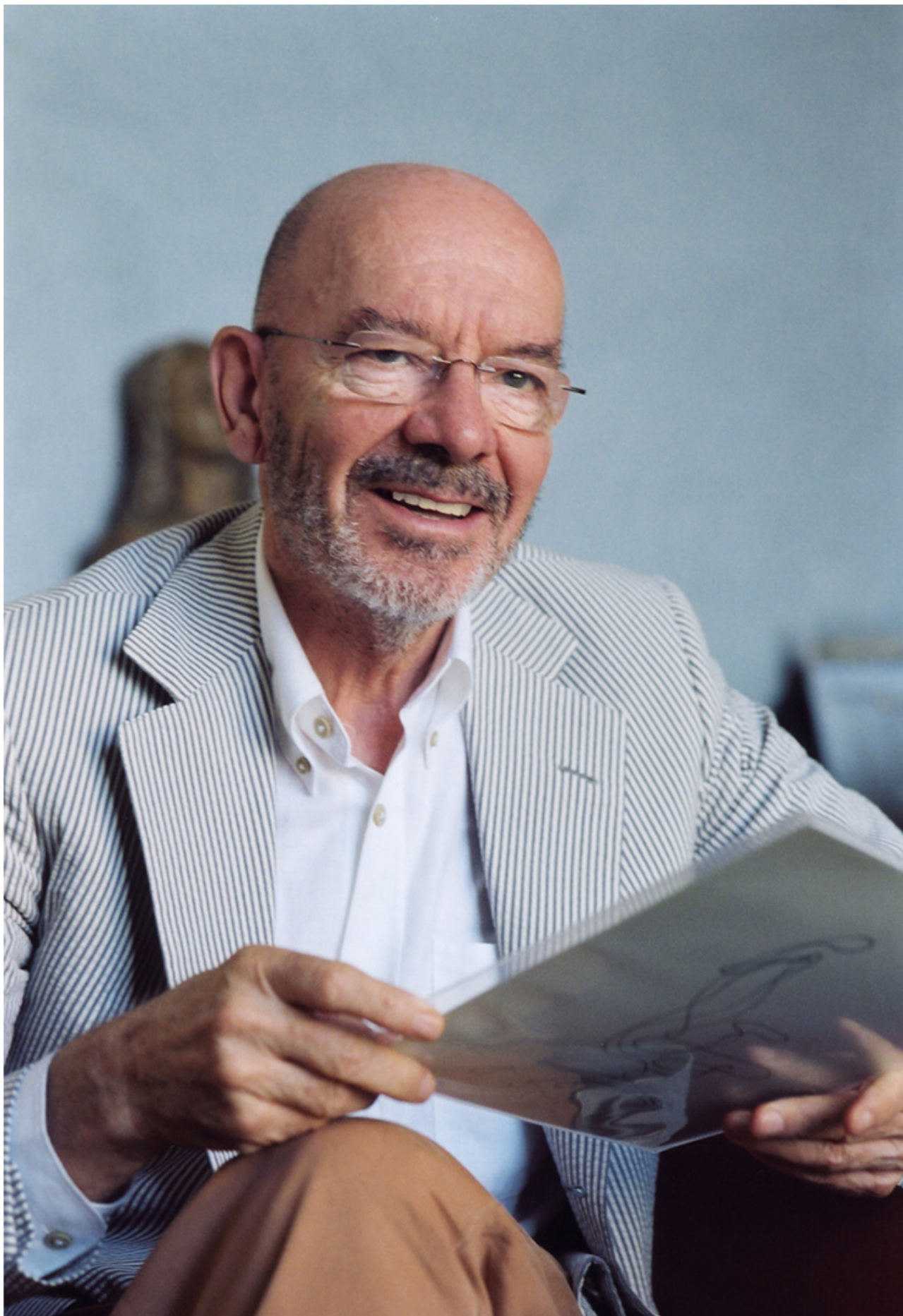


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EVOLUTION OF AN ICON

Q&A | SEP 2015 | BY LAUREN PELLERANO GOMEZ



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- Videos

For the past five decades, architect and designer Mario Bellini has been designing boundary-pushing pieces for Italian furniture maker Cassina. The eight-time recipient of the Golden Compass Award, Bellini was the subject of a major retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the 1980s and was awarded the Medaglia d'Oro by the Italian President for furthering design and architecture on a global scale. This year, he introduces two additions to the iconic *Cab Chair* collection for Cassina: the *Cab Night* bed and the *Cab* lounge armchair. When he's not creating comfort, he's been keeping busy designing the "New Eco-City" of Zhenjiang, China, and an expansive residential, cultural, sports complex in Qatar. While in Miami to celebrate "A Passion Called Project" with Cassina at the Poltrona Frau showroom, we caught up with Bellini to discuss a lifetime of international awards and industry-topping achievement.



