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| Art and DesignPartial micro-history of a crossoverBy Ivan Quaroni |
| The story of art’s encounter with design is a long one, which tradition has it began with the spread between 1880 and 1910 of the Arts & Crafts Movement that promoted an ideal reform of applied arts through the combined work of artists and artisans. Its founder, William Morris, was a painter enamoured of the Middle Ages who took inspiration from the ancient trades corporations to try to implement his utopian, social mission to fill daily life with beauty by renewing the concept of home décor. Furniture, upholstery, curtains, rugs and objects should not just express human labour and practical needs, but also counter the anonymous industrial products of the time. Although it was a failure from the business point of view, the legacy of Arts & Crafts spread like the aftershock of an earthquake throughout the twentieth century, influencing movements such as *Art Nouveau*, Liberty, *Jugendstil* and Modern Style. However, it was in the arts secessionist revolution that the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Viennese Workshops) arose. This was a production facility founded by architect Josef Hoffman and painter Koloman Moser, which inserted Morris’s legacy into the concept of *Gesamtgestaltung*, an idea of ‘total design’ for the development of furniture poised between architecture, painting, sculptures and artisan crafts, which existed from 1903 to 1932.  |
| In the meantime, in the German Weimar Republic, what would become the founding experience of future design was maturing: the Bauhaus, a movement and a school that formalised the idea of converging art, crafts and design not just with the architectural works of Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, but also through numerous complementary décor items that consolidated a new, sober and functional style which adapted well to the needs of industrial production.The Bauhaus objects that have become milestones in the history of design include the famous chairs *Wassily* by Marcel Breuer (1925), *Barcelona* by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich (1929), and *Cantilever* by Mart Stam (1926); the wardrobe on castors by Joseph Pohl (1929); artist Joseph Albers’ nesting tables (1927) and Peter Keler’s Bauhaus Cradle (1922); the Table Lamp by William Wagenfeld and Carl Jacob Jucker (1923) and Marianne Brandt’s teapot (1924). All iconic modernist pieces that have become timeless classics.  |
| The interest displayed by avant-garde art in every aspect of daily life, including interior design and furniture, was also reflected in Italian Futurism. The manifesto for ‘Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe’, signed in 1915 by Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla, declared a will to tangibly *redesign* and *reshape* the world, exploiting the opportunities offered by the production possibilities and market of the time. This idea, anticipated by Giacomo Balla when he designed the décor for theLöwenstein House, Düsseldorf (1912), became a reality through the foundation by Depero of the enterprise *Casa d’Arte Futurista* (1919) for the production of furniture that epitomised the concept of ‘living life at speed’ in a dynamic rapport between house and city. In 1920 another futurist, the Neapolitan Francesco Cangiullo, inspired by Marinetti and the architect Antonio Sant’Elia, published the ‘Manifesto of Futurist Furniture’ and designed his first *mobili a sorpresa parlanti e paroliberi:* “Have you never noticed”, he wrote, “how static your furniture is? My furniture will speak and be joyful, and will never bother you”. |
| However, the man who revolutionised the craft making of future furniture was Gerardo Dottori in the early 1930s. He created the décor for the dining room in the Cimino House, using valuable wood species, metal inserts and unusual colours (such as olive green and burgundy, which did not hide the wood grain) to adapt futurism’s dynamic, geometric style to the comfort of a middle class life. Halfway through the decade Mario Sironi realised the dining room displayed in the 1936 Furniture Exhibition at the Milan Triennial, now kept in the Boschi-Di Stefano Museum-Home in Milan. His furniture – a sideboard, table and chairs in Italian walnut – were conceived with classical, essential design involving square shapes, without mouldings but enhanced with outstanding details, like the double ivory and ebony line inlaid on all the surfaces or the