

The Museum of Modern Art

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FIRST U.S. MUSEUM EXHIBITION DEVOTED TO ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER CASTIGLIONI OPENS AT MoMA THIS FALL

Achille Castiglioni: Design!
October 16, 1997–January 6, 1998

The first United States museum exhibition devoted to the work of the Italian architect and designer Achille Castiglioni (b. 1918) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 16, 1997. *Achille Castiglioni: Design!* features work from all periods of the designer's long and exceptionally fruitful career. The works, ranging from the often whimsical lighting and furniture designs that make up the bulk of his oeuvre, to his meticulous, thought-provoking interiors, reinforce Castiglioni's reputation as one of the masters of contemporary design.

Organized by Paola Antonelli, Associate Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, the exhibition comprises some 200 objects, including bookshelves, ashtrays, glassware, bathroom fixtures, cameras, electrical switches, and vacuum cleaners. Three reconstructed interiors, designed by the architect over a span of 27 years, demonstrate his sense of irony through innovative combinations of domestic objects. Also featured are Castiglioni's full-scale drawings of furniture, fittings, and objects from 1946 to the present.

On view through January 6, 1998, *Achille Castiglioni: Design!* is organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in collaboration with Cosmit, Organizing Committee of the Italian Furniture Exhibition, Milan, Italy. This exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from Maureen and Marshall S. Cogan. Additional support is provided by Agnes Bourne, Alessi, Cosmit, Abitare, Campeggi S.r.l., Flos, and M2L, Inc. The education programs and brochure accompanying the exhibition are made possible by a generous grant from the Furniture and Lighting Division of the Italian Trade Commission.

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While renowned and respected by designers worldwide, the 79-year-old Castiglioni is little known by name to the general public. "Several of his designs, such as the 'Arco' or the 'Parentesi' lamps, are featured in the design collections of museums worldwide," notes Ms. Antonelli, "but they are lamps that people know, use, and appreciate even if they have never heard of Castiglioni's name." This relatively low profile fits in with the designer's overall philosophy, one in which observation, imagination, and common sense take precedence over "authorship" or trends.

Achille Castiglioni studied at the Architectural School of the Polytechnic in Milan, earning his degree in 1944. Just after World War II he joined the studio run by his two older brothers, Livio and Pier Giacomo. While Livio left the practice in 1952, Achille and Pier Giacomo continued to collaborate until 1968, when Pier Giacomo died. Many of the brothers' most successful design objects, the "Arco" lamp and the "Sella" and "Mezzadro" stools for instance, are still in production today.

Achille Castiglioni: Design! is centered around three reconstructed rooms that the designer created for exhibitions in 1957, 1965, and 1984, respectively. The first exhibition, entitled *Colors and Forms in Today's Home*, was first on view in Como, Italy, and included an intriguing, bohemian-style mix of Castiglioni's furniture and lighting designs and what Ms. Antonelli calls "found objects" (for example, a sink or a plastic toy gun), combined in expressive, unexpected ways. As part of this installation, the pivoting "Sella" stool, composed of a leather bicycle seat, a tubular stem, and a rounded counterweight, has obvious Dadaist overtones, while the understated "Mezzadro," whose key feature is a mass-produced tractor seat, incorporates Castiglioni's edict that design be both timeless and adaptable. The seat has been updated over the years as the style of tractor seats has changed, without losing its elegance and wholeness.

The second interior, originally part of the 1965 exhibition *The Inhabited Home*, held in Florence, is a more traditional dining room environment that includes Castiglioni-designed glasses and cutlery, three Thonet-inspired "Tric" chairs, and the "Ventosa"

lamp, an adjustable spotlight made up of a small reflector held in place by a suction cup. In this installation the lamp, which can adhere to any smooth surface, is attached to a whisky bottle—further evidence of Castiglioni's genius for assembling groups of seemingly disparate objects to form a cohesive, provocative whole. "It's the mixture of very classic crystal ware and a ladder on the wall," Ms. Antonelli says, referring to the aluminum ladder that is suspended, with no apparent purpose, on the wall behind the dining room table. "He throws things together without inhibition," Ms. Antonelli adds.

Castiglioni designed the third interior—part of *Italian Furnishings*, a promotional exhibition held in Tokyo in 1984—in an effort to integrate Eastern and Western design. One of the room's key elements, the "Primate" stool, brings the Eastern style of sitting (no back support, more weight on one's knees and feet) to a Western audience through the addition of a padded cushion. Castiglioni also interprets a traditional Japanese method of dining by means of a convivial arrangement in which every guest has his own "Cumano" table (a small, round-topped iron table that can be folded and hung on a wall), all placed in an oval configuration. A fine-stemmed lamp, passing through the hanging hole in each "Cumano," illuminates every table individually, while at the same time adding to the sense of unity.

"In these three environments one feels Castiglioni's desire to provide unusual living spaces that emphasize how one should live—organizing objects around oneself, not the other way around," Ms. Antonelli notes. "This is why we find a sink in a living room, a ladder in a dining room, and many tables around us rather than one big one. This is the correct way for a designer to work—to suggest more freedom in our living rather than redressing the common, ordinary, and rigid ways."

This freedom is further expressed in Castiglioni's ability to "redesign" a familiar object, as in the famous "Arco" lamp—inspired by the ordinary street lamp. The redesigned version, named for its graceful arc, has a light source that is almost seven feet from its 110-pound marble base, suspended by a three-part, telescoping steel arm. The

"Arco" has the effect of an overhead lamp without the need for drilling a hole in the ceiling; it illuminates the center of a dining room table without impeding traffic flow. To allow portability, a pole or broom handle for lifting can be inserted into a hole in the base.

Widely imitated, the "Arco" lamp suggests a new use of domestic space, and is exemplary of Castiglioni's unerring combination of wit, sensuality, and clear understanding of why a product needs to be created, or why an existing one needs improvement. "Design is different from fine art in that, between the initial idea and the final product, there need to be so many compromises," Ms. Antonelli states. "In spite of all these obstacles, which a good designer can turn into strengths, Castiglioni has produced a great deal of work that is easy to understand and fun to use, and which has lasting beauty."

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For more information contact Mary Lou Strahlendorff, Department of Communications, 212/708-9755.