Bellini's *Le Rotonde* table, seen above, was originally designed in the 1970s and continues to be produced by popular demand. Courtesy of Cassina

What drew you to design and architecture? To be an architect or a designer, you need to have a kind of talent for it. As you know, it is not enough to go to a literary school to become a poet or a writer. There is no possibility for this. Nor is it enough to go to music school to become a musician. Basically, you have to be born an architect.

When did your love affair with design begin? Since I was a child, I always had the pleasure to draw, to design, to use colors, to make portraits and landscapes. So I was definitely rearing a kind of talent for fine arts and aesthetics.

How did this translate into your design education? When the moment came to decide which university course to pick up, after high school, I said, "Engineering is only technical. In the academy, art is only painting. If I pick architecture, I have arts, theory, science—practicality and creativity all together." And I was right. Architecture is math, science, physics—everything.



Pop Automatic Record Player (model GA 45), 1959. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

So you chose architecture for its practicality? I asked myself, "What do you need?" You need tools, but the tools can't make you become an architect. Definitely not. You use the tools and it gives you the opportunity to spend five years thinking and building up your mind by reading and traveling. School does not do much more than that to become an artist. At that time, doing architecture in Milano, there were less than 100 of us. Now, there are 10,000 or 30,000 people doing architecture there. We didn't have any design schools, only architecture schools.

How did you get your start? When I was very young, I was called by the Rinascente department store and immediately became a designer for them, of furniture and design objects. I immediately discovered that with my architecture degree, I was also talented in doing these kinds of projects. They don't teach you how to design a table or a lamp. They teach you nothing like this. Anyhow, I happened to design some furniture, some lamps and it went well.



Divisumma 18 Electronic Printing Calculator, 1972. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

What happened next? Two years later, they closed this expense because it was no longer strategic for the department store. Mr. Olivetti [of the Olivetti design company] happened to know me at that time so he said, "Why don't you design for us some new machines, because we are in the transition from electromechanical to electronics. It is a very important season, and a young architect and designer like you are could be something." Olivetti was internationally known, and before that somebody asked me to design furniture for an exhibition in Milano. That furniture won the Golden Compass Award. I was 27 when I won the prize for the first time. I was so young.

You were met with immediate success? Yes. The first piece of furniture and the first machine I ever designed, they both won the Golden Compass Award and it sky-rocketed my career. I was showing in Japan, China, Germany—all over the world. It wasn't until 1987 that MoMA discovered they already had 25 pieces of my work in their permanent collection. They said, "It's time for you to have a one man show here." All this happened with such a speed and when I got that one man show, I felt it was time for me to say, "Okay stop a little bit, go back to architecture."



Le Bambole Armchair, 1972. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Why did you decide to join *Domus*, with all of the other projects you were working on? I never did something being forced to or not liking it. Never. Even when they asked me to be chief editor of *Domus* magazine—I was very busy. But I thought about it and said, “Why not?” And I did it with a lot of success. I started writing editorials every month; it was a nice opportunity to force myself to write about my practice. Normally a new director was called in every three years. But the publisher wanted me to stay one more time so I was there six years instead.



Milan International Congress Center (MiCo) by Mario Bellini Architects. © Raffaele Cipolletta

How would you describe the trajectory of your architectural career? My architectural career went through a lot of international competitions and won, but not because of friends doing me a favor. I won a competition in Melbourne for a big museum. I won a competition in Paris for the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre, in Frankfurt for the headquarters of the Deutsche Bank, the Tokyo Design Centre in Japan—and so on and so on. All of these things are because of talent. You accept the talents you have and you prove your proposal is the best one; you get the job. It’s the way I like it. This kind of life is a continuous journey but it is also a continuous war.

A war? How so? You have to continuously try to get the best proposal; to make something nice. If you stagnate, you fail. If you keep boiling, you die. You have to burn yourself out. The moment you stop being enthusiastic, compulsive and energetic, you’re finished.

Do you really believe that? I do. An artist who starts repeating himself and being boring—he dies out.