Furniture, Feminism and the Feminine: Women Designers in Post-War Italy, 1945 to 1970
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Women furniture designers played a key role in Italian post-war design, and yet their presence has been overlooked and their contribution under-acknowledged. This article is part of continuing research into the existence, experience and representation of women designers and architects in post-war Italy. It uses a feminist approach to focus on those women who engaged predominantly with furniture design in Milan from 1945 to the early 1970s. Furniture design was a marginal option for women in post-war Italy; its links with architecture and the wider sociocultural context are used to understand their minority status. Women designers employed strategies to overcome this gender marginality and these influenced both their experiences within the profession and the recognition they have received. From the trend of male-female partnership to those who either embraced or rejected female solidarity, these women designers demonstrate multiple and contradictory relationships with their own sex, the idea of the feminine and feminism. The use of female imagery by male designers in the 1960s and 1970s suggests that both the feminine and feminism were problematic as forms of expression for women furniture designers, pointing to the embryonic status of the women’s movement at this time and its marginal impact on the profession.

As a woman in general it has always been a disaster and it is the same now … I have fifty years in the profession, seventy, many—and I also have important clients. I have young assistants both male and female here [and] I have to tell you that when I am here talking with my clients, I speak and they reply looking at the guys.¹

Still practising today, Milanese architect-designer Cini Boeri is one of the most high-profile women in her profession, with designs including the much-feted ‘Strips’ sofa [1] designed with Laura Griziotti for Arflex, which won the prestigious Compasso d’Oro in 1979.² Despite this success, Boeri’s account is one of being overlooked, rather than looked at—a characteristic that typifies the experience and representation of women furniture designers who conducted their careers in post-war Italy.

As a woman, Boeri was among a minority in the profession: on her graduation in 1951 just seventeen female architecture students were enrolled at the Politecnico di Milano, a number that rose to 223 in 1969, anticipating women’s emergence as ‘new social subjects’ in 1970s’ Italy.³ Women became a significant minority, active in the vicissitudes of post-war Italian design and often collaborating with male architect-designers including in Boeri’s case, Gio Ponti and Marco Zanuso [2]. Italian design literature has largely overlooked this female contribution; Penny Sparke singles out just Gae Aulenti and Anna Castelli-Ferrieri as having appeared with any regularity.⁴

This article is the result of a continuing research project dedicating to redressing this gender imbalance, concentrating on women furniture designers in Milan from 1945 to the early 1970s. This northern industrial city was not just the centre of much of post-war Italian design but was also at the forefront of Italy’s women’s movement.⁵

So far, forty-seven Italian women from this period have emerged as furniture designers—in the sense that furniture defined a significant portion of their practice.
Furthermore, working as a designer was just one way in which women were active in post-war Italian furniture. Female impagliatrici (chair-menders) wove the straw seats of Italy’s traditional ladder-back ‘Chiavari’ chairs, and women were employed in the artisanal workshops and factories in Brianza, the locus of Italian furniture production located to the north of Milan [3]. Fede Cheti and Gegia Bronzini designed and produced fabrics for Italian furniture; Enrichetter Ritter and Lisa Licitra Ponti were part of Domus’ editorial team and Aulenti worked with Ernesto Rogers at Casabella-Continuità on its relaunch in the 1950s. Women also mediated Italian design as consumers and educators; Boeri, Raffaella Crespi and Franca Helg were amongst those who taught at the Politecnico di Milano.

This article builds on research that has sought to obtain a more accurate picture of Italian creativity in the post-war period, recognizing the importance of craft and fashion in particular. In line with the expansion and development of feminist interventions in design history in general, gendered approaches to Italian design have also appeared in the last decade. Sparke highlighted the ‘feminine face’ of Italy’s brand of post-war modernism, and more recently Javier Gimeno Martinez has examined the difficulty of the word ‘feminism’ in Centro Studi Alessi’s women-only project ‘Creole Project/ Memory Containers’ from 1990.

