

## Design degree zero

Anyone who has ever played the ‘happy family’ game knows how satisfying it can be to find the matching shape. I have been playing this game through work, visits to the museums, readings, etc. It always appeared fascinating to me that some shapes which have been invented at such early stages of humanity remain present through centuries, as if the first iteration contained the potential for such a large number of creations, variations, evolutions.

This idea of finding the ‘original’ shape has been resonating in my mind since I read *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* by Roland Barthes while studying at the university. This book exposes the written language as composed of an helix of readable signs or ‘style’, creating various degrees of our common heritage. It supposes that every cultural product contains a self-veiling mechanism within it. Barthes perforated the study of culture in all its forms—art, literature, film, design, fashion—with a series of sharp concepts. His theories have remained a polestar for me over the years, inhabiting my own approach to culture and the way I decipher the ornaments and fundamentals of the material world. To back the star Roland Barthes I found the supporting cast of Gio Ponti (with his theory of the *Forma Finita*), Massimo and Leila Vignelli (their research for the most effective forms), Andrea Branzi (the project *Grandi Legni*) and even Carl Jung (for his analysis of the signs in *Man and his symbols*) and Sigmund Freud (his fascination for collecting antiquities and archeology that he considered to be comparable to psychoanalysis).

The present newsletter does not aim to be an exhaustive catalogue but, rather, is intended as a readerly invitation. Should you have examples that have fascinated you, I would be delighted for you to share them with me.



In shaky times, when the narrative does not hold anymore and we are left without a story to tell ourselves, it is somehow comforting to know that certain knowledge, some sort of order remains immutable.

After selecting some of the innovations and names of the contemporary design scene, I will look at the anonymous ‘pillars’ that have been supporting some of our design structures for centuries. I will expose some of the takes of the XXth century and contemporary minds that I regard as particularly beautiful and interesting. The forms that are put forward are the ‘X’ shaped structure and the slender vase.

‘Metafora’ table by Leila and Massimo Vignelli, designed in 1979

The top is supported by the four forms of the Euclidean geometry, which are independent and can be positioned freely. Regardless of their position the table does not lose its stability or its function making it a metaphor of contingency and the fil rouge of meaning and historical

## Solve for 'X'

Seats presenting with a wide rest on an 'X' shaped leg structure and incurvated feet is a familiar sight in most of the cultures. Found on early Egyptian seals, the stool might be one of the first piece of domestic furniture.

Egyptians were not interested in cluttering their homes with unnecessary furniture but invented simple and highly functional designs. The feet are mostly embellished with animal features such as lion paws, duck heads, bull legs. Presumably the user was expected to derive some of the strength of the depicted animal. This embellishment could also have been to reinforce the idea of stability and finally the spool-like support, today known as casters, were originally placed under hooves or paws to raise them above the sandy floors and increase their importance. For practical reasons such as the scarcity of wood carpenters developed tools and outstanding skills in joinery.

Sitting in a chair marks a higher rank by raising the sitter above the others. Such distinction, scarcely changed and the Roman *Sella curulis* takes its name from the eponymous highest rank of the magistrates that were allowed to sit on it. In ancient Greece the gods are depicted sitting on the *Diphros Okladias*, inherited from the Egyptian stool with variations in the elaboration of the curves, the seat support, etc.

The rank distinction is why the chair took a bit longer to appear in China were the tradition valued the group rather than the individual. As a result the kneeling position was dominant until the latter part of the 3rd century A.D when Confucianism gave way to Taoism and Buddhism from India. Seating was introduced in China through woven chairs and the nomadic folding stool – *hu ch'uan* – already well established in the western world. On a side note it is interesting to point out that once developed it is fair to say, that Chinese seats were partly responsible for the mad pursuit of Chinoiserie taste in Western Europe.



Ceremonial throne from Tomb of Tutankhamun, ebony inlaid with ivory, gem stones and gold, Thebes, Egypt, New Kingdom, Dynasty XVIII, Egyptian Museum, Cairo



Fresco from Casa del Chirurgo designated as 'the painter', Pompeii, 50-79 A.D, Archeological Museum, Naples



Head holder depicting the god Bes, carved wood Dynasty XVIII, New Kingdom, ca. 1550 - 1069 B. C., Musée du Louvre, Paris



Detail from a Roman stone sarcophagus showing two women seating on a folding stool and the other on a chair, 2nd century A.D, Palazzo Massimo, Rome



Detail of a Greek vase depicting a woman sitting on a *diphros okladia*, 6th-4th BC Archeological Museum, Naples



Detail from an epinetron attributed to The Golonos Group, painted and incised ceramic, circa 500BC, Athens, The British Museum, London

The Confucian scholar Fan Hsun, sitting on a *hu ch'uan* (nomadic seat) from the scrolls *Scholars of the Northern Chi'i Collating Classical Texts*, late 11th century AD Metropolitan Museum, New York



## Timeless seats for the new elite

Evidently this structure was revived by important discoveries such as the discovery of Pompeii (1689), the discovery by Ernesto Schiaparelli of Queen Nefertiti's tomb in Deir el-Medina in the Valley of the Queens (1904), and the excavation of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings by Howard Carter (1922). This design went through many interpretations but looking at them closely reveals that it always kept one or two of its essence.

