

BRIDGING THE CLEAVAGE

# BETWEEN ART



# AND DESIGN

An interview with Mattia Bonnetti, Miami, December 2, 2009

By Daniella Ohad Smith



**Mattia Bonnetti** stands out among the most talented designers of our time. He is known for his exceptionally sculptural furniture, for a unique approach to materials and for his love for superb craftsmanship. His jewel-like furniture of fantasy and exquisite, energetic forms, span the disciplines of high-end furniture design, industrial design, and interiors. He has made his name with such iconic furniture as the Yo Yo table a coffee table modeled after the traditional yo yo, and made of polished aluminum, with one part seeming to float above the other and Abys Table, a modern version of Louis XV grand furniture.

Bonnetti was born in the picturesque Swiss town of Lugano in 1952. He had graduated from the local Centro Scolastico per l'Industria Artistica before moving to Paris in 1973, where he has lived and worked since. It was in 1982 that Bonnetti and Elisabeth Garouste had established one of the most intriguing partnerships in the design world. For the next two decades, the two had crafted their names in the limited-edition and one-of-a-kind arena just as this became a serious area in the international art market. Recognition and fame came with the commission of the interiors of the 80's mega star Christian Lacroix's showroom in 1987. This commission also came to tag their aesthetic agenda, which combines fantasy with reality, dramatic visual vocabulary of baroque and excess much in the spirit of the legendary couturier who has made the 80s and who has recently showed his grand finale couture collection just before closing down his couture house due to financial woes.

For over a quarter of a century, Bonnetti has played a prominent role in the international design community with a new design of a French flavor, inspiring the "stylish," or "designed" look of the new trend in design. I call him the *Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann of our time. The pre-eminent Art Deco Parisian designer who produced fine furniture of 18th-century quality that had rooted in tradition on the one hand and represented progressive taste on the other. Bonnetti's luxurious furniture and dazzling interiors express a clear French identity.*

While his unique vision has been extensively discussed in the literature, his work cannot be categorized. It demonstrates his fascination with materials, with luxurious appearance, standing on the line between reality and dream, primitivism and sophistication, modernism and surrealism, functionalism and ornamentation, playfulness and extravagance. While his eclectic work is not subjected to one stylistic character, he has established a signature aesthetic of reserved theatrical look. His Barbare Chair, the Nina Ricci perfume containers, the interiors of Christian Lacroix showroom, and the Extroverted Kitchen, a bean-shaped block with integrated oven and sink all covered with gold leaf, which he had designed with former partner Elisabeth,

have already entered the pantheon of 20th-century design. I have met with him for a conversation at the booth of Paul Kasmin Gallery at Design Miami, which devoted its entire space to his work. The fine art, New York-based gallery has worked with Bonnetti for the past two years on pieces that are exclusive to the gallery. As Paul Kasmin has followed the work of Mattia for years, this showcases the project of working together on a series of furniture. The gallery, which has been in business for nearly two decades, which represent only one the Lallains ist envisions this furniture as work of contemporary art in a unique medium.

**You were born** in 1952. Was this a good vintage year for an avant-garde, forward-looking designer to be born? Some of the most notable minds of our time



**were born in that same decade, Ron Arad in 1951, Jasper Morrison in 1959, just to name two. History has shown us that some extraordinarily gifted designers or architects didn't make it only because they were born in the wrong time.**

To me, working as a designer has always been a constant struggle. It was a struggle for me as a young designer out of school and it is as difficult today with all the success I have achieved in the field. It is a daily struggle, working around the clock whether in creating, thinking or just being critical about my own work, always trying to improve, to do better.

**Funding your work must be a great challenge.**

Funding too, but mainly communication. Communication has become so central to the world and to the business of design, so much more than lets say, thirty years ago. It takes a great deal of time and effort to engage with that aspect of the profession.

**Design is everywhere today. We are all constantly experiencing design in a revolutionary way. This revolution started in the 80s when design became incredibly popular, something a wide portion of the population became conscious of. With this revolution, the role of the designer has changed. Some believe that designers have that responsibility to shape the world; others believe that their job is to help us coping with the change. How has the role of the designer changed since you came out of college?**

On the one hand, designers ought to take that responsibility to shape our world and by that, I mean to enable the population to achieve a better life. Yet, although many believe that the role of the designer is fundamentally moral, this is not my own agenda. Throughout the twentieth century, there has always been design that reached to the masses, that was reasonably priced. My design doesn't fall in this category.

**Would you like to see your products being mass produced?**

I have designed a variety of products for mass production. I have done the "Deci Dela," perfume bottles for Nina Ricci.

