



# Food, family and God: How Italy won the race for beauty

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What does 'Made in Italy' really mean?

**(CNN)** *This is the first of our new [Style Italia](#) series - dedicated to the past, present and future of Italian design.*

Gathering to eat with family and friends is a cornerstone of Italian life, and so it's no surprise that the architecture of the table has inspired many Italian designers to make extraordinary objects.

Designer Ettore Sottsass lovingly crafted his classic 1987 Nuovo Milano cutlery to be as "smooth as sea-worn stones," while industrialist Alberto Alessi saw fit to commission world-famous architects to make miniature skylines of jugs, pots, and percolators.

Would any other country have taken functional food utensils and transported them to this often surreal hinterland of art, architecture and design?

Yet, the story of how Italy came to comprehensively dominate the global design field -- in everything from cars, to clothes, to furniture -- is a remarkable one.

Emerging from the rubble of World War II as an impoverished and exhausted nation on the wrong side of history -- defeated in war and lagging far behind its more industrialized European counterparts -- it surely seemed unlikely.

Discover how, in just two decades, an alliance of city-states seized space-age manufacturing and Mediterranean tradition to make Italian design *just so good*.

14 photos: The history of Italian design in 15 significant objects



**Carlton Shelving Unit** – *By Ettore Sottsass for Memphis, 1981*

From Italy via mid-century USA, this attention-grabbing shelving unit epitomizes Postmodern design and the Memphis style, the radical design collective Sottsass founded in 1981.





## An unexpected start

The radicalism attributed to Italian designs can in part be connected to an often overlooked -- and certainly unintended -- quirk of the country's design education.

Other parts of Europe have enjoyed their own internationally famous design programs -- from Germany's Bauhaus art schools of the 1920s and 1930s and Ulm School of Design in the 1950s and 1960s, to the UK's Royal College of Art in London, which continues today.

But the Italian practice of design education has worked in quite a different way to foster creativity.

Italy's lack of design programs -- until the launch of the Politecnico di Milano School of Design in 1989 -- has meant that throughout much of the 20th century, designers were usually trained in architecture.



"La Conica," Aldo Rossi's first coffee maker for Alessi, designed in 1983

Architectural education is highly theorized and in Italy this led to significant groups of theoretically-aware designers. Architect and designer Aldo Rossi's coffee makers -- with their conical lines and architectural finishes -- show what happens when designers bring an entirely different sensibility to product design.

Many architects from Italy's Radical Design movement (at its height for about a decade from the mid-1960s) produced eye-popping solutions for urban living and rural escapes. Imaginatively persuasive on paper, these designs were largely too radical for widespread take-up -- but found a second life as objects.

## The enduring identities of Italy's city-states

Although we think of Italy as having an ancient history, it is in fact a fairly young nation. After all, the Romans were just that: Romans, not Italians.

Italy was formed in 1871 from separate city-states with distinct identities. Even today, people living in Milan are Milanese first and Italian second, and the same is true of Neapolitans, Venetians, and others.

This heritage of city-states and local identities feeds into a design culture that is similarly regional: from the concentration of wood-working in the northern Italian lakes region, to auto manufacture around Turin (where a giant car manufacturer famously built a testing track on the roof of its factory).

Yet, 20th century Italian radical design was conducted in an international cultural climate in thrall to advances in space design inspiration provided by Stanley Kubrick's film "2001 A Space Odyssey," as well as American technology.

This was an era of rebellion against the establishment -- and that included in the world of design.



'Kandissi Sofa', designed by postmodernist Alessandro Mendini in 1973

The student riots of 1968 in the U.S. and several European cities were met that same year with the occupation of the XIV Triennale design exhibition.

In this climate, Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass provided new compelling design in the postmodern mold through the Studio Alchimia group, and later the Memphis group. The theoretically-astute designers who had promoted radical design began to play with postmodernism and dally with deconstruction. Their designs shone on the pages of international style magazines.

'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours'



A principally Catholic country, Italy's history has been formed around the church as a local, regional, national, and global influence.

The spiritual and social focus offered by the church has also enabled the development of networks of reciprocity -- "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" -- that have helped businesses develop locally.

And even when family feuds erupt, opportunities arise for designers to step into leadership roles -- as Tom Ford famously did at the Gucci fashion house.

Family ties are also crucial here.

Alberto Alessi's self-styled "Design Factory" in Crusinallo, northern Italy, placed the notion of family right into the heart of its homewares catalogue.

Here, sets of products are described as "families," rather than ranges. There's the 1990s range of luminous plastic kitchen goods, called "Family Follows Fiction." And the "Graves Family" collection, which was designed by U.S. architect Michael Graves on the back of his hugely successful 9093 Kettle -- better known as the "Whistling Bird" kettle.

Italy has an unusually high proportion of family firms of small to medium size. Designers, here, can develop close working relationships with design-savvy members of family firms - - and in turn become honorary members of the family.

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Taken from the world, made in Italy

Ultimately, the most compelling secret of the 'Made in Italy' brand's success is that it is not entirely Italian.

To use a soccer comparison, Italy's design community is like the UK's Premier League; it achieves global recognition by attracting talent from around the world.



Juicy Salif lemon squeezer by Philippe Starck for Alessi

The designer of some of Italy's most recent icons is Frenchman Philippe Starck, while the staffs of Italy's biggest fashion studios come from fashion schools internationally.

Designers around the world want to work with Italy's design-forward companies and manufacturers. For some of them, that means traveling to Milan, Florence or Turin and living there.

Other times, products travel to them.

The 1953 Iso Isetta (otherwise known as the "bubble car") was designed in Italy but has been licenced for production internationally, notably by BMW.



The myth and mystique of 'Made in Italy'

The "Made in Italy" brand itself initially developed organically, as companies manufacturing their goods in Italy began to see a business advantage in the tag.

The label been legally protected since 1999, with the proviso enforced from 2009 that all goods must be designed, manufactured and packaged in the country to earn the right to use the moniker: "Made in Italy."

The myth and mystique of Italian design excellence have solid foundations in Italy's regional centers of excellence, in family firms and professional networks, in unique approaches to architecture and design education, materials innovation, and radical theorizing.

While the best Italian design is deceptively simple in its craftsmanship -- there is much more to its success than meets the eye.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/24/style/the-hidden-history-of-made-in-italy>