

THE FIRST SHOWCASE FOR DESIGN

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*la*Rinascence

[prima della Rinascence]

1865 - 1915

Universal expositions and retail spaces gain ground in the second half of the nineteenth century as the ideal setting for new industrial products. These, together with mechanised production systems, played a key role in the birth of modern design, still in its embryonic stages in those years.

There is no design without a system of commercialisation of goods. In particular, department stores have furthered the production of standardised and

accessibly priced goods, which they promoted for the benefit of the public with innovative sales methods, such as free access to the store without being obliged to purchase goods and without haggling over the price, the rapid rotation and vast assortment of products. Lastly, they developed a complex system of communication around these items, from the packaging to advertising as well as catalogues and user guides.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the new commercial structures like the Parisian *passages*, set in central areas where they formed a dense network of indoor promenades, already represented in people's minds a symbol of modern retail and renewed ties to the city. Shops looked on to these "streets under a glass dome", made more exciting by gas lamps and a skilful game of mirrors, and acted just like catwalks for fabrics, accessories and the latest fashions in clothing. The windows looked like

sumptuous treasure chests with high quality goods that had already become accessible to the middle classes, who perceived the purchase of household goods as a form of investment. Lamps, furniture, ornaments, crockery and furnishings that until that moment had been made to order by artisans and small workshops were now available in shops that had become intermediaries between production and end users.



Galleria De Cristoforis, Milan, 1832

The Galleria De Cristoforis (1832) of Milan represented the launch of new retail models in a city wholly striving for the role of Italian capital of modernity, as emphatically reaffirmed with the construction of the more majestic Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II right next to Piazza Duomo. From the words of the Milanese writer Otto Cima, we can hear the "scuffing of feet on the shining marble floor"

on the evening of the inauguration on 15th September 1867, when "the Galleria was illuminated, like a grand hall, by a series of gas lamps with large cut crystal shades, protruding from the pilasters, between one shop and the other, and by a circle of small flames around the cupola".

The Galleria would be completed in 1878, that is to say in the same decade in which the Bocconi brothers went from the small tailoring and haberdashery shop to the store called 'Magazzino Livornese' and then to the department store Aux Villes d'Italie. As

true protagonists of the rituals of consumerisms, department stores took from the experience of domed arcades the feeling of enchantment springing from promenading inside a space where the goods were in full view before being purchased, one of the peculiarities of modernity. And, as standardised production of goods intensified, department stores soon became real places of trade in line with the constant increase in consumption recorded in Italy from 1860 to 1911. Similar to “cathedrals”, using a definition by Émile Zola, they hosted, in a single space with ample domes of iron and glass, on several floors with lifts and electric lighting, countless typologies of objects, from traditionally crafted items to goods manufactured in series, which were mainly imported from more industrialised countries, such as Great Britain, France or Germany, but also Belgium and Switzerland.

In addition to textiles and clothing, displayed in a great assortment of models of different quality in terms of materials and embellishments, the commercial enterprise of the Bocconis gained strength by expanding its range of activities to other typologies of goods. There were small metal objects, such as napkin rings, dish covers, trays, candle stick holders made from bronze, nickel and “Britannia met-

al”, objects that had been among the first to be industrialised as a result of excess production in the metalworking sector. There were umbrellas that, as a result of the innovative mechanised production line for ribs and the use of cotton, stopped being only fashion accessories but started being used to take shelter from the rain. Products that were real emblems of the growing industrial design, such as the sewing machine, first appeared in catalogues. In 1887 the department store sold 5,000 Singer machines, but later on the same Bocconis produced their own professional models for tailors and also household models especially decorated with floral patterns for women to use at home.

Even if many of the products for sale were imported, others came from small workshops of craftsmen that made up the small-scale productive network of the city and

the areas of the North until Piedmont, the department store itself set up the production of particular products: in this way fostering the mechanisation of internal processes and the culture of standardised design.