Jean-Michel Frank significantly renewed the design esthetic. He had a simple idea: use a plain and elegant forms without ornaments but upholstered with the most luxurious materials. Indeed, Frank understood that the design has to be functional but that the materials are only limited by the designers imagination. Naturally the 'X' structure was used for numerous models of stools, chairs, table and even lamps. His interiors and his designs are familiar yet their execution is utterly new. I have had the luck to see important pieces of the master's work for various sales and it has always left a strong impression on me. They all carry that very distinctive feel between poetry, elegance and sadness.

A brass version of the table lamp 'X' made for Jorge Born's home in Argentina in 1939, one of Frank's most important and iconic commission, was sold in Paris at Christie's last November for €162,500.



Salon de Madame Arthaud by Jean Michel Frank with oak and Hermes hand stitched leather chairs 'X'. On the mantle the plaster vase lotus by Alberto Giacometti inspired by the Egyptian alabaster *brûle parfum*

Diego Giacometti drew inspiration from antiquity for various models reinforcing the sense of strength and adding sculptural qualities to his creations. Giacometti created the first design of this 'X' stool circa 1960, inspired by a Spanish armchair 'en curule' that Aimé Maeght had brought back from a flea market. The first version of the 'Tabouret en X' was born, he then made slightly different versions with variations in the thickness and elaboration of the framework. For me, Diego Giacometti's works have a unique presence that goes beyond a piece of furniture.

Sculpting from models or sheer imagination his works can have lyric qualities displaying birds running along stretchers. Some pieces feel more raw as if they were going to the essence of what a design must be. The simplicity and elegance of his work immediately created a consensus amongst the most prestigious mécènes such as Henri Samuel, Aimé Maecht, Hubert de Givenchy. If today these works have left the original artist circle it is still amongst the most refined furniture one can buy.



'Tabouret en X', first version, circa 1960



The new edition of the 'Barcelona' chair by [Vitra](#) for the 90th birthday of the design

The 'Barcelona' chair by Mies van der Rhode is probably the most iconic example that comes to mind when one thinks of the 'X' structure. The 'MR90' – its original name – was designed for the German Pavilion at the 1929 International Exhibition of Barcelona. Comfortable and opulent but yet imparting a modern approach the, leg structure goes from 'X' to fluid 'S'. Did Mies have in mind the power implications of the design's history? It is most likely, as not only did this chair assert the ingeniousness of the German designer and therefore of his nation but the Pavilion was the site of the inaugural ceremony for the German exhibits, and the Spanish king and Queen were to attend.



German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona.

## Shaping the modern life



Furniture photographed for exhibition "Furniture of Classical Greece" organised in 1963 in Athens with Susan and Eleftherios Saridis, photography by Loomis Dean in the court-yard of the House of the Dolphins, ca. 110 BCE, on the Island of Delos

"On Greek vases I saw furniture that was young, untouched by time... Vitality, surging through the human figures on the vases, surged through this furniture." said Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings.

As one of the preeminent figure of the XXth Century American design Robsjohn-Gibbings strongly believed in the power of design to shape contemporary life. He devised industrially produced furniture with the look of high-quality handicraft and introduced an alternative aesthetic to that of the plastic, tubular chromium, plywood, and metal furniture that flooded postwar America.

His aesthetic is extracted from Ancient Greece classical forms and yet rather than merely imitating historical models, one can feel there is a dialogue between the past and the American domestic and visual culture. The result is simple, unpretentious, familiar and yet display a passionate attention to proportions and details.



'Affecter stool', walnut and gilt bronze stool, with woven leather cord seat, manufactured by Saridis, Athens, circa 1960

On paper the thick and lush exotic wood combined with the timeless beauty of the structure are already irresistible. Unfortunately I have never had the luck to sit on the 'F-2 Sloucer' or 'Sling' chair by Don. S. Shoemaker and discovered it only through articles on Mexican Modern design. The precious tropical wood is from the state of Michoacan where the manufacture, SEÑAL,S.A., was initially set up in the late 1950s. Shoemaker is originally from Nebraska but fell in love with Mexico during his honeymoon and eventually moved there in 1940. His furniture factory grew into an international manufacture with showrooms in large cities in Mexico as well as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston.

