

The Museum of Modern Art

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MARIO BELLINI: DESIGNER

June 25 - September 15, 1987

The distinctive furniture and industrial designs of Mario Bellini are the subject of an exhibition opening at The Museum of Modern Art on June 25, 1987. Organized by Cara McCarty, assistant curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, MARIO BELLINI: DESIGNER is the first major retrospective devoted to this influential Italian designer.

On view through September 15, the exhibition has been made possible by generous support from Olivetti; Cassina, S.p.A.; Brionvega; Lancia; Vitra Seating, Inc.; and Erco Leuchten. Additional funding has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The approximately fifty objects that comprise the exhibition represent Bellini's most innovative and accomplished designs and include several unseen prototypes and early, experimental works. Ranging from calculators to lounge chairs to the design of the exhibition space itself, the retrospective reveals the full extent of Bellini's versatility and inventiveness.

Bellini began his career at a decisive moment in twentieth-century design: the transition from mechanical to microelectronic technology. During the sixties, miniaturized electronic components freed machine parts from the rigid restraints of mechanical interdependence and allowed designers the opportunity to create new industrial forms. Bellini's work has taken full advantage of the formal freedom made possible by the new technology. Several of his designs

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have set the standards for contemporary office equipment and have inspired numerous imitations worldwide.

Bellini's collaboration with the Olivetti Company has produced some of the most celebrated typewriters, calculators, and computers of the past two decades. One notable example is the TCV 250 Video Display Terminal, a futuristic computer workstation designed in 1966. "The video screen bulges from the taut skin like a cyclops eye or a colossal pushbutton," describes Cara McCarty in the catalog accompanying the exhibition.* "The notion of the pushbutton, activating circuits that send machines of potentially enormous power into action, has fascinated many people and has become a metaphor for power and technology."

As an alternative to anonymous black-box designs, Bellini emphasizes the tactile appeal of office equipment in an effort to make it less intimidating. The soft, suggestive rubber pushbuttons that protrude from his Divisumma 18 Electronic Printing Calculator (1972), for example, are playful and inviting. Many of Bellini's most influential industrial designs derive from the wedge shape he introduced in 1972 with the Logos 50/60 Calculator. His latest product, the ETP 55 Portable Electronic Typewriter (1986), departs from this emblematic wedge and indicates a new direction for the designer.

Bellini's furniture designs of the sixties and early seventies represent a shift from Bauhaus austerity to generously padded, overstuffed chairs that reflect the less formal lifestyles of the period. Inspired by anthropomorphic forms and Pop art, he makes inventive use of new synthetic materials and sophisticated molding techniques. Many of these seating designs can be arranged and rearranged at will and take the shape of sculpture you can sit on.

By emphasizing the interdependent relationship between upholstery and structure--the "skin" and "bones"--Bellini has created new furniture forms. According to the designer, his works "are not covered with fabric, they are built with it." The Cassina "CAB" chairs (1976), for example, are composed of a continuous leather skin stretched over a simple steel armature. The stylishly upholstered "Persona" and "Figura" office seating, created for Vitra (1979-84), are his most technically sophisticated chairs and "represent an integration of Bellini's experience with both industrial and furniture design," explains Ms. McCarty. "By treating them as 'dressed' mechanisms, Bellini understates the mechanical structures and makes them more familiar to us."

Born in 1935 in Milan, Mario Bellini graduated in architecture from the Milan Polytechnic and currently maintains a studio for industrial design and architecture in the city. Since 1963 he has served as the chief industrial design consultant to Olivetti. He also designs furniture for Cassina, B&B Italia, and Vitra; electronic equipment for Brionvega and Yamaha; and lighting for Erco, Artemide, and Flos. His designs have been recognized by numerous awards, including seven Compasso d'Oro prizes, the Delta de Oro Prize, and the "Made in Germany" award. Thirteen of his products are represented in The Museum of Modern Art's design collection. In March 1986 he became editor-in-chief of Domus magazine.

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*Catalog: Mario Bellini: Designer by Cara McCarty. 100 black-and-white and 8 color illustrations. 80 pages. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Paperbound, \$10.00.

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