

Salone salutes home-grown heroes

From Leonardo celebrations to an all-Italian pavilion, this year's Design Week has a strong local accent



Fabric from Rubelli, a manufacturer from northern Italy

Hannah Roberts APRIL 5, 2019

Having breakfast in Milan's [Brera](#) neighbourhood last summer, stone specialist Gabriele Salvatori and architect Piero Lissoni admired the café's shabby marble coffee table and determined to reproduce it in a collection.

"It was old and broken and romantic," recalls Salvatori.

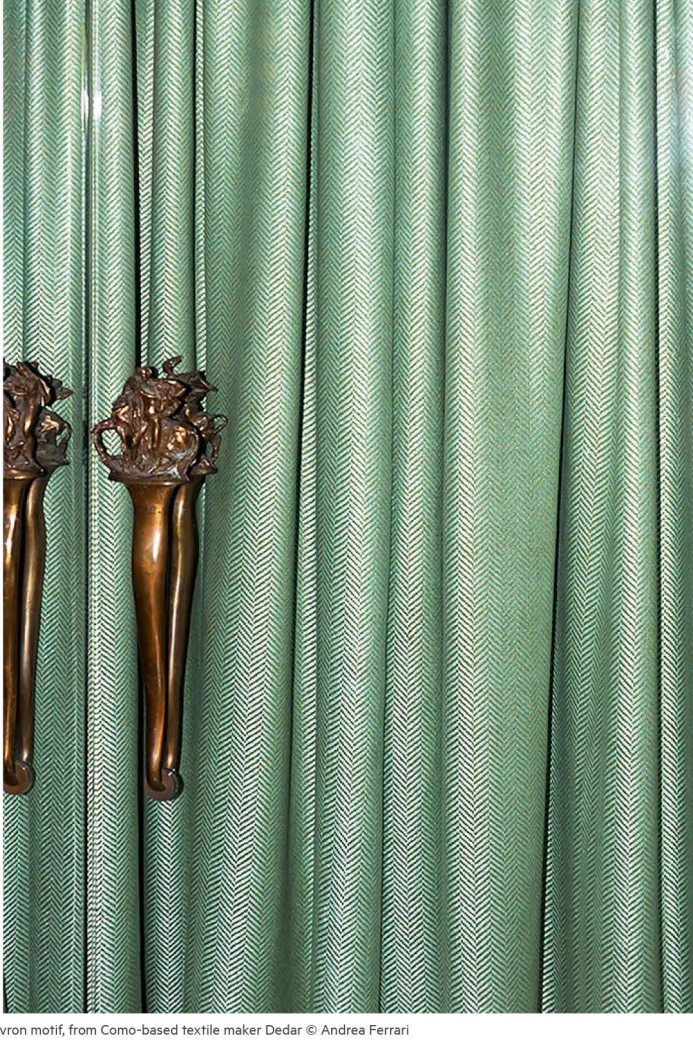
But duplicating the time-worn table proved problematic. From Salvatori's base in Tuscany they looked to the nearby Carrara mountains, one of the largest sources of marble in the world, where Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo found the stone for sculptures including "David".

They tried breaking newly extracted slabs of marble but this "looked fake", says Salvatori. To source weather-beaten, sun-baked stone, they sought out abandoned marble blocks from pits, some of them closed centuries ago. "We even bought the last few slabs left over from the construction of Notre Dame and from the Vatican," says Salvatori.

Renaissance-inspired and unreservedly artisanal, the "Rene" table, which will be exhibited at Salone, is emblematic of a decidedly Italian thread running through this year's Design Week.

S.Project, a new pavilion for Salone del Mobile, will be dominated by home-grown talent such as fabric brands Rubelli and Dedar, marble atelier Budri and metal specialists De Castelli.

In February, Italy's minister of culture Alberto Bonisoli announced that millions in state funding would be given for a [permanent design museum](#) in the city, with the first exhibition coinciding with the start of the fair.



Matka silk with chevron motif, from Como-based textile maker Dedar © Andrea Ferrari



Marble 'Rene' table by Piero Lissoni for Salvatori

Since a [populist government](#) took power last summer, there have been concerns over nationalist rhetoric being attached to Italy's cultural institutions. Bonisoli recently suggested that the previous government's decision to appoint international directors to Italian museums may be reversed.

With up to 500,000 people attending the week's events, the City of Milan and the ministry of culture have co-operated closely with organisers.