Sling chairs photographed by Ryan Lowry in Michael Nyman's home for apartamento issue #24, autumn/ winter 2019-20



## Sarcastic tones



Crococurule stool, gilt bronze, 2008  
This example from the Alberto Pinto collection sold at Christie's Paris in September 2017 for € 440,000

The enchanting and irreverent art of Claude Lalanne has made many smile and opened many wallets. It seems to me that the whimsical 'Crococurule' stool plays on the contrast between the stool's original function, the nobility of the bronze and the incongruity of the crocodile. Perhaps one could even perceive a slight parody on the iconography of the animal skin lavishly layed down on the ruler's chair...

Usually known to live in the vegetal realm Claude Lalanne has nonetheless incorporated the crocodile in several of her creations. In 1972, a crocodile passed away at the Paris zoo. Alerted by her friend and fellow artist Niki de Saint Phalle, Claude contacted the director of the zoo who eventually agreed to the unusual request to get the remains of the animal. The croco has now embarked on many lives in the shapes of console, desks, low tables, etc.

An Egyptian Black Basalt Jar, Predynastic Period (Nagada I)/ 1st Dynasty, circa 3500-2900 B.C. sold at Sotheby's New York in 2012 for \$ 21 300



## Physiology of the vase

The Museo del Vetro in Murano is a pilgrimage that every amateur of beauty must make. On the first floor, make a left turn and you will arrive to the display dedicated to Antique glass. In the dark room appear, like if they were floating, cases with groups of delicate glassware assorted by colors. One is taken aback by the subtlety of the technique, the softness of the colors but, to my eye, mostly by the fact that these ancient roman vessels could have very well been made last week or collected from a mid-century-modern apartment.



Group of Roman vessel, circa 100 B.C., picture taken at the Museo del Vetro, Murano

It is - again - in Egypt, between the 18th and the 20th dynasties that one finds the first vases displaying geometrical qualities and a form of ornament. The classic vase lines present a foot raising an ovoid body, sometimes sided by handles and end in a narrower neck. Elevated as an art during the antiquity the vase was relatively ignored by the middle age. However, it was rediscovered during the Renaissance. In 1537 Sebastiano Serlio published the Seven Books of Architecture to canonize the classical orders of architecture including presentation of the antique vase shapes. Under his impulse the vase form is rediscovered and even becomes an architectural element.



The vase classic shape as illustrated in *I Sette libri dell'architettura* by Sebastiano Serlio



Pixis signed Thérinos, circa 300 B.C. from the Myrina necropolis

Amphora of Nicosthemic shape, signed by Pamphaios, terracotta, circa 525 - 515 B.C. Louvre Museum, Paris



Hydria vase, signed by Euthymides, terracotta, circa 500 B.C



Glass hydricke (perfume bottle) Hellenistic period, late 4th-3rd century B.C. Greece Metropolitan Museum, New York

Terracotta krater, late Cypriot III, circa 1150-1100 B.C. Cyprus Metropolitan Museum, New York



## Back to the antiquity to move forward



Poster for the third decorative arts Biennale by da Marcello Nizzoli, 1927

The first biennale dedicated to decorative arts took place in 1923 in the Villa Reale in Monza, Italy. Although it was technically a flop, this new fair announced the revolutionary lines that were to put Italian design at the avant-garde. One might recall that at that point it was France that held the tutelary deity of worldwide arts, excelling in the decorative realm with Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, Emile Gallé and René Lalique. This first edition of the fair put an end to the stale eclectic drift Italy was experiencing and projected the country into modernity. Amongst its interpreters were Vittorio Zecchin and a young Gio Ponti. The first was appointed creative director for the ambitious project of the Milanese lawyer Paolo Venini and Venetian antiquarian Giacomo Cappellin, and the second was entrusted to rouse the venerable but dormant porcelain factory Ginori. The vessel imagined for this first biennale created the mediation between the past and the future, tradition and modernity. Just like a crack to let in wit and air into the new world still shaken up by the absurdity of the war.

The ancient forms were dressed in new audacious colors such as Terranova red (also known as Ponti red) and new combinations like blue and gold or white and gold.

In Paris, the other center of the arts, the epurated and elegant form also helped regain lucidity and peace of mind over the past events.



