Achille Castiglioni : design!

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ACHILLE CASTIGLIONI

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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talian architect and designer Achille Castiglioni (b. 1918), to whom The Museum of Modern Art dedicates this first individual retrospective in the United States, is an internationally acknowledged master of design. During his fifty-two-year career, he has designed and collaborated on almost 150 objects, including lamps, stools, bookshelves, electrical switches, cameras, telephones, vacuum cleaners, and car seats. Several of his works, such as the Arco and the Brera lamps, are featured in the design collections of many museums. They are also familiar to many people who use them in their homes, even if Castiglioni's name may not be. This exhibition presents a wide selection of objects, as well as special reconstructions of three rooms chosen from his dozens of installations for art exhibitions, trade fairs, and showrooms. His work, which has had a powerful impact on the history of the applied arts and has taught generations about good design, provides an overview of the characteristics that make design one of the highest expressions of twentieth-century creativity.

Immediately after graduating from the Architectural School of the Polytechnic of Milan in the late 1930s, Achille Castiglioni's older brothers Livio and Pier Giacomo opened an office on the mezzanine of a building facing the Sforza Castle in Milan. As with many other Italian architects at that time, the lack of major architectural assignments led them to concentrate on smaller-scale design projects. Alone or in collaboration with architect Luigi Caccia Dominioni, they designed interiors, exhibition installations, furniture, and objects. Among these were the 1938 Caccia cutlery set, which is still in production today and remains ubiquitous in Italian homes. Their spectacular five-valve radio receiver from 1939, manufactured by Phonola, was one of the first radios to move away from the traditional heavy cupboard setup, and served as a milestone of organic design in plastic, comparable to Isamu Noguchi's Radio Nurse of 1937. Achille joined his brothers as a licensed

architect after the close of World War II. In 1952, Livio left the office and set out on his own to design lighting and sound installations. Until Pier Giacomo's premature death in 1968, he and Achille worked together on a multitude of designs, both concentrating on the same task, rather than dividing up the work. Many of their objects, like the Arco and Parentesi lamps, are still in production. The clarity and wit that characterizes their combined efforts is also evident in Achille's solo production from 1968 to the present day.

Castiglioni's creative method seems so lucid and logical it could be an example taken from a manual on the design process, but only a designer with skill and experience can achieve the leap from a sound, well-reasoned process to a beautiful working object.

Castiglioni nonetheless acknowledges the standard principles of his practice: "Start from scratch. Stick to

Achille, Pier Giacomo, and Livio Castiglioni, c. 1952. Photo Walter Laeubli, courtesy Studio Castiglioni

"Ventosa" lamp, 1962. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Rubber, socket and metal, $4\% \times 2\% \times 2\%$ ". Manufactured by Flos. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. "An experimental and adjustable spotlight," as Castiglioni defines it, Ventosa is a small reflector supported by a suction cup ("ventosa") that connects to any smooth surface, including the reader's forehead—thus making the reader part of the fixture.

Environment "Colori e forme nella casa d'oggi" (Colors and Shapes in Today's Home), Villa Olmo, Como, 1957. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni

Left to right: a wood milking stool from Castiglioni's found objects collection. "Mezzadro" seat (see pages 10, 11). "Sella" stool, 1983 (1957). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Racing bicycle leather saddle, lacquered steel stem, cast-iron base, 28 x 10" diam. Manufactured by Zanotta. Sella (saddle) is the pivoting stool that garnered the Castiglionis an incongruous "Dadaist" label. With this seat, the brothers designed a new behavior, a hybrid between sitting and pacing nervously, because, says Achille, "When I use a pay phone, I like to move around, but I also would like to sit, but not completely."

^{*}Date of manufacture is followed by date of design in parentheses when different.

