

modern

MAGAZINE



SPRING 2017
modernmag.com

DESIGN
DECORATIVE ARTS
ARCHITECTURE



Gio Ponti (1891-1979) Bilia lamp 1931

GIO PONTI IS ARGUABLY one of the twentieth century's most recognized design superstars. His accomplishments in several overlapping disciplines (including furniture design, entire interiors, architecture, and journalism) have cemented his reputation as Italy's preeminent force of modernist design. However, much of his reputation is based on his postwar activity: his collaboration with Piero Fornasetti in the late 1940s; his Pirelli Tower, completed in Milan in 1958; the Superleggera chair first produced in 1957; the Parco dei Principi Hotel in Sorrento, designed in the early 1960s; and the list goes on. Ponti was certainly relevant in the 1920s and '30s in

several creative realms, including architecture, porcelain (working for Manifattura Richard-Ginori), design journalism (as editor of *Domus* magazine), and glass (working for Luigi Fontana & Partners and then FontanaArte). With Ponti on board as art director, with the goal of revitalizing/modernizing the firm's output, FontanaArte debuted several successful designs in the early 1930s. However, I am partial to the surprising and delightfully simple Bilia lamp, which could be misread as German, Dutch, or even Scandinavian. Ponti reduced the lamp's essential elements to two completely unadorned geometric elements—a cone and a sphere.

Gino Sarfatti (1912-1985) Model no. 2003 (Fuoco d'artificio) 1939

THIS ENTIRE LIST could be devoted to Gino Sarfatti and his accomplishments as a lighting designer. Except for Le Klint and Poul Henningsen, the other designers profiled here dabbled in lighting. Sarfatti was devoted to it, as both a designer and an entrepreneur. He founded the legendary lighting studio Arteluce in 1938, whose earliest designs, whether by his hand or others in the atelier, decisively banished any allusions to historical styles. Despite his focus on one product type, Sarfatti was an essential contributor to the aesthetic design revolution that occurred specifically in Milan, and Italy in general, before and after World War II. In the years leading up to the war, Italy was still considered a peasant nation. Modern materials were difficult and expensive to procure, especially compared with Germany. One of Sarfatti's many talents was his ability to innovate using limited resources. At Arteluce his craftsmen could manipulate wood using a lathe to resemble plastic, or paint it to appear to be brass. However, his best designs were made from metals.



One of his key aesthetic—and practical—adaptations was phasing out traditional lampshades or diffusers (made of parchment) and replacing them with metal reflectors, made of lacquered aluminum. Two of the most famous reflector forms, calla lily and perforated cone, were introduced (and later popularized) by Sarfatti at the end of the 1930s. So how to choose from the abundance of ingenious Sarfatti designs? I selected Arteluce model nos.

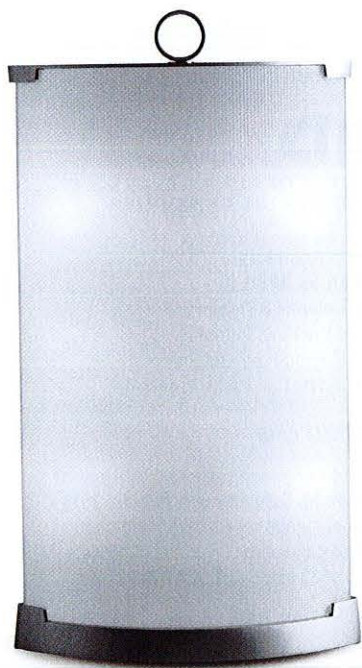
2003 (Fuoco d'artificio or Fireworks) and 2064 (which was flush-mounted to the ceiling) because their date, 1939, was so much earlier than I expected; I had been under the impression that the mid-century "Sputnik" or "Fireworks" style light fixture was an American creation. Numerous metal arms (there were versions with up to twenty-five) hold exposed bulbs in Sarfatti's remarkably simple yet incredibly poetic and influential composition.

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.