

# The Museum of Modern Art

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INTRODUCTION - **Objects**  
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**ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE**  
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The emergence of Italy during the last decade as the dominant force in consumer-product design has influenced the work of every other European country and is now having its effect in the United States. The outcome of this burst of vitality of the Italian designers is not simply a series of stylistic variations of product design. Of even greater significance is a growing awareness of design as an activity whereby man creates artifacts to mediate between his hopes and aspirations, and the pressures and restrictions imposed upon him by nature and the manmade environment that his culture has created.

Italy has become a micromodel in which a wide range of the possibilities, limitations, and critical issues of contemporary design are brought into sharp focus. Many of the concerns of contemporary designers throughout the world are fairly represented by the diverse and frequently opposite approaches being developed in Italy. The purpose of this exhibition, therefore, is not only to report on current developments in Italian design, but to use these as a concrete frame of reference for a number of issues of concern to designers all over the world.

It is possible to differentiate in Italy today three prevalent attitudes toward design: the first is conformist, the second is reformist, and the third is, rather, one of contestation, attempting both inquiry and action. By the first, or conformist, approach, we refer to the attitude of certain designers who conceive of their work as an autonomous activity responsible only to itself; they do not question the sociocultural context in which they work, but instead continue to refine already established forms and functions. As a group, they may be distinguished by certain characteristics (also found, however, among other Italian designers): their bold use of color, and their imaginative utilization of the possibilities offered by the new hard and soft synthetic materials and advanced molding techniques. Their work, which constitutes the most visible part of Italian design production, is mainly concerned with exploring the aesthetic quality of single objects — a chair, a table, a bookcase — that answer the traditional needs of domestic life.

The second, or reformist, attitude is motivated by a profound concern for the designer's role in a society that fosters consumption as one means of inducing individual happiness, thereby insuring social stability. Torn by the dilemma of having been trained as creators of objects, but of being incapable of controlling either the significance or the ultimate uses of these objects, they find themselves unable to reconcile the conflicts between their social concerns and their professional practices. They have thus developed a rhetorical mode to cope with these contradictions. Convinced that there can be no renovation of design until structural changes have occurred in society, but not attempting to bring these about themselves, they do rhetorical operation of redesigning conventional objects with new, not invent substantially new forms; instead they engage in a rhetorical operation of redesigning conventional objects with new, ironic, and sometimes self-deprecatory sociocultural and aesthetic references.

In their ambiguous attitude toward the object, these designers justify their activity by giving to their designs shapes that deliberately attempt a commentary upon the roles that these objects are normally expect to play in our society. The diversity of these rhetorical operations permits us to recognize at least half a dozen different procedures for recharging known forms with altered meanings:

Some of these designers are involved in a process of revival. For the most part, they restate forms created by the earliest modern movements in design — mainly, Art Nouveau and the Bauhaus — since these forms have by now become understood, and the complex set (more)

of ideas that they once connoted have by now become explicit. Sometimes, however, in their nostalgia for the past, they reach back even to medieval times.

Other groups are more concerned with ironic manipulation of the sociocultural meanings attached to existing forms, rather than with changing those forms. Specifically, they design deliberately kitsch objects, as a way of thumbing their noses at objects created to satisfy the desire for social status and identification. Some, taking their cue from Pop art, adopt forms from the manmade elements that compose our milieu, presenting them transformed in little else but scale.

Other designers seek neither to add anything to, nor to alter, the profile of our environment; they use the device of giving their designs the guises of nature.

Conversely, others satisfy the same intention by assembling their designs solely from already existing industrial elements, recovered from the surrounding industrial landscape; by this recycling, they avoid the proliferation of new formal matrices.

For a few designers, the cultural premises predominant today have no validity and can therefore provide only a false basis for any formal inquiry. Devoid of any firm referents, they return, in a somewhat self-deprecatory attempt at purification, to the human figure as the source of all formal truth.

