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Zoom. Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo: An Italian Point of View

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Aldo Ballo and Marirosa Toscani Ballo in their Studio in Milan, 1971-72.

Stereotypes and clichés used to identify specific cultures abound all over the globe. With its own sense of time irrespective to the impatient pace of capitalistic societies, the mythology of postwar Italian lifestyle as manifested in product and industrial design includes a powerful extension of a mindset pervasive in the *Bel Paese*, which can be handily summarized in three actions: indulge, savor, slow down. Italian design expertise, a definite source of national pride that defies times of recession, can be understood as developing from an investment in craftsmanship that began centuries ago and is at the very core of the making of Italian things. While the aesthetic revolution that the Germans brought about in the twentieth-century household and the built environment was predicated on a scientific analysis of human needs, the Italians brought to these realms a hedonistic dimension that was largely absent outside of the country's boundaries, near and far.

The sensorial and visual appeal of the everyday objects in the postwar period found a sustained presence in the consumer market thanks to the efforts of several generations of designers (many of them architects as well) located, for the most part, in Northern Italy with Milan as their headquarters. For those familiar with the geopolitics of the glorious peninsula, Milan is to Italy as New York is to the United States. The stock exchange, the fashion industry, the media empires and the pillars of the national economy were and are still there. Furthermore, the social composition of Italy is essentially a collection of families: Whether it is Fiat (the equivalent of Ford), Ferrari, Versace, Buitoni, Aversa or the bakery down the street, all are family businesses. The infrastructure of the small- and medium-sized industries, sectors with strong representation in Northern Italy, constitutes the very elixir needed for the survival of craftsmanship over time beyond the market's predictions. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that both the producers and the messengers of Italian design are also settled in the financial capital of the country. From Northern Italy, designers Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Achille Castiglioni and Marco Zanuso are some of the more prominent names among a staple group of prolific visionaries found in the Italian shaping of interior spaces.

Yet while so much of what speaks to this national design ethos seems indigenous, Italy also took advantage of the changes in the media affecting Western societies around the world after World War II, broadcasting its message of modernity regarding lifestyle. In the '60s, Italy gave birth to the infamous *paparazzi*, ad hoc photographers pestering celebrities to serve the popular readership's unquenchable thirst for gossip. Concurrently, Italy also crafted a highly refined photographic rendition of the stylistic details and elegant sensuality of shapes in Italian design.

Photography became the centerpiece in making knowledge of Italian design ubiquitous in the public consciousness, and Aldo and Marirosa Ballo's work brings unequivocal evidence to this claim. The Bellevue Arts Museum exhibit, *Zoom. Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo*, comprehensively surveys the career of this venerable couple that was so supremely influential in making (or breaking) the aura of the protagonists of Italian product design in the 40 years following World War II; they immortalized the golden days when the sweeping changes occurring in the workplace and household indeed were registered in the middle class as well. For such an imprint to take place, the Ballos leaned on media infrastructure on the rise the time. The specialized publishing industry was, and still is, a heavy hitter among the players determining the highs and lows of architectural culture. The founding of magazines such as *Casabella* and *Domus* during the rise of Italian Rationalism skyrocketed the demand for photography of a genre yet to be invented. And if architectural photography has in the natural and or built environment its inevitable backdrop, the photography of product design was on its way to establishing its own rhetoric.



Luigi Baroli/ Baleri Italia: Cartoon, 1992. 50 x 65 CM.



Osaldo Borasni/Techno: D 70, 1953 50 x 65 CM.



De Pas, D'Urbino, Lomazzi/ Poltronova: Joe, 1970. 50 x 65 CM.



Mario Botta: armchair Seconda for Alias, 1982. 50 x 40 CM. Studio, 1970.

If a Heideggerian point of view is to be taken regarding the relationship between design and photography, then furniture, cars, lamps, typewriters, telephones and virtually all human-made objects exist in the real world in settings we can all relate to at a very factual level. These artifacts are intended to extend individual capabilities and enable flow within the prosaic obligations of users' day-to-day lives. At the same time, they also brought to these mundane and utilitarian moments an unprecedented aesthetic experience, in theory

available to the masses, but by and large only truly within reach of the ruling class. The type of photography Aldo Ballo and Marirosa Toscani Ballo deliver to us sublimates the platonic suspension of such objects caught between the preciousness of their physicality and the earthliness of their function. Magnifying an object's scale by zooming in on it, as well as isolating pieces in enclosures without planes, or planes without material definition, flooded with artificial light or positioned in unlikely environments disconnected from their intended use, were standard rhetorical strategies shared in photography circles and used to memorialize postwar Italian design. Such pictorial space comes with its strictures because while abstract and elitist, it also acknowledges a critical trait of Italian national folklore: the supremacy of the domestic interior. With all the fanfare accompanying the celebration of outdoor life in The Boot, a frequent cocktail party topic while socializing in California, there exists also a collective Italian distrust in the government, in state-run programs, in everything associated with the politics of the civic realm, and in all that the public sector's care permeates, what belongs to everyone and therefore to no one. The public sector is seen as wasteful and therefore an environment in which to invest neither energy nor resources. Italian industrial design is the ultimate expression of a private sector with its own cultural standards associated with it.

In matters of design, the outcome of such an unbridgeable gap between public and private is an intense focus on the micro-scale, which can be controlled in laboratory conditions by family businesses. The artistry of the Ballos fixes in still, arresting images the countrywide Italian obsession with the small scale, where taste and social status coalesce into design items tied to a very specific class system. In that, authorship plays a monumental role in the marketing of a signature piece. It equates to quality control by manufacturing circles that is as benevolent as it is maniacal. To see Ettore Sottsass next to his creations seals authenticity and distinction to each piece, now immune from the anonymity of mass production. The Ballos' photography zooms into the hyper-reality of furniture fabrics, of keyboards, of kitchenware to aggrandize the uneventful and bring it into the stream of idealized living. All these aesthetic decisions were certainly conscious choices. However, it is the realization of the photographers' agency in the making or breaking of the legendary that is the achievement of our time. To understand why particular images and their creators have become, in time, the face of an era is a big question worthy of rigorous sociological scrutiny. For those with less scholarly but equally notable aims, the high of looking at these photographs or handling these wonderful design gems makes *Zoom* an exhibit most certainly worth remembering.

[Zoom. Italian Design and the Photography of Aldo and Marirosa Ballo](#) can be seen at the [Bellevue Arts Museum](#) from 15 March – 16 June.

Pierluigi Serraino is an architect, author and educator. He has lectured extensively on postwar American architecture, California modernism, architectural photography, changes in architectural practice and digital design. Pierluigi's work and writing have been widely published, and he has authored four books, among them *Donald Olsen: Architect of Habitable Abstractions*, *Modernism Rediscovered with Julius Shulman*, *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism* and numerous essays.

All images in this article are from the Collection of Marirosa Toscani Ballo and courtesy of the Bellevue Arts Museum.

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