



Series Off Series

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Foreword

In Italy, design was born in the womb of the avant-gardes and developed in the Fifties within a small circle of enlightened businessmen (e.g. Olivetti) and micro-businessmen who were originally craftsmen, who adopted it not so much for its reformist traits but realistically as purveyors to a domestic market that lacked any real modernisation in home behaviours and also as an opportunity to face an international competition that stood out for its sound technical and commercial traditions.

Actually, in Italy between the two wars there were no major public works, which in the rest of Europe boosted the spreading of special design cultures and the rising production of commodities, as happened in Germany thanks to the army, in England to the merchant navy, in France to the aviation industry; those public industries offered big contracts to the private industries and left a very distinctive technological and stylistic imprint on local design. In Italy, the origins of design, especially in furniture, are to be found instead in supplies for big cruise liners (Cassina: Furniture for the Andrea Doria designed by Zoncada and Ponti in 1951), veritable floating cities which had to be furnished in varying styles and at fixed times, by coordinating a widespread local handicraft production. As we will see, this seeming general weakness, this ever-broken modernity, this relationship with a small-medium sized industrial fabric, this continuity with handicraft practices and with a historical memory that has never been completely abandoned have laid the grounds for developing a unique local model of cooperation between companies and design, between technological research and linguistic experimentation, between the universe of the fractioned markets and the ability to produce small runs. Excellent conditions to work in post-industrial markets and in a global world.

The exhibition

Series Off Series is dedicated to illustrating "What is Italian Design?" through the original relations existing between project design and production.

Relations that - in our country - often follow a non-linear itinerary, based on the spontaneous interweaving of two cultures: that of design and that of production. These have never been welded into a single logic, into a single reality in Italy.

Rather, they exist within a dense network of collaborations among individual entrepreneurs and individual designers, where each one always conserves his own autonomy of role and thought.

This imperfect but dynamic system is similar to a voltaic pile: by exploiting the potential difference between different materials, it creates an active magnetic field.

The title *Series Off Series* indicates the irresistible extremes of this dynamic circuit, where industrial production, in fact, receives energy from spontaneous experimentation. And this, in turn, is nourished in an open territory of production, available not only to the experimental prototype, but also to large series production. Where the norm always takes the exception into account.

In relation to the classical definition of linear relations between designer and production, the merit of this ring can be appreciated by comparing it to the rigidity with which, in other





countries, the production of consumer goods has responded by introducing fractioned markets and by confronting international competition through strategies of continual innovation.

It is not by chance that all the world's major designers have begun working with Italian industries in recent decades: Ron Arad for Friade and Kartell, Fratelli Campana for Edra, Philippe Starck for Kartell, Flos and Alessi, Zaha Hadid for Serralunga, Cassina and B&B, Karim Rashid for Foscari, and all the young talents for Cappellini

The list is long, demonstrating that Italian design industries, on the whole, represent a sort of "European district for innovation," constituted of enterprises for series production, of technological and manual artisanship, of experimental laboratories, specialized districts, small and medium industries, converters, autonomous micro-producers, "self" brands, and of youthful free research.

The ordering of this exhibition is based on four principal categories: research, the small series, the large series, and the off-series product (besides their various subcategories).

These areas correspond to design-production modes that often have their gradations and nuances, made up of many exceptions and imprecisions, with vast intermediate or gray areas defying exact definition. And so it is not a matter of scientific ordering, but rather a description of a complex and dynamic molecular system, whose vitality has not always been understood or historicized correctly.

It is not our intent to catalog or put into order a complex, contradictory production system, but rather to seize upon one of the most significant structural aspects of Italian design, one that provides, better than any other, information on the internal operating mechanisms of an activity fulfilling an important economic role for the country and that represents a significant historic aspect of this. In fact, to understand Italy, it is important to understand its design. And to understand "What is Italian Design?" one needs to understand the workings of the country that expresses it.