Archival research and the contemporary design press have shed light on a number of previously unknown and little-known women; nevertheless inequalities of knowledge remain and it is vital that this does not create a hierarchy among the women designers discussed. Accordingly, the feminist perspective used here combines what Judith Attfield termed the biographical ‘woman designers’ approach with the question of these women’s relationships with gender, the feminine and feminism. All three are conceived as shifting and fragmented categories, a multiplicity that mirrors the differences between the women under discussion. Judith Butler has cautioned against a totalizing concept of feminism, and this discussion differentiates between not just second- and third-wave feminisms but also employs feminist thought and the developments of the women’s movement in the Italian
context, in particular the shift from emancipationist to psychoanalytically informed separatist discourse in the early 1970s.10

The minority status of women in the design profession is examined in the wider sociocultural context of Italy’s uneven transition from fascist regime to republic at the end of the Second World War; the legacy of fascist legislation and continuing dominance of the Catholic Church at least partly accounts for why so few women entered the profession, particularly at the start of this period. The trend for male–female partnership was one way women dealt with this minority status: others joined the Association of Italian Women Engineers and Architects (AIDIA) set up in Turin in 1955, in search of female solidarity, while yet others rejected both the feminine and feminism. The reasons and implications for these strategies will be examined, alongside the factors that enabled women’s entry into the patriarchal spheres of design and the profession.11

Finally, Boeri’s desire to be looked at rather than overlooked raises the question of the visibility of women in design; not just as active subjects but also as subject to the male gaze.12 Female imagery was employed by a number of male furniture designers in post-war Italy—but not by women. This was most overt in the mid-1960s to early 1970s, just as the women’s movement was emerging in Italy: the first document of Italian feminism was the DeMau Manifesto, dating from 1966 and first published in 1969.13 This imagery suggests the difficulty for women designers in escaping the constraints of a patriarchal profession to express a female or even feminist design language as well as indicating the particular status of women and the women’s movement in Italy in this period.

Women in the minority: design, education and employment in post-war Italy

Pat Kirkham has described furniture design as, historically, a male-dominated profession.14 Its associations with architecture, an arguably even more masculine domain, have to be considered here too; most designers operating in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s trained and practised as architects, owing to the lack of a specific design education in Italy until the 1970s. This close-knitted relationship between architecture and design saw furniture perceived as part of the architectural environment until the early 1950s. Margherita Bravi and Luisa Castiglioni typified this approach, as their built-in wardrobe, table and chairs for the 9th Triennale di Milano in 1951 demonstrate [4].

Bravi and Castiglioni, like the majority of women featured here, trained at the Politecnico di Milano, graduating in 1946 and 1948, respectively. In 1922 Elvira Luisa Morassi became the first woman to enrol in architecture [5], graduating in 1928 with fellow student Carla Maria Bassi (who had enrolled in 1923).15 In 1933 a separate architecture faculty was formed at the Politecnico, although it would take some years for women to become a visible presence; just nine women enrolled in the School that year, six per cent of the total.16
The lack of women at the Politecnico in the 1930s is largely explained by fascist legislation that sought to confine women to their maternal role and exclude them from highly skilled employment. Education minister Giovanni Gentile’s law of 1923 limited access to university to those who had attended the liceo classico. At the same the licei femminili were formed, initially just one of the forms of schooling open to women but soon their only choice, preventing them from entering university. Mussolini offered his own opinion on the absence of women architects at this time, noting in a widely read interview in 1933 that it was a ‘symbol of her destiny’: ‘ask her to build you a mere hut, not even a temple, she cannot do it’.

With the eventual repeal of much fascist-era legislation in the 1960s, women entered higher education in ever greater numbers and by 1962 made up nearly half the student body. Although the increase in female students enrolled was disproportionately greater than the general growth of the faculty, the numbers of women graduating was, however, lower and less consistent: in 1944 women made up thirty-three per cent of graduates, but in 1962 just twenty-four per cent. This disparity is larger than would be expected, despite a higher trend in Italy than elsewhere in Europe for abandoning one’s studies. Crespi attributed this phenomenon to the heavy workload; for Boeri, it was the unlikelihood of professional success and the hostility of male students and some professors. During one exam at the School, the architect Ambrogio Annoni asked Boeri ‘how she could ever think of being an architect with curly hair’. Architect Sofia Badoni recalled how professors had problems believing in women’s capabilities; in one instance, rationalist architect Piero Portaluppi gave her low exam marks because he did not believe that the work she had submitted was her own.

