



Ico and Luisa Parisi in their studio in Como, Italy, in 1953.



A 1955 lounge chair and ottoman for Cassina.

ICO AND LUISA PARISI

With their dynamic shapes and strong lines, this design couple brought a distinctive Italian flair to midcentury style

BY TIM McKEOUGH

With organically shaped brass-tipped walnut legs supporting a hefty rectangular top, the console that Ico and Luisa Parisi designed for Singer & Sons in the early 1950s is not the kind of piece that's easily forgotten. "It has an insect-like quality that shows exactly what post-war Italian design was," says auctioneer Richard Wright, who has sold more than a dozen of the consoles over the years. "It is all about lightness and a very visual suspension," he notes, pointing out that the Parisis' creation "was a big commercial hit."

Key players in the development of mid-century Italian design, the husband-and-wife partners had a knack for blending the pared-down modernism of the day with Italy's characteristically expressive streak. Many

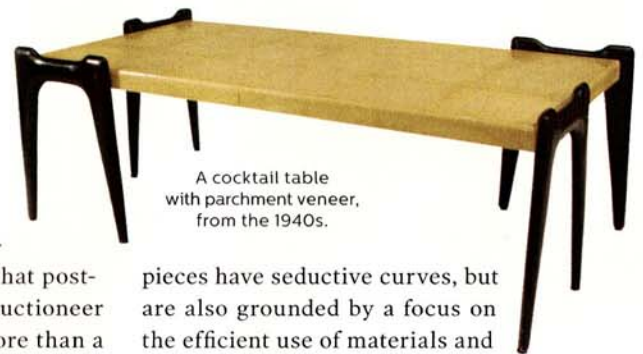
pieces have seductive curves, but are also grounded by a focus on the efficient use of materials and intelligent manufacturing. "The quintessential point of their work is that it's in love with construction," says dealer Markus Winter of New York's Lampedo. "Dynamic shapes have a reason—they're not just randomly created," he adds, an approach to design that influenced the following generation of Italian designers.

That the Parisis' work has a formal rigor isn't surprising—both were trained architects. Ico, born in Palermo in 1916, worked for architect Giuseppe Terragni—one of Italy's influential early modernists—in the '30s, before striking out on his own and completing his architectural studies in Lausanne, Switzerland. Luisa, born in Como in 1914, attended the Politecnico di Milano, where she studied under Gio Ponti, the grandmaster of postwar Italian design.

In 1948, the Parisis founded their own studio in Como, named La Ruota (the Wheel). In addition to some 150 interiors, their major architectural works included a pavilion for the Milan Triennale in 1954 and the church of Santa Maria dell'Osa in the Tuscan village of Fonteblanda in 1962. Their furniture designs include one-of-a-kind custom creations as well as production pieces for companies such as Cassina, MIM, and Stildomus. ▶



A 1950s inlaid rosewood cabinet.



A cocktail table with parchment veneer, from the 1940s.



Uovo 813 chair, circa 1951.



The Parisis' home in Como.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ARCHIVE ENZO PIFFERI, COMO; COURTESY OF LAMPEDO; COURTESY OF NEWEL, LLC; FROM ICO PARISI/LA CASA, FLAMINIO GUALDONI © 1999 BY ELECTA, MILANO ELEMENTO EDITORI ASSOCIATI; COURTESY OF DONZELLA 20TH CENTURY; COURTESY OF NEWEL, LLC

A cocktail table of veneered teak, rosewood, and plywood, 1958.



An artful corner of the couple's home.



Urlo shelving, of rosewood veneer and metal, a 1957 design.

Among the most celebrated of their designs is the Uovo (literally, egg) 813 chair for Cassina; its pod-like form was introduced in 1951. "It's a spectacular object," says Nicholas Kilner, creative director of New York's Sebastian & Barquet gallery, who recalls a letter Gio Ponti sent Ico, which remains in the Parisi archive. "The letter has a doodle by Ponti of the Egg chair and a note that says, in effect, 'My dear, your Egg chair is a marvel. You are a master, and all that is left for me is to retire.'"

The irony is that the Parisi are not as well remembered as some of their contemporaries, such as Ponti and Carlo Mollino. Although top examples of their work can fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction—Wright holds the Parisi auction record with \$240,000 for a wall-mounted console from the Zucchi residence in Como—more common pieces sell for a few thousand dollars, and little has been written about their work outside of Italy. "The Parisi are underrated, and don't get nearly as much attention as their brethren," says Guy Regal of New York's Newel. But, he argues, the market for

midcentury Italian design is still young, and it's just a matter of time until they have their moment in the spotlight. "The Parisi are top-tier, postwar Italian design," he says. "They were groundbreaking."

"After a long period of focusing on midcentury furniture from France, Italy is finally getting a second look," agrees Kevin Roberts, a partner at the New York interior design firm Haynes-Roberts. The Parisi's work is notable for its "combination of architectural rigor and whimsy," he says. "The pieces are elegant, upbeat, and usable."

Another mystery is how deeply Luisa was involved in the design process. Although Ico is often given sole credit for the studio's creations, evidence suggests that the majority of its work involved collaboration between husband and wife. "Their architecture and interior design drawings were invariably stamped 'Ico and Luisa Parisi,'" says Kilner. Roberta Lietti, a Como gallery owner who had known the Parisi since childhood and is now responsible for authenticating their work (along with Luigi Cavadini of Uesse-arte), confirms this. "Luisa Parisi was the

alter ego of Ico Parisi," she says. "She was his shadow and muse. I think that in every Parisi project there is a bit of Luisa."

The Parisi became increasingly experimental. When designing furniture for private clients, they played with new materials and bold, primary colors. Ico, in particular, branched out beyond design, focusing on photography, painting, and proposals for utopian cities. Although they worked into their final years (Luisa died in 1990; Ico in 1996), their furniture from the late '40s and '50s remains the most sought after. And, according to most experts, it will become even more coveted. "They designed pieces that are extraordinary, in terms of modernist ideas," says Winter. "It can be difficult to research, but when you see the work, it's genius." ■

WHERE TO FIND IT

- Most Parisi furniture is not signed, so be sure to work with knowledgeable dealers. Roberta Lietti and Luigi Cavadini in Como, Italy, can provide certificates of authenticity.
- Donzella 20th Century Gallery, New York City, 212-965-8919; donzella.com
 - Lampedo, New York City, 212-380-8906; lampedo.com
 - Newel, New York City, 212-758-1970; newel.com
 - Sebastian & Barquet, New York City, 212-488-2245; sebastianbarquet.com
 - Wright, Chicago, 312-563-0020; wright20.com



A 1950s cocktail table made of walnut and brass.