

Thirty years after his death, Milan has not yet realized that one of its finest sons, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, was the greatest master of Italian Industrial Design

27 November 1968 - 27 November 1998

Pier Giacomo Castiglioni has never been remembered by a short-sighted press that is always ready to reward banality. His professional and human lessons, his brilliant insights, the sensitivity and intelligence that animate every aspect of his work and of his life, have opened the door to new understandings and accompanied us in every gesture and thought dedicated to industrial design.

Those who were lucky enough to know him retain the memory of his extraordinary humanity, and it is not uncommon for them to express deep emotion when speaking of him.

In a society where banality, opportunism and hypocrisy dominate, it is the famous, recognized mediocre ones who prevail.

Pier Giacomo Castiglioni could not be anywhere else but among the overlooked: "a genius is a defendant"

Therefore, further proof of his greatness is the complete lack of publications on his work.

An important lesson for everyone.

It is truly shameful that this country, and particularly Milan, have never dedicated even a small exhibition to him in the last thirty years.

It is the sign of an incivility that cannot be forgiven.

Letters - silkscreen on Paper - 33x23 cm

In 1978, on the tenth anniversary of his death, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni was remembered with an event at the Simongavina offices on Via Montenapoleone in Milan.

To us, the text written by Giordano Falzoni on that occasion seems so interesting as to still deserve our attention today.

Tailor's tape measures - printed on oilcloth - 84x152 cm

REDISCOVERING PIER GIACOMO CASTIGLIONI

TEN YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH:

THREE READY-MADE PICTURES FROM 1949

“In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed....” (From The Time of Your Life by William Saroyan)

Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, one of the towering figures of modern architectural civilization, died ten years ago, and for thirty years (precisely since 1949) three of his ready-made pictures (allow me, exceptionally, to borrow from Marcel Duchamp the term he used to refer to partly similar works of incitement and mental and material intervention on the ready-made) have been waiting for us to realize the pioneering importance and the meaning of the gesture that led to their creation.

They are now being presented to the public for the first time, extrapolated from the context for which they were made: the wall of his home, where his daughter Giorgina always saw at least two of them hanging (the third one, rarely exhibited, was usually kept in a drawer) and in the background of which she was photographed as a child.

A great surprise, I believe, for most people, even for those who admired Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and who had the privilege of knowing him personally and watching him at work.

It certainly is for me, who owe the pleasure of encountering these unpublished works - so personal that they could be considered private and almost hidden away - to Dino Gavina.

These are three pictures created by removing printed surfaces from the last phases of the manufacturing process for which they were intended, shortly before completion of the final product, affixing them to plywood and framing them with strips of natural wood.

The largest piece (152x84 cm) bears 42 printed strips, black over yellow oilcloth, each one intended to be cut from the sheet to become a tailor's measuring tape showing centimetres and millimetres on both sides. The other two pieces, measuring 45.5x32 cm and 33.3x23.5 cm, feature uppercase alphabets, silk-printed on paper, in white over red and turquoise, each repeated 26 times. The smaller of the two alphabet works (with slightly smaller letters) has faded due to longer exposure to direct light, especially in the case of the red, which has turned yellowish. The other piece is perfectly preserved.

It should be noted, in this brief description, that while these pieces may appear, at first glance, to be the result of a mechanical and regular process, like that which characterizes stamp or transfer sheets, they all three have a liveliness that comes from scanning irregularities and deviations from the strict symmetry closely associated with the construction methods and nature of the prints.

The 42 strips, arranged in six sections of seven strips slightly spaced apart and regularly inverted, create an overall very dynamic image structure because the vertical sections start at different heights, as the unprinted tails of the strips are situated on opposite sides, due to the inversions mentioned above, creating the optical effect of an alternately ascending and descending dynamism.

This particular, staggered arrangement of the six sections of strips, which certainly met some or other production logic criteria and finishing or assembly requirements, captured as it is in an intermediate, transitory moment of the production process in which it was destined for a

fleeting existence, in addition to being interesting on the level of what is usually referred to as the procedural aesthetic dimension, projects an immediate aesthetic effect through the architecture of the image.

By removing from the final phase of the production process the cloth from which the 42 individual tailor's measuring tapes would have been obtained, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni provided an example of how we can begin with the ability to see in order to be then able to reveal through minimal intervention, carried out in the analogical way implicit in the artistic ritual.

The same basic concept applies to the alphabets, even though the visual effect is different here, due to both the different relationship between modular elements and total area and to the different printing technique and graphic layout.

There is minimal scanning of the 26 rows of letters, arranged into thirteen adjacent rows, probably intended to be cut with minimal waste to obtain pairs of identical letters and then joined together to make double-sided alphabetical index tabs.

In addition, the boundary overlap between the two colours is minimal, almost imperceptible, as are the slight deviations here and there from the letter alignment, due to registration issues. There are very subtle transgressions within the context of an essentially uniform and static iterative pattern, where the dynamic element stems, rather, from the alternation of the two colours and the semantic level that features series, on one side, and repetition on the other.

