

# CONTEMPORARY SILVER

## Made in Italy

5 August 2004 – 13 February 2005

*Contemporary silver: made in Italy* brings together significant loans from Italy in addition to objects from the Powerhouse Museum's own collection. It features over 150 silver items, mostly silverware for the table, many of which were designed by leading 20th and 21st century international architects.

### **Background: a fabulous tradition from antiquity to the early 20th century**

Silversmithing has been practiced for many centuries in Europe. The discovery of silver deposits in Anatolia in about 2500 BC led to a greater production of silver objects in Mesopotamia. Silver also played an important role in ancient Greece and Rome where it was used for domestic and personal objects, sacrificial bowls, drinking vessels and other household utensils. However, it was mainly in Rome that new techniques such as casting, hammering, chasing, engraving, high-relief, and decorative inlay were developed.

Gothic styles of silversmithing flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries, leaving a legacy of ecclesiastical silver objects. By the Italian Renaissance in the late 15th century, work in precious metals was highly regarded and considered equal to painting and sculpture. Elaborate ecclesiastical and ceremonial silver pieces were produced during this time and many famous architects and artists also trained in silversmithing. Their skills came to be greatly admired and many of these artists worked at grand European courts.



*Phoemina* and *Diana* vases, Minimal collection, designed by Gabriele De Vecchi in 1978 and made by De Vecchi in Milan.

Technical advances continued through the 16th century, with Rome being the birthplace of some of the most inventive and dramatic silver works at that time. The 17th and 18th centuries continued the production of extravagant silver with the development of distinctive styles such as rococo, neoclassical, art nouveau as well as highly ornamental designs which were combinations of various historical styles.

Italian design suffered for some time during World War I due to government restrictions and a lack of exposure to contemporary developments in other countries. Benito Mussolini's fascist regime was keen to foster Italian art and industry and the 1920s and '30s saw an unprecedented number of local and international decorative arts and design exhibitions which showcased local talent. In the tradition of the renaissance and baroque periods, decorative arts manufacturers often engaged architects to design their products.

## Silver — myths and facts

- In ancient cultures, the moon was often associated with silver (and gold with the sun). The moon goddess, Artemis, carried a silver bow.
- Astrologers associate the Moon with imagination, fantasy, dreams and poetry.
- Like the moon, silver requires light and darkness for its reactions. When highly polished, silver receives light and reflects back tones of white and grey.
- Historically, silver was predominantly used for making coins, mirrors, ornaments, jewellery and table utensils.
- Most mirrors are made by coating glass with silver, which reflects back what is placed before it.
- In photography silver creates a 'memory-image' of the past.
- The interest in space travel in the 1970s brought with it an interest in all things silver. Photographs beamed back to earth from the 1969 moon landing show decidedly silvery moonscapes.

## Syllabus links

These notes are suitable for students of Design & Technology Years 7–10, Design and Technology Stage 6, Visual Arts Years 7–10, Visual Arts Stage 6 as well as tertiary students of design, architecture, jewellery, fine arts, interior design, graphic design and industrial design.

A special supplement is included for students of Italian.



Covered jug in silver and plastics designed by Michele De Lucchi for Cleto Munari, made by Rossi & Arcandi, Vicenza, 1979–80.

## Exhibition introduction and themes

### Contemporary silver: made in Italy

For three decades Italy has been a world leader in the production of innovative, finely-made silverware for the home. This success has been engineered by Italian silversmiths and producers working closely with some of the world's most acclaimed architects and designers.

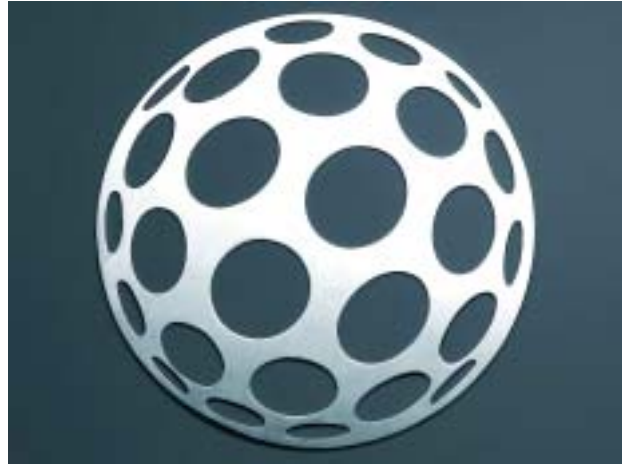
Beginning with some examples from the 1950s and 1960s, this exhibition of sterling and pure silver objects selected from leading firms and studios is presented chronologically, from the 1970s to today.

