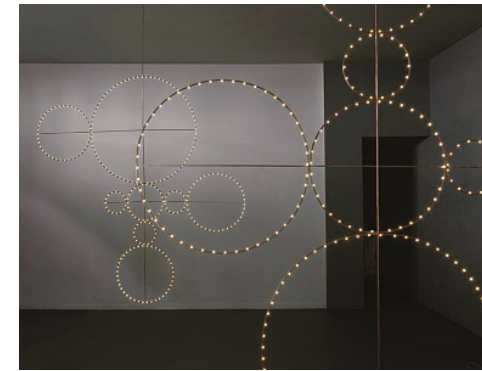


IN RESPONSE TO GLOBAL INSTABILITY, DESIGNERS AT MILAN DESIGN WEEK ARE REIMAGINING THE PAST, USING NATURAL MATERIALS AND ARTISANAL TECHNIQUES TO CREATE A SENSE OF COMFORT AND REFUGE AT HOME. BY HANNAH ROBERTS. PORTRAITS BY MATTIA BALSAMINI

SENSE AND SPIRITUALITY



RENEE

'All we can do is offer a few dreams, change small things in our homes, using objects, colour and light'

Claudio Luti, president of plastic furniture manufacturer Kartell



Every Easter week, the towns and villages of southern Italy, or the Mezzogiorno, come alive with religious processions, an expression of the region's Catholic culture. These candlelit, often masked parades have inspired Sicilian designer Sabina Belfiore's installations for this year's Milan design week: thin copper rings lined with soft LED lights are interwoven and suspended to cast a delicate luminosity. With Italy's economy still stagnant, Belfiore is one of a number of designers glancing back at the country's history and customs to evoke comfort and security.

The designs of another Sicilian, Mario Trimarchi, are similarly rooted in the past. His series of stainless-steel fruit bowls and centrepieces for Alessi, which will appear at the Salone del Mobile, recalls childhood memories of playing cards while the ferocious Sirocco wind was blowing outdoors. As Belfiore says, "In Italy we are perhaps a little embarrassed of our present, and instead look to reimagine the past, the things that we already do well: simplicity and spirituality."

The Italian furniture industry collapsed in the years after the global downturn, with production down 25 per cent in 2013 from 2007, according to the Centre for Industrial Studies in Milan (CSIL). But growth returned in 2015. It has since slowed again but Italy remains the third-biggest furniture exporter in the world, with an 8 per cent share of the market. At the high end it is the undisputed leader, with a global market share of 30 per cent versus 20 per cent for Germany and the US, according to a 2016 report by Altgamma Bain Design Market Monitor. Domestic consumption, which had fallen by a third, was modestly boosted by the Bonus Mobili, a tax break introduced in June 2015 on furniture purchases for those restoring their homes. The deduction on income tax of up to €16,000 was conceived to help furniture companies squeezed by a recessionary slump in consumer spending.

In the run-up to the Salone, the world's largest furniture fair, global instability seems to be feeding into designers' march away from noughties minimalism and towards a comfortable, cosy home that serves as a refuge or escape from reality. ▶

From left Alessandra Baldereschi with her metal screen, treated with different finishes to create a landscape of the green hills of Treviso; thin copper rings lined with LED lights by Sabina Belfiore; "La Stanza dello Scirocco" stainless-steel fruit bowl by Alessi Mario Trimarchi for Alessi

'Wood used to be for old people or the mountains. But it is tactile, ages well and each piece is unique'



From left Marco Parolini of wood specialist Slow Wood; Slow Wood's combined entertaining space/kitchen, with panelling in five woods hiding the utilities

rework will be presented by Molteni&C, founded in 1934 by Angelo Molteni, one of the organisers of the first Salone del Mobile. The armchair was originally commissioned as a one-off for a family in Caracas by Gio Ponti, one of Italy's masters of architecture and design. Molteni&C recently bought Ponti's archive with the intention of revising the vintage forms from that era.

Giulia Molteni, Angelo's granddaughter and the company's marketing and communications director, explains: "The 1950s and 1960s were, in Italy, a period of postwar reconstruction and optimism. These years were very alive and full, after a sad and difficult wartime. We used to be a bit snobbish about 1950s design but now we are so far from it, we can appreciate it."

Part of the appeal of the past lies in its perceived simplicity, before life was complicated by an excess of possessions. Consumerism slowed down during the financial crisis. "It's not the time for fast fashion. You want to have a few things that last well," says Molteni.

Trimarchi concurs. "The strongest influence on my work is our increasingly empty houses. The rich now have fewer objects than the poor." Trimarchi has even coined a word for it: *pochismo*, or "littleness", as in having little in the way of possessions. "It's interesting to be with one woman for the whole of your life," he says, "so it should also be beautiful to be with an object for your whole life."

Although fewer in number, objects are more likely to be unique: one-offs in natural materials such as ceramic, wood or metal.

Alessandra Baldereschi is presenting a metal screen treated with different finishes to create a landscape of the hills of Treviso. Marco Parolini, of wood specialist Slow Wood, says his chosen material is increasingly valued in high-end design. "It used to be for old people or the mountains. But wood is tactile, ages well and each piece is unique. It's still minimal, but warmed up."

Slow Wood has created a combined entertaining space/kitchen, with panelling in five woods hiding the utilities. It is one of several manufacturers responding to demand for homes that are better adapted to the inhabitant - and with barely visible furniture.

In this spirit, several designers have created objects with multiple functions. Poltrona Frau's Ren collection is a series of hybrid objects including a combined mirror, coat rack and dressing table in wood, brass and leather, which can be used in bedroom, study or bathroom. Verona-based start-up Dossoforito's combined screen, plant stand and seat will be one of many screens at the Salone, reflecting the need to break up rooms for different functions.

Italy's established names remain confident in their ability to dominate the international design market. Poltrona Frau opened a shop on London's Fulham Road in 2015 and a space in Harrods last year. "There is the perception of an Italian touch," says Molteni. "We try to communicate the lifestyle, the quality of life."

One advantage Italy's design industry might have in an uncertain market, in which orders are small, is its fragmented galaxy of small companies with an average annual revenue of around €2m. "It's part of Italian DNA to create artisan pieces in small numbers," says Gianluca Giabardo of Dossoforito. "As a small company we can be flexible, so it's an advantage for us."

Yet uncertainty over the consequences of Brexit, and the policies that the US will adopt on trade, may contribute to a slow year for international trade in 2017, which could also have repercussions on Italian exports. It remains to be seen whether small will mean successful. **FT**

◀ Natural materials, artisan techniques and vintage forms help to make the home "more welcoming", providing reassurance during times of disruption, says Claudio Luti, president of the Milan-based plastic furniture manufacturer Kartell. Kartell will show a range of rechargeable lanterns that emit an ambient glow. "All we can do is offer a few dreams, assurances, the opportunity to change small things in our private homes, using objects, colour and light. Design creates beauty and emotions, when we need them."

In a country with an enviable heritage of workmanship, artisan methods are an obvious way to evoke these emotions. Giorgia Zanellato of Zanellato/Bortotto Design has created a mirror of Murano glass, using craftsmen from her native Venice. In a world where we are overwhelmed by images, "if an object is just beautiful you forget it quickly, but if you can create the feeling of nostalgia it lasts longer", she says.

There is also a tendency to rework specific pieces from the past, says Nicola Coropulis, managing director of furniture maker Poltrona Frau. "It's a way of seeking comfort which the world is not capable of giving us." One such



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