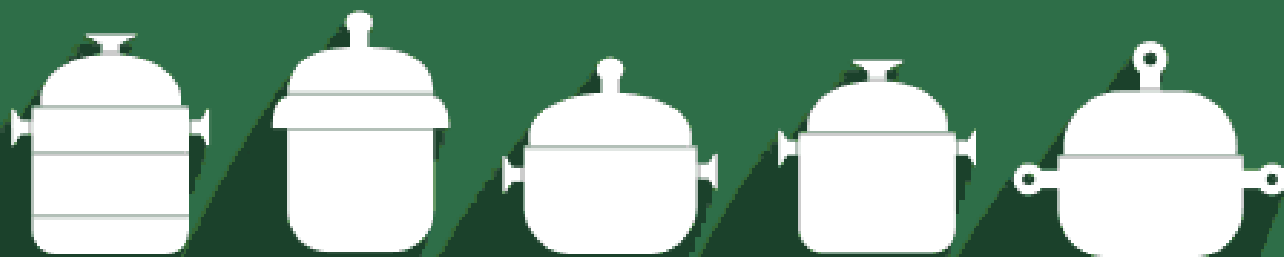
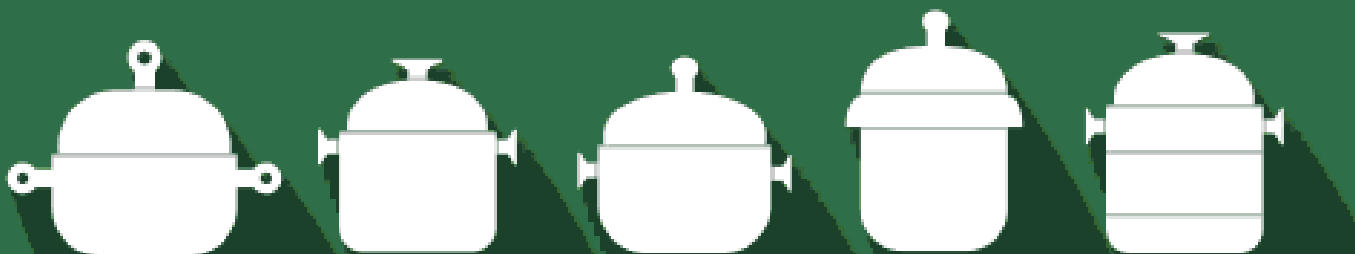
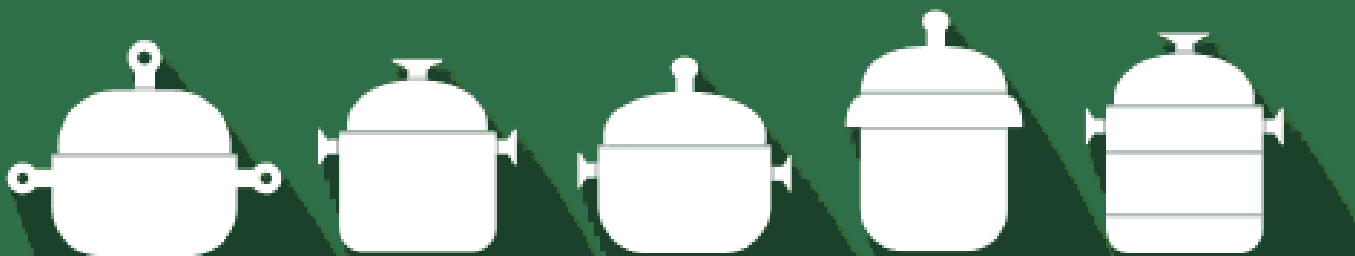


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Storia e Ricerche



JOE COLOMBO, ZUPPIERE IN CERAMICA, SALA RETTANGOLARE DELLA MOSTRA "LE PRODUZIONI", XIII TRIENNALE DI MILANO, 1964



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THE STRAW DONKEY PAPER: A RE-DISCOVERY OF AN EXHIBITION

Lisa Hockemeyer, Politecnico di Milano

PAROLE CHIAVE

1950s, Furniture, Design history, Italy, Penny Sparke, Crafts history, Tradition

It was 1998 when the seminal paper “The Straw Donkey: Tourist Kitsch or Proto-Design? Craft and Design in Italy, 1945-1960” by Britain’s eminent design historian Penny Sparke was published for the first time in the British *Journal of Design History*. As its witty title suggested, the paper took as its starting point a small toy straw donkey, illustrated in the pages of the catalogue that accompanied the *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* exhibition that was hosted by the Brooklyn Museum of Fine Arts in New York in 1949 before touring to eleven more venues all over America. Although over fifteen years have passed since, this paper - which is being re-published in this issue of *AIS/Design Storia e Ricerche*, and also translated in Italian - has lost nothing of its relevance to the design historian since.

