



BY
ELIZABETH HELMAN
MINCHILLI

CUTTING-EDGE
CHIC

How Italy has stayed ahead of the design pack.

IN THE WORLD of home furnishings, Italy means one thing: cutting-edge, modern design. Many of today's premier furniture companies hail from Milan, and the architects and designers they have recruited to produce the sleekly sophisticated yet highly livable pieces include the ubiquitous Antonio Citterio and Piero Lissoni as well as an international roster of young designers. New technology and the creative freedom Italian firms allow this global talent pool fuel Italy's ongoing stylistic hegemony.

The leader of the pack is B&B Italia. Since its founding in the 1960s, the company has embraced technological advances. One of its early masterpieces—and still a best-seller—is Gaetano Pesce's Up chair, which harnessed the mutability of expansive polyurethane in a chair that literally sprang into shape as it was liberated from its packing case. The company continues expertly to combine experimental design and innovative materials. A perfect

Left: Designer Jeffrey Bennett's Metropolitan armchair for style leader B&B Italia. Below: Von Robinson's lacquered and upholstered Oblio footrest for Moroso.



Cutting-Edge Chic



Above: Philippe Starck's line of Ploof chairs for Kartell is the epitome of sophistication in a stylish palette. Below: Patricia Urquiola's Low Seat for Moroso is an irreverent take on the chaise longue.

example of this unique marriage of technique and style is Antonio Citterio's chair Mart. The result of a new technology for producing heat-shaped leather, Mart begins with a plastic frame, upon which cold-foamed polyurethane is applied. Almost-seamless leather is stretched over an organic form to produce a taut surface that is sensual and refined, without sacrificing comfort.

Even more adventurous is Cappellini, which started in 1946 as a traditional furniture manufacturer. In the 1960s, Giulio Cappellini decided to reorient his family's company toward modern design, and the firm now enjoys renown for its flamboyant presentations at furniture fairs. Cappellini stands out as an incubator for younger designers, with a knack for searching out undiscovered talent and helping launch careers. A Cappellini collection, innovative and full of new ideas and forms, is often a risky proposition. But certain Cappellini pieces have gained the status of cult objects. The sinuous forms of Shiro Kuramata's PC/3 Side 1 and PC/6 Side 2 cabinets, as well as Tom Dixon's S-Chair, are familiar even to those with a limited knowledge of furniture design. Not all Cappellini pieces are edgy and overly sculptural. A popular recent piece was Jasper Morrison's Low-Pad armchair, a pared-down rethinking of the upholstered leather easy chair. Explains Cappellini: "I think that after many years in which the market was demanding super decoration and obvious opulence, today we are seeing a return to research into the purity of form itself."



Cassina, one of the grandes dames of Italian furnishing, dates to 1927. Against a backdrop of wilder designs from other Italian firms, Cassina provides a minimal yet classic antidote to trendiness. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the company expanded dramatically as a result of huge contracts with ocean liners such as the *Andrea Doria*. Yet even when its production reached enormous volume, Cassina always placed emphasis on quality as well as design. In 1957, Cassina produced Gio Ponti's chair *Superleggera*, which translates as "superlight." Designed to be the lightest chair ever made, Ponti used wood but stripped the frame down to its bare essentials. The *Superleggera* was an instant hit and became a symbol of modern Italian furniture design. Its emphasis on weightlessness still informs Italian design today.

Highlights of Cassina's current collection are the Thor chaise longue by Hannes Wettstein, available in leather or cowhide, and Piero Lissoni's Reef series of armchairs and couches, which perfectly express Cassina's refined stylistic vision. Right angles, cubes and rectangles are stacked and layered atop a visible steel frame. Appearing weightless yet solid at the same time, each piece hides its own unique movements: The chair swivels, and the couch has two different back positions. Philippe Starck adds his typical dose of irony with the *Strange Thing*. The podlike forms of the polyurethane base make it seem to have landed from outer space. Yet if the silhouette is retro space age, the upholstered seat—removable and washable—is comfortable and surprisingly practical. Continuing the theme of design that



Above: Among the sleek furniture that Hannes Wettstein is creating for Cassina is the *Hola* chair. Below: Antonio Citterio's *Mart* chairs for B&B Italia use heat-shaped leather for a smooth, taut finish.





Cutting-Edge Chic



Left and below: Ron Arad's The Big Easy chair for Moroso is made of molded polyethylene. Opposite: Tom Dixon's Serpentine sofa, also for Moroso. Bottom: B&B Italia's Marcel 3 sofa.



is practical and comfortable, the Dodo swivel armchair by Toshiyuki Kita solves myriad problems. Most lounge chairs are uncomfortable, but who wants to give up design for the sake of comfort? Dodo addresses both issues expertly, with an enveloping egg form that stretches out to a chaise with the flip of a brushed steel knob. And while Cassina appreciates the importance of the new, it has always remained faithful to tradition. The Maestri series, which reproduces classics by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, accounts for a third of its production. In fact, Le Corbusier's LC2 armchair and sofa are still the company's best-sellers.

Kartell produces some of Italy's most entertaining pieces. Founded more than 50 years ago, the company is a world leader in the use of plastics, combining creativity with technology in ways that are always surprising, fresh and completely new. The star of Milan's Furniture Fair last year was Philippe Starck's Louis Ghost chair. Starck turned tradition on its head when he took a Louis XV fauteuil and executed it in transparent, lightly tinted polycarbonate. In Spoon, Antonio Citterio, with Toan Nguyen, created a stool using a spoon's outline to create an elegantly sinuous





line. Candy bright colors in molded plastic make these stools forceful exclamation points in any setting.

Moroso, founded in 1952, always seems to go one step further to produce bold and striking objects that stand out from the pack. Moroso has turned to a younger set of designers such as Ron Arad, Konstantin Grcic and Patricia Urquiola to come up with designs striking in form, color and texture. Arad's The Big Easy is almost Disneyesque in its tongue-and-cheek approach to the easy chair with molded polyethylene, colored and recyclable, that looks soft but is actually hard and cool to the touch. Osorom, an ottoman by Grcic, looks more like a puzzle than a seat. And Von Robinson's Oblio explores the concept of an empty sphere within the form of a footrest and stool.

What keeps Italian furniture on the leading edge is its passion for intelligent design, a willingness to experiment with material and an outlook that regards even seemingly trivial items—footstools, for instance—as worthy of Lissoni's or Starck's attention. And then, of course, there is the admirable fact that Italians place as much value on beauty as on anything else. As long as its country's manufacturers continue to nurture designers in a hothouse environment, Italy will continue to reign supreme in the furniture showrooms. ☐

B&B Italia, 800.872.1697, www.bebitalia.it; *Cassina*, 212.245.2121, www.cassinausa.com; *Kartell*, 212.625.1494, www.kartell.it; *Cappellini*, 212.755.9079, www.cappellini.it; *Moroso*, 305.640.1991, www.moroso.it

