

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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Masterworks

Italian Design, 1960-1994, Part 1

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts

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MASTERWORKS: *ITALIAN DESIGN, 1960-1994* IS BEING PRESENTED IN TWO parts at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, an institution founded by Susan Weber Soros. Located in a beautifully restored townhouse on Manhattan's Upper Westside, it is an oasis in the city. Its galleries are not large, but its exhibitions are usually scholarly examinations of topics that are also visual delights. Bard hosts traveling shows that might not otherwise find a home in New York. This exhibition, being toured by the American Federation of Arts, was organized by R. Craig Miller, curator of Architecture, Design, and Graphics of the Denver Art Museum and drawn from that museum's superb collection. (It's interesting to note that Denver lured Miller away from his previous post at our own Metropolitan Museum of Art, which suggests the rather different priorities of these two institutions.)

The first part of the exhibition covers the '60s and '70s. (The '80s and '90s will be seen at Bard during the summer, from July 16 through September 21.) It's a wonderful look at a period that seems both close and distant, modern and yet nostalgic as it is currently being revived in fashion. It focuses on the time when Italy rather suddenly became an international design leader. France, England, Austria, Germany, and Scandinavia had all helped to create the styles of the 20th century, from Art Nouveau to Swedish Modern, but Italy had not contributed much that was memorable until 1960. Devastated by the Second World War, the "Italian miracle" came to fruition as its industry revived and promoted products for their visual impact, just as the proto-industrial designers had "styled" products to combat the Great Depression of the 1930s. Lacking a strong research or technological base, Italy "concentrated on promoting an 'Italian look' as a means of distinguishing their products," writes Miller in the catalog to the exhibition. The Modernist aesthetic pioneered by the architects and designers of the Bauhaus acquired an Italian accent, "an overt flair and bravura," according to Miller. British design historian Penny Sparke characterizes the Italian design sensibility in the modernist vein as being seemingly simple, but using sophisticated materials, finely crafted; having expressive form; and utilizing new technology usually borrowed.

To baby boomers who came of age in the '60s and '70s, Italian-accented Modernism is instantly recognizable as a somehow casual elegance. There are the "classic" designs that define that moment. From what curator Miller called the first generation of modern Italian designers, the ones who came to prominence between the two world wars, there is Achille Castiglioni's 1962 ARCO lamp, still an elegant reach of stainless steel springing from a block of marble. The combination of the classical material with the new was distinctly

innovative and Italian as was the transmutation of lighting fixture into sculptural statement. There is also Richard Sapper's *TIZIO* lamp, designed in 1973 for Artemide. The first low-voltage lamp, its cleverly counterweighted arms allow for a variety of positions. The wall label accurately notes that it became a "cult object" in the following decade. There is also Joe Colombo's 1970 *BOBY* storage trolley of molded plastic, a material the Italians exploited even if they didn't invent. It has sat by many a drafting table, and may still be in service next to today's designer and his Mac.

The enduring quality of many of the designs on view is evidenced by the fact that they are still in production, sometimes altered by the rude confrontation of form with function, which the Italians did not necessarily excel at. Think of Olivetti's stunning red portable typewriter, *VALENTINE*, which is a pleasure to behold, a torture to type on. It is presented in this exhibition, as is Massimo Vignelli's plastic *COMPACT* dinnerware, introduced in 1964 by Articoli Plastici Elettric and kept in circulation by the American company Heller. The original design, an elegant articulation of form with a semi-circular cut in the lip where the handle joined, was modified early on to prevent the coffee from draining down the handle.

Also on view are evidences of design that did not make it into production. Gio Ponti's molded fiberglass chair *NOVEDRA* from 1968 was never manufactured. Its slat-like forms echo the diagonals of the slate blue geometrically patterned fabric, also designed by Ponti as well. There is no indication about why it was never produced, but it has obviously functioned quite well over as the original upholstery is a little worse for wear having been sat upon for decades by Ponti's daughter's cat.

The reaction to Modernism, which was termed "anti-design" in Italy and Miller prefers to call "anti-modernism," and goes more commonly by the name Post Modernism, can be seen in Ettore Sottsass' *NIRVANA* cabinet of 1966. It is one of a number of "superboxes" designed for Poltronova as wardrobes and cupboards. Made of plastic laminate, wood, and metal, there are only three, one made for Sottsass' retrospective at the Pompidou, one made for the Denver Art Museum, and one made for a patron of the Museum. It is a remarkably restrained example of the principles that define the "anti-modernist" aesthetic. There is the odd scale and juxtaposition of form, assertive color, and wit that characterizes Sottsass' design impulse.

Even though there is an attempt to create a sense of how these objects might have functioned with the *NIRVANA* cabinet set on a shaggy white carpet against a wallpaper design of squiggles on a PoMo mauve-y pink, next to one of Gaetano Pesce's *UP* chairs from 1969, the impression remains that the viewer is being presented objects for contemplation, not objects designed to be used.

The constraints inherent in a museum exhibition are understandable, so as much as I would have liked to have settled into the Pesce chair, I also found the intellectual experience quite satisfying.