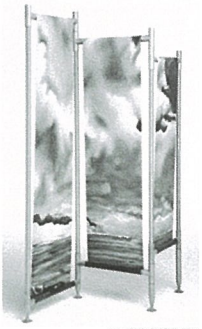
No lack of ambition in furniture design

FROM T MAGAZINE

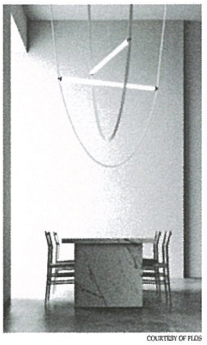
There was much to catch the eye at the Salone del Mobile in Milan this year

BY MONICA KHEMSUROV

COURTESY OF ANTON ALVAREZ



LAILA POZZO FOR DOPPIA FIRMA



COURTESY OF FLOS

COURTESY OF STUDIO BINOCLE

Clockwise from far left: An exhibition by Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte; a room divider by the designer Vito Nesta; a leather chandelier by Formafantasma; marble tables by Studio Binocle.

It's hard to gauge the exact scale of the Salone del Mobile furniture fair in Milan — where most international design brands and studios introduce their annual collections — because it encompasses not only the city's fairgrounds but also hundreds of nearby pop-up shows in galleries, retail spaces and even an abandoned panettone factory. But it certainly feels more ambitious each year, at least in terms of the work on view.

This year's fair featured no fewer than five presentations by the Milan design firm Dimore Studio; a sprawling Kvadrat show with a restaurant, a flower field and two Jean Prouvé cabins; and to showcase interiors, an interactive installation by Google developed in partnership with neuroscientists. Not to mention the ever-growing, ever-more-elaborate involvement of the world's biggest fashion brands, which included Louis Vuitton, which unveiled a collection from its Objets Nomades series of travel-inspired furnishings.

Some of the other highlights from the show, which just wrapped up:

NICOLAS BELLAVANCE-LECOMPTE, an Italian curator, recently introduced a design residency program at the century-old Milanese foundry Fonderia Artistica Battaglia and chose as his first subject the Stockholm-based designer Anton Alvarez, who used a special machine to extrude huge noodles of wax that were then cast in bronze using the lost-wax technique. The results had their debut this month in the 5Vie district inside a private 15th-century church open to Salone visitors for the first time.

STUDIO BINOCLE'S Six Tableaux series may look like simple, free-form marble tables, but the pieces have an entertaining back story. The architect Lorenzo Bini tried to avoid making a piece too boring or too pretentious by creating an amoeba-shaped tabletop that he called "an impudent rip-off" of one of Ellsworth Kelly's leaf drawings. Five more versions were traced from details of works by Louise Bourgeois, Cy Twombly, Christopher Wool and others.

CC-TAPIS, a French-Italian rug brand, has made a habit of inviting up-and-coming designers to translate their aesthetics into striking floor coverings each year, and this collection was no exception. The standouts were soft, irregularly shaped gradient rugs by the Amsterdam designer Germans Ermics and a trippy harlequin grid series by Martino Gamper.

DOPPIA FIRMA, a project by Fondazione Cologni dei Mestieri d'Arte and Living Corriere della Sera that pairs designers with highly skilled artisans to create an object, marked its fourth edition this year. We spotted a nice take on a room divider — one of the fair's most ubiquitous objects this year — by the designer Vito Nesta and the wallpaper artisans at San Patrignano.

FAR, the Nilufar gallery offshoot dedicated to experimental contemporary work, took over a majority of Nilufar's Depot space with pieces by 10 designers. The work was memorable, especially the pieces by Julien Manaira and Odd Matter, but so was the scenography: a landscape of enormous plastic exhibition bubbles dreamed up by Space Caviar.

Louis Vuitton unveiled the latest of its Objets Nomades travel-inspired furnishings.

FLOS builds a huge booth every two years at the Salone del Mobile that inevitably fills up with crushing stampedes of curious people. Four key releases this year: an enormous chandelier of interlocking leather parabolas by Formafantasma; a poetic curved track-lighting system by Michael Anastassiades; the resurrection of Mario Bellini's 1964 flatpack Chiara lamp; and a brilliantly sculptural outdoor lighting collection by Nendo.

ARTEK showcased a playful initiative called the FIN/JPN Friendship Collection, a group of six projects that represent various thoughtful mergers of Finnish and Japanese design, like new versions of Aalto's Stool 60 — including one with Technicolor tops by the Tokyo architect Jo Nagasaka and another that was indigo-dyed by the Japanese workshop Buaisou. There was also a bench by the designer Koichi Futatsumata that channels the shared public bathing traditions of the two countries.

KABINET, a brand founded just months ago by two young designers interested in revitalizing the craft industry in the Veneto region of Italy, was a clear exception in a show that felt short on new discoveries. The line stood out for its contemporary take on sumptuous materials like tortoiseshell and mohair.

KVADRAT AND RAF SIMONS created "No Man's Land" — not just an exhibition, a destination. Visitors came to see Simons's sixth collection for the textile brand — corduroy, shimmering or speckled bouclés — and to taste food from a pop-up outpost of the London restaurant Rochelle Canteen, gaze at a field of wildflowers installed by the Belgian florist Mark Colle and wander around the Jean Prouvé prefab cabins that were part of the presentation's elaborate mise-en-scène.

