

Will success spoil Italian design?

Milano Furniture Fair

... has stabilized in the last three years. I was impressed with quality, not design. With the venture into plastics there were innovations caused by the problems of the material. Now it's all settled down to a practical angle—refinements in construction, durability."—George Tanier

A general overview of the modern furniture at the Fair showed variations on several themes:

sleek, highly engineered kitchens

squishy, modular soft seating

plump pillow-like upholstery

luxury looks of leathers, suede, textures and tufting

many modular wall storage systems

integrated bedroom furniture

new plastic case goods, as at BBB and Artemide

unusual, imaginative innovations such as Saporiti's chrome plating of ABS, Simon's furniture surrealism, Cattaneo's "Unibloc" banquette seating, Poltronova's bed sitting on circles, Giovanetti's "Anfibio" raft sofa/bed, and other selected gems.

"Marketing can destroy creativity," states Rodolfo Bonetto, Chairman of Italy's Industrial Design Association. "We have the power of the small people. In American marketing, the big guys have to be sure it will sell. They walk like an elephant. We try to know the situation in which a product will sell, but we are most interested in the beauty of the product. We are more honest."

Nevertheless, Italy's designers showed an increasing consciousness of marketing at the latest Milano Furniture Fair. American importers commented that fewer things were sensational, more things were substantial.

Is this the beginning of the end? Unlikely. Maybe the design/marketing seesaw can strike a balance. Maybe the experts in each can learn something from the other.

A bit of history. In the late fifties, and early sixties, Italy stunned the world with a tremendous wave of new ideas about furniture. With joyous, sometimes humorous, forms and shapes, Italian designers and manufacturers released modern design from its Miesian straitjacket. They explored new materials and showed the imagination to apply existing technologies to the fabrication of furniture. For example, they took an injection molding machine (made in the U.S. in 1964) and made the world's first injection molded furniture in 1969.

How did it happen? A combination of artistry and ambition. Italy's artisan heritage offers the endowment of many skilled craftsmen who are able and eager to understand and execute a designer's schemes—quickly. The furniture industry, an outgrowth of craft shops, is small-scale and family-owned. The family member who manages the manufacturing is typically a self-made man. He steers by instinct and emotion rather than by business school rules. He wants to make a name for himself. A good designer offers him an opportunity to become a star, to stand out from the crowd. He is eager to take the risk. He feels that the publicity will pay off, even if the product never makes money. And because his shop is small, the financial stakes are not horrendous. The designer, for his part, must convince only one person of the validity of his design, not a board of directors playing power politics. The designer, himself, has status. He is respected as an artist, a professional person with a responsible role to play in society. And he has glamor, for in Italy furniture is a hot fashion field that arouses public interest and excitement. Hundreds of fine, beautifully displayed modern furniture stores throughout Europe make ordinary people connoisseurs and critics.—(To be fair, there is also a lot of bad stuff that finds a market.)

Fascinated, Americans came to see. And buy. The Italians did their thing and the Americans theirs. And there were complaints. The Americans': "The Italians don't have a grasp of the quality required here. They are very sluggish at following through with their commitments. I found in several instances, a positive deviousness." (The rules of marketing require reliable performance, reliable delivery, reliable commitments). The Italians were incensed that the Americans suggested changes in their designs. (Art admits no compromise even for practicality.) It was worse that some manufacturers simply stole their ideas. Opportunistic importers misled them about their sales opportunities.

Everybody learned. Discriminating importers created an American market for Italy's fine designs, causing the Italian companies to grow and prosper. Bob Wexler of Selig was even knighted by the Italian Government for his contribution to Italian furniture exports. Manufacturers and markets shuffled into a match. Some manufacturers allied themselves with importers (such as D&F Wright) who would interpret the American market and invest in them. Saporiti hired Thomas Campaniello in New York to coordinate its American distributors. Knoll bought the Gavina factory. The more industrialized firms stopped simply producing products that their architects happened to come up with. New research and development departments started analyzing markets and materials, searching for valid, viable products.

Then the cost of exporting increased due to rising costs of labor and materials and the devaluation of the dollar. To minimize the problems of price and of plagiarism, manufacturers of machine-molded products are now striving to establish foreign licensees. Artemide has just formed a collaborative company with Burlington Industries. Directional is about to announce a major arrangement. De Styl in Miami is going to try it out with one piece from Diridae. (Beylerian has always manufactured for Kartell.)