sculptural bronze panel on the sideboard with mirror and engraved figurines. From the edition directed by Gio Ponti and Mario Sironi in 1933, the Milan Triennial became one of the venues where art, architecture and design converged. It was at the 1940 edition, in the building by Giovanni Muzio, that Gio Ponti first saw patterns printed on silk scarves by Pietro Fornasetti, with whom he shared a passion for Giorgio De Chirico’s and Alberto Savinio’s metaphysical paintings. Their working relationship, which began in the 1940s and continued for the next ten years, developed into interior design and décor, including the *Architettura* series of furniture items, exhibited for the first time at the Milan IX Triennial (1951) and the interiors for the *Andrea Doria* ocean liner (1952) and Sanremo Casino (1950). The combination of design and metaphysical painting distinguished all Ponti’s work for ship interiors in the post WW II years, also involving artists such as Lucio Fontana, Fausto Melotti, Massimo Campigli and Salvatore Fiume. The binary model of cooperation between architects and artists entered a critical period at the end of the 1960s, when Radical Design exploded, in line with the counter-cultural movements of 1968, which produced an anti-rationalist view of objects that made materials and colours the eye-catching elements. Through novelties and provocation typical of the figurative arts, the new designers-artists claimed a central role for creativity, irony and poetic invention in design. Groups like Superstudio, Archizoom, UFO, Gruppo Sturm and Gruppo 9999 contrasted functional design, industrial production aimed at consumerism and the concept of ‘good taste’ with massive doses of visionary ideas in the form of utopian architectural projects, strangely shaped furniture and complementary items that somehow smacked of subversion.  |
| When the revolutionary, polemical urge had played out, Post Modernism gathered up the ‘Radical’ legacy, transforming its refusal of industrial processing into a sort of laid-back, anarchic eclecticism with regard to style. This led to the poetic and multi-disciplinary experiments by *Studio Alchimia*, founded in 1976 by Alessandro Guerriero for the purpose of exhibiting works freed from production diktat, such as, for example, the *Mobile Infinito* designed by Alessandro Mendini in 1981 and presented in the courtyard of Milan University’s Faculty of Architecture in front of Gio Ponti’s *Trifoglio* building, with a theatrical performance of *Zone Calde* by Magazzini Criminali. *Mobile Infinito* was a construction almost twenty metres long, comprising tables, chairs, cabinets, ornaments, lamps and various objects, a symbol of creative dissemination, produced with the cooperation of the Transavantgarde painters Clemente, Chia, Cucchi, Paladino and De Maria – who coined the term Transdesign for the occasion -, architects Andrea Branzi, Michele De Lucchi, Ettore Sottsass, Ugo La Pietra, Denis Santachiara, Piero and Achille Castiglioni, artists Luigi Veronesi and Luigi Serafini, as well as legendary exponents of design and architecture such as Bruno Munari and Gio Ponti.  |
| Radical Design and the experience of *Studio Alchimia* gave rise to *Gruppo Memphis*, a team of designers founded by Ettore Sottsass in December 1980, which included, among others, Andrea Branzi, Aldo Cibic, Michele De Lucchi, Marco Zanuso, Matteo Thun, Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Nathalie du Pasquier, Marco Zanini and Masanori Umeda. The group’s aim was to oppose rational design, using an aggressive, optimistic style for furniture items, lamps and objects faced in coloured laminates with vivacious textures that celebrated the normality and banality of a consumer society. The use of ‘poor’ materials with no history and therefore anti-intellectual, was a strategy in tune with the Post Punk and New Wave culture, which spread from music into the art and architecture of the 1980s. That decade was also the most brilliant in the history of cooperation between art and design, and the last time theories solidified into a proliferation of different forms. If it is true, as Stefano Casciani wrote, that “right from the start, for design, furniture has been the instrument of all the revolutions and new declarations of poetry”, then we can only start again from here – i.e. from interior décor, seen as objects that draw the borderline between the ideal and the mundane – to take up again the fertile story of crossovers of creativity and projects.By involving contemporary artists in furniture making, ***Icon’s Milano*** becomes part of this adventurous tradition, transforming itself into a laboratory that investigates the aesthetic dimension of the present to give it back to us in evocative forms for objects that have always shaped and defined domestic space.  |