From the entrepreneurs of the 1970s who rejected historical designs in search of modernity, to the iconic postmodern silverware of Memphis and Alessi and beyond, to the most recent explosion of ideas, *Contemporary silver* reveals how an ancient craft in Italy developed a truly modern spirit to seduce contemporary consumers.

### The 1950s and 1960s: post-World War Two modern

Even though distinctively modern silver objects were made in Italy in the 1930s, Italian silverware in the post-war decades looked mostly to the styles of the past. This traditional approach to silver design is still much in evidence in Italy even today.

Some designer-makers however, embraced post-war modernism. Arrigo and Olga Finzi, Piero De Vecchi and Lino Sabattini for example, displayed striking objects at Milan Triennales, Compasso d'Oro awards and in international exhibitions. Crafted in small numbers mostly for private clients, modern sterling-silverware had to wait until the 1970s for greater impact on the market and recognition.



*Vasarely* placemat designed by Rodolfo Dordoni, made by De Vecchi, 2002.

### The 1970s: modern silver reaches the market

Rising consumerism, low labour costs and a crisis in the plastics industry created a favourable climate for the renewal of silverware in Italy in the early 1970s. Determined to introduce modern sterling-silver articles into Italian homes, Milan's two silversmith-entrepreneurs, Ciro Cacchione of San Lorenzo and Gabriele De Vecchi, seized the opportunity.

It is mostly due to their vision and effort that modern Italian silverware reached a wider market. In the late 1970s, patron and collector Cleto Munari began commissioning ground-breaking designs for silver tableware from key architects and designers.

*During the 1970s and the affluent 1980s, Italian silver was transformed from a largely conservative material into an exciting modern medium. Talented designers with a postmodernist sensibility slowly moved Italian silver away from the museum pedestal and into the domestic setting.*

## The 1980s: the ground-breaking decade

Radical design ideas and collaboration with foreign architects dramatically changed the appearance of silverware made in Italy in the 1980s. In 1982, the avant-garde design group Memphis included silver objects in their extraordinary collection. The impact of Alessi's 1983 *Tea & Coffee Piazza* series — eleven tea and coffee sets designed by leading Italian and international architects — was felt in studios the world over.

Encouraged by this success and responding to growing demand, more silversmithing firms and design studios offered 'designer' silverware. While some still produced their own designs, an increasing number of guest architects and designers were invited to enrich Italian brands.

## The 1990s and beyond: silver ... more than ever contemporary

During the past decade, leading Italian studios experimented with the forms and functions of silver objects and with silver as a material. While they continued to collaborate with the 'giants' of 20th-century architecture and design, they also involved emerging new talent. Alongside limited-edition showpieces, the studios produced more affordable, highly functional articles in series.

Increasingly, objects have been designed for daily use rather than for special occasions. Whether intended for the table, for use in the kitchen or just for display, Italian-made silver continues to inspire and set the highest standards as the new century unfolds.

*Technological advances in the design process with the use of new digital technologies has enabled architects and designers such as Australia's Tom Kovac to continue to push the boundaries of traditional forms.*

## Glossary of silversmithing techniques

While limited edition objects in this exhibition have been mostly hand crafted, many have been made using traditional techniques combined with industrial methods. Below are some key terms.

**hammering:** hand-forging silver hollowware and flatware using hammers to shape a silver sheet on a wooden block or leather pad.

**Embossing (repoussé):** hammering silver-plate from the back to produce relief decoration.

**Chasing:** decorating the surface of articles with tracers and hammers by indenting it to create a design. Chasing is coarser than engraving which cuts into metal and removes it.

**Spinning (lathe-turning):** gradually pressing a silver disc against a wooden form (chuck) rotating on a lathe, conforming to the internal shape of the article.

**Die-stamping:** forcing a silver sheet with a shaped stamp into a hollow die conforming to the external shape of the finished article.

**Bright cut engraving:** creating patterns by a series of short cuts with a tool (burin) into the metal to achieve narrow faceted channels that reflect light, giving a sparkling effect.