Other sophisticated Italian firms like C & B and Zanotta (at AI and ICF, respectively) are keeping competitive by developing technology faster than their copiers can figure it out. Even others offer the quality of hand craftsmanship that is simply unavailable elsewhere in the world. Check it out at Pace.

Indicating another way to solve the import problem, Sormani is opening its own New York showroom.

Marketing has refined Italian creativity. And we dig the designs. It's a beautiful balance. Maybe, now, we might even learn to encourage our own designers. —C.C.C.

Left column

Elam space at the Milano Furniture Fair

"Unibloc," design: R. Landault, manufacture: Cattaneo Furniture, import: Harvey Propper

Table with bird's feet, bird's tracks on top, surrealist design: Meret Oppenheim, manufacture: Simon

Arflex space at the Fair, lounge seating design: P. L. Spadolini

Center column

"Le Mura," design: Mario Bellini, manufacture: Cassina, import: Atelier International

"Tucroma," design: G. Faleschini, manufacture: Mariani di Valerio, import: Pace Collection

"Toi-Ty-Toi-Ty" central kitchen unit, design: G. Coslin, manufacture: Garavaglia Marcallo

Stacking chair, design and manufacture: Gigi Sebadin, import: Atelier International

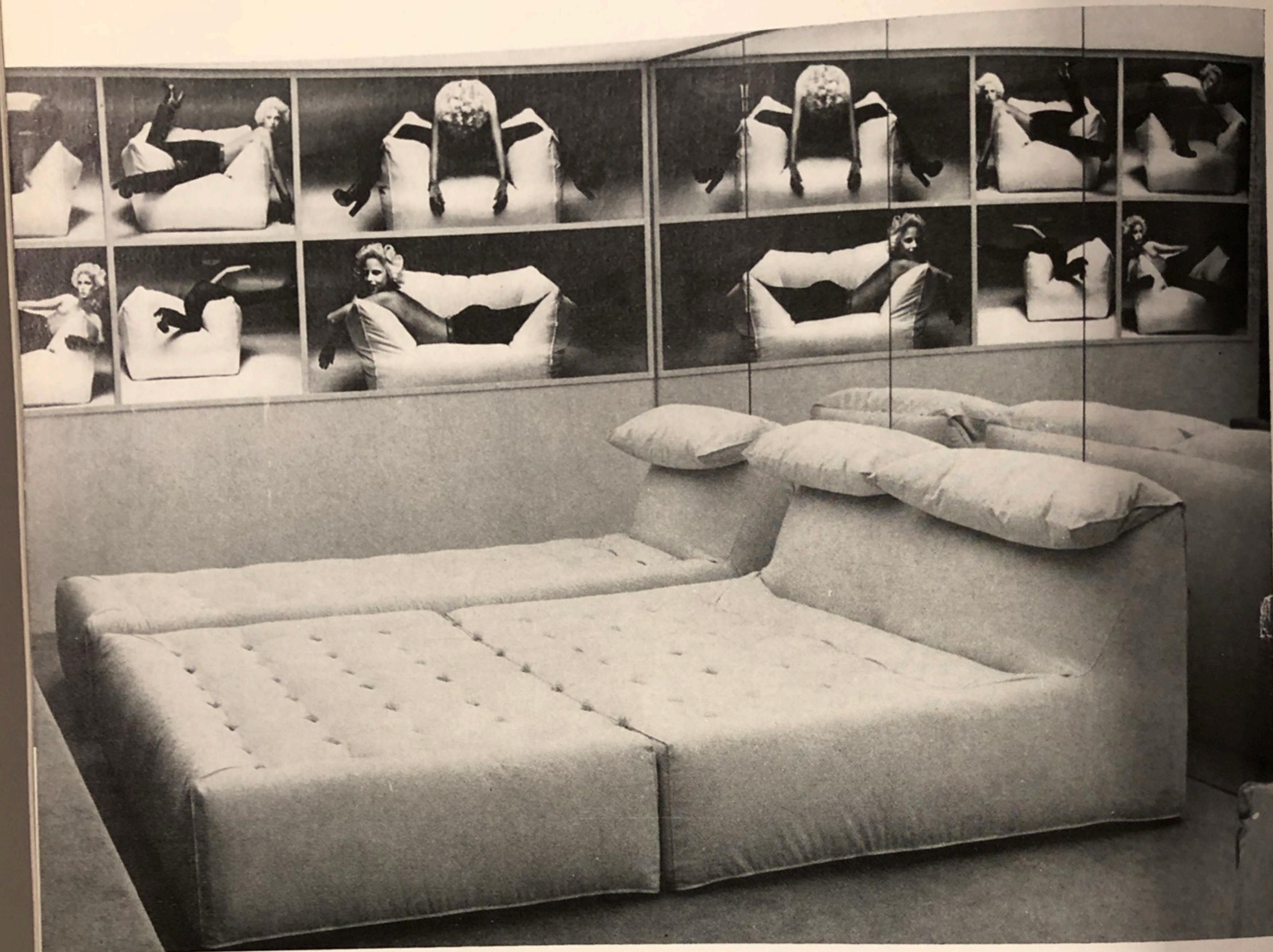
Right column

Versatile wall unit, manufacture: Pozzi and Yerga

"Le Bambole," design: Mario Bellini, manufacture: C & B, import: Atelier International

Magazine rack, design: Giotto Stoppino, manufacture: Kartell and Beylerian

"Blap," design: Carlo Bartoll, manufacture: Giuseppi Rossi, import: Jack Norman



C & B



Piero Busnelli could be a pirate. His looks are exotic and his spirit exploratory. When you meet him you have the unsettled and excited feeling that you don't know what will happen next. You don't.

His firm reflects him. It is perhaps the most innovative furniture factory in the world. And at the latest Milan Fair it introduced a design that Marvin Affrime of the Space Design Group calls the "ultimate of the soft look. There is nowhere to go from here."

Piero's father drove cable cars. Piero had little education and many rather menial jobs. He worked his way into the furniture field, finally forming his own little firm with his father and brother. It split because Piero wanted innovation. In 1966 he got together with Cesare Cassina and formed C & B. The objective: mass production of a few modern models made in new materials with new technology. Investment was sunk in research