Male hostility towards women was also present beyond the Politecnico’s walls: architect Carlo Scarpa, lecturing at IUAV (Venice University Institute of Architecture), stated that women could not be architects, in as much as they lacked ‘gravitas’. Women also faced concrete forms of discrimination in the profession—the newsletters of AIDIA in the 1950s and 1960s reveal problems of less pay, hostility from male colleagues and cases of being fired rather than promoted.

Gender also affected the type of commissions women received: Boeri’s first architectural project at Marco Zanuso’s studio was for a nursery for single mothers (1953), and most of her work has been for domestic contexts. This demarcation of ‘feminine’ realms within architecture, linked to women’s maternal and domestic duties, ensured that the gender hierarchy within the profession remained intact. This cultural and temporally specific operation of patriarchy also partly explains the concentration of women in design rather than architectural practice. Smaller in scale and lesser in prestige, furniture became the ‘female’ to the architectural ‘male’. Even within furniture, gender affected the types of commissions that women received: Boeri lamented that she has never been commissioned to design ‘a train or an airplane, unfortunately ... nor a bicycle’.
The patriarchal conventions of the architectural and design press also served to contain women’s existence in the profession. This marginalization has further contributed to the male bias in design literature. Articles in *Domus* naturalized women’s presence in traditionally female realms of creativity and allied their skills to their domestic and reproductive duties. In a 1939 issue, editor Gio Ponti pointedly described needlework as ‘the natural work of women; it should be the only work for women, it is work that does not take her away from the home and does not distance her from the cradle and the hearth’. Women’s ‘natural’ domestic role was also used to explain—and contain—the increasing number of women architects emerging in the late 1940s. A 1946 article attributed Sofia Badoni’s skills as an architect to her proximity to the domestic sphere:

Women who experience the home more intimately give valued suggestions, and these can be all the more acceptable when they come from people who unite a specific ability with empirical experience. In this way women ‘architects’ are making themselves ever more common among us.28

The use of inverted commas around the Italian word ‘architetti’ is loaded with the implication that Badoni’s career choice is outside normative language. It would not be until at least a decade later that women architects were given their own word—architette—but they were usually referred to as architetti, the masculine form.29 In ‘Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference’, Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero described the effects of the absence of a female language on women. Along with Luce Irigaray, Cavarero exposes language and thought as inherently masculine; she ‘unveils the false neutrality of thought ... to show how it is tantamount to woman’s alienation’.30 Badoni’s demarcation as a female anomaly in a male-dominated profession is also an example of what Artemis March has termed ‘pseudo-inclusion’, a mechanism that guarantees the invisibility of women in cultural representation through their representation as soon-to-be forgotten exceptions to the norm.31 What is also clear is that in 1946 the woman architect was still expected to maintain her domestic role; to combine her ‘specific ability’ as an architect with her ‘empirical experience’ in the home.

The period of Italy’s post-war Reconstruction initially represented a moment of optimism for Italian women; in 1946 they voted for the first time as ‘full Italian citizens’ in the referendum on the Italian monarchy and election of the Constituent Assembly.32 Both the main parties, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Christian Democrats (DC), had set up women’s associations in 1944 and by 1950 a bill on working mothers became law, which provided paid leave before and after childbirth and prohibited the dismissal of mothers during pregnancy and for a year after the child’s birth. This legislation did not, however, cover the multitudes of women who worked at home, such as the impagliatrici pieceworkers, and resulted in the dismissal of newly married women, who joined those sacked from their jobs to make way for men returning from war, even into the late 1950s.33 Both the PCI and DC promoted a model of womanhood as primarily committed to the family and, crucially, the Church was opposed to working women; in 1945 Pius XII insisted on women’s natural destiny as mothers and declared that ‘women who do go out to work become dazed by the chaotic world in which they live, blinded by the tinsel of false glamour and greedy for sinister pleasures’.34

Penelope Morris has described the years 1945 to 1960 as a period of ‘immobility for Italian women’, thanks to the triumvirate of the continued dominance of the Catholic Church, the ruling DC party and the ‘rigid policies and attitudes’ of the Cold War.35 With the continuance of fascist legislation, and a Left that supported women’s maternal and familial role as much as the Catholic Right, women’s opportunities were still circumscribed at the onset of the 1960s.
Enabling factors for women designers

A male-dominated profession, the legacy of a misogynistic regime, an all-powerful Catholic Church: the obstacles for would-be women designers and architects were considerable and they raise the question of what enabled women’s entry into, and continuing practice of, the profession.