Manifesto of the new *Art et Industrie* magazine, Novembre 1945, beginning of a new era after the war

Alberto Giacometti's decorative works in plaster is perhaps less well-known. These creations are amongst my favorite, the poetry of the artist animates the plaster - otherwise a simple and humble material - with poetry and nobility. The plaster works are mostly inspired by classical models, lesser known than his bronze sculpture which can be seen in the database made by the [Giacometti Committee](#).



'Grecque' table lamp, designed 1935, this model circa 1935, stained plaster, sold in the iconic Jorge Born collection in September 2019 at Christie's Paris for € 100, 000



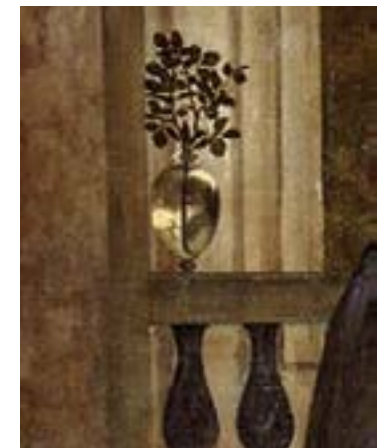
Group of 'Sofiat'i by Vittorio Zecchin for Venini, including 'Veronese' vases and 'Tintoretto', designed between 1921-1925, from the August Warnecke collection sold at Christie's Paris in 2012 for € 5800.

It is as if the dark antiquity room had been revisited. The aerial vase lines undulating sinuously reflecting new translucent colors. I imagine that this extraordinary shape, symbol of a new era in the decorative arts was already potentially alive centuries B.C. As a son of a Murano glass worker Vittorio Zecchin grew up around the furnaces. Appointed creative director of the newly created Cappellin Venini & C. vetreria he designed the most representative masterpieces of the manufacture.

Inspired by the Venetian masters such as Titian or Veronese – themselves influenced by the antiquity – his creations will stand out by their essential proportions and classic lines.



Sketch for the 'Veronese' vase, 1921



Detail of the *Annunciazione* by Paolo Veronese, 1578, Oil on canvas, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

## Experimenting on the material



A rare *Pulegoso* vase, model 3273, circa 1928 blown bubble glass with applied details, covered with burst gold foil from the Barry Friedman collection sold at Christie's New York for \$233,000

Napoleone Martinuzzi succeeded Zecchin as creative director at Venini in 1925, just like Zecchin he was the son of a glass worker, also took part in the Ca Pezzaro Secessionist movement and even founded a company with another Zecchin. Martinuzzi continued the antiquity *fil rouge* but gave it a very personal impulse. The classical lines became robust large scale glass sculptures subtly contrasted by experimental glass techniques for which the designer will become known for. The most well-known experimentations are the *pulegoso* glass - a semi-opaque or translucent glass with a rough surface due to tiny bubbles that form by using special ingredients - and the ones conducted to create intense and compact colors. In my opinion this master's creations have a strong and distinctive presence, as well as an incomparable humour.

Aquarium in clear smoke-grey glass containing a blossomed branch in malachite glass, Napoleone Martinuzzi for V.S.M. Venini & C., circa 1930 exhibited at 'Napoleone Martinuzzi. Venini 1925 — 1931' curated by Marino Barovier at the Stanze del Vetro in September-January 2014



Humour and freedom are also components of the creations by the contemporary designer [F. Taylor Colantonio](#) who irreverently makes antediluvian vases look like they are about to bounce their way out contrasting with their usual fragility. Like the Italian designers before him he draws inspiration from the classic shapes like the Amphora, the Calix, but also from old masters painting such as the human-scale vase from *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* by Sargent. The sculpting process follows a centuries-old American technique for making rugs in which the vase is shaped with a cable woven on cast-iron machines from the 1940s.



Models from left to right; Amphora, Sargent vase, Kylix, Giusti Urn, colored-figure cable, hand made in USA and available on the designers e-shop.

## Deconstructing



Flyers announcing the serie Orsete for Vistosi, 1974

'The permanent issue is about building new perfections from which to carry on feeling nostalgia' wrote Sottsass in his diary *Scritto di notte*.

In 1974, he designed his first glass works for Luciano Vistosi. Thirty designs exploring the idea of the *forme essenziali* with titles echoing the Rinascimento paintings (not too far from the idea of Zecchin a few decades earlier). Only eleven of the drawings will be produced but they will mark the beginning of Sottsass fascination for Murano glass. In 1982, Sottsass designed the first Memphis glass collection manufactured by Toso in Murano.

Classical elements are borrowed and dismantled to be rearranged, multiplied, suspended and glued. The essential forms are transformed through the technical and artistic maturity and the explosive colors. Through his deep understanding of the object's sensuality together with his ebullient personality, Sottsass laid the groundwork for all radical architecture and anti-design avant garde movement.

