

Vaudeville Furniture Fair Spirit Brings Italy Out of Its Funk

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MILAN — Some things are best left to the professionals — plumbing, laparoscopic surgery, supramolecular chemistry, dentistry. Judging by Lenny Kravitz's attempt to cast himself as a rock star-turned-designer at the Milan Furniture Fair last week, furniture design may be among them.

Covering a Philippe Starck chair with a couple of fake python skins and animal pelts doth not great design make, although it can be a promotional triumph, as Mr. Kravitz ("the Kanye West of design," as one wag dubbed him) demonstrated when his efforts for the Milanese furniture manufacturer, Kartell, were splashed across the Italian media. But it says a great deal about the fair, which is the biggest event of the year for Milan and the global design scene, that his project was by no means the silliest thing in it.

There was tough competition for that. One young designer staged an "Occupy My Sofa" show, presumably unaware that the anti-capitalist activists in the Occupy movement might object to this name being used to flog furniture. The French architect Jean Nouvel inexplicably chose to display several lifesize statues of himself in an installation for the Swedish flooring company Bolon. And the Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout of Atelier Van Lieshout picked "WWIII" (yes, as in World War III) as the title of an exhibition of his industrial design projects.

It was all part of the fair's vaudeville spirit and a welcome respite from Italy's economic problems and the furniture industry's financial woes. A pleasant outcome of the economic squeeze was the chance to enter some of the grander historic buildings in Milan, whose owners had hitherto rebuffed offers to rent them during the fair, including the ornate 18th-century Palazzo Clerici, where the Italian design magazine Domus staged an exhibition of new production technologies beneath the Tiepolo frescoes. The experimental design scene, which recently emerged in the Ventura-Lambrate area of northeastern Milan, is now imperiled by the furniture fair's equivalent of gentrification. It has become so expensive to show there that many of the young designers have been replaced by corporate exhibitors, including the retail giant Ikea.

This was not a vintage Milan Furniture Fair. There were relatively few landmark products, and at times the splashy events staged by technology companies, car manufacturers and cosmetics brands threatened to overpower those of the furniture makers. Yet there were plenty of intriguing developments, and many of them came from small, often family-owned, manufacturers that operate as industrial artisans by focusing on specific materials or production techniques.

Typical is Mattiazzi, an Italian company founded and run by two brothers, Nevio and Fabiano, that specializes in wooden furniture. They produced the most compelling chair of the fair, the Medici, with the German designer Konstantin Grcic. Known for his technocratic design style, Mr. Grcic originally trained as a cabinet maker and returned to

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his roots for the Medici, which he conceived as a low chair made from wooden planks in an imposing shape, with the grain of the wood clearly visible.

Similarly, the Japanese porcelain maker Arita developed Colour Porcelain, a beautiful series of plates, bowls, teapots and vases designed by the Dutch group Scholten & Baijings, whose work is dominated by their use of color. Their characteristic combination of vivid hues with sugary pastels looked exquisite in Arita's luscious porcelain.

Another Italian family company, Salvatori, which works with marble and stone, pulled off one of the technical coups of the fair, with the Israeli designer Ron Gilad, by coaxing Carrara marble into improbably curvaceous shapes for the aptly named Soft Marble series of benches. The marble in one piece, the Girella, curls around like a biscotto arrotolato, the Italian version of a Swiss roll.

One of the most appealing fringe exhibitions, Japan Creative, featured finely made objects developed by international designers in collaboration with Japanese craftsmen and artisanal manufacturers. The British designer Jasper Morrison produced an elegant set of cast iron pots at the Oigen Foundry, and his compatriot, Peter Marigold, devised a wooden bench with the woodwork factory Hinoki Kogei.

Also on the artisanal front, the Spanish designer Tomás Alonso made a beautiful tool kit at the IN Residence workshop program in Turin. And the hit of the student shows was a portable disaster relief kit made by Hikaru Imamura, a Japanese graduate of the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

Among the major manufacturers, Vitra of Switzerland presented Corniche, a new means of display and storage devised by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec. Made from glossy A.B.S. plastic, each Corniche, the French word for mountain ledge, forms a small shelf on which objects can be shown off, or deposited safely. The best toy of the fair was Rocky, a perky plastic rocking horse devised by the Australian designer Marc Newson for the Italian company Magis.

An encouraging development on the sustainable front was the Hemp Chair, which was originally shown as a prototype in Ventura-Lambrate at the fair last year by its German designer, Werner Aisslinger, as the first chair to be made in a single piece of material from a natural composite fiber. He has since worked with the Italian group Moroso to develop it for mass production.

The technological star of the week was 3D printing, the very fast, very precise system of customized production, which dominated many of the experimental shows, the most dynamic of which was Domus's collection of robots and printers beneath Palazzo Clerici's Tiepolos.

So far, 3D printing has been applied mostly on a small scale. The most convincing examples were exhibited at the Nilufar gallery: a series of bowls designed by the Japanese group Nendo, and a set of tables developed by the Swedish-German design team Kram Weisshaar. There is so much interest in the technology that the furniture industry may accelerate its efforts to apply it on a more ambitious basis, perhaps in time for the fair next year. Who needs snakeskin?

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