



Chair leaders

Italian furniture maker Arflex marks a past era with a eye to the future.

Words DAVID HARRISON

Clockwise, from top Arflex at Space Furniture. Fausto Colombo (right) with Hamish Guthrie (centre) and Paul Hecker. Hecker Guthrie, *Belle* and *Pollform* recently joined to celebrate more than 65 years of Arflex. 'High Hug' chair and 'Hollywood' sofa, both by Claesson Koivisto Rune. 'Octopus' table by Carlo Colombo.



UNLIKE MOST OF THE OTHER post-war Italian furniture start-up brands, Arflex came with no baggage – it was a totally new enterprise with an agenda to modernise furniture production in Italy. “Arflex started from a purely industrial model,” says Fausto Colombo, who helms the company these days. “All the others were artisan workshops that converted to mass production.”

Aldo Bai, Pio Reggiani and Aldo Barassi – the three technical people who founded the company in 1947 – were all former employees of Pirelli, the Italian rubber products manufacturer. They saw the enormous potential for Pirelli’s elastic webbing material in the furniture business and recruited the young Italian architect, Marco Zanuso, to develop products and test new ideas.

It was not until the 1951 IX Milan Triennale, however that the company went public with products, exhibiting the now famous ‘Lady’ chair by Marco Zanuso – more as an example of the technical benefits of modern materials than as a design piece – in fact, the chair was cut in half to show its internal construction. The chair won the Triennale’s prestigious gold medal and the brand launched a host of designs that are classics to this day: Zanuso’s ‘Martingola’ armchair and Franco Albini’s ‘Fiorenza’ armchair in 1952, and the ‘Ellettra’ and ‘Neptunia’ chairs by Studio BBPR in 1953 and 1954, respectively.

This thirst to invent and utilise modern materials continued through the 60s and 70s, with radical concepts such as Cini Boeri’s ‘Strips’ sofa (1972), inspired by artist Christo’s wrapped buildings. “Initially, ‘Strips’ sold almost zero,” says Colombo. “Then, in 1974, it suddenly became the most desirable sofa in Milan.”

Fausto was just a baby when ‘Strips’ was released but, in 1995 at 24, he convinced his family’s furniture business, Seven Salotti, to purchase Arflex, ailing due to poor management and the European financial crisis. The chance to buy a slice of modern Italian design history was irresistible. Colombo has worked tirelessly to right the Arflex ship, his efforts paying dividends with a 40 per cent jump in sales in the rapidly developing Asian market. The brand still manufactures everything in Italy, mostly in-house to maintain quality control. Since 2006 Carlo Colombo (no relation) has been art director and designer for Arflex but Swedish design group Claesson Koivisto Rune (CKR) also contributes.

While honouring the brand’s classics, Fausto argues against a reliance on past successes. “I don’t want Arflex only to be remembered for its designs from the 50s, 60s and 70s. I want to put my stamp on it, move it into the future and continue the modern, uncompromising approach that has always been Arflex.” His vision goes well beyond simply maintaining a legacy. “Arflex is not here to present just normal products. We want to present a new way forward. Sometimes this means that people don’t like our new designs at first but that is what we have to do. To challenge is the Arflex way!” he says.

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