and in developing new machines. The outcome: fiberglass in furniture, steel inserts in cold cure foam, a completely automatic cutting system for fabrics and leather, self-skinning on an industrial scale, the ability to injection mold 45 kilos of cold cure foam in 11 seconds with one shot, vacuum forming furniture into cellophane bags to save shipping and storage costs. Atelier International distributes the designs of C & B in the U.S.



Cas
 manufacturers of kitch
 highly industrialize
 of other furnishi
 and typically not hi
 Castelli is an excep
 founded in the last
 Castelli industrial after W
 manufactured wooden and
 here. Twelve years ago
 Giancarlo Piretti (now
 company introduced its
 "106 Chair," design
 of seven pre-formed c
 and "Axis 4000" ex
 concept into modules f
 Two and a half years
 market, Castelli intro
 famous "Plia"—a see-t
 ing chair made of a m
 mated parts. Its desi
 ended into the "Plona
 "Pliane" folding table. Pi
 used the clever coat rac
 have the social aim to
 well designed," explain
 er Sandro Longarini, "a
 the price. We don't
 the elite. Piretti alwa
 can be built a day a
 cost." (1,500 "Plia" c
 each day.) Krueger
 distributor.

Castelli

In Italy, the manufacturers of kitchens are few, big and highly industrialized. The manufacturers of other furnishings are many, small, and typically not highly industrialized. Castelli is an exception. A family firm founded in the last century, Castelli became industrial after World War II. It manufactured wooden and metal office furniture. Twelve years ago it hired designer Giancarlo Piretti (now 32). In 1965 the company introduced its first seating—Piretti's "106 Chair," designed as an assembly of seven pre-formed components. "Axis 3000" and "Axis 4000" extended the original concept into modules for multiple seating. Two and a half years ago, for the residential market, Castelli introduced Piretti's now-famous "Plia"—a see-through plastic folding chair made of a mechanism of three patented parts. Its design principles have extended into the "Plona Chair" and the "Platone" folding table. Piretti has also introduced the clever coat rack pictured.

"We have the social aim to produce good items, well designed," explains export sales manager Sandro Longarini, "but we worry about the price. We don't want just to serve the elite. Piretti always thinks how many can be built a day and what they will cost." (1,500 "Plia" chairs are produced each day.) Krueger is sole American distributor.