Among the most exciting projects is that project I have done for a beverage produced by Pernod-Ricard Group, the second largest beverage group in the world and the promotional glass I have designed for Chivas Voilà. I find that design for mass production is the best way to become visible, and I love witnessing designs used by so many.

**The market for contemporary, sensational furniture of interesting, exciting, stimulating forms has flourished thanks for a few art dealers, visionaries who had recognized a shift in the market for design. Gallery Neotu had produced editions of your furniture as well as of objects by Jasper Morrison and others for the upper reaches of the market. The whole idea of a gallery that addresses the top end of the design market is new. David Gill in London, Gallery Kreo in Paris, Gallery Mourmans in the Netherlands, Cristina Grajales in NY, are among the leading forces in the field.**

In the early 80's I had worked with Neotu. Its founders of this Parisian gallery and its New York-based branch, Gerard Dalmon and Pierre Staudenmeyer, were the true pioneers. They were the first to recognize the significance of design in our culture and its potential in the art market. They sold furniture and other items by designers, artists, and architects, representing Jasper Morrison, Ron Arad, myself, and many others. The gallery initiated and funded production, and I believe was the first one of its kind to get engaged with this type of production and promotion of design. They were instrumental in establishing some of the young, essentially unknown designers of the 1980s and 1990s, bringing them to the mainstream of design. A new book, which will be published in the next month or so traces the history of these two galleries that unfortunately closed their doors several years ago.

**Your work is being shown here, at Design Miami by the New York-based gallery Paul Kasmin Gallery. You have been here now for several days since the opening night. What do you think of the state of the market?**

We constantly read about the tremendous effect of the recession on the market. I think that the recession has transformed the field of collecting design, and that the market is being reinventing itself. Furniture for hundreds of thousands of dollars which were present in all the previous fairs are nowhere to be found at Design Miami this year. My pieces are not that expensive, and although all of it is done in by hand, they have never reached those numbers. I have to admit that I haven't seen any substantial change in the market so far. I am pleased and fortunate to work with Paul Kasmin Gallery, as he is a fine art dealer. Therefore, by representing me, Paul is announcing my work as "art," rather than functional design, issuing me with a "passport" to the art world. My design is becoming accessible to his clients who are those not typically searching for design, but who perceive my furniture as a work of art.

**Tell me about your taste in period design, about design that you admire, about what is moving you, what is inspiring you?**

My taste is highly eclectic. I am moved by so many movements and periods that it is hard to count. I grew up in a family of a great appreciation for the arts, and art has always been central to the shaping of my own identity. My parents had been antique dealers in the Swiss town of Lugano, and they dealt with a wide variety of art ranging from Asian art to furniture of the Renaissance. I went to an art school very early on, at the age of 14. My taste is colorful, its dynamic, and it constantly keeps changing. What I like in a given moment, whether it is material, style, or mode, may not appeal to me at all in other moments.

**You were educated at the Centro Scolastico per l'Industria Artistica in Lugano. Tell me about the agenda of this institution. What type of school is it?**

It was founded in the early 60s with a methodology based on that formulated at the Bauhaus. It has a great Swiss identity, and from the its very beginning, the school came to embrace all richness of Swiss tradition and particularly its tremendously rich graphic design.

**Are you still connected to Switzerland?**

My parents have passed away but I travel to Switzerland on a regular basis.



**"MY APPROACH IS DIFFERENT THAN ANY OF THE LIVING DESIGNERS I KNOW".**



**One of the most striking chapters in the history of Swiss design was manifested in the sanatorium, which had been among the earliest and most ambitious manifestations of modernism. With its clarity, rationality, and concept of hygiene, modernism was the perfect fit for that institution.**

Switzerland has been known for its tradition of sanatoriums since the 19th century, when those unique institutions were established for the treatment of tuberculosis for the privileged. The sanatoriums were a combination of grand hotels and spa, prevailing the culture of the body. They were typically designed in functional aesthetics, with what I believe reflect the progressiveness of the Swiss nation. The Swiss are super progressive and I feel fortunate to be brought up in such an atmosphere.

**In 1973 you moved to Paris. Why?**

In my twenties, upon graduating from the school of design, I was working as a textile designer in Italy. I knew that it was in Paris that I could find some great job opportunities for designing textile for the fashion industry.

**What do you think about Paris today as a center of contemporary design?**

There is a lot going on in Paris, but I consider myself both different from other designers as well as isolated in the design arena. It's my choice and there is no suffering here. My approach is different than any of the living designers I know.