Achille, Pier Giacomo, and Livio Castiglioni



"Ventosa"



"Colori e forme nella casa d'oggi"



"Mezzadro" and "Sella"

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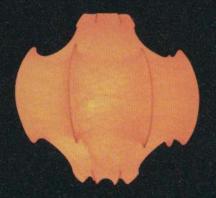
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"Viscontea"



"Lampadina"



"Arco"



common sense. Know your goals and means." In other words, the designer must not take for granted any previous similar object, must understand the reason for creating a new product or improving an existing one, and must be aware of the available resources. For each object, the designer then has to "try to find a Principal Design Component, and build upon it." If this part of his process sounds almost mathematical, the Principal Design Components, or PDCs, of some of his objects are so quirky as to seem absurd. Still, these PDCs always initiate a rigorously thoughtful design

"Viscontea" hanging lamp, 1960 (out of production). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Plastic polymer, steel frame, 19 x 27 ½" diam. Manufactured by Flos. The Museum of Modern Art. Greta Daniel Design Fund. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. Inspired by George Nelson's 1950s experiments with metal-frame lamp structures, Viscontea is a decorative luminous sculpture in which the white steel wire frame is formed and then sprayed with a film of plastic polymers, like a cocoon.

"Lampadina" wall or table lamp, 1972. Achille Castiglioni.

Aluminum reel, socket, bulb, 9 ½ x 5 x 5". Manufactured by Flos.

Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. This ready-made fixture is made of a large light bulb in which a "skullcap" is sanded on one side to control glare, a socket with a switch, and a base made of an aluminum recording spool, convenient for rolling up the excess wire or for hanging it on the wall.

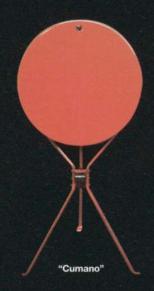
"Arco" floor lamp, 1962. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Carrara marble base, stainless steel stem, and reflector, 95 x 78%". Manufactured by Flos. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the manufacturer. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. A street lamp was the springboard for Arco, a ceiling lamp which does not require holes in the ceiling. The light source is projected eight feet away from the base, leaving enough room to serve dinner and sit at the table. The lamp can be moved by two people by inserting a broomstick through the hole in the marble base.

"Sleek" mayonnaise spoon, 1996 (1962). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Polymethylmetacrylate, 8" long. Manufactured by Alessi. Photo Santi Caleca, courtesy Alessi. Originally conceived as a promotional object for Kraft mayonnaise, the spoon features at its tip the precise curvature of common jars and is cut straight on one side to better adhere to the walls of the jar, so that every last bit of mayo can be scooped out.

process that is remarkable in its respect for materials and production techniques and its concern for the formal balance of the final product.

Castiglioni loves paradoxes and the new perception and wisdom they can engender. One example is the Sella (saddle), the pivoting stool designed with Pier Giacomo in 1957, which garnered the Castiglionis an incongruous "Dadaist" label because of its use of an already existing, everyday object in an unexpected context. The Sella is made of a leather bicycle seat, a tubular metal stem, and a rounded cast-iron base. Its inspiration induces smiles: "When I use a pay phone," says the designer, "I like to move around, but I also would like to sit, but not completely." The Principal Design Component was in this case a new behavior, a consequence of a more probing understanding of an object's combined form and function, which is often the focus of Castiglioni's work. "I try to suggest different behaviors," he has declared, expressing his idea that the designer must be the interpreter of both real and virtual needs, those that people discover only after having them satisfied first. Virtual needs, the means to a consumers' market, are here demonstrated in their pre-cynical form. With the effortless composition of the three Sella elements, the designers both invented and fulfilled a need that arose from perceptive imagination; at the same time, they designed a new but thoroughly convincing behaviora hybrid between sitting and pacing nervously.

The Sella parable is instructive, but it is not necessarily representative of the whole of Castiglioni's production. His ideas are often inspired by everyday things, and the statement "Design demands observation" has become one of his many mottos. A street lamp was the springboard for the brothers' famous Arco lamp (1962), in which the light source is projected almost eight feet away from the marble base as if it were coming from the ceiling, while their Toio lamp (1962) was based on a car's front reflector. The idea for

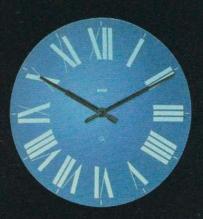




"Spirale"



"Noce"



"Firenze"

an object sometimes comes to Castiglioni while he is working on an entirely separate assignment, such as an exhibition design. Ideas can also derive from technological advances, like the introduction of the thin fluorescent tube which suggested the Tubino lamp (1951).

