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MAGAZINE



SPRING 2017  
modernmag.com

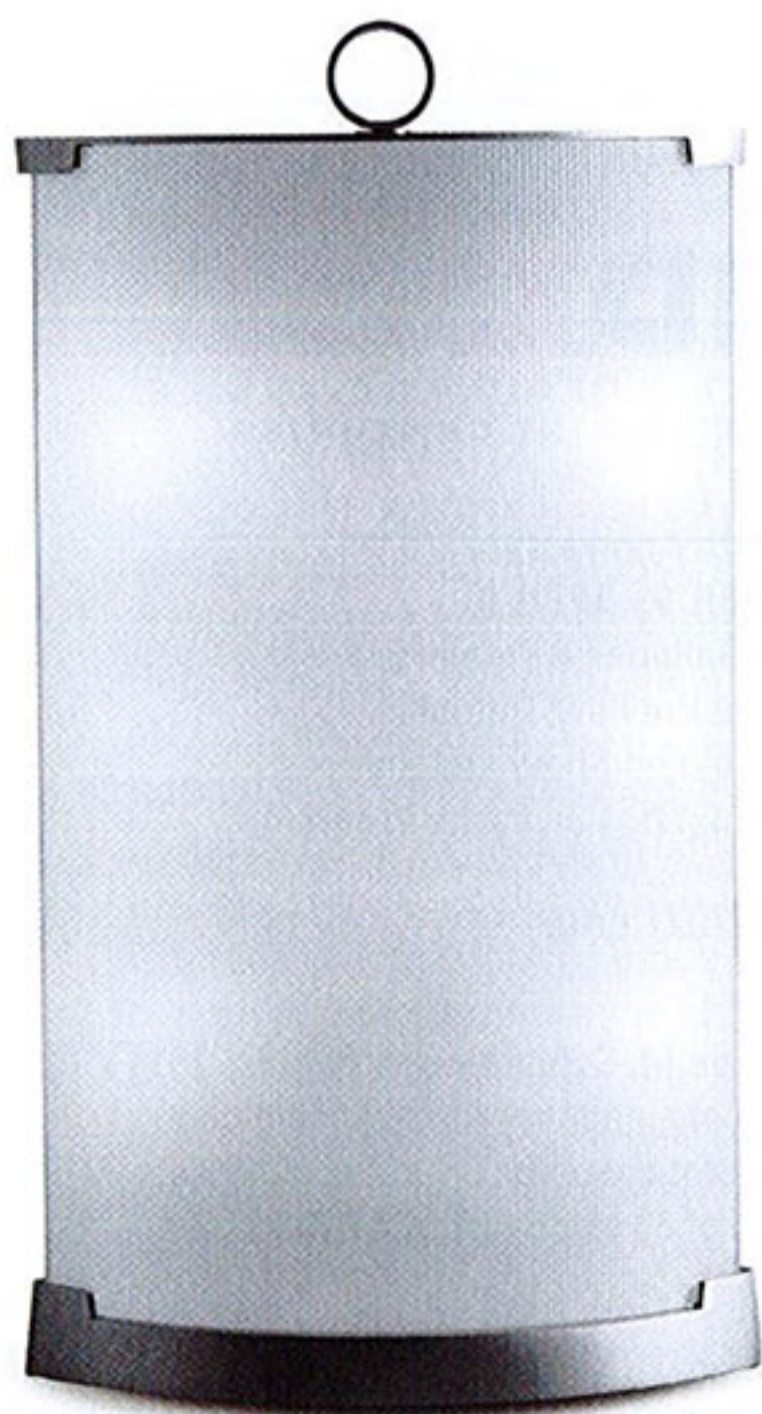
**DESIGN**  
**DECORATIVE ARTS**  
**ARCHITECTURE**

# Italy Makes Light Right

By ARLENE HIRST

Italy is to contemporary lighting design as Detroit is to cars. While no country can claim total dominance of the field, Italy has long been at the forefront of lighting innovation. After World War II the country transformed itself from a sleepy, mostly agrarian culture into a powerhouse of design manufacturing, thanks to a core group of men and women who almost single-handedly shaped the direction of contemporary consumer products. "The emergence of Italy during the last decade as the dominant force in consumer product design has influenced the work of every other European country and now is having its effect in the United States," wrote curator Emilio Ambasz in his introduction to the catalogue to *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, a groundbreaking show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1972. This was especially true for lighting, with companies like FLOS and Artemide leading the way. With the establishment of Euroluce, a major lighting trade fair in 1976, Italy became the global lighting marketplace.

Since then the major players have kept pushing the envelope, from incandescent to halogen to LED, whose potential seems boundless; and OLED fixtures loom on the horizon. The secret to Italy's prominence is the passion of its individual manufacturers as champions of technological exploration and innovation. "Design has little meaning if there is no substance," Ernesto Gismondi, founder and CEO of Artemide, has said. "It is only in-house technology which sets you apart from the rest."



## FontanaArte

LEGENDARY ARCHITECT GIO PONTI created FontanaArte as a division of Luigi Fontana's industrial glass firm in 1932. The catalyst for the firm's formation was the acquisition of Bottega di Pietro Chiesa, an artisanal glassmaker operated by Chiesa, an old school friend of Ponti's. Ponti appointed Chiesa artistic director of the new company, and together they created a host of classics, including furniture as well as lighting. Many of these designs are still in production, including Ponti's Bilia table lamp and Chiesa's Cartoccio vase. Chiesa died in 1948 and the company took no big steps forward until it hired French innovator Max Ingrand in 1954. Ponti kept up his relationship with FontanaArte on an informal basis, and returned to be its creative director in 1967. He produced another enduring collection, the Pirellina and Pirollone lamps, inspired by

his design of the Pirelli Tower, a Milan landmark.

In 1979 FontanaArte was acquired by a group of private investors headed by Carlo Guglielmi, who installed Italian architect Gae Aulenti as creative director. Aulenti widened the company's circle of designers with Vico Magistretti, Sergio Asti, David Chipperfield, and Alvaro Siza, among others. Nice S.p.A, a company specializing in automation systems, acquired FontanaArte in 2010 but it did little in the way of innovation. Last fall the company was sold again, this time to ItalianCreationGroup. "The new owners want to bring the company back to its old glory," says John James Jenkins, the American CEO. "FontanaArte has a great history. We need to refocus on design." Technology, he adds, will be a necessary ingredient.