From the Bocconi's catalogue of 1883 we know that “the department store had 3 lifts for moving goods, a machine that could cut 3,000 suits a day, printing and other machines for different jobs that



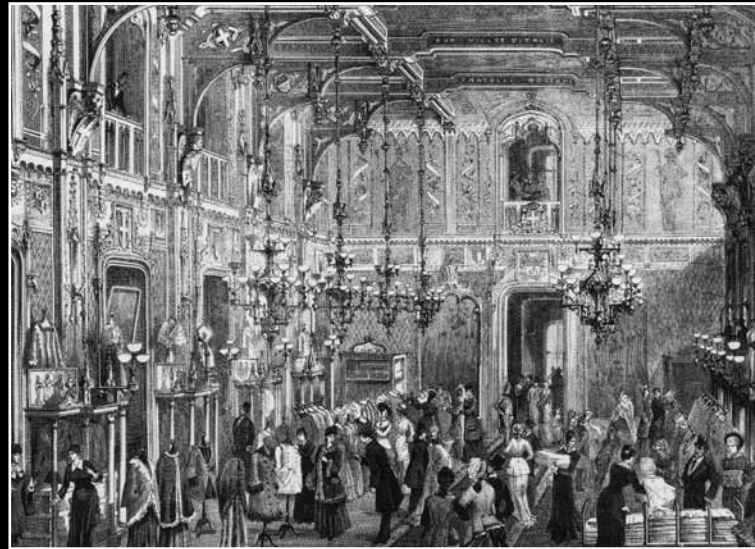
page of the catalogue  
“Alle Città D’Italia”, 1839



were powered by an eight-horsepower steam engine.”

As was already happening in the retail enterprises in Great Britain, France and the United States, the overlap between production and sales marked some important moments in the history of *la Rinascente*, right from the first stage when it made ready-to-wear garments to the production of furniture designed by Gio Ponti with the brand name Domus Nova (1927). This was the first time that design appeared to take centre stage, marked by the onset of collaborations with artists and designers that would become crucial in years to come, as an indicator of the role played by the department store in the process of modernisation of buying habits and the cultural requalification of industrial products.

As a result of a savvy commercial strategy, the “Magazzini Bocconi” was able to promote both the more expensive pieces as well as cheaper products. Objects, furniture, ornaments and earthenware, which until that moment had been made to measure in line with the aesthetic requirements of customers, were henceforth produced in series, a process in which even the more affluent classes soon took part, as claimed by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The author of *The Leopard* described



Antonio Bonamore, the Gothic English Room of Magazzini Bocconi, about 1890

the frames that, like chests of “supernatural treasures”, held the relics of the Salina princesses in the chapel: “There were frames of carved and plain silver, frames of bronze and coral, frames of tortoiseshell; in filigree, in rare woods, in boxwood, in red and blue velvet; large, tiny, square, octagonal, round, oval; frames worth a fortune and frames bought at the Bocconi store”.

This transformation in buying habits brought about an equivalent change in the means of communications, which went from the use of artistic posters to new forms of advertising aimed at the working classes such as posters on trams or the sandwich men of the early twentieth century.

Between 1907 and 1914, by looking at the automobile enterprise of Henry Ford in the

United States and the collaboration as artist director of Peter Behres for AEG for buildings, electrical good and corporate image in Germany, we could finally say that for design the mission was accomplished.

A process of production, with very particular characteristics, started to take shape also in Italy and this would later lead to the Made-in-Italy phenomenon. In these years, the automobile sector took its first steps, Olivetti was established and the number of companies producing bicycles, sewing machines,

coffee makers, crockery, furniture and furnishings multiplied. These manufacturing companies would become the great brands of Italian design. In spite of the emphasis on futurism that marked the first decades of the new century, these were the first steps of a system that only after WW2 would allow design to fully express itself.

We can now say that among the specifics of the

devolvement of design in Italy, there is surely the fact that the Bocconi brothers took the lead in the absence of a fully developed productive structure and even in the absence of a real market. No mean feat that, and after Senatore Borletti took up the baton, it would be developed even further with the new brand name *la Rinascente* coined by Gabriele D'Annunzio.



Sandwich man in front of la Rinascente store of Genua, 1931