Most were born in the northern industrial triangle, the area between Milan, Turin and Genoa that was the centre of Italy’s post-war economic boom. Italian students tend to study in or close to their home towns and so opportunities in higher education and employment are often limited by what is in their area. Because all three northern cities had major architectural schools—the Politecnico di Milano, the Politecnico di Torino and IUAV—the likelihood of attending one of these increased considerably for those born within this geographical area.

A significant number of women designers were born into Milan’s progressive elite, including Anna Castelli-Ferrieri and Boeri, and as such were less bound by conventional cultural traditions and gender roles; the issue of class and concomitant educational advantage is also relevant here.

Family connections were also important; Antonia Astori, Emma Gismonde Schweinberger and Boeri all had brothers who had studied architecture, and Giorgina Castiglioni and Maria Luisa Belgioioso were both daughters of celebrated male architects.36 Astori went on to work with her brother Enrico Astori, founding design firm Dríade together with the designer Adelaide Acerbi in 1968. Early issues of the AIDIA newsletter identified the professional advantage of familial connections; male family members could introduce their female relatives into the profession.37

AIDIA newsletters also noted the importance of collaboration for improving women’s career opportunities, and partnership was a popular choice amongst the women designers investigated so far.38 Seventeen worked with husbands or male partners, five with female partners and six in mixed-gender groups, leaving nineteen—fewer than half—who practised predominantly on their own. Male partnership promised more commercial success as well as the continuity required to sustain a practice when the demands of raising children arose.39

In Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership, Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron explore the dynamics of creative partnerships and the effects this has had on the recognition that the ‘Other’ (mostly female) partner has received.40 Outside the Italian context, the partnerships of Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier, Charles and Ray Eames and Sadie Speight and Leslie Martin illustrate the problems that these collaborations have for the female partners.41 Returning to the post-war Italian context, while architect-designers such as Franco Albini, Tobia Scarpa and Ico Parisi have achieved a considerable degree of recognition, their partners—Franca Helg, Afra Scarpa and Luisa Parisi—have been marginalized to varying degrees.

Albini and Helg worked together from 1951 until Albini’s death in 1977, collaborating on celebrated designs such as the ‘Luisa’ and ‘SD9’ chairs, and yet Albini has mostly been painted as a solitary figure—including in a recent exhibition at the Triennale di Milano design museum. 42 Furthermore, as in the case of the Eameses, their studio was also populated by other figures who have not received adequate credit—Albini’s son Marco Albini and Antonio Piva remain relatively anonymous figures.43 Helg was aware of the problems of partnership and warned Boeri about her own collaboration with Zanuso: ‘what are you doing? You’ll end up always being in the shadow of someone. Get yourself away, decide, be brave’.44 Boeri did go on to set up her own practice in 1979—significantly, the year she won the Compasso d’Oro for the ‘Strips’ sofa.
The subordination of the female Other appears more common in architect-designer married couples such as Luisa and Ico Parisi and Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Luisa is never mentioned without Ico while the reverse is not true, and yet she also worked independently of her husband with textile designers Marisa Bronzini and Renata Bonfanti. Bonfanti declared that Luisa was an:

inventive and intelligent designer [who] with originality and confidence designed furniture and furnishings ... [with regard to the] works that appeared in various publications, signed Ico and Luisa Parisi, I know, from direct experience, that it was always she who formulated these designs.45

Castelli-Ferrieri experienced problems of partnership as both a wife and an architect. Biographer Cristina Morozzi has described Castelli-Ferrieri's bitterness at 'not having had her contribution fully recognized' in her partnership with Ignazio Gardella; Gardella took the recognition for projects she had worked on, adamant on being the 'master' of his studio.46 Castelli-Ferrieri has received acclaim for the designs, such as the celebrated '4900 series' (1969) [6] she produced for Kartell, the firm her husband Giulio Castelli established in 1949. Nonetheless, she had only started working with Kartell on his request following the departure of two of his partners. She agreed 'not willingly, as I was convinced and I still am that you should never work with your husband' and in fact Castelli-Ferrieri stopped working with plastics for some time 'to renew my image as designer'.47

