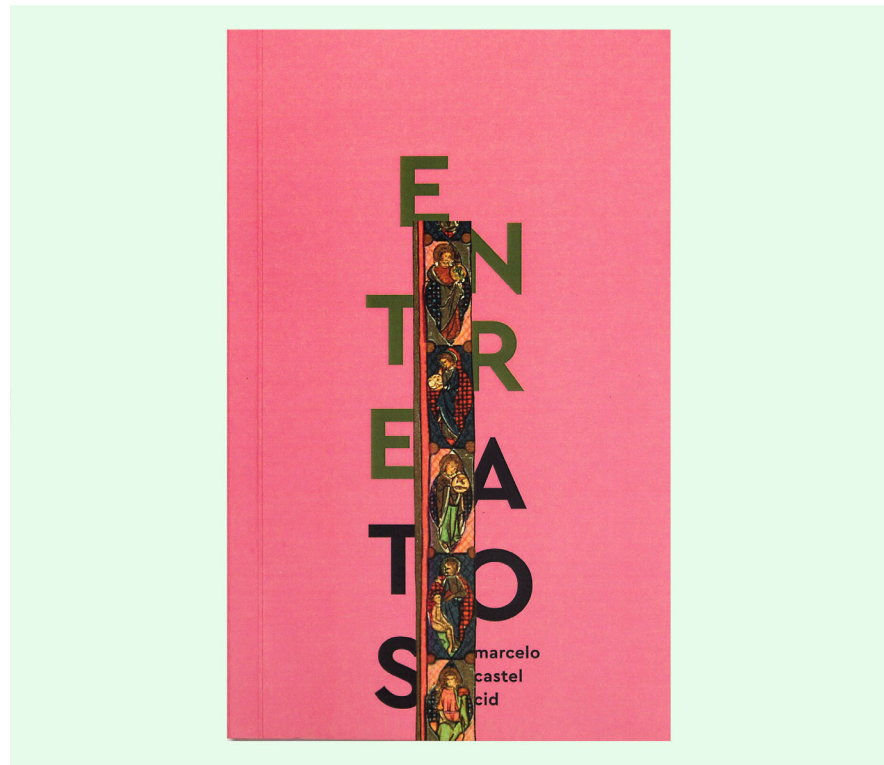
4. Entreatos, by Marcelo Castel Cid

This book features monologues from figures in the Bible's Acts of the Apostles, so Piqueira utilized medieval religious imagery—but sparingly, and carefully, to avoid cliché or pastiche.

Then came the art of creative alchemy—once again, the mixture.

The pink palette and sans serif type take the cover in a modern direction, forming a column evocative of a church pillar, the letterforms becoming ornamental elements.

“Today, the pure graphic language sometimes doesn’t make any sense anymore,” he says. “Sometimes you do blackboard handwriting to communicate food—no matter if it’s a local grocery or if it’s a Knorr soup. You use the same visual resource. So sometimes the way you put together things that are not a perfect match, it’s a good way to escape from the expected.”



5. Impertinentes, by Gustavo Piqueira

Piqueira has released numerous books of his own—from the aforementioned dining set to his revised gospels—and this collection serves as a catalogue for a library exhibition about 14 of them.

Translating to “naughty” or “inappropriate,” in *Impertinentes*, Piqueira reflects on how all of his books are somehow “wrong,” or the diametrical opposite of a “correct” book.

So, naturally, he had to do the cover “wrong.” He presents prospective readers with a choice: Leave the book aside and do something else, or assume an active role in puzzling the cover back together, engaging with a familiar object in a fresh way.

Rather than rolling off a dieline, the cover is the product of manual disassembly—cutting and folding, which Piqueira and a team of two or three others did in a single day.

Given the possibilities he has explored with his cache of *impertinentes*, one wonders: What does he think of the “traditional” book? Should all books seek to break new ground beyond formula?

“I haven’t any issue with everyday things,” he says. “I think that what maybe annoys me is when everyday things pretend to be something unique when they’re not.”

He reflects on how a student once remarked about how many “weird” ideas he has.

“I told her, ‘No, for me, they’re absolutely normal. They’re very logical and normal. They’re not weird.’ I don’t say, ‘I have to do something crazy today.’ It’s very normal. For me, very normal. And I believe that’s how I see things.”