It is through the lens of this, until then entirely unacknowledged exhibition, its catalogue and accompanying literature that Sparke readdresses Italian design history. At the time of publishing, her paper offered the first thorough examination of this exhibition which, at its time was, considered the most significant organized and carefully orchestrated event to take place in post war America to help foster Italo-American economic and cultural relationships and which influenced the coming of age of modern Italian design.^[1] The culture-historical significance of the *Italy at Work* exhibition which Penny Sparke’s paper brought to the surface, has been reconfirmed by the fact that the original exhibition catalogue has been reproduced only four years ago making the contents of this formerly hard to find and access work available to a vast audience (Meyric, 1950). The publishers justify the plain reprint which is a scanned copy that includes the imperfections of the original caused by time and that has had the original front cover designed by the artist Corrado Cagli substituted by a simple photograph of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, Milan, by their “believe [that] this work is culturally important” (Meyric, 1950, p. 2; statement by the new publisher, 2010).

What is most important is that Sparke’s study represented a new and, in 1998, unorthodox approach towards the studying of modern Italian design, and she significantly contributed towards opening up new contexts and frameworks with which to approach the study of Italian material culture and design, and brought forth further challenging research and influenced many other fields of scholarships, rather impossible for the author to foresee at the time of its writing.

The “Straw Donkey Paper” and Sparke’s earlier study “Industrial Design or Industrial Aesthetics?: American Influence on the Emergence of the Italian Modern design Movement, 1948-58” (Sparke, 1995) were among the first to draw attention toward the

relationship between America and Italian post-war design development and have informed many studies that draw on both or either analysis of this particular relationship and the *Italy at Work* exhibition. Among some of the significant work that emerged is design historian Nicola White's *Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry* (2000), design historian Wava J. Carpenter's significant work on the influence of Italo-American economic and political relations in the post war years on the becoming of modern Italian design (2006) and my own research of which the most recent "Manufactured Identities: Ceramics and the Making of (Made In) Italy" (Hockemeyer, 2013) concentrates on the instrumental role early post-war Italian ceramic manufacture played in the shaping of the "Made in Italy" idea via cultural platforms among which the *Italy at Work* exhibition accounts as one of the most significant ones.

Sparke's exploration of Italy's post World War II material culture production through an unblemished view at the mostly artisanal produced items, artifacts of popular culture appeal and artistic work that were chosen for display at the *Italy at Work* exhibition has, at the time of its publication, provided first proof of the significant role that traditional craft work, "low" design but also art have played not only in Italy's immediate post-war social and economic recovery but their short-lived yet vital part in the becoming of an independent Italian post war design aesthetic. It challenged the then widely accepted legacy of a wealth of mainly Italian language contributions on Italian post-war design that entirely dismissed Italy's craft industries as having a place in its history and contributed towards distinguishing the history of post-World War II Italian material culture and design from that of still nowadays rather widespread modernist-lead readings of Italian design history.[2] Sparke's study of the crafts as a denominate part in Italian design history has subsequently been carried forth by research that concentrates on the role of the crafts in the early formation of what became known as Italian design by the authors named above (see Carpenter, 2006; Hockemeyer, 2008) and led even further by design historian Catharine Rossi's more recent research *Crafting Modern Design in Italy, from Postwar to Postmodernism* that examined the role that craft played in Italy's design culture 1945-1980s (Rossi, 2011).

Much still has to be written about this exhibition of which there exists yet no clear account about the impact it had in the eleven cities it toured in America in the three years following the New York event. And while Wava Carpenter's extensive research cited above has provided extensive research on the American network involved in the planning and organization of the *Italy at Work* exhibition, still much has to be discovered about the underlying networks on Italian soil, that made this exhibition happening. It will promise even more insights into the history of post-war Italian design and material culture.

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NOTE

1. At the time of its opening but even during the two years anticipating the arrival of the Italian artifacts in America, numerous articles in the *New York Times* portray and describe the *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* exhibition as the most anxiously expected and most important exhibition ever brought to America from Europe. See Hockemeyer (2013).↵
2. Until recently much of Italian design history writing followed the trail laid down by the school of international modernism and dismissed not only the existence of other design histories but the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches, too. An example is Renato De Fusco's treatise on Italian design history, *Made in Italy: Storia del design Italiano* (2007), a book still employed by many faculties at Italian Universities as a standard text book for undergraduate design students which presents a modernist-lead reading of Italian design history and struggles to adopt new, challenging multi and interdisciplinary methodologies.↵

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