MARIE SCHUMANN, based in Zurich, presented luminous wall hangings in one of the best projects on view at Satellite, the section of the Salone dedicated to showcasing young designers. Made from ombré cotton or polyester and draped threads of metallic Lurex, they were almost three-dimensional, more like artworks than textile designs.

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON, an American artist, showed three versions of his loopy new table and chairs for the Finnish brand Made by Choice. Arranged within three color-coded rooms, the pieces came in bright green; black with a subtle rainbow sheen; and a more conservative natural wood. Jackson engineered the tables' legs to work entirely by an elaborate system of interlocking parts, so that no tools are needed to put the table together.

BEC BRITTAIN, a New York-based designer, fashioned angular Heron lamps — particularly a version in pink and gray stone — that were the stars of the Carrara-based marble brand Mmairo's small but admirable collection, along with new tables by Karen Chekerdjian and an architectural table lamp by Niko Koronis.

DAVID GIROIRE, the Parisian design publicist, decided to become his own client at the Salone del Mobile, joining with the creative director Jerome Bazzocchi to start an ambitious new furniture brand dedicated to making limited-edition works by lesser-known talents. Called Theoreme Editions, its first collection features a chubby shearling chair balanced on a copper cube by Pool, a colored resin console by Francesco Balzano and a huge pebble-shaped floor mirror by Joris Poggioli.

A landmark for French style

Vanessa Friedman

UNBUTTONED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCES MCLAUGHLIN-GILL/CONDÉ NAST, VIA GETTY IMAGES

Notre-Dame as backdrop in a Glamour magazine fashion shoot in 1961.

There has never been a fashion show inside the Cathedral of Notre-Dame or in the piazza splayed in front of it, the way there have been shows at other French cultural landmarks like the Louvre, the Palais de Justice and the National Archives.

But there might as well have been. It is embedded in the psychographic style map of the city, its two towers as defining a silhouette as the New Look, its image practically a brand in itself.

Four times a year, as the couture and ready-to-wear shows dawn in Paris, town cars and editors and retailers shod in stilettos or Stan Smiths would crisscross the quais from the Tennis Club de Paris to Bercy, Austerlitz to the Pompidou.

Each time, they would swirl past the towers and rose windows of the cathedral on the Île de la Cité, the nexus of a diagonal from the Sixth Arrondissement headquarters of Sonia Rykiel to the Fourth Arrondissement home of Azzedine Alaïa, all around it other showrooms and ateliers like pearls on a string.

When the cathedral burned, so did one of the poles by which the fashion world orients itself, and not just geographically.

The tragedy at Notre-Dame pierced viewers around the world, and leaders of all kinds have responded with emotion and support. For the French, there's a more visceral connection between French fashion and French monuments that has to do with definitions of the country's culture and how it is disseminated around the world.

To designers of French brands, whose identity is wrapped up in the history of Paris, Notre-Dame is not just an example of gorgeous architecture (though it is that, and designers often cite various buildings as catalysts for their imagination), nor is it just another tourist draw that helps bring their customers to France (though it is that, too).

It is, in a more abstract sense, part of their patrimony, an example and embodiment of the values they hold dear and that define their work at its best: beauty, artisanship, handwork, heritage, the emotion that can be evoked by creativity. A concrete — or rather, stone and wood — example of the worth that resides in these concepts. A character in the myth of Frenchness written by Victor Hugo and Disney.

And for anyone trying to capture that elusive quality of Frenchness and give it form — which is, let's face it, part of the promise of French fashion, especially those brands that are synonymous with that je ne sais quoi (Dior, Saint Laurent, Givenchy, Chanel and Hermès) — Notre-Dame was an essential reference. Just as it was shorthand for the sagas that surround it, be they of Joan of Arc, Napoleon or de Gaulle, which also provide the elements of a sartorial vocabulary all designers share.

That is why over the years the cathedral was so often used as a backdrop in glossy magazine features, an image that could immediately telegraph place as well as aura and association.

As the photos of flames went round the world, designers joined the chorus of mourning.

"While it was burning, a part of all of us was smoking away with immense sadness," Anthony Vaccarello, the creative director of Yves Saint Laurent, said on Tuesday. He had posted a photo of the burning building on Instagram with one simple word: "Sad."

He was not the only one to demonstrate solidarity on social media. "Sadness for what is happening right now at Notre Dame, a place which holds a big space in my heart," posted Riccardo Tisci, the Burberry designer who was creative director of Givenchy for 12 years. Diane von Furstenberg and Clare Waight Keller of Givenchy likewise took to Instagram to express their emotions.

In a text message, Nicolas Ghesquière, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton women's wear, called the cathedral a "testament to human strength, inventiveness and faith."

And Peter Copping, the former designer of Nina Ricci, who is British but based in Paris, wrote in an email that when he moved to the city, Notre-Dame "was the first place on my list to see. It is a huge part of the fabric of Paris — a city I love, that I have made my home and is very special to me."

Little wonder that the titans of the two largest French fashion and luxury groups — Bernard Arnault of LVMH and François-Henri Pinault of Kering — were among the first business leaders to pledge millions of euros to the restoration of the cathedral. (Together their donations total over $300 million.)

For those who aspire to be guardians and stewards of French savoir-faire, what better way to prove it? Especially at a time when luxury itself is under attack, the windows of its gilded emporiums broken by the so-called Yellow Vest movement, a symbol of elitism and division rather than culture.

Now, of course, Notre-Dame's famous buttresses and centuries-old lines have been warped by disaster. But if there is one thing that fashion knows, it is that the designs of the past can be given new form, and new life.