

# Masters of the modern

No visit to Milan is complete without seeing the studios that preserve the work of three designers who helped revolutionise the aesthetics of postwar Italy – and continue to inspire. By *Sheila Pierce*

## Franco Albini

Every year, architects, designers and tourists flock to Milan's Salone Internazionale del Mobile to launch new products or discover the latest in eye-catching interiors. Tucked away from this trade show but not to be missed are the city's courtyards, once the workplaces of several of the founding fathers of Italian design. Visitors seeking to trace these roots should take a detour to the studios of three of Milan's most renowned designers – Achille Castiglioni, Franco Albini and Vico Magistretti – whose doors are open all year round.

Just as leading furniture companies continue to sell objects created by Castiglioni, Albini and Magistretti between the 1950s and the 1980s, the designers' families keep conversations about their work alive with tours and lectures in the studios-turned-foundations established in their names.

"A couple of hours in any of these historic foundations is like turning the pages of an encyclopedia or a textbook of design, and touching upon fundamental chapters of design history," says Lorenzo Damiani, a Milan-based furniture designer who is working on a project of wafer-thin bendable marble for the Salone. "Every time I visit one of them – which I often still do for inspiration – I walk away having learnt

'Castiglioni had an ability to simplify the complicated in order to make something work'

something new, and am reminded of the simplicity of their genius in producing objects which transcend the time in which they were invented."

Giovanna and Carlo Castiglioni open the door of their father's studio with a warmth and enthusiasm in their eyes that colleagues say runs in the family. Bookshelves in the hallway overflow with archives of the furniture, lighting, interiors, installations and architectural projects Achille designed from the 1950s until his death in 2002. In that time he won the Compasso d'Oro, Italy's highest award in industrial design, nine times.

"Whatever you do, please touch everything you see," says Giovanna, who, after establishing the Fondazione Achille Castiglioni in 2006 with her brother, put aside her career as a geologist to study design and architecture. "We want visitors to interact with our father's objects because he believed strongly that learning came from playing."

Of the foundation's 6,000 annual visitors, a third arrive during the week of the Salone. The Castiglioni siblings sit with guests around their father's drawing table and offer a show-and-tell session that explains his desire to infuse everyday objects with a new form of minimal aesthetics, often recalling the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. Visitors are encouraged to test his chairs scattered round the studio (from the Irma, an ergonomic chair designed to ease back pain, to the Babela stackable chair designed for Milan's Chamber of Commerce), to turn on his suspended Parentesi or armlike Arco lamps and to handle his Spirale ashtrays.



Cutlery pieces



Albini's studio in Milan — Matteo Girola



Archive photographs — Matteo Girola



Schoolchildren during a visit to the studio last year



Franco Albini in 1956 — Mondadori/Getty Images



Margherita chair — Matteo Girola

Damiani remembers visiting Castiglioni's studio as a student. "He explained the design of the Arco lamp to us in the simplest of terms, which made it seem like the most natural design in the world, but it's actually incredibly complicated," says Damiani, who was the first designer to have his work displayed in Castiglioni's studio in 2012. "He had an ability to simplify the complicated in order to make something work." The young Damiani was struck by the patience and openness with which the designer received him – identical in spirit, he says, to the way Castiglioni's children receive their visitors today.

During this year's Salone week, the foundation will recreate an installation at the studio that Castiglioni first set up in 1957 with his brother Pier Giacomo, now retitled "Dimensione Domestica". It includes some signature pieces still sold by furniture companies: the Poltrona Cubo (a soft-fabric, rigid-form armchair), the Sella (a stool with a bicycle saddle) and the Mezzadro (a stool with a tractor seat). A 20-minute walk from Castiglioni's studio across Milan's Parco Sempione, the Fondazione Franco Albini continues to operate as an architectural studio where Albini's son and grandson collaborate on building projects. Albini's granddaughter, Paola, offers lectures at the studio-turned-foundation to architecture students and design aficionados. The family will often show visitors off one of

## Achille Castiglioni



Achille Castiglioni in 2000 — Mauro Galligani/Contrasto/Eyevine



Castiglioni's studio library — Lorenzo Barassi



Spirale ashtrays



Above: Babela chair

Left: Arco lamp



Giovanna and Carlo Castiglioni, the designer's children  
Lorenzo Barassi

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## Vico Magistretti

Albini's chairs, only to place it on a table and explain its every component.