The effect achieved here by blocking and, as it were, freezing a phase of production for a transfer of context capable in itself of aesthetically activating the object, is of a perceptual nature and concerns, to be more precise, certain perceptual thresholds.

Letters - silkscreen on Paper - 45x32 cm

Now, it is precisely these minimal variations that distinguish the authentic from the artificial, as, for example, Borromini - a systematic disseminator of almost imperceptible asymmetries in the symmetric structure of his architecture - well understood, long before analysis by electronic computers made it possible to quantify the difference, previously perceptible on the level of taste but inexplicable in material terms, between the performance of a great pianist and a perfectly planned one on a synthesizer, without introducing random variations, of the same sonata.

These three pictures, jealously hermetic and not surprisingly kept in the privacy and silence in which one would keep products of alchemical operations, can be considered almost an implicit declaration of poetics and a key to the architectural work of Pier Giacomo Castiglioni.

They anticipate, not only in Italy, a period that witnessed the flowering of conceptual art and a kind of reversal in the relationship between the artist and the environment. After all, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni was already a trailblazer. After starting his career as an architect on the eve of the Second World War, together with his elder brother Livio, he immediately gained an international reputation, which would significantly contribute to the fame of Italian industrial design, with a series of studies and prototypes that aimed and succeeded to replace the radio cabinet of the time, drawing inspiration from various furniture “styles”, with a “container” conceived from the inside, for its function, rather than from the outside, for camouflage. This marked the beginning of a career as a designer that would see him in the international avant-garde, in harmonious collaboration with his younger brother Achille and with Luigi Caccia Dominioni.

He died prematurely in 1968 at the age of fifty-five, leaving

behind a body of work of the highest quality, which always bears the signature of his partners and which demands to be properly documented in monographs as soon as possible.

In addition to his less numerous monumental works, building projects and numerous undisputed industrial design masterpieces, part of his most intense and surprising poetic activity remains with us not only in the memory of witnesses but also in photographic documentation and in his projects for exhibition spaces and pavilions, including the famous ones for the Milan Triennale and others, of the highest quality, carried out abroad. The son of a sophisticated sculptor, he was introduced at a young age to rigorous drawing and modelling studies, in which he immediately revealed a clear aptitude for pursuing that traditional path, had he wished to do so; however, he soon distanced himself from it and as an architect his approach was that of radical innovation in every field.

His life was a life that led, in both building and design, to the abandonment of the superfluous and ornamental in favour of the functional and essential, and to eschewing an artisanal conception in favour of an industrial and technological mentality specific to our time, which is characterized, among other things, by electric lighting, telecommunications, increased mobility, rapid recycling of areas as well as pluralism of traditions and stylistic influences in the same living context. His path is the one that leads not to his affirming an individual style, personality or taste but, rather, to establishing a highly discreet relationship with the object, with dwelling places and with human activity in all its various aspects and in the various traces it leaves behind and to illuminating, displaying, and enabling coexistence: in the most open spaces compatibly with functional and environmental needs. A path that leads to revelation.

An aesthetics of the revelation of beauty within the sea of objectivity, which would express itself in seemingly different and contrasting forms in the 1950s and later, shifts the focus from the author, who becomes anonymous, detached, revelatory, to the existing elements susceptible to being isolated, assembled, combined, or subjected to the iteration that after all is one of the hypotheses of the combinatorial process. Through the elimination of compartments and individualist myths, individual work, even in the realm of aesthetics, becomes teamwork. The combinatorial metric, with its repetition of modular elements, brings the creations of people closer to a sort of ideal homogeneity with the organic and inorganic structures of the microcosm and macrocosm from which they have been deeply divided for a long time.

The concrete architectural space - related to the cellular tissue and star clusters, crystal aggregation and the mass production that nature reserves for its constant masterpieces - to which Pier Giacomo Castiglioni dedicated his life does not admit of a solution of continuity, distinction, opposition between the design of the details or the serial object to be produced (or already produced by others), and the total project, just as the architecture of a living being cannot be considered a separate chapter from the functional organization of its cellular structures, skeletal and molecular systems.

We find hermetic hints of this implicit poetics (they say that Pier Giacomo loved silence, reserve, and never saying everything) in works with a neo-Dadaist flavour, which may have seemed merely provocative, like the one with which he participated in the exhibition “Colours and Shapes in Today's Home” at Villa Olmo in Como. And the portable ladder leaning against the wall next to the clock in an antique furniture show in Florence is also charged with implicit suggestions that invite a careful revisiting.

Giordano Falzoni

Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and Luigi Caccia Dominioni can be considered the heirs of the great Milanese architectural tradition that was formed before the last war, thanks to figures like Giuseppe de Finetti, Giovanni Muzio, Emilio Lancia, Piero Portaluppi, Mino Fiocchi, Aldo Andreani, and Pier Giulio Magistretti

We owe much of the extraordinary modernity of Milan to this dazzling era

An architectural body of work of unparalleled beauty and modernity in the world

Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and Luigi Caccia Dominioni met at university and immediately became close friends

They began to work together and create several objects together, extending the typically Milanese culture and ethics into the post-war period

Four works jointly created with Luigi Caccia Dominioni in 1939.