**AIDIA and the relationship with feminism**

For a working woman facing obstacles in the public sphere, the private sphere was not necessarily easier. Castelli-Ferrieri found juggling her roles of designer, wife and mother difficult. She took just five days off work for the birth of each of her three children and has said that 'I have always felt a bit hurt because I could not dedicate myself to my home and my husband'.48

This incompatibility of professional and familial life was a key issue in AIDIA newsletters from the 1950s and 1960s. The very first newsletter published excerpts from the 8th Pax Romana congress in Rome.49 One paper stated that 'the first duty of the young married graduate is towards her family' and recommended that remaining single was necessary in order to advance a career.50

Charting this issue through the 1950s and into the 1960s, the pages of AIDIA newsletters offer a window onto the wider shifts in Italian society, in particular the declining influence of the Church. AIDIA began to question the 'spirit of sacrifice' expected of women, although their primary role as mothers remained intact; in 1961 one member commented that 'the family represents for every woman the principal ideal and aim, but ... it substantially influences their possibilities of a career'.51 In line with the flourishing of consciousness-raising collectives in the early 1970s and anticipating the years of mass mobilization (1974–76), liberationist discourse began to creep into AIDIA newsletters.52 The theme of incompatibility between professional and familial life remained, but by now the family was the problem. In 1971 one member declared that the family was 'the biggest obstacle in women's liberation'.53

Only one woman furniture designer—Ada Bursi—seems to have been a member of the organization, and she is one of the least known women here. Of the most pre-eminent, only Castelli-Ferrieri seems to have showed an interest in feminism. In the early 1970s she was asked by one of Giulio Castelli’s aunts to join the Soroptimists, an international feminist organization.54 By 1973 Castelli-Ferrieri was president, even presenting a talk at the United Nations on 'International and interdisciplinary action for the promotion of human rights and in particular the condition of women'.55
Castelli-Ferrier's active feminism contrasts to the marked aversion to feminism and women's organizations amongst Aulenti, Boeri and Helg. Helg felt that being a part of an organization such as AIDIA was a sign of weakness: her assistant Anna Giorgi has described how

> It signified admitting the need to be in a group in order to defend oneself ... [but] she considered herself indestructible. She had great insecurities, but I believe that a woman such as herself did not feel the need to associate herself with other women. I would say rather that she forgot that she was a woman.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Furniture, Feminism and the Feminine
Aulenti shared Helg’s rejection of both female solidarity and her own gender. Aulenti, arguably the most ‘famous’ of the female designers, was described by Boeri as a ‘panther’ who was ‘considered a man’. Unlike Castelli-Ferrieri, Aulenti dismissed feminism as tiresome, fearing that it can ‘hide easy self-commiserations’. Boeri similarly denied the impact of the women’s movement: ‘feminism as a movement did not enter into the field of our profession. To a feminist I would say that I did not need it because I had brought up three sons alone, I was working, so I had already started my battle’.

The different positions adopted by women exemplifies what Butler described as the ‘fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from “women” whom feminism claims to represent’. Butler recognized that neither ‘woman’ nor feminism are stable, universal categories and as such necessitate an identification of other factors that contribute to the construction of a gendered identity, such as generation and class. Aulenti, Boeri, Castelli-Ferrieri and Helg were all born between 1920 and 1927. All graduated from the Politecnico di Milano between 1945 and 1953, as such constituting the first generation of women designers to emerge in the post-war period. As Aulenti crucially reveals ‘I belonged to that generation that had not lived feminism directly, but instead emancipation’.

The emancipationist movement began in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century and re-emerged in the late 1940s. Centred on the idea of equal access to waged work, Paola Bono has described that by the end of the 1960s: ‘the emancipatory struggle had been largely achieved: in a sense women had become significantly more equal than ever before’. Italian feminist groups of the 1970s such as Rivolta Femminile rejected Marxist emancipationist discourse in favour of psychoanalysis and sexual difference. Feminists criticized emancipationism for its individualist strategy, which, as Lesley Caldwell has described, ‘offered the possibility of equality with men only for particular women, who, as a result, assumed a new status, which consisted in being different from other women and instead being like men’. From the perspective of 1970s Italian feminist thought, this rejection of both the feminine and a collective female strategy was evidence of the patriarchal dominance of the design and architecture professions, and the inadequacy of emancipation, itself a masculine strategy, to engender change.