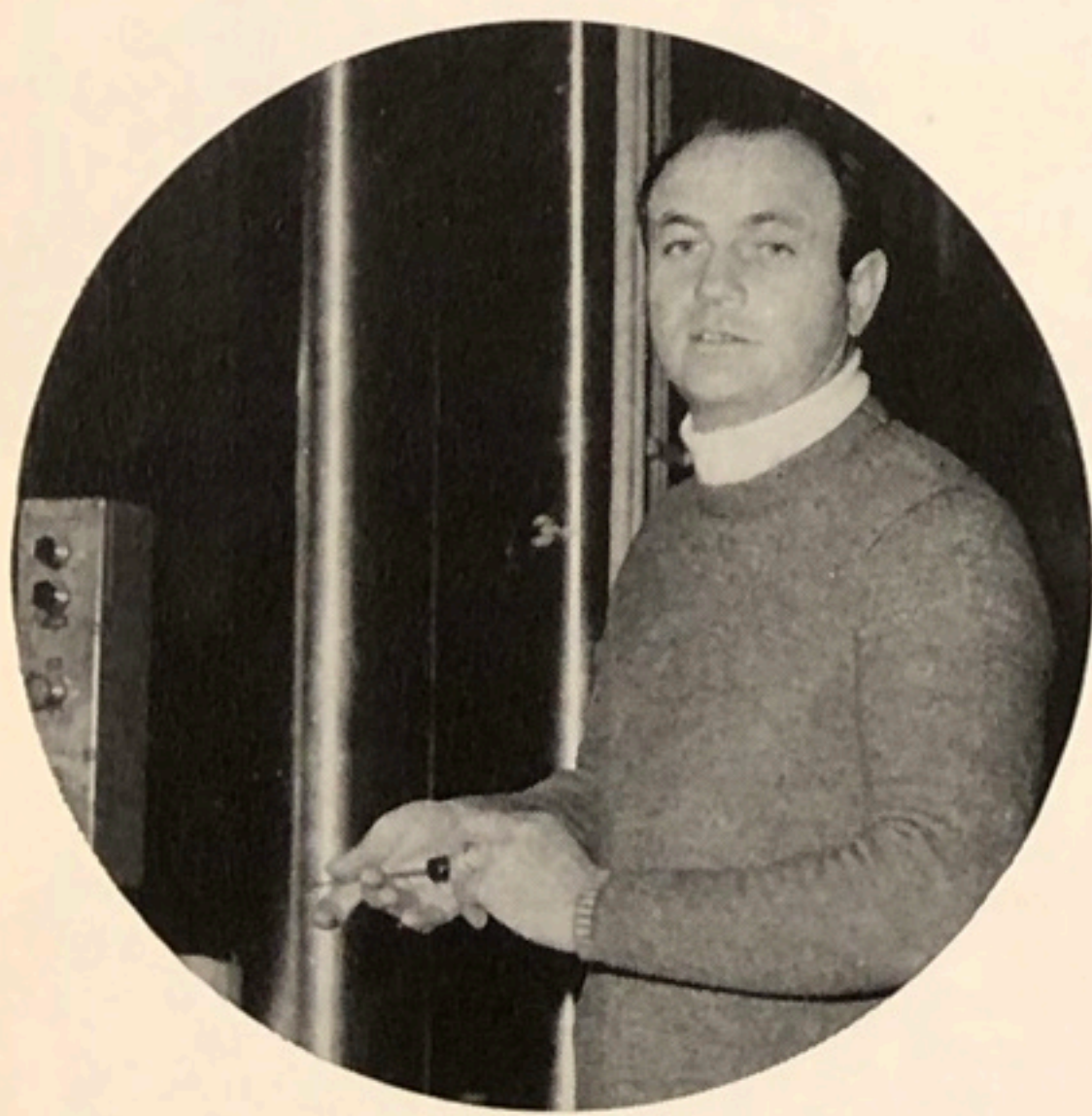