Drawing on the classifications made by Paolo Ferrari in his 1984 book *Achille Castiglioni*, Castiglioni himself divides his work into various groupings. The Sella belongs to the category of Ready-made Objects, as do the Mezzadro (1957)—a stool composed of a mass-produced tractor seat, a bent steel bar, a wood bar, and a wing screw—and the above-mentioned Toio lamp—made from a car reflector, a transformer that also works as heavy base, a formed metal handle, a

"Cumano" table, 1979 (1977). Achille Castiglioni. Steel, nylon, 21% x 44½ x 2¾". Manufactured by Zanotta. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. Cumano is one of Castiglioni's most exemplary redesigns, in which he chooses an object that has already existed for decades and adapts it to current technologies and conditions. The designer upgraded the classic small outdoor coffee table and made it foldable by means of an ingenious injection-molded joint. He also punched a hole through the top, so that the closed table can be more easily stored, or hung like a decoration.

"Spirale" ashtray, 1970. Achille Castiglioni. Steel, 23/4 x 6 1/4". Manufactured by Alessi. Photo Aldo Ballo, courtesy Studio Castiglioni. A clever redesign of an existing ashtray, Spirale is a steel bowl fitted with a steel spring that serves as a cigarette holder and which can be removed to easily clean the bowl.

"Noce" floor lamp, 1972. Achille Castiglioni. Steel, glass, 8 x 14% x 10%". Manufactured by Flos. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. "Natural light comes from the sky. Since electric light is artificial, it should come from the ground." Castiglioni therefore designed a luminous stone, a lamp that can be kept outdoors and even kicked around. Noce, meaning "walnut," is made of a two-part shell that contains two swiveling bulbs.

"Firenze" wall clock, 1997 (1965). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. ABS, diam. 14 1/5". Manufactured by Alessi. Photo Santi Caleca, courtesy Alessi. Named after the city where the prototype was presented in 1965, Firenze is apparently a true redesign of a classical wall clock. Once again, one has to look for the hidden expressionistic twist: the Roman numeral IV is misspelled as "IIII."

hexagonal stem, three fishing rod rings, and a single screw. His Ready-made Objects evolve like living things: the components of the Mezzadro stool have been updated as the manufacture of tractor seats has changed without damaging the purity of the object. Castiglioni refers to another grouping as Redesigned Objects, meaning traditional objects that he has perfected or updated according to current needs and technological developments. These include his personal takes on small outdoor café tables (Cumano, 1979), ashtrays (Spirale, 1971), glass globe ceiling lamps (Brera, 1992), and bedside tables (Comodo, 1989). The Minimalist group contains such subtle icons as the Luminator floor lamp of 1955, which is simply a bulb in a tube on a tripod—the tube just big enough to accommodate the socket and to contain the three thin legs during transportation—as well as the Fucsia hanging lamp of 1996, simply an upside-down glass cone with its edges sanded to protect the eyes from the bulb's glare. The Snoopy table lamp of 1967, so named after its prominent beagle-like nose, and the anthropomorphic RR126 stereo system of 1966, endowed with eyes, movable ears, and a mouth, are two of his so-called Expressionistic Objects, while the sleek curvilinear shells of appliances like the 1956 Spalter vacuum cleaner and the 1968 VLM light switch are among his Integral Projects.

Although such classification is useful up to a point, what is most important is the fact that behind each of these varied and unique objects lies a story. The perceived need that inspired the object can be equated to the conflict central to any narrative, and the design itself then acts as the resolution, the happy ending. The illustrated vignettes by Steven Guarnaccia that appear throughout the exhibition communicate the solution to the project in a few knowing lines, eloquently conveying the genesis of the idea in a concrete situation.