*'When I started to work with silver full time (this was in 1962), I found myself handling an aristocratic material that was in conflict with my socially oriented way of thinking. How could I produce something for the community while using a material intended for kings?'*

— Gabriele De Vecchi, *La lingua degli specchi: l'atelier De Vecchi, 50 anni di storia nell'argento*, Giacobone, ed, Electa, Milan, 1997

## The properties of silver

**Reflection:** silver is photo-reactive which means it is able to transport light. Like a lamp that reflects light from one point in space to another, silver can create a virtual image which is a distortion or fusion of real and reflected image. Unlike some metals, silver cannot be cut with a laser.

‘I have discovered that if you work and shape silver ... it vanishes in your hands ... the object turns into a sort of black hole in space ... in which I can see for example, a magnified reflection of my eye ...’

— Gabriele de Vecchi

**Superior heat and energy conduction:** pure silver is one of the best conductors of heat. It has the unique ability to distribute heat evenly from top to bottom. Silver cookware allows cooking at low or medium temperatures which means that the nutritional properties of food are not altered. Cooking over a low flame can enhance flavour and save energy. Silver is also the best electrical conductor of all metals.

**Non-reactive:** unlike many other metals, pure silver does not interact with food to leave a metallic taste.



Covered bon-bon bowl designed by Sergio Asti in 1993, made by De Vecchi in Milan.



Saucepan and risotto pot in pure (99.9%) silver and titanium, part of the Cooking in Pure Silver range designed by Afra and Tobia Scarpa in 1997-98 and made by San Lorenzo in Milan in 1999.

**Antiseptic:** silver has been found to have bactericide and fungicide properties and was used by ancient Mediterranean cultures to purify water. Silver oxide is still used today in aqueducts.

**Tactile:** silver warms to body temperature and its reflective qualities encourage the user to touch the object. Designers who work in silver have often exploited this quality to great advantage.

**Indicator of value:** silver gifts have traditionally been given to celebrate significant occasions such as births, christenings, birthdays and marriages. The convention of giving silver gifts to celebrate 25 years of marriage was well established by the middle of the 19th century.

‘Precious material is not sufficient to render an object luxurious; the luxury lies in the design and skills required to make it.’

— From San Lorenzo ‘Cooking in pure silver’ brochure, Milan, 1999

## Focus questions

1. What conventions or methods do silversmiths use to indicate the quality of a silver product?
2. Select an item from the exhibition and determine the surface techniques which have been used? (*See glossary of techniques, p 4, for more details.*)
3. Describe three functional objects in the exhibition that make use of novelty or the element of play in their design. What do you think the designer was trying to express with these features?
4. Select an object from the exhibition designed by a prominent international architect. Research the architect and compare their design of silver to one of their architectural projects. Consider the similarities and differences between the two designs.
5. What were some of the economic and social conditions of post-war Italy which encouraged the production of innovative silverware?
6. What were some of the economic and social conditions that created a favourable climate for the renewal of silverware in Italy in the early 1970s?
7. Which highly influential company became a leader in the production of high quality and innovative silverware in the 1980s? What is the name of the collection which is said to have launched this company's international profile?
8. Which design cooperative established in the early 80s became instrumental in challenging conventional notions of form and function? What were the trademark characteristics of this group's designs?



*Pannocchia* bowls, designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg, made by San Lorenzo, 1971.

9. What was the most popular style of silverware prior to World War II?
10. What moulding technique used in the aircraft industry (and in the creation of the Vespa) was later used by Gabriele De Vecchi in the production process of his silver products? What were the advantages of this particular technique?
11. What are the advantages of using pure silver in the manufacture of cookware? What kind of research would a manufacturer undertake to ascertain silver's effectiveness for cooking purposes? What kinds of professionals might be engaged in this research?

12. What happens to silverware after continual use or after being in the dishwasher?
13. Describe the process of *repoussé*. List three objects from the exhibition which use this technique.
14. List 10 materials (other than silver) used in objects on display in the exhibition. Describe your favourite combination of materials and the reasons you believe they create an effective design.
15. Compare the techniques used to make the *Vasarely* placemat (from the De Vecchi Too series designed by Rodolfo Dordoni in 2002 and made by De Vecchi in Milan) with the *Elite* beakers (designed and made by Olga Finzi Baldi in Milan in the 1960s).
16. What tools do designers such as Tom Kovac use to develop their highly sculptural and irregular designs?
17. Name three objects in the exhibition which use the reflective qualities of silver as an integral part of their design.
18. Which designer featured in *Contemporary Silver: made in Italy* was keen to explore the optical illusions created by silver? Name an object that does this?
19. Which object in the exhibition is named after a famous storybook character?
20. What is the common theme for the names of pieces created by the Memphis group? Why do you think they used these names?