**If I tell you that to me, you are a kind of Jacques Ruhlman of our time. Am I completely off?**

In some ways it is a great complement, but in others it is not. The use of traditional approach in making objects, the high quality of the decorative arts, Ruhlman had that obsession with quality, with refined finishes, with the most expensive and unique materials. Today, we cannot even dream to achieve that level of quality that he had mastered in the 20s. Although there are craftsmen out there who have the skills, the culture of making objects this way has been lost. I work in the studio, with many techniques of handcraftsmanship, but I am trying to tailor those skills to the world of today. In this respect, I believe, you may compare me to Ruhlman. Yet, I am not looking into going sixty years backwards.

**It is not about going back to the Art Deco era, to its high style French look, but it is about the approach that I find your work reminiscent of that of Ruhlman. Your work has not one stylistic character, yet, it has a strong signature. It looks French, which was also a part of Ruhlman's agenda, that French identity that he tried to reconstruct, and there is that handcraftsmanship on a level rarely seen today. The work shown here, at Miami is stunning and highly innovative with an unorthodox approach to form and materials. I like the "Quasimodo" cabinet (made of colorful resin, tinted wood, patinated wrought-iron). It looks surrealist and I envision this piece of furniture**

**belong into that extraordinary language of design, Surrealism, like the designs that Dali did.**

I am glad you are asking me particularly about this piece. I am pleased that you like it because it is too complicated for many people to fall in love with. I wanted to create a piece of art, a sculpture; the function is secondary. The inspiration came from paintings by Miro and Cy Twombly, and I commissioned an artist to cover the resin surface with hand color. Although we will be producing an edition of 8, this is a way to make each piece unique.

**Lets go back to the early part of your career in Paris. In 1979, you had created a partnership with Elisabeth Garouste and together you achieved an international fame when designing the interior studio of Christian Lacroix. When he first launched his couture house in 1987, Lacroix quickly emerged as the prince of the fashion world. In many ways he had manifested that decade, the 1980s, with all of the excess, the dramatic image, recreating what looked at that time as fashion taken from the Palace of Versailles. He has recently**



**closed his house. How do you feel about it?**

I am sad for Christian, who is a super creative man, I am also sad for those who worked for him, for all of those craftsmen who lost their jobs. They created couture in the most traditional way and I look at this as an end of an era, knowledge and skill that may disappear with the closing of Lacroix House. When we designed his maison couture, we had to complete the job within three months. Christian followed our work for years. He admired we have done in interiors and called us the new Jean Michel Frank. He had determined that if would ever open his own studio, he would commission us with the interiors.

**Working with Christian Lacroix in the 80s was the turning point in your career, and overnight you were crowned as the golden pair of the design world.**

It is true, but by that time we had already had three shows in New York and were featured on the cover of the New York Times Magazine.

**In 2002 you parted from Elisabeth and started working on your own. Why?**

I wanted to start expressing myself in different ways. I was looking for the freedom that one cannot achieve when working in partnership. Working with Elisabeth was about a constant conversations and discussions. I was ready to move on, and now it is about my own desires. It is just me.

**Your Abyss Table had become one of your most recognizable designs. It looks like a jewel, it is glamorous, dramatic, dazzling, and striking. With its scale and approach, with the precious materials and finish, it is reminding me of the famous desk of Louis XV at the Galerie Versailles. What is Abyss?**

Abyss was named after the deepest point of the ocean. Indeed, it is the most iconic work of mine and it will be make in an edition of 8. We have made four so far, and you are definitely correct with your observation because it reveals that high luxury of the Louis XV furniture.

**I have seen the new publication of your work by Reed Krakoff, published by Rizzoli here for the first time. It a beautiful coffee table books with high gloss, fantastic photographs of your work. But there is a very little text. Would you like someone to write an academic critical account on your work?**

Susan Yelavich wrote about my work and I like to read what she has done, as her work brings to the surface aspects that I have not been aware of. It is something that design historians can do very well, to explore me as a person, as an artist and look deeply into the meanings of my work.

**There has been a talk about design as art, about the boundaries of these two, or some say one arena. What is the relationship between the two? You show at the Kasmin Gallery stimulates that notion that design is art. It is certainly a long contested issue, the relationship between design and art. The French designer Pierre Paulin, who recently died, said that design is not art. He said that whereas art is almost sacred, a product of enlightenment, design should be functional. What is your stand on that issue?**

I am not fond of all this talk about design and art. I do not believe that it is necessary to define those boundaries. To me, this is an open field.

**What is your next project?**

I am working on a new show with David Gill, my London gallery and on the upcoming show at the New York gallery of Paul Kasmin, scheduled to be open in February.