These drawings illustrate Castiglioni's design process, already inherent in the objects themselves.

astiglioni's design approach can best be understood within the context of the cultural climate of which he was a product, and which he in turn helped to shape. Like other Italian designers and architects such as Marco Zanuso and Ettore Sottsass, he benefited from a fortuitous combination of trends that has made Italian design a worldwide force. In part because Italian culture has always been founded on a tradition of the fine arts and of skillful craftsmanship, and in part because the disruption of World War II had created a need for newly designed and produced objects to restore the country's quality of life, Italy was poised for a design renaissance in the 1950s. The seemingly disparate sectors of culture, technology, and the economy enjoyed harmonious cooperation toward the common goal of rejuvenation. In the absence of architectural projects, architects focused on designing smaller objects. Talented architects still looking for commissions met ambitious manufacturers eager to bring their pre-existing companies up to date or to boost their new enterprises. The relatively small size of their familybased companies and their attention to detail and craftsmanship caused them to take risks and embrace innovative design. These manufacturers put at the designers' disposal all their technical skill and resources, along with their knowledge of the technological breakthroughs occurring in the postwar period. The long-lasting relationships between designers and manufacturers that were established during that time—like those between Zanuso and Brionvega (television manufacturer), between Sottsass and Olivetti (typewriter and computer manufacturer), or between the Castiglionis and Flos, the lighting fixtures company that still produces their lamps—were based on shared creative vision and understanding. In addition, both these groups benefited from the presence of ingenious engineers and technicians, as well as from worldrenowned architecture and design publications like Domus, which facilitated the international exchange

of ideas. Concurrently, Italy's economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s allowed the production and consumption of this new design to become a reality.

For many years, Castiglioni disseminated his design philosophy through his work as an educator. His peculiar teaching style seamlessly merged an almost anthropological approach to design with the advanced study of manufacturing processes and material technology. Until he retired from teaching almost ten years ago, he offered the most entertaining and popular Industrial Design course in the chaotic and overcrowded Architectural School of the

Achille Castiglioni in his office, under an Arco lamp, resting on a Sanluca armchair next to a Rocchetto table. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. "Arco" lamp (see pages 4, 5). "Sanluca" armchair, 1960. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Leather, polyurethane foam, rosewood, 39 % x 33 ½ x 31 ½". Manufactured by Gavina (1960), Knoll International (1969), and Bernini (1991). "Rocchetto" table, 1967. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Polyester, 23 ½ x 19 %". Manufactured by Kartell.

"Aoy" lamp, 1975. Translucent and opaline glass, $23 \, \% \, x \, 11 \, \% \, x \, 11 \, \%$ ". Achille Castiglioni. Manufactured and lent by Flos. Photo Aldo Ballo, courtesy Studio Castiglioni. To use up the light that ordinary floor lamps usually waste on their stem, Castiglioni designed a translucent support, a glass cylinder a foot wide with an opening at the bottom for a cat to curl up where it's warm, and to allow for cleaning of the floor inside. All parts are hand-blown glass and are made to match, without any metal connectors.

"RR126" stereo system, 1965 (out of production). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Miscellaneous materials, steel base, 36 ½ x 13 ½ x 23 ½". Manufactured by Brionvega. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. The components of a stereo system are arranged to create a "musical pet" with loudspeaker ears, a witty face, and the capacity to move around on its casters.

"Parentesi" hanging lamp, 1971. Achille Castiglioni with Pio Manzú. Cast iron, steel, rubber, 157 ½" h. Manufactured by Flos. Photo Azimut, courtesy Flos USA. An adjustable spotlight moves up and down a cable in tension between a hook in the ceiling and a cast-iron counterweight on the floor. The center of this minimal fixture is the parenthesis that gives it its name, the shaped tubular support that holds the light source in place by mechanical friction with the tense cable.



Castiglioni in his office



"Aoy"



"RR126"



"Parentesi"

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"Mezzadro"



"Brera"



"Allunaggio"



"Primate"

Polytechnic of Milan. During the 1980s, when I was his student and the head count was 13,000, he typically came to class with a large Mary Poppins-like black bag, from which he would extract and line up on the table that day's chosen pieces from his stupendous collection of found objects: toys made from beer cans that he had bought in Teheran; odd eyeglasses and eye protection screens; galoshes from the USSR; wooden stools from Aspen, Colorado; colanders; small suction cups strong enough to lift a table. These were the most effective tools of design instruction.