Stackable tea and coffee service, Manhattan, designed by Olga Finzi, made by Finzi Arte in Milan in 1957. When assembled as a 'tower' the set can be used as a vase. Assembled service 51.5 cm h.

21. Name the piece created by San Lorenzo and Afra Tobia which is inspired by a character from the Venetian carnival?
22. Name two tea and coffee services whose lids feature initials to indicate their contents?
23. Find examples of the following types of objects: domestic, jewellery, furniture or other.

## Resources

### Books

- *Contemporary silver: made in Italy*, Eva Czernis-Ryl, Powerhouse Publishing, 2004
- *La lingua degli specchi: l'atelier De Vecchi, 50 anni di storia nell'argento*, Giacobone, ed, Electa, Milan, 1997
- T F Giacobone (ed), *Italian silverware of the 20th century: from decorative arts to design*, Electa, Milan, 1993.
- A Mendini (ed), *Tea & coffee towers*, Mondadori Electa, Milan, 2003.
- B Radice, *Memphis*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1995.
- *Tea & coffee piazza*, Officina Alessi, Shakespeare & Co, Brescia (Italy) 1985.
- *The work of the silversmith's studio, San Lorenzo, Milano 1970–1995*, exhibition catalogue for the

Victoria and Albert Museum, Electa, Milan, 1995.

- *Mod to Memphis: design in colour 1960s–80s*, Powerhouse Publishing Sydney, 2002

### Websites

- The Silver Institute, a worldwide association of silver miners, refiners, fabricators and manufacturers.  
<http://www.silverinstitute.org>
- For more information about associations between silver and the moon, visit:  
[www.skyscript.co.uk/metal.html](http://www.skyscript.co.uk/metal.html)

### Please note

The websites referred to in these notes were available and suitable at the time of publication. We advise teachers to check sites before recommending them to students.



### Exhibition book

Available in the Powerhouse Museum Shop or by mailorder  
([www.powerhousemuseum.com/publish](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/publish))

\$39.95 (pb) and \$55 (hc), 128 pages  
members price \$35.95 (pb) and \$49.50 (hc)

An exhibition developed in association with the Museo per gli Argenti Contemporanei (Sartirana) with loans generously provided by the Museo Alessi, De Vecchi, Pampaloni, San Lorenzo, Sawaya & Moroni and the Gallery Paolo Curti/Annmaria Gambuzzi & Co, Milan.

For more information on the exhibition  
*Contemporary silver: made in Italy*,  
visit the Powerhouse Museum's website  
<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com>

For more information about education support  
or your booking, contact Education and Visitor  
Services at the Powerhouse Museum:  
Telephone — (02) 9217 0222  
Fax — (02) 9217 0441  
Email — [edserv@phm.gov.au](mailto:edserv@phm.gov.au)

Get regular updates about museum programs  
delivered directly to your computer by joining our  
listserv. Email: [edserv@phm.gov.au](mailto:edserv@phm.gov.au)

## Activities for students of Italian

1. a. Quante ciotole ci sono nell'immagine?

Ci sono \_\_\_\_ ciotole grandi, \_\_\_\_ ciotole medie e \_\_\_\_ ciotole piccole. Sono \_\_\_\_ ciotole in tutto.



*Pannocchia* bowls, designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg, made by San Lorenzo, 1971.

- b. Quante ciotole ci sono nella mostra?

Ci sono solo \_\_\_\_\_ nella mostra. C'è \_\_\_\_\_ ciotola gr\_\_\_\_, una \_\_\_\_\_ media e \_\_\_\_\_.

- c. La superficie di queste ciotole è \_\_\_\_\_ e \_\_\_\_\_.  
(liscia, ondulata, lucida, opaca)

- d. Completa la frase.

Le ciotole sono tutte uguali/diverse ma hanno la stessa forma/misura. Ogni oggetto è decorato/liscio e da poco/tanta luce.

2. a. Che forma è?

cubo piramide sfera  
cilindro cerchio  
triangolo quadrato



*Vasarely placemat*, designed by Rodolfo Dordoni in 2002, made by De Vecchi.

- b. Stand directly in front of this item. What happens to the pattern? Choose the sentence that best describes it.