The problem of the feminine: female imagery in furniture

This rejection of the feminine and denial of feminism extended to a gender-neutral concept of design and architecture. For Aulenti ‘architecture is a discipline...where masculine and feminine do not come into it’, for Boeri ‘there does not exist a female or male design’.

Sparke has since unmasked the apparent neutrality of Italian design literature, to reveal the existence of both masculine and previously marginalized feminine characteristics in post-war Italian design. Sparke unpacks the dualisms of what she terms ‘Italian design modernism’: ‘culture and nature; mass production and craft; public and private; production and consumption’. Her article concentrates primarily on male designers, but the themes she identifies are shared by designers of both sexes, negating any notion of an intrinsic link between gender and design practice.

That is not to say that the imagery employed by designers was not informed by gender difference. In 2002 the Triennale di Milano staged an exhibition called ‘I’m No Lady: When Objects Have Women’s Names’ that surveyed a male-driven trend in Italian post-war design for furniture and products named after women. This
article looks at an accompanying phenomenon: the substantial references to the female body in male-designed objects such as the chair ‘Fenis’ (1947) by Carlo Mollino, writing desk ‘Barbarella’ (1964) by Ettore Sottsass and sideboard ‘Sky, Sea, Earth’ (1962–63) by surrealist group Officina Undici, which were completely absent from the work of women designers. This objectification of women in designed objects mirrored the sexualized depiction of women in Italian culture at the time; for instance, Silvana Mangano, on screen in the neorealist film Riso Amaro (1949), to Anita Ekberg in La Dolce Vita (1960) and Gina Lollobrigida in the farce Le Bambole (1965). The specific shape the representation of women took in two of the most overt depictions of the female form, both of which occurred at the onset of the 1970s, tells us not just about the masculine-dominated values of design but also the problem of using feminine and feminist imagery for women designers.

In 1972 Cassina & Busnelli (C&B Italia) launched its advertising campaign for Mario Bellini’s ‘Le Bambole’ (dolls) seating system at the Salone del Mobile in Milan. The firm commissioned photographer Olivero Toscani, a move that was seen as a ‘calculated risk’ but one that paid off; the campaign was one of the most successful in the firm’s history and in 2007 Toscani was invited to re-envision the campaign for the twenty-first century relaunch of Le Bambole.

For the campaign, Toscani chose American Donna Jordan, a well-known model in the 1970s who was also a friend of Andy Warhol. Toscani took over 3000 photographs of Jordan, who is pictured topless and heavily made-up in poses that combine doll-like stiffness with sexual availability. On the campaign’s launch at the 1972 Salone, the photographs proved so controversial that the breasts had to be blacked out, a move that generated even more publicity for both the firm and Toscani.

The semi-clad Jordan and the sexual passivity of her poses make her the epitome of the to-be-looked-at female, discussed most notably by Laura Mulvey in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’:

> The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly ... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

The accompanying copy is a fetishistic narrative of promised erotic pleasure in an encounter with Jordan/Le Bambole: ‘you can sit on a BAMBOLA: alive and yielding, flexible and willing, a BAMBOLA who hugs you because that’s the way she is inside ... you’ve already found a number of ways of being with her ... and perhaps you don’t have to know the way she is inside.’

The sexual permissiveness of the copy situates the campaign in the Italy of 1972. It mirrors the increasing liberalization of Italian society and in particular women’s sexual liberation in the early 1970s; in 1971 the ban on advertising contraception was lifted, following the legalization of divorce in 1970. Crucially, Caldwell has cautioned against viewing these legislative reforms of the early 1970s as victories for feminism—the repeal of fascist legislation on divorce and contraception amongst others occurred ‘without the influence of feminist agitation’. The Americanness of Jordan is notable; her slender frame and short, peroxide Marilyn Monroe-style hair mark her out from the buxom females of the Italian male’s imagination; women such as Lollobrigida, Mangano and Ekberg. This marked aesthetic difference and the implied sexual availability of Jordan suggest a new perception of women in the 1970s, different to the traditional Italian model of woman as mother, and in stark contrast to the impossible Italian ideal of the virgin-mother.
Three years before the Le Bambole campaign, in 1969 C&B Italia launched Gaetano Pesce’s ‘Donna’ (woman) [8] chair as part of his ‘UP Series’. Like Bellini’s design, Donna combined unconventionality with technological innovation; a polyurethane chair that arrived vacuum-packed in a PVC envelope, on opening it expanded, sponge-like, into an voluptuous shape reminiscent of prehistoric votive statues of fertility or the womanly curves of an Italian film star.