Vase *Mizar*, blown glass, designed 1982, Compagnia Vetraria Muranese for Memphis, sold at Wright Chicago for \$3,250



## Applied interpretation

*Katabasis*,  
2018  
Terracotta  
vessel, plaster,  
paint  
exhibited at  
Ben Hunter,  
London



The classic shapes provide a first canvas for the designers to elaborate their ideas freely and progressively just like a blank page for a writer. It seems that with time, the technical challenge being met, the artist turns towards ideas and concepts. Are we condemned to revisit the classic shapes of the antiquity over and over again? Are these innovative forms the classics of today or are we still looking at the same vases? These questions remain open and the examples to prove one or another side are numerous.

What seems certain to me is that the conflict between the old and the new is still the motor that drives modernity.



When she was pregnant Clementine Keith Roach became fascinated by the changes her body was going through, particularly the evolution of her breast. She would cover them in seaweed gel and create vivid plasters. She then began moulding these casts on to large terracotta vessels sourced from Turkey or Greece, and blend it to make it appear to have been made contemporaneously.

The ovoid shape of the amphora “spoke to a very universal idea of the vessel representing the female body” she said in an [interview to the Financial Times](#).



Keith Roach’s exploration on her body expanded to hands and arms. Unexpected, witty and elegant it is as if these vessels were animated.

*Tithe*, 2020  
Terracotta vessel, jesmonite,  
paint, coin  
exhibited at  
Ben Hunter, London

## To explore further:

Visit tombs of the [Queen Méresânkh III](#) or [Ramsès IV](#) from your sofa

Visit the online antiquity department of the [Metropolitan Museum](#)

The Stanze del Vetro will be opening their annual exhibition dedicated this year to [Venice and American Studio Glass show](#), curated by Tina Oldknow and William Warmus on the 6th of September



## Upcoming sales

19th of May - [Design Lab at Cambi](#)

Very decorative and reasonably priced sale of Italian - mostly pre-war - design

Christie's reshuffled the cards and will be holding [Creating Space: Design](#) Online their New York annual sale online starting on the 19th of May 19, 2020.

The much expected Paris sale will be held live on the 30th of June

A few gems in the XXth century decorative arts sale at Drouot on the 26th of May such as a this [Percifal Lafer armchair \(estimate 2500-3000 €\)](#)



Phillip's has confirmed the [London Design sale](#) will be held on the 11th of June

On the 25th of June [Sotheby's will hel \(live\) its Paris sale](#) featuring life-size family of bronze hippopotamuses bathroom set by François-Xavier Lalanne with estimate in the region of €2.5 million and has announced works by Jean Dunand, Georges Jouve, Jean-Michel Frank, Pierre Jeanne-ret, Alberto Giacometti, Paul Dupré-Lafon, Marc Newson, Eugène Printz, Ron Arad, Eileen Gray or Pierre Paulin.

## News

Explore the [Eileen Gray show online](#)

'Design is one of our most powerful tools in the COVID-19 crisis,' Moma curator Paola Antonelli and design critic Alice Rawsthorn are collaborating on a new project that explores design's role and impact on the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath. Follow [@design.emergency](#)

The series of online interviews [Design in Dialogue](#) a series of online interviews hosted by curator and historian Glenn Adamson and organized by Friedman Benda. Conversations are held on Zoom for 45 minutes + 15 minutes participatory Q&A, beginning at 11am Eastern Standard Time, three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Live panel series, ART MATTERS on the [Phillips webstise](#) visiting Ai Wei Wei at home

Should there be a "new normal," and how will artistic production change after the pandemic is over? Switzerland's Vitra Design Museum director Mateo Kries and Hans-Ulrich Obrist will be on Instagram Live to discuss how the art scene is reacting to the coronavirus crisis and to chat about the future of museums and galleries.

["#VDHMHomeStories" Instagram Live with Hans-Ulrich Obrist hosted by Vitra Design Museum](#)

[Interview with Jodi Pollack](#), the Design department Senior Vice President, who has led the house to sell some of the most iconic sales in the past years (more than \$100 million over the past three years in its New York auctions alone). Jodi Pollack highlights some ideas that I also strongly believe in such as the great opportunities in many of the more classic prewar markets today as well as the fact that when looking at contemporary design the most defining pieces will prove to have the most enduring appeal.



Directed by Sarah de Beaumont and photographed by Giulio Ghirardi AD France has published a [beautiful photoshoot featuring garden furniture in the Vittoriale degli Italiani](#) the former residence of Gabriele D'Annunzio.