- i. I cerchi sono molto piccoli.  
ii. I cerchi cambiano forma.  
iii. I cerchi diventano più piccoli e sembrano cambiare forma.

- c. Rispondi Vero o Falso

La forma è simmetrica. \_\_\_\_\_  
È un DVD. \_\_\_\_\_  
È un piatto. \_\_\_\_\_

3. a. In your opinion, what is this for? (fiori, candele, decorazione, portacenere, specchio)

- b. Which words describe the finish: (freddo, lucido, opaco, liscio, morbido, duro, riflettente, ondulato)

- c. Compare the picture with the item exhibited.

Cosa manca? \_\_\_\_\_

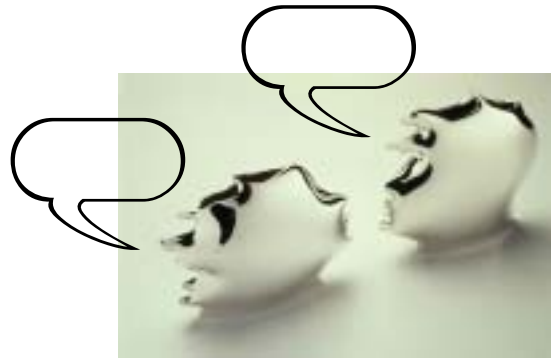
- d. What shape does the item in the exhibition have? (una donna, una bambina, una nuvola, un pesce)

- e. What shape do the items in the picture have? (due amanti, due bambini, due nuvole, due pesci)

- f. One of the pieces in the picture is not at the exhibition.

Secondo te, dov'è? \_\_\_\_\_

- g. If they could communicate from a distance, what would they say to one-another? Che cosa si dicono? Scrivi il dialogo.



*Phoemina and Diana* vases, designed by Gabriele De Vecchi in 1978, made by De Vecchi.

- h. Imagine you are one of these objects. Describe what you can see, hear and feel at this exhibition.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(tanti ragazzi, sono molto interessati, non mi guardano, parlano, ridono, c'è troppo chiasso, sono triste/felice perché, quella ragazza/quel ragazzo è molto bella/bello, sono stanco/a, mi piace, ho paura)

4. a. Collega con una freccia.

**Creative description**  
**Il fenicottero**

- La coda
- L'ala
- La zampa
- Il becco
- Il ciuffo di piume



Design drawing for Tea & Coffee Piazza (below) by Alessandro Mendini.

**Description for its use**  
**La piazza**

- La caffettiera
- La zuccheriera
- La teiera
- Il bricchetto per la panna
- Il beccuccio
- Il manico
- La base

b. Questo è un disegno per 'la piazza' di Alessi. Secondo te, perché ha usato questi colori nel disegno?

b. Che forme vedi? (cono, rombo, cilindro, triangolo, quadrato, piramide)

5. a. Describe this coffee set using some of the examples below:



Tea and Coffee Piazza, designed by Alessandro Mendini for Alessi, 1983.

- sembrano come dei fenicotteri
- sono in uno stagno d'argento
- guardano il sole che tramonta
- è una famiglia, con il padre la madre e due figli

c. Le linee usate sono \_\_\_\_ curve/rette/tratteggiate.

d. Select the sentence that best describes why this piece is called *Pinocchieide*. Give reasons for your choice.

Il beccuccio della caffettiera è come il naso di Pinocchio.

Il manico della teiera è fatto di legno.

Il coperchio della teiera sembra il cappello di Pinocchio.

e. Describe the sort of person that you imagine would own this object. Make a list in Italian.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

b. Imagine that you could touch this coffee service. How would it feel? Write a list. When you return to school, reflect on the words that you have written and turn them into similies. Example: **Freddo come il ghiaccio**; **Lucido come uno sp**, etc.

f. Describe the person's home and where they would display this object. (In Italian)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. Aguzza gli occhi! Quale sono le differenze tra il disegno e la piazza di Alessi?

6. a. This piazza is called *Pinocchieide*. Write the name of the famous character that it resembles.



*Pinocchieide* tea and coffee set, designed by Lapo Binazzi, made by Pampaloni, 1987.

7. I salvadanai — the moneyboxes

a. Ci sono tre salvadanai diversi. Uno è come una c \_\_\_\_\_, l'altro è come un reg \_\_\_\_\_, il terzo è come un \_\_\_\_\_.

b. Immagina cosa senti quando cascano le monetine nel terzo salvadanaio.

\_\_\_\_\_