Salone director Claudio Luti insists the focus of the fair is international, but admits it is natural for politicians to try to capitalise on its power. "Politicians do politics. They always try to use the best of the best for their own ends and Salone is the jewel in Italy's crown," he says.

But at a time when Italy's growth forecast has plunged to a five-year low, could a focus on the home-grown serve as part of a broader drive to promote domestic manufacturers and designs?

For Luca Fuso, chief executive of furniture designer Cassina, an Italian-accented Design Week could be a boon for the industry. "The country is still not out of crisis, and design, the pride of Italy, must do its part to help. I hope that there is an Italian spirit this year."

Cassina will play its part in this by relaunching one of its iconic pieces, the "Cab" chair by Mario Bellini, as a way of "paying homage to a pillar of our collection".



'Cab' chairs, designed by Mario Bellini in 1977, now relaunched by Cassina



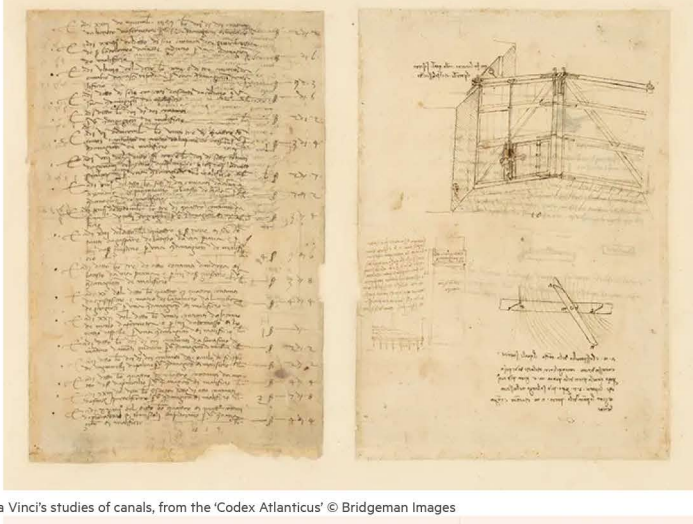
Missoni's 'Glass Fantasy' collection

"It's right to have more of an Italian presence this year," agrees Mauro Lorenzi of Lorenzi Milano, an artisan knives and accessories producer, who says that Design Week, which started in 1961 as a vehicle to advance Italian design, has been too focused on foreign designers in recent years.

Giulia Molteni, of the celebrated Italian brand Molteni Group, believes that an increased emphasis on national identity is in the air everywhere, not just Italy. "Nation states are increasingly looking for their own identity and creative spirit. They are asking: 'What is our DNA?'"

One designer who remains a touchstone for ideas of Italian sovereignty is Leonardo da Vinci. He made headlines again recently when the culture ministry threatened to renege on an undertaking to [lend some of his paintings](#) to France for an exhibition marking the 500th anniversary of his death.

Design Week will also signal the beginning of a year-long series of [events](#) celebrating this anniversary. Giuseppe Sala, Milan's mayor, says that Leonardo, who worked in the city for some 20 years, is "still a reference point for today's designers".



One of Leonardo da Vinci's studies of canals, from the 'Codex Atlanticus' © Bridgeman Images



Sketch for Balich Worldwide's 'Aqua', an installation beneath Milan's Conca dell'Incoronata; inspired by Leonardo's work, it is one of a series of events marking the 500th anniversary of the artists' death

His influence can be found across Salone. The events producer Marco Balich has created "Aqua", a water-sawed installation in a room under the Conca dell'Incoronata, a canal lock that Leonardo oversaw the building of.

For Balich, the anniversary is more a celebration of Leonardo's excellence than of Italy's. "But the Renaissance was a magical moment for history and art, and Italy contributed massively to that," he says.

Meanwhile, "De-Signo", a cinematic installation by Davide Rampello and Alessandro Colombo, recreates the Renaissance workshops of designers including Leonardo.

In addition to official events, a number of design houses have also attempted to decode Leonardo. Metalwork specialist Dieffebi has produced "Ottaedro", an office-storage system inspired by the artist's drawings. "Italy is not very patriotic but design has the advantage of uniting us," says marketing director Alessandra Fardin.

For Milan-based architect and designer Cristina Celestino, channelling Italy is something that's unconscious for the country's designers, whatever the contemporary climate. "It's part of our history and language. It's spontaneous," she says.

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