| Paolo De Biasi for Icon’s Cooperation between Icon’s and contemporary art could only begin with Paolo De Biasi, an architect and painter skilful in successfully merging the two disciplines. Having studied under Arduino Cantafora at Venice University’s Faculty of Architecture, De Biasi interprets art as a centuries-old practice that investigates the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between the reality of images and the abstraction of ideas. His style of painting is sensitive to the construction of space and the shape of objects, which he organises like a highly personal catalogue of references, a sort of register of memories and visions. The self-referential element of his paintings regards the founding paradigms of Western art, inserted into a visual language that alternates classical and modern terms, recurring forms and unusual inventions. In particular, De Biasi mixes the constructive and ornamental taste of architects such as Le Corbusier, Gio Ponti, Aldo Rossi and Gigiotti Zanini with the ‘re-ordered classical style’ spirit of 1920s art, intertwining these two sources of inspiration with the grand Italian tradition of the Renaissance and the Tuscan Primitives. The two canvases produced by the artist for Icon’s confirm and reinforce the iconographic ties with history, directing the production of a series of limited edition furniture items towards elegance and formal composure with an exquisitely metaphysical flavour. |
| Tutt’altro ancoraThe painting called *Tutt’altro ancora* (2022) depicts a surreal metaphysical landscape, strewn with enigmatic objects. The scene is arranged like a set in which the artist projects a plethora of mysterious images. The artificial nature of the representation is highlighted by the fact that the bottom right-hand corner shows visible trace of chequering, a system used by painters since ancient times to transfer their drawings onto bigger surfaces. On this sort of proscenium, the artist’s linear style, underlined by a palette reduced to a few essential colours, distributes a series of clues and mysterious symbols, some of which reminiscent of artists and architects from the past. The open hand, a symbol with many meanings, such as friendship, generosity and prosperity, not only recalls Le Corbusier’s monumental one in the Indian city of Chandigarh, closely related to his *Modulor* (proportions based on the size of a human body), but is also a sign that appears in certain sketches and drawings by Aldo Rossi, as well as in bozzetti for ceramics by Gio Ponti. The round black figure on a pedestal in the centre of the picture harks back to the series ‘*Soli Spenti*’, first developed by Giorgio De Chirico in 1930 and then pursued in the 1970s with *Sole su Cavalletto* (1973), which hints at the dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in other words between the rational and chaotic aspects of life. Other incomprehensible objects, such as the stick and the box, belong to the iconography of De Chirico, founder of *Metaphysics,* and are taken from a 1973 painting: *Meditazione di Mercurio.*  Other details, like the flying (and crying) eye, or the sphere and the cube, reveal the purely cerebral nature of the image, which can be interpreted as interior morphology, a landscape of the soul. Icon’s has taken inspiration from the work *Tutt’altro ancora* to create two pieces of furniture, each one produced in a limited number of twenty, onto which it has transferred the fascination of Paolo De Biasi’s pictorial image. The sideboard is a rectangular cabinet with an oak veneered structure and iron legs, divided into three compartments with doors, one clad in leather, one ribbed and black lacquered, and one that almost entirely reproduces the artist’s contemplative landscape with imitative accuracy. The pantry is in oak with iron supports and has two vertical doors, one of which ribbed and black lacquered, the other focussing on the central section of the painting, so that we get a close up view of that jumble of enigmatic objects, making this complementary décor item a ‘meditation unit’.  |
