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Milan Furniture Fair: mixed not matched

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The Hermes exhibition space at Palazzo Serbelloni, Milan.

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The fashion boutiques along Milan's swanky Via Monte Napoleone got in on the act at this year's Milan Furniture Fair (the annual Salone del Mobile). Bottega Veneta and Etro had their homeware to the fore, while Maserati sponsored the pavement-side display cases of furniture classics.

Halfway along the street, La Murrina, an outlet for the glassware of Murano, had on display a life-sized pink glass crocodile emerging toothily from a Venetian lagoon in a water tank on crystal legs – complete with blown glass reeds and a golden heron. It is hard to know what was more astonishing about it – its vulgarity or the workmanship involved in its creation.

Whatever happened to modernism's aspirations for design for the masses? Whatever happened to luxurious minimalism, for that matter?



In furniture design, the quality middle market seems to have vanished. On offer is either IKEA, or a bespoke, "design art" extravaganza. Fashion and publishing are going the same way – free-sheets and H&M, or lusciously printed photography magazines for the price of books. There's not a lot in between for those who have a discerning eye and a bottom to their pockets as well.

Crocodiles apart, a whiff of austerity hung in the air at Milan this year. Launch parties were notably fewer and smaller, and a little extra soda stretched out the Aperol spritzes. That wasn't due just to the exorbitant rents venues were asking of exhibitors but to a lack of the innovative buzz of pre-GFC years.

The fair felt as flat as a forgotten bottle of prosecco, with far too many companies simply showing old products in new colours or finishes.

AUSTERITY? WHAT AUSTERITY?

Some brands clearly didn't get the austerity memo, however – most notably Hermès. Nothing says "posh" like a palazzo, and the company had fitted out an enfilade of staterooms in the 18th-century Palazzo Serbelloni to reveal its home collection. And beautiful it was too, in a dimly lit, heart of darkness, junglified way.

Panels of silk depicting lush tropic undergrowth were the backdrop to a range of furniture inspired by luggage and campaign furniture, such as a crafted timber travelling desk that folded away into its own valise. There was a customised cocktail bar by Philippe Nigro for \$A500,000 and elegant LED lamps and lanterns bound in stitched leather. Ebony, pearwood and horsehair also made a prominent feature.

Milanese design guru Rossana Orlandi set up shop in the house museum of the barons Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi. Among the contemporary works on sale alongside the 19th-century collection of noblemen's Renaissance baubles was a black lacquer safe complete with giant gilded key that folded down to a princess bed. This is the work of Slovenian designer Nika Zupanc, and only three have been made.

On display elsewhere in the museum were handblown glasses from J Hill's Standard. The company is using designers Martino Gamper and Scholten & Baijings to revive Waterford, the crystal brand that bit the Irish dust.

Other exhibitors sought out cheaper premises on the presumption that more grit means more hip. *Wallpaper** magazine's annual "Handmade" curated show joined others in locating to a dodgy neighbourhood near the city's main station. There was a pretence that the objects shown were practical: a "Jungle Wash" bathroom vanity in green Guatemalan marble, a picnic basket, a sewing set. All were exquisitely rendered in expensive materials, including Adelaide studio Daniel Emma's walnut and polished aluminium dustpan and brush.

The Adult Tool Kit, a series of black glass sex toys by Jeff Zimmerman and Michael Reynolds blows the cover on any of this being genuine utility chic.

PLAYFUL COLLECTION

A few doors down, Dutch collective Droog was selling a truly affordable and playful collection developed in conjunction with Amsterdam's reopened Rijksmuseum and gift shop. These included "tea for one", a traditional white china teapot with its bottom half sliced clean off ("tea for two" has two handles and two spouts), pleated paper napkin rings like the neck ruff from a Golden Age portrait, and an embroidered damask tablecloth depicted in a Dürer work in the museum. Except this time around it's made of white rubber.

Otherwise Milan was a little threadbare on the inspiration front, with not much resembling a trend – unless a wisp of psychedelia counts. Studio Job reworked earlier imagery to create wallpaper patterns including Withered Flowers (like a droopy William Morris print); Alexander McQueen and The Rug Company showed butterfly and poppy-strewn floor coverings; and Lasvit presented kinetic crystal chandeliers. The "Alice" chandelier by Petra Krausová gently opened and closed its glass leaves in time, one imagines, to the puffs on a caterpillar's hookah. Maybe a pink crocodile was on trend after all.

Such glimmers may be less a sense of "the hell with austerity, let's turn on, tune in and drop out" and more a sign that the mine of mid-century modernism has been thoroughly worked out.

Younger designers at the fair got pushed out to Ventura Lambrate, a zone of ratty garages and workshops near Linate Airport, where they made up for a lack of resources with enthusiasm and commitment: Pepe Heykoop trains Mumbai slum dwellers to turn bottles into vases, and the Berlin-based Refugee Company for Crafts and Design is skilling up immigrants in furniture making. Sadly, its products are awful.

OCCASIONAL DELIGHT

But there was the occasional delight in Ventura Lambrate, such as an ingenious shelving system made out of pegboards and wooden rods by the small, Puglia-based studio Foro Officina. If European countries could successfully harness what remains of their manufacturing and artisanal traditions to clever designs such as these, they could be the beginning of the answer to Germany's economic Mittelstand and go some way to restoring the vanished middle.

But don't expect the next generation of designers to necessarily assail the establishment. While in the past young hopefuls went cap in hand to the big design houses with their prototypes, artisanal designers these days are more likely to make and market their products themselves, possibly avoiding expensive Milan altogether.

They still need money to survive in the meantime, though, and this is the thinking behind the inaugural \$35,000 Be Open prize for young designers launched within the ancient brick cloisters of Milan University. Austrian winners Misher Traxler are an inventive duo who delight in the mischievously conceptual, such a basket-making machine that only works when somebody is looking at it and their 'Relumine' light, which makes a new lamp out of two discarded ones by joining their bulb holders together with a fluorescent tube.

The award buys them time to think. As jury member Giulio Cappellini pointed out, "you can't be contemporary unless you do research".

Even at the bubble-headed Salone del Mobile, ideas still matter, and "make do and mend" is definitely a trend.