Villa Olmo

Villa Olmo, Como 1957

Here was an event destined to revolutionize the history of Italian Industrial Design

The living room-study curated by Castiglioni opens up a new and unexpected horizon

For the first time the essence of industrial products becomes evident in its brilliant simplicity

A clear logic links the objects, so everyday and so perfect as to become invisible, with designer products but of identical nature

Anonymous intelligences are dignified and thus what everyone had always had right in front of their eyes but had never seen now becomes obvious

Villa Olmo is a great lesson that allowed us to precisely identify the value of all those extraordinary anonymous objects that every day we use too carelessly

This lesson revolutionized the way we understand Design, revealing a world that was previously unknown

We have thus come to clearly appreciate the great value of many anonymous masters as skilled as the best designers who sign their work

We also owe to Pier Giacomo Castiglioni the idea of dedicating to "Anonymous Masters" a section of the Industrial Design exhibition organized in Pesaro in 1988

An amazing event, never done before

The Inhabited House

After Villa Olmo, almost as if to drive the point home, here is another lesson in security, freedom, simplicity

At the exhibition "The Inhabited House," held at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1965, amid the ostentatious elegance of the other exhibits Castiglioni invents an apparently very humble room, a truly unexpected surprise in that context

The few objects are partly anonymous and partly designed, but indistinguishable as a whole

The unifying quality is absoluteness, the impossibility of removing or improving

**Here is a small cénacle of objects that cannot be perfected
And among them, high up like the Holy Spirit, a beautiful sculpture, a needle of Roman inspiration**

Splügen-Braü Beer Restaurant

In 1961, a new brewery with a restaurant and snack bar opens in Milan

The interior design is a small jewel filled with many playful and technical inventions

The space, used in all its parts, is magisterially composed

The seating, organized into compartments, is placed on different levels, so as to occupy all available space, including that of the service corridors turned into galleries

This impeccable and elegant order is dominated by the apparent chaos of installations, vents, cables, wires, lamps, and speakers

This chromatically perfect and sculptural whole produces a very modern effect that has been imitated countless times

The brewery, which should have been protected as a genuine masterpiece, was dismantled a few years ago

To the everlasting shame of the enlightened administration

Beer tap - Poretti 1960

"Arco" Lamp design - Flos 1962

"Cubo" Armchair - prototype

"Luminator" Lamp - Giraldi Arform 1955

About ten years ago, an interviewer asked me to name the five greatest designers. I immediately replied without hesitation:

Marcel Breuer, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Charles Eames, Alvar Aalto, Kazuhide Takahama.

Now, thinking it over, I find that I am still of the same opinion.

Sometimes I have wondered who I would give the "palm" to; in the end, I always come back to Pier Giacomo Castiglioni.

There are certainly others hidden by anonymity, but unfortunately we do not know them.

All we can do is pay reverent homage to their seriousness and privacy with a "Monument to the Unknown Designer."

Always keeping in mind, of course, the great "anonymous masters" who have given us masterpieces that we see every day. (Dino Gavina)

The projects published after page 11 are signed "A. PG. Castiglioni" because they were designed in the studio he shared with his brother Achille.

"Toio" Lamp – Flos 1962

This by itself would be enough to consider him a great master.

"Sanluca" Armchair – Gavina 1960

“Light Ball” Lamp - Flos 1960

“Black & White” Lamp - Flos 1960

“Splügen - Braü” Lamp - Flos 1960

“Snoopy” Lamp - Flos 1960

In the early 1960s, there were still no lighting industries in Italy capable of adapting to the modernity that had already appeared in furniture design.

No one had yet addressed the problem directly.

In 1960-61, Dino Gavina was persuaded by the Eisenkeil company in Bolzano to organize a new Company for the production of lighting fixtures.

He involved Cesare Cassina and Maria Simoncini in the operation, relying on the skills of Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and the advice of Carlo Scarpa.

Thus Flos was born.

In a few years, it gained global attention as the first modern company in the sector.

Castiglioni's lamps are true masterpieces, as demonstrated by their incredible longevity and timeless design.

Without him, it would not have been possible to achieve the historic results that everyone knows.

“Taccia” Lamp - Flos 1960

Study in the context of bio-ecological design aimed at the use of industrial production waste, which can lead to a re-semanticization of the image through photography as well

(Work by Giorgina Castiglioni)

Curiosity directed towards interplanetary spaces, towards expressions of nature, to the point of identifying their presence in the materials of architectural production: this is Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's approach to design, which is manifested through a constant and careful reading of realities and events that he incorporates into his works, where the artifice that distinguishes the formulation of architectural space and the products intended for industry takes on a broad and entirely natural significance, with the astonishing result of reflecting their harmony.

(Giorgina Castiglioni)

Daughter Giorgina – pencil sketch

Portrait of his wife

Giannino Castiglioni – Pier Giacomo's father

Pier Giacomo's mother and daughter Giorgina