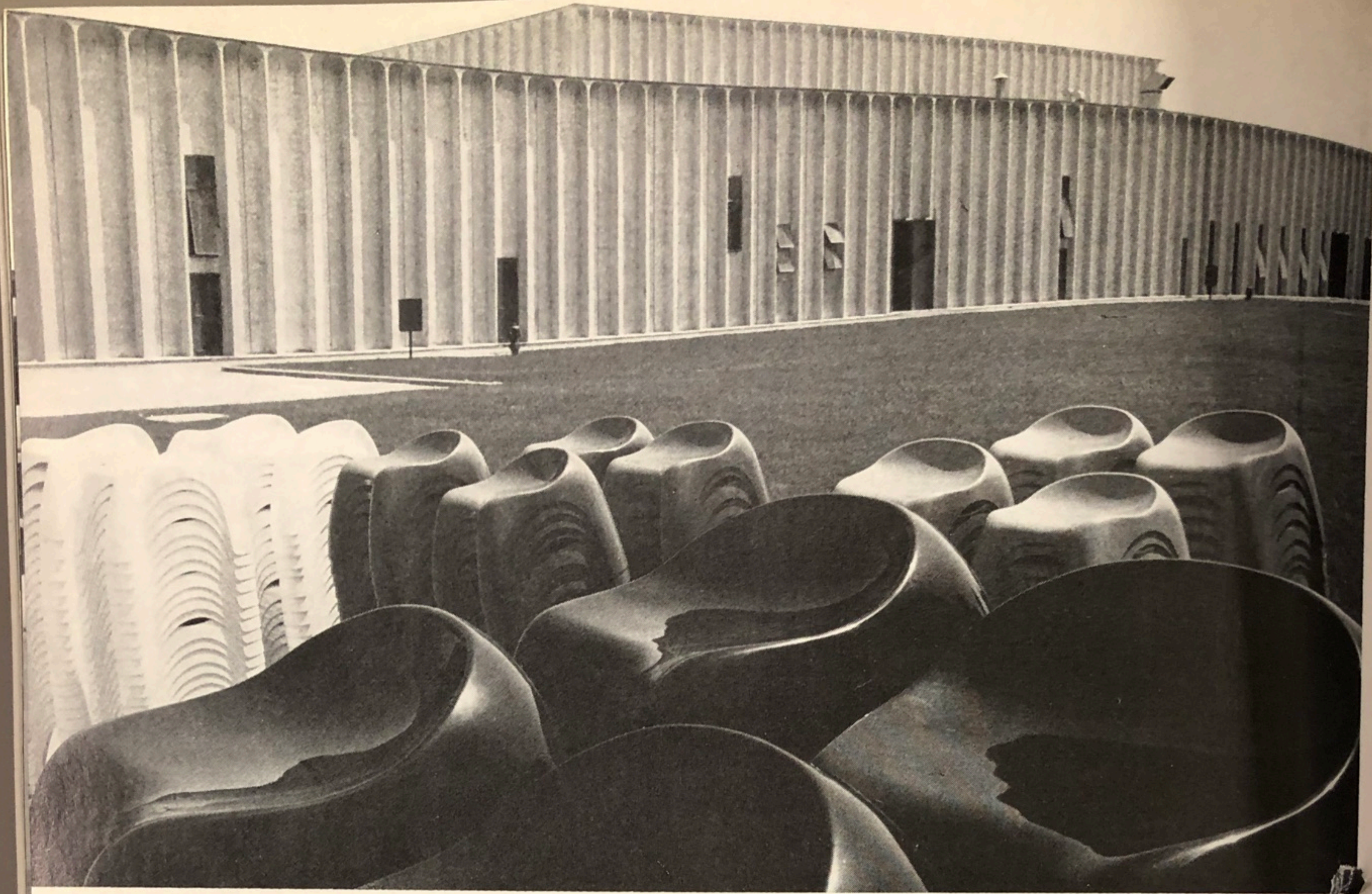


