

# Fun, Then Function, In Italian Design

By ELAINE LOUIE

**A**T "Masterworks: Italian Design, 1960-1994," the first of a two-part exhibition of furniture and product design, which opens today at the Bard Graduate Center on the Upper West Side, fun can still be fun the second time around.

The playful designs from 1960 to 1979 — lamps that look like mushrooms, a chair that resembles a white wave — conjure up memories of those decades, a time when furniture didn't need to look like furniture. It was, after all, an age of experimentation.

R. Craig Miller, the curator of architecture, design and graphics at the Denver Art Museum in Colorado and originator of the show, had an explanation for the loopiness that informed some of the designs. "The Italians were looking at Pop Art and transforming it," he said. "The Italians designed with elegance, seriousness and wit. That's why the designs come back and embrace you, 30 years later."

Nina Stritzler-Levine, the director of exhibitions at Bard, said, "Architects and designers collaborated with manufacturers and worked with plastics, different laminates, and even gave bentwood, a 19th-century material, a new esthetic."

Mr. Miller divided the designers into two groups: the modernists and the antimodernists.

The modernists, like Joe Colombo and the Castiglioni brothers, Achille and Pier Giacomo, stripped their designs of any historical references and made sleek, sometimes biomorphic, objects. In their hands, furniture and lighting became sculptural. Antimodernists like Ettore Sottsass infused their designs with pattern, ornament and texture.

But a distinct sense of merry rule-breaking emerged from both schools of thought.

From the modernists came the kinetic Arco lamp. Its gleaming rounded stainless-steel shade was attached to an arc that was 84 inches long and gently bobbed up and down when touched. The lamp, which was designed in 1962 by the Castiglioni brothers, often became the focal point of a room. It was movable sculpture, and people could not resist poking it.

That same year saw the introduction of the Nesso lamp by Gruppo

Architetti Urbanisti Citta Nova, which looked like an orange plastic toadstool, and in 1965, Gae Aulenti designed the Pipistrello lamp, which resembled a bat.

If lamps could move, why couldn't chairs inflate or wrap themselves around the human body? In 1967, Donato D'Urbino, one of the show's antimodernists, designed the inflatable plastic Blow chair, kin to all whimsical inflatable pool toys.

In 1969, Piero Gatti, Cesare Paolini and Franco Teodoro created the beanbag chair, which they called Sacco seating, whose shape conformed to the human body. (It was filled with polystyrene pellets, not beans.) Nearly 30 years later its descendants, squashed and rumped, live in the rooms of teen-agers.

Mr. Pesce's Up Five armchair (1969) looks like an abstract sculpture of a seated woman, complete with rounded breasts. Made of cushiony polyurethane wrapped in stretch fabric, "it is, indeed, like a huge maternal lap," the architect said at the time.

Even a typewriter could be light-hearted. Mr. Sottsass said his red plastic and metal Valentine I-47 version for Olivetti was "for use in any place except the office, so as not to remind anyone of monotonous working hours." Designed in 1969, it was

## Furniture infused with the spirit of experimentation.

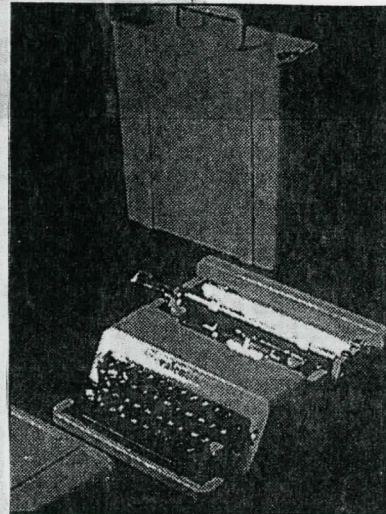
as slender and compact as other typewriters were large and clunky. There were two orange buttons on the ribbon spools, "like the eyes of a robot," Mr. Sottsass once said.

The typewriter was designed "to keep amateur poets company on quiet Sundays in the country or to provide a highly colored object on a table in a studio apartment," he said.

The first part of the show runs through June 29. The second part, which covers 1980 to 1994, will be on view July 16 through Sept. 21.

The center is at 18 West 86th Street, and is open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. (Thursdays until 8 P.M.).

Admission is \$2; \$1 for students and those 65 and older.



**A typewriter for poets**  
The Olivetti I-47 (1969).



**Early beanbag** The Sacco chair (1969) started a style.