Recognizing that the object in our society often serves as a fetish, some designers underscore that quality by assigning to their designs an explicitly ritualistic quality. The object is given sculptural form and conceived as an altarpiece for the domestic liturgy.

For some designers, the object can be stripped of its mystique only if it is tamed, if it is made to assume the role of house pet. Reduced to graspable size, the object no longer intimidates us; endowed with the stability of inert matter, and created for no specific function, such objects can be allowed into our homes in the certainty that they will never make evident the passage of biological or social time.

Confronted with the erosion of the simplistic doctrine of functionalism, some designers produce objects whose function is not evident from their form, and whose structural properties, in fact, contradict the behavior one would expect from that form. In such cases, no longer does 'form follow function' but, on the contrary, aggressively conceals it.

The distinction between the two main approaches so far discussed, the conformist and the reformist, is in reality not so clear-cut. The oscillations of designers between these two attitudes reflect the contradictions and paradoxes that result from simultaneously doubting the benefits of our consumer society, and at the same time enacting the role of voyeurs of the technological dream.

The third approach to design, which we have designated as one of contestation, attempts to deal with such a situation. This attitude reveals itself in two main trends in Italy today, each trying to get to the root in very different ways. The first is by a commitment to a 'moratorium' position and an absolute refusal to take part in the present socioindustrial system. Here, 'antiobject' literally means 'not making objects,' and the designers' pursuits are either confined to political action and philosophical postulation, or else consist of total withdrawal.

Those in the second tendency share with the preceding group the disbelief that an object can be designed as a single, isolated entity, without regard for its physical and sociocultural context. Their

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reaction to the problem, however, is not one of passive abstention but rather one of active critical participation. They have thus come to conceive of objects and of their users as an ensemble of interrelated processes, whose interaction results in constantly changing patterns of relationships. To the traditional preoccupation with aesthetic objects, these contemporary designers have therefore added a concern for an aesthetic of the uses made of these objects. This holistic approach is manifested in the design of objects that are flexible in function, thus permitting multiple modes of use and arrangement. To one accustomed to dealing with finite shapes that can act as points of reference, such objects can be offensive, because they refuse to adopt a fixed shape or to be a reference to for anything. In contrast to the traditional object, these objects, in some instances, assume shapes that become whatever the users want them to be, thereby providing an open-ended manner of use. Objects of this sort are conceived as environmental ensembles and permit different modes of social interaction, while at the same time they allow the user to make his own statement about both privacy and communality.

The products of this mode of Italian design do, in fact, seem to correspond to the preoccupations of a changing society. It has therefore been the environmental approach that the present exhibition has been particularly concerned with exploring. Accordingly, The Museum of Modern Art invited a number of well-known Italian designers to propose environmental concepts and translate them into physical designs; at the same time, it conducted a competition in the same terms for young Italian designers under the age of thirty-five. Both the commissioned designers and those entering the competition were requested to explore the domestic landscape with a sense for its 'places,' and to propose the spaces and artifacts that give them form, the ceremonies and behaviors that assign them meaning. Special attention was paid to the individual's need for spaces both of an adaptable and fixed nature, in which previously unrealized and unthought-of relationships might be openly expressed.

To complement these concrete environments, a number of designers who believe that no substantial solution can emerge from physical design, but only from social and political involvement, were also invited to present their points of view.

The objects shown in this exhibition, and illustrated in its catalogue; therefore, serve to provide a cultural context for the environments. These examples of design produced in Italy in the last decade have not been selected with an historical intent, but rather with the purpose of indicating the different design positions now evolving in Italy. The two parts of the exhibition — objects and environments — are thus complementary.

This publication documents the exhibition and follows its scheme of organization. In the first section, the objects selected are presented in three distinct groups, according to the three main tendencies in Italian design discussed above. The second section presents the environments and the design program submitted both to the designers invited by the Museum and to the young designers entering the competition it sponsored. The critical articles in the two sections that follow provide, respectively, historical and critical frames of reference for the ideas presented by the designers in the preceding sections.