Recently the foundation also began running workshops for budding young designers. Albini's portable Cicognino table accompanies schoolchildren on a tour of the armchairs, desks and bookcases scattered round his studio. Referring to original sketches from Albini's archives, the young visitors dismantle and reassemble his Luisa chair (for which he won the Compasso d'Oro in 1955) and work together to sketch their own dream design object.



Above: Vico Magistretti

Left: archive photographs  
Matteo Carassale



Magistretti's studio workspace — Matteo Carassale

During the Salone, the foundation will stage a monologue with music and images titled *Il Coraggio del Proprio Tempo: Uomini e Valori del Movimento Moderno* ("The Courage of Their Time: The Men and Values of the Modern Movement"), telling the story of how Albini and his contemporaries contributed to the postwar rebuilding of Italy. The foundation is also holding an exhibition of Albini's works at Milan's Galleria Straburgo during Salone week.

A short drive away, in front of the Milan Conservatory, Vico Magistretti worked in a studio inherited from his architect father. Today, visitors can sit at Magistretti's desk or in one of his Carimate chairs (his first piece of furniture, designed in 1960) and look out of the ground-floor window through which his

manufacturer and friend, Cesare Cassina, used to pass him prototypes for this very chair, among other pieces that they built together.

The studio is too small to house all the armchairs, sofas, beds and lamps Magistretti created with furniture companies Cassina, De Padova and Kartell, among others. Its central room, however, is home to rotating exhibitions of an extensive archive of about 30,000 sketches and technical drawings, and 7,000 photographs of the buildings and neighbourhoods he designed around Milan. During the Salone, the foundation is also holding an exhibition of drawings of Milan private apartments Magistretti designed. And all year round, a video montage of interviews



Atollo lamp



Studio displays — Matteo Carassale



Carimate chairs — Matteo Carassale

filmed throughout Magistretti's life projects his voice and personality into the quiet space in such a way that he acts as a virtual tour guide to his own studio.

After the second world war, Castiglioni, Albini and Magistretti belonged to a group of young Milanese architects who responded to Italy's need to rebuild its cities by combining their ambitions and talent with those of artisans. These designers emerged as cultural revolutionaries, working with carpenters and metalworkers to produce an elegant, functional aesthetic.

"They held a huge desire to invent themselves in a new, modern life, and to overcome the [burden] of the war while not renouncing the fundamentals of their cultural history," says Giampiero Bosoni, curator of *Il Modo Italiano: Italian Design and Avant-garde in the 20th Century*, a 1997 exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. "They also wanted to have fun and transgress."

## i / STUDIO TOURS

## Fondazione Achille Castiglioni

Piazza Castello 27

Tel: +39 02 805 3606

Email: info@achillecastiglioni.it

Tours: Tues-Fri 10am, 11am, 12pm;

Thurs 6.30pm, 7.30pm, 8.30pm.

Tours on Sat for groups of 15 minimum.

Compulsory advance reservation by email

Entrance fee: €10 full; €7 concessions

## Fondazione Franco Albini

Via Bernardino Telesio 13

Tel: +39 02 498 2378

Email: fondazionefrancoalbin@gmail.com

Tours: every day at 6.30pm and on first

and third Saturdays of each month,

11.30am- 3.30pm. Compulsory advance

reservation by telephone or email

Entrance fee: €10 full; €7 concessions

## Fondazione Vico Magistretti

Via Conservatorio 20

Tel: +39 02 7600 2964

Email: fondazione@vicomagistretti.it

Open: Tues 10am-6pm, Thurs 2pm-8pm,

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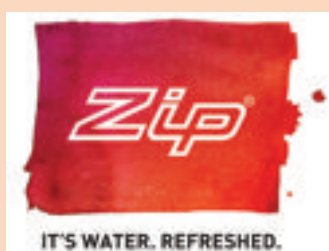
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