Cassina

Cassina is making masterpieces. It brought back the classics of Corbu and now it is reviving the work of Gerrit Thomas Rietveld. His De Stijl school, founded in Holland in 1917, was dedicated to integrating the plastic arts with architecture. Striving for purity, he and Mondrian adopted a horizontal-vertical rhythm and a counterpoint of primary colors. Rietveld's "Red and Blue" chair, designed in 1918, got rid of the excess baggage that had accumulated for centuries around the notion of a chair. The chair was stripped to its essentials: structure, seat and back. Its pure planes were balanced by the contrast of colors. With great attention to authenticity, Cassina is producing both this chair and Rietveld's "Zig-Zag," designed in 1934.

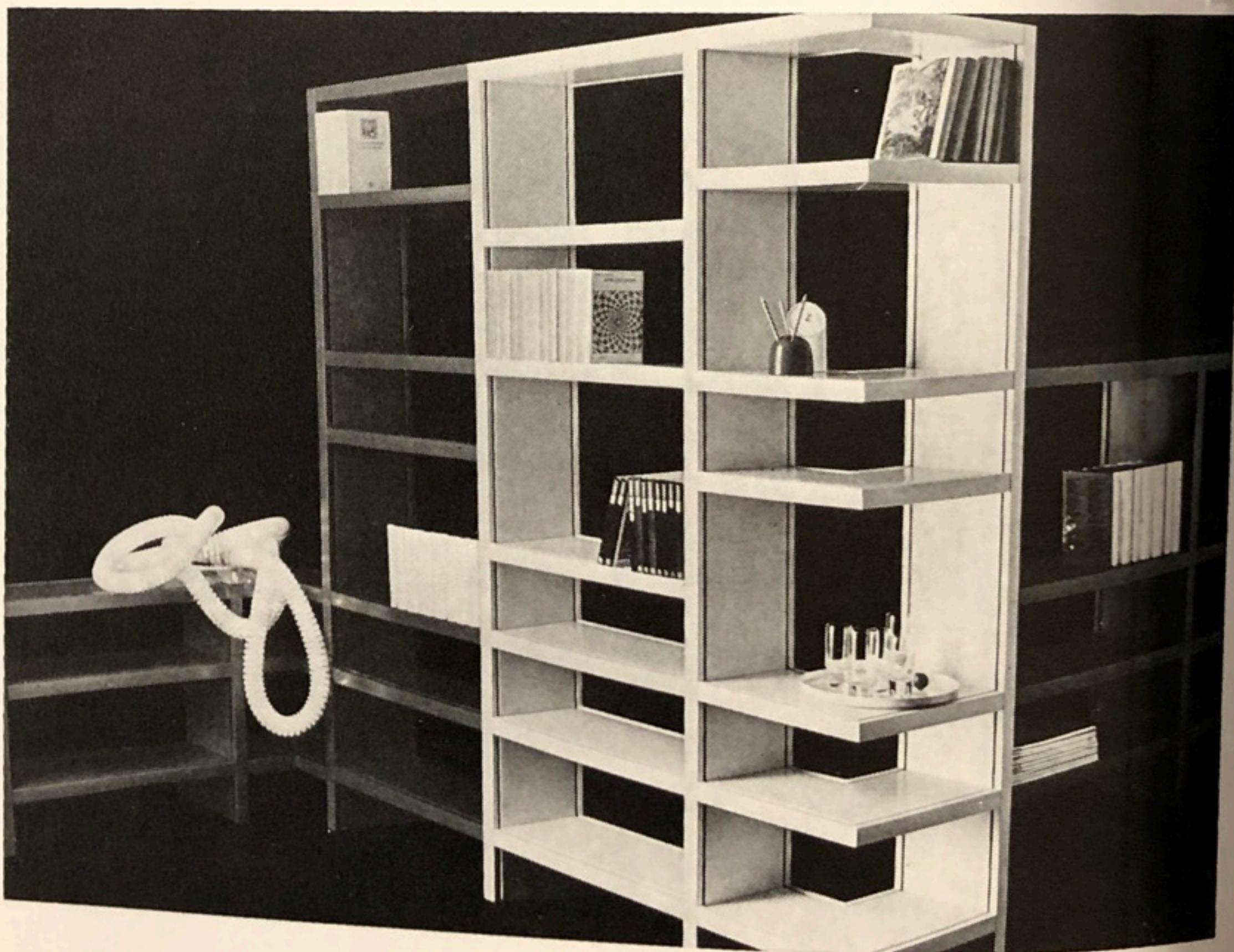
Other than its Great Masterpiece Collection, Cassina makes no more than 1,000 of any of its designs. The factory philosophy is to make many models in limited edition and to change production fast enough to set the styles. This extraordinary freedom and flexibility is due to manpower, rather than machine power. 250 skilled employees are responsible for the outstanding Cassina quality. Atelier International is the American importer.





