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'Zoom' at BAM: When Italy ruled the design world

"Zoom: Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo" will engage design aficionados and history buffs alike, writes reviewer Gayle Clemans. At Bellevue Arts Museum through June 16, 2013.

By Gayle Clemans

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Design junkies — and you know who you are — can get a big, satisfying dose of great design with the current exhibition at Bellevue Arts Museum. Not only are there sexy midcentury modern chairs and playful postmodern cabinets, there are small wonders, like an early flip phone, and big statements, like the red-walled vignette full of red furniture, including “Sacco,” the first mass-produced beanbag chair.

And all of it is that sleek, clever Italian stuff from the second half of the 20th century, when Italy rose to design prominence.

“Zoom: Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo” should also be gratifying for those of you with a taste for layered, historical exhibitions — and, yes, this show will satisfy the history buff in you, too. It looks good and it’s got a lot to say.

Here’s the basic premise: The show looks at how objects of Italian design were photographed and rendered iconic by a married duo of Milanese photographers, Aldo Ballo and Marirosa Toscani Ballo. Studio Ballo (which opened in 1953 and operated until Aldo’s death in 1994) became a hub of artists and designers as well as a sought-after studio for the new niche of product photography.

“Zoom: Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo” was organized by the

Vitra Museum of Design, in Weil am Rhein, Germany, in close collaboration with Marirosa Ballo, who may be visiting Seattle in conjunction with the show. “Zoom” brings together roughly 300 photographs from the Studio Ballo archive and more than 70 classic-design objects owned by the museum and private collectors.

So, objects by such well-known designers as Osvaldo Borsani (furniture) and Mario Botta

(architecture) are surrounded by Studio Ballo's photographs of these objects, photographs taken for magazine covers, advertising campaigns and editorial features. Many of the original magazines, posters and catalogs in which these images appeared are also on display.

The show is as much about the creation of iconic images as it is about the three-dimensional design of a couch, lamp or typewriter. Studio Ballo photographers zoomed in on the functional, aesthetic, or quirky characteristics of design objects, creating images that generated and spread consumer and critical interest.

The Ballos, particularly in their early photographs, favored blank settings and nuanced lighting that showcased the sculptural beauty of the objects. Later, their photographs became more theatrical and more complex, as did the designs of furniture and industrial objects. The streamlined, utilitarian style of modernism was injected with the wit, whimsy and polymorphism of postmodernism.

And so the exhibition is also about the history of design. Accordingly, there is a chronological path to follow and I suggest you take a minute to find its beginning (this can be a little tricky with the architectural challenges of the museum).

But once you find the earliest work and start there, you can easily meander through the rest of the galleries, moving through time, pausing to get a feel of different decades. Not to be missed are the groovy, animal-print "Safari" sofa designed by Archizoom in 1970 and the irreverent, almost dysfunctional, 1980s bookshelf by Ettore Sottsass.

The Bellevue Arts Museum is the only U.S. venue for this compelling exhibition, and it's worth traveling for. My only word of caution: You may be struck with object envy.