Unlike its sexist depiction in Le Bambole campaign, Pesce intended the evocation of the female form in Donna—and the spherical footrest to which it is tied—to communicate a feminist message: ‘in this design I have expressed my idea of women. A
woman is always confined, a prisoner of herself against her will. For this reason I wanted to give this chair the shape of a woman with a ball chained to her foot to use the traditional image of the prisoner.\(^7\)

Donna is also known as ‘Big Mama’, a reference to motherhood that is mirrored in the shape of the chair and footrest: the ball looks as if it mirrors the negative space of the chair seat, suggesting a woman and womb/baby; the cord the inextricable link to her reproductive function. Coupled with Pesce’s own statement, the chair suggests that woman is both incomplete without and enslaved by her reproductive qualities.

That Pesce decided to reify his recognition of the female condition when no woman seems to have done so is intriguing, and yet the feminist status of the chair is problematic. Following Butler, Pesce presumes a commonality and universality of the category of woman and rather than seek to engender change, he presents a unchanging picture of women as ‘always confined’, immobile, tied to a reproductive cord that is not cut but remains in place in the chair. Furthermore, the reductive equation of woman with ‘mother’ is a continuation of the traditional Italian ideal, promoted by institutions such as the Catholic Church even into the early 1970s.\(^7\)

Similarly problematic is the use of the female body to represent womanhood. Not only is it reductive but this construction of woman as object also continues the objectification of the curving female figure, echoing Ekburg’s dip in the Trevi fountain in _La Dolce Vita_. The abstract rendering of the female body could be said to actually undermine the objectifying male gaze—but as Gill Perry has noted with reference to abstract art, this reading is offset by the potentially misogynistic concept behind the exaggerated figure.\(^8\) Donna could also be seen as an attempt to co-opt the imagery of patriarchal culture and reclaim it for feminist expression, a strategy also seen in Italian feminist slogans such as _donna è bello_ (womanhood is beautiful)—we can also note the American influence here, the slogan being derived from ‘Black is beautiful’.\(^8\) If this was a strategy of appropriation, then Le Bambole’s appearance three years later demonstrates that it was unsuccessful, as the female form continued to be the subject of a sexualized depiction.

Furthermore, publicity shots of the chair \(^9\) by photographer Klaus Zaugg from 1969 were populated by women; tightly clothed, slender figures whose synthetic, over-sized white wigs appear as science fiction parodies of Jordan in the Le Bambole campaign. The female body was still subject to the male gaze, too closely allied to women’s objectification in Italian visual culture even into the 1970s to be palatable to a woman designer. Furthermore, just as Pesce did not direct the promotion of Le Bambole—and his statement does not feature on any of the publicity material—as the designer, he was not in control of the reception and consumption of the object.

Le Bambole and Donna both featured in ‘I’m No Lady’. Curator Silvana Annicchiarico described them as amongst ‘the many epithets by which language evokes and designates the very idea of femininity’.\(^8\) If Donna is problematic if it is interpreted as a feminist object, then both Donna and Le Bambole are difficult as feminine objects. Le Bambole was promoted by an advertising campaign that took the notion of the femininity of the doll and sexualized it. Even without Toscani’s intervention, the name is not innocuous—in addition to the childish femininity that _bambole_ suggests, the name had already been used in 1965 in the film of the same name, a _Carry On_-esque farce whose poster depicts

Lollobrigida alongside a bevy of similarly semi-clad women. Even if Bellini was not familiar with the film, the name already had popular cultural connotations of both an infantilized and sexualized idea of the feminine. On the other hand, Pesce’s Donna equates femininity with motherhood; a role that AIDIA newsletters show up as incompatible with the working woman in the architecture profession.