Artemide

Like Knoll International, Artemide is setting up licensees all over the world to manufacture in its major markets. To avoid knock-offs and to compete in the U.S. market, Artemide wanted to associate itself with a major American manufacturer. Burlington Industries was the marriage choice. An Artemide USA showroom will soon be opening in New York's Burlington House; one was opened this fall at the High Point market. Stendig, a division of Burlington, is



the showroom to the trade. Artemide is the creation of smooth, suave Dr. Ernesto Gismondi. An aeronautical engineer in missile-rocket propulsion, Gismondi married an architect who introduced him to Sergio Mazza. In 1959, he and Mazza decided to form a company. They began with artisan work that required little investment and realized a high price. They made lamps handcrafted of Venetian glass. Then they began thinking about products for a mass

market. Gismondi transferred some of his sophisticated space age technology into the furniture field. In 1964 he started doing handmade fiberglass. By 1966 he had developed the special compression molding technique which is still his forte. Now Gismondi is introducing the first production extrusion plastics for furniture. See the book shelf system pictured. The supportive structure was inspired by the cross section of an airplane wing. See it at Stendig.

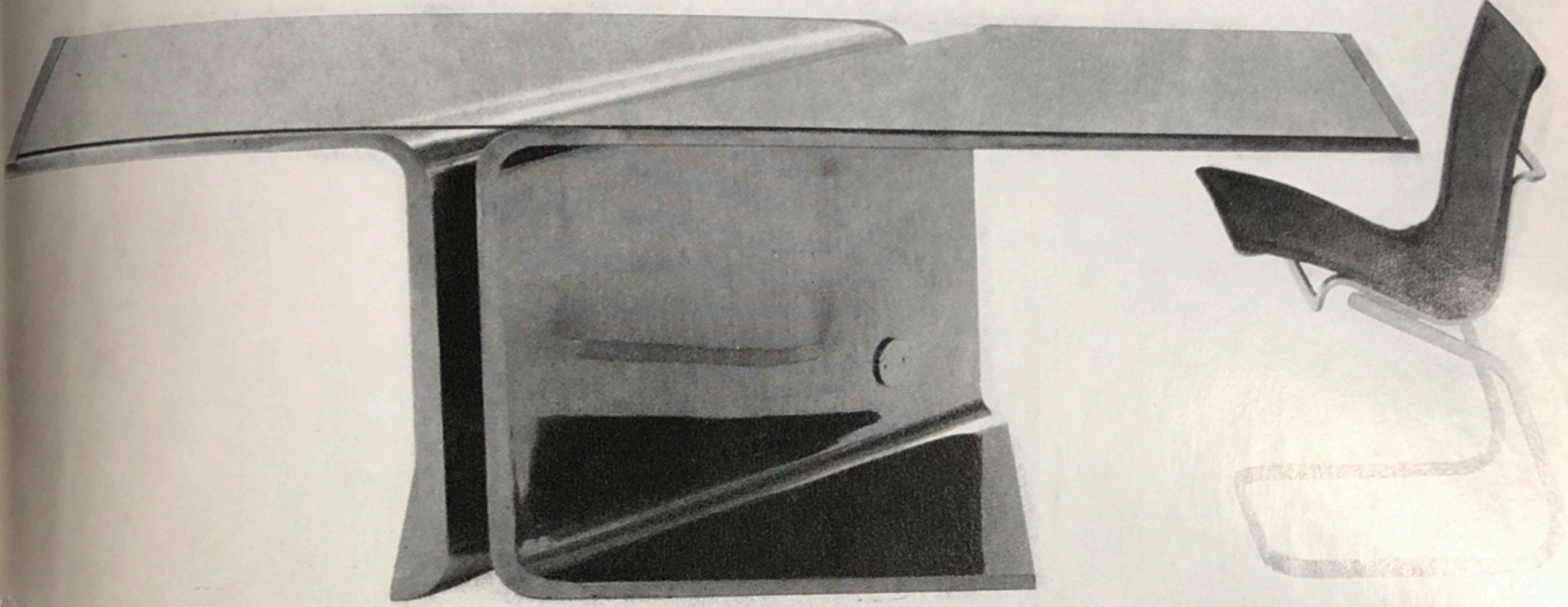
Sormani

Sormani is opening its own New York showroom in New York (964 Third Avenue) this January. Alessandro Lanfranchi who was in advertising and promotion at agencies in New York got together with his old friend

Enea de Bernardi who was in the antique business in Italy. (They had studied law together at university in Italy.) They determined to bring something Italian to the American market. Considering American enthusiasm for Italian designers and design and the tremendous impact of the MOMA show, they decided their best chance was in home furnishings. Since Sormani was a friend of de Bernardi and also had a large manufacturing capacity, an extensive line, rather reasonable prices, and was willing,

they selected Sormani. Lanfranchi and de Bernardi became partners with Sormani so that there would be no middle man and so that their expenses would come out of the manufacturer's first costs. All this results in lowering the import price.