| … se non, per esempioThe painting entitled *… se non, per esempio* (2022) is, in the words of Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, “a picture to dream over”. Or, better, a ***rêverie*, a work that mixes fantastic and dreamlike elements that here also recall signs and memories of art from the past, brought into the present by the artist through visual grammar plunged completely into contemporary *zeitgeist.* In effect, nostalgia is only for those who live in the present. Once again, the work is constructed like a proscenium, with the back of the stage and wings arranged to delimit the space in the foreground, a perspective box that contains the remains and fragments of classical statuary, as in certain sketches made by architect and urban planner Carlo Aymonino when re-organising Rome’s *Piazza Campidoglio*. However, the archaeological finds are purely signs, not to be intended as the expression of a will to go back to the classics, but as headwords that survive the exercise of composing contemporary painting. The same goes for the citations of Tuscan Primitives, such as, for example, the urban profile in the background of the picture, reminiscent of the square blocks of buildings depicted by Giotto or Simone Martini. They are recognisable elements that persist in the form of effigies in the lexicon of the art of today. Art that, in the case of De Biasi, appears to be dominated principally by precise, geometric construction, perhaps a conditioned reflex due to his profession as an architect.**  |
| Icon’s has used the work *… se non, per esempio* to add another two pieces of furniture to its collection (also producing just twenty of each one) that translate the visionary character of the painting into an object of household décor, conserving the quality of placid suspension, also suggested by its title, which seems to be a fragment of an interrupted speech. The pantry has a blue painted oak structure, iron base and a front comprising two doors, one in leather and the other with an accurate reproduction of a particularly significant segment of the picture, which includes the mutilated statue of an ephebe, a fragmented detail of the feet of another ancient statue and part of a bird painted in the style of the Tuscan Primitives. The low rectangular sideboard in chestnut-coloured veneered oak boasts a close up of two archaeological details, divided by a central ribbed door in the same colour as the structure. On the right, an ephebic figure stands out against the back panel decorated with an elegant diamond-shaped pattern, and on the left an anatomical detail in a corner of the perspective box covered entirely in geometric decorations of modernist taste.  |
| BiographyPAOLO DE BIASI was born at Feltre in 1966. He lives and works in the city of Treviso. An architect, he studied under Arduino Cantafora at Venice University, and together with the Treviso UP3 Studio, where he is an associate, he took part in the 2012 edition of the Venice Biennale of Architecture. He began his career as an artist relatively late; after reaching the final of the *Premio Celeste* he met Ivan Quaroni, who included him in the original nucleus of the Italian Newbrow scenario, resulting in a series of exhibitions and publications to which he contributed with paintings and collage works. In 2011 the Italian Newbrow movement and Paolo De Biasi were explicitly mentioned in the film ‘*I Soliti Idioti*’, starring comedians Fabrizio Biggio and Francesco Mandelli and directed by Enrico Lando (2011). He took part in national and international exhibitions, including, to name just a few: the Prague Biennale (2009); the Pecci Museum Maretti Prize, Prato (2011); *Impresa Pittura* at the Genazzano International Contemporary Art Centre (CIAC) (2010); Italian Newbrow at the Como Pinacoteca (2012); at the Fortino, Forte dei Marmi (2012); the Italy-China Biennale, Villa Reale, Monza (2012); the first edition of Contemporary Dolomites (2011); *Selvatico 13* at Palazzo Pezzi, Cotignola; Caroline Corbetta’s virtual art gallery, Il Crepaccio Instagram Show; and the most recent Italian Newbrow at the St. Augustine Complex, Pietrasanta (2021). In 2012 he was awarded the Paolo Parati National Painting Prize, and was a finalist in the *Premio Terna, Premio Celeste* (2007) and the Lagoon Art Prize (2007), as well as being selected in the London International Creative Competition (2012). He has exhibited in several Italian art galleries: Area/B, Milan; Carini e Donatini, San Giovanni Valdarno; Andrea Arte, Vicenza; Galleria Flavio Stocco, Castelfranco Veneto; Antonio Colombo Arte Contemporanea, Milan; Labs Gallery, Bologna; and in Germany and Hungary with the Hamburg CCA&A Gallery.  |