We should not presume that Pesce was a feminist; arguably feminism was just another resource at his creative disposal, in the same way that the chair takes clear inspiration from pop culture, abstract organic sculpture and prehistoric votives. That Pesce chose to employ feminist discourse makes Donna evidence of Pesce’s expressive freedom, a freedom that was translated into his active participation in the Radical Design movement of the 1960s. We can contrast this freedom of expression with the absence of female-designed feminine and feminist furniture, as well as the near absence of women in Italy’s more experimental design movements. Lucia Bartolini appears to have been the only woman to participate in Radical Design and did so in partnership; together with husband Dario Bartolini, she was a member of the Florence-based group Archizoom. Pesce’s reference to feminism also suggests its embryonic state in Italy at this time, revealing a cultural awareness informed as much by international women’s movements as by what was happening in the Italian context.

Finally, this multiple, complex relationship between being female, the feminine and feminism shows how women’s experiences and opportunities in Italy’s post-war encounter with modernity were different to those of men and how being a woman in a male-dominated profession necessitated and conditioned this relationship. As Cheryl Buckley has noted, women architects had to conduct themselves in accordance with their patriarchal context and it was surely not a coincidence that Aulenti and Boeri dismissed the feminist movement and became as successful as they did and that those who sought solidarity with their gender were further marginalized—although Castelli-Ferreri’s experience cautions against any generalizing reading of this relationship. Ultimately, to be female in the post-war Italian design profession demanded strategies to overcome marginality; as
this article has demonstrated, however, in a male-dominated profession these strategies were themselves overriding masculinely.

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Notes

1 C. Boeri, personal interview, 28 July 2006.
2 The Compasso D’Oro (Golden Compass) design award was set up in 1954 by La Rinascente department store, on the initiative of Milanese architects Gio Ponti and Alberto Rosselli.
18 The Liceo Classico was a humanities-orientated secondary school.
24 Galbani, op. cit., p. 62.
26 Boeri, personal interview.
29 In the Italian language, female plural nouns normally end in -e, while masculine plural ends normally end in -i. In a group which contains both female and male objects, the presence of one male renders the group ‘masculine’.


33 Ibid, p. 3.


35 Morris, op. cit., p. 5.

36 Giorgina Castiglioni is the daughter of Piergiacomo Castiglioni and Maria Luisa Belgiojoso the daughter of Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso of the rationalist group BBPR.


38 Ibid.


42 ‘Zero Gravity. Franco Albini. Costruire le Modernità’ was held at the Triennale di Milano in 2006.

43 Pat Kirkham also lists Gregory Ain, Harry Bertola and Deborah Sussman as amongst those missing from the Eames narrative. Kirkham, op. cit., p. 2.

44 Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 16.


47 Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 300.

48 Ibid., p. 293.

49 Pax Romana is an association for Catholic professionals and intellectuals.


54 Morozzi, op. cit., p. 12.

55 Morozzi, op. cit., p. 12

56 Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 349.

57 Boeri, personal interview; Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 257.

58 Grasselli & Valota, p. 188.

59 Boeri, personal interview.

60 Butler, op. cit., p. 6.

61 Ibid., pp. 4 and 6.

62 Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 190.


64 Caldwell, ‘Italian Feminism: Some Considerations’, p. 100.

65 Grasselli & Valota, op. cit., p. 197; Boeri, personal interview.

66 Sparke, op. cit., p. 61.

67 Ibid.

68 S. Annicchiarico (ed.), I’m no Lady: When Objects Have Women’s Names, Edizioni Charta, 2002.


70 C&B Italia (Cassina & Busnelli) was set up in 1966 by Cesare Cassina and Pietro Busnelli. C&B Italia began trading as B&B Italia (Busnelli & Busnelli), as it is now known, in 1974.


76 Ibid., pp. 105, 106.


79 Caldwell notes the ‘constant and insistence’ references to motherhood in post-war statements made by the Church into the 1970s; Caldwell, Italian Family Matters, p. 21.


81 The slogan replaced the female ending of -a with -o: the ‘correct’ version is donna è bella. Sassoon, op. cit., p. 109.

82 Annicchiarico, op. cit., p. 34.

83 Buckley, op. cit., p. 12.