"Mezzadro" seat, 1971 (1957). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Chromium-plated steel stem, lacquered metal tractor seat, kiln-dried beech footrest, 19% x 17 ½ x 15". Manufactured by Zanotta. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the manufacturer. Photo Masera, courtesy Zanotta. The seat and the crossbar from a tractor designed in the first years of the century and still in production become a seat to be used at home in this new composition of existing objects. The fixing screw is the kind familiarly used in bicycles, while a wooden crossbar gives the seat its stability.

"Brera" hanging lamp, 1992. Achille Castiglioni. Acid-treated glass, 11 % x 5 %". Manufactured by Flos. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the manufacturer. Photo courtesy Flos. Inspired by the ostrich egg, the symbol of the virginal birth in Piero della Francesca's painting *The Madonna and Child with Federico da Montefeltro* (c. 1475) housed in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. The egg-shaped diffuser is split in two parts held together by a ring nut to assure easy access to the bulb and to provide cooling.

"Allunaggio" seat, 1980 (1965). Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Stove-enameled steel, aluminum seat, nylon feet, 16 ½ x 31 ½ x 39 ½". Manufactured by Zanotta. Photo courtesy Zanotta. Translating as "moonlanding" in English, Allunaggio is an outdoor seat specifically designed for grass expanses. It is configured to minimize the shade projected onto the lawn.

"Primate" seat, 1970. Achille Castiglioni. Baydur frame, polystyrene base, polyurethane seat, stainless steel, 18 x 31 ½ x 18". Manufactured by Zanotta. Photo courtesy Zanotta. Primate is a playful and useful seating compromise for Western travelers. It enables respectful guests at Japanese formal dinners to sit with their hosts in the appropriate position, which would otherwise be painful for unpracticed knees.

Castiglioni demonstrated to his throngs of students the vernacular ingeniousness of seemingly unremarkable objects. One such example was a milking stool, consisting of a round piece of wood as a seat with a round incision into which fit the single wooden leg. Both parts were held together by a strip of leather. so that the stool could be carried over the shoulder. Standing on a table, Castiglioni mimed its use by milking an invisible cow, thus highlighting the pure relationship between form and function. He chose to show objects that clearly had a life of their own, derived from material culture and independent of any designer's name. By emphasizing that the success of these objects resulted from their fulfilling a functional task with wit and common sense and within the available resources, he initiated his students' discovery of the design process for themselves.

Castiglioni has often said, "What you need is a constant and consistent way of designing, not a style." His own way has been to focus on understanding objects, basing his designs on a narrative approach in which observed or imagined need results in a satisfying design solution. Castiglioni has shown that while form and function are the main ingredients for successful design, they cannot be the designer's only concerns. His flexibility has allowed him to design a vast array of stylistically varied objects. Today, at age seventy-nine, he is still as energetic and driven as ever and is still working on many assignments at a time, applying his philosophy and methodology with wit, curiosity, and a combination of exuberance and understatement. Over the course of his long career, Castiglioni has, with his purist yet playful and individual objects, helped to update modernist design to contemporary modern.

Paola Antonelli Associate Curator Department of Architecture and Design The curator wishes to acknowledge the following for their commitment to this publication: Greg Van Alstyne, Rachel Posner, and Claire Corey; and the Italian Trade Commission and the Department of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, whose support made this publication possible.

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A special thank you goes to Jerome Neuner and his staff, who realized the complex installation of the exhibition. The illustrations that accompany the objects in the exhibition are by Steven Guarnaccia.

The MoMA World Wide Web site at www.moma.org features an extensive section devoted to Achille Castiglioni: Design!, including a bibliography and other reference materials.

Cover: "Taraxacum 88" hanging lamp, 1988. Achille Castiglioni. Aluminum, light bulbs, 23 3/3" diam. Manufactured by Flos. Photo courtesy Studio Castiglioni. Almost thirty years after his first "dandelion," Castiglioni designed an updated high-tech version of his previous chandelier and gave it the same name. Taraxacum 88 is composed of twenty die-cast aluminum triangles, each accommodating three, six, or ten bulbs. It is produced in three sizes, with a total of sixty, one hundred and twenty, or two hundred bulbs.

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ACHILLE CASTIGLIONI DESIGN!

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