Sormani's styles are geared toward young people—seating is not so far from the floor. The long line includes furniture, fabrics, accessories and even a compact kitchen for an office, complete with a pull-down bed on the back side.



The Zevi Company was born about 29 months ago. It started with 8 men, 1 building. Now it has 6 buildings, 70 people. It exports 70% of its production. Its best market is the U.S.—Selig is taking practically everything the company can produce. Zevi's greatest asset is its chrome work, much of which is done by hand.

The success story: Renato Zevi had spent 24 years in Ethiopia. Part of the time he was managing a furniture factory. In 1963 he decided to return to Italy. He worked as a salesman, later as an export manager for a furniture firm. Then, a little more

than 2 years ago, he and some partners started a new company "just for a joke." When he found he could get space at the Milano Furniture Fair, Zevi went home and spent a rainy Sunday making sketches of furniture designs. He had never made a special study of design. "I like nice things. I like simple things." He showed his prototypes at the Fair and enjoyed such a suc-

cess that immediately afterward the company started construction on its second building.

Being a born salesman, having great facility with languages, and having experience and understanding of export markets, Zevi has made marketable models and his company has come on like a comet. See the designs at Selig.

Zevi



transferred some of the
age technology into the
1964 he started with the
By 1966 he had opened
compression molding
his firm. Now the
the first production
for furniture. The success
ed by the cross-section
See it at Selig.



Poltronova

Professor Cammilli's father was an artisan working marble. Professor Cammilli started to do the same, but decided his heart wasn't in it. About 15 years ago, he got curious about modern furniture. He discussed the problem with young architects who were not then known, people such as Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass, Sergio Asti, Angelo Mangarotti. Excited by the adventurous avenues of their thought, Cammilli obtained a tiny factory with five workers and started to make their designs. The cooperation continued over the years. The Poltronova factory grew to 200 workers.

Today, Professor Cammilli feels he is facing a crisis in finding new designers. "We have real new designs when a new material is discovered. Now it is a stagnant situation. What is drawn now is a new aspect of the same solution, rather than a new idea."

To satisfy his own hunger for innovation, Professor Cammilli has turned to the sculptor Mario Ceroli. When viewing some Ceroli sculptures, he thought of making multiples. He encouraged Ceroli to make furniture. The results, introduced at Eurodomus, are pictured on this page. The collection includes an armchair, a divan, a chair, a dinner table, a head bed, and a trunk—all made of rough Russian pine. The pieces are priced as sculpture. Cammilli admits he won't sell many, but wow, what publicity!

Stendig imports many Poltronova pieces.



Saporiti

At the Milan Furniture Fair, the Saporiti space was one of fabulous luxe. There were great green walls made of dark emerald ABS panels. There was an irresistibly sumptuous sofa upholstered in soft green suede plaid. There was a sculptured chest that looked like a gold and enamel jewel. Many curved and comfortable seating structures. Seating shells of ABS covered in chrome. In the middle of it all was modest and serious Sergio Saporiti. Where had it all begun?
Saporiti had worked in a furniture factory when he was 11 years old. He went to

school in the evenings. In 1948, at the ripe old age of 17, he decided to become an industrialist. To pursue his purpose, he contacted as many architects as he could and explained his objectives: He wanted to produce avant garde designs of quality and beauty. He wanted to study and explore the opportunities of advanced technology. The architects who were attracted by his ideas offered him their designs. Saporiti started production. (His only problem was the people who came to his factory couldn't believe he was boss and kept asking for his father.)

Since those days the Saporiti factory has grown with success, but it hasn't lost sight of its original objectives. Cooperative exploration is still the order of the day today. Saporiti has a stable of designers with engineering and architectural backgrounds whose concepts he encourages. The result is a cycle of success.

To handle his exports to America, Saporiti has sensibly hired an agent who knows Italy and the American market. New York-based Thomas Campaniello has placed Saporiti designs with selected showrooms.

