

“To change. Enzo Mari and the “Chestnut Tree Project””

- Curated from the Keiji Nagai collection –

Thursday, 4 April ~ Sunday, 21 July 2019

Planting the “Chestnut Tree project”.

Why are we having an exhibition of the Italian design master, Enzo Mari, at MUJI?

In 2002, MUJI collaborated with Mari on a project, launching a range of 19 tables and chairs altogether. Both parties have stayed in contact since then, and one day Mari explained his outlook to us:

“In the past, design played a role to invent an outstanding standard in the name of equality. However, following a period of drastic economic growth, it has now been degraded to a simple means to sell merchandise. At present I feel rather ashamed to be a designer. Here I would like to propose a long-term project to go forward towards the future: it isn't for financial gain in the short term, but is more like planting chestnut trees to nourish people with their fruit, and to let them relax under their shade. I believe that companies should have this kind of viewpoint”.

We agree with his opinion, and would like to think about what we could do together with you all. This exhibition introduces the basis of Enzo Mari's works in order to plant the first chestnut tree. Then let us imagine this tree growing its branches and leaves from that moment.

Five Important Ideas of Enzo Mari

Enzo Mari is a maestro in Italian design who has completed more than 1800 projects spanning over 50 years. ‘What is design? I don't know’, he would often say, as if he was trying betraying our image of the maestro who knew all about design. What do his words mean?

Not only Mari, but other Italians who had driven industrial design after the war have called ‘design’ as ‘*progetto*’, and ‘designer’ as ‘*progettista*’. *Progetto* implies to the entire process that leads to a physical form which is the best answer possible for a question. *Progetto* on the other hand, involves many people in different positions, from entrepreneurs and their employees, factories, to craftspeople and even sellers. Since other aspects such as materials, technology, machine tools and so on are also complexly intertwined into this process, as a result each situation becomes unique and impossible to repeat. Mari didn't deal with *progetto* referencing any of his prior knowledge or experience, but tended to work from scratch every single time. This is one of the reasons why he simply cannot answer the question ‘what is design’.

On the other hand, Mari's work has a consistent philosophy. His idea is to strive for utopia, an ideal which we are to find ‘nowhere.’ Mari once said, ‘If we cannot bring about change, it is not a good *progetto*.’ What he wants to change is not the ‘form’ of things, but rather the society, economy and the system of production system in order to get closer to this utopia. To do that, Mari has talked to people

with sincerity and though sometimes even raising his voice in doing so. It was from one of these dialogues that he told us the story of the 'Chestnut Tree.'

In this exhibition, the 'form' of things which you can see probably does not immediately tell of the idea of utopia that lies underneath. However, the 'form' does indeed shake our senses and this gives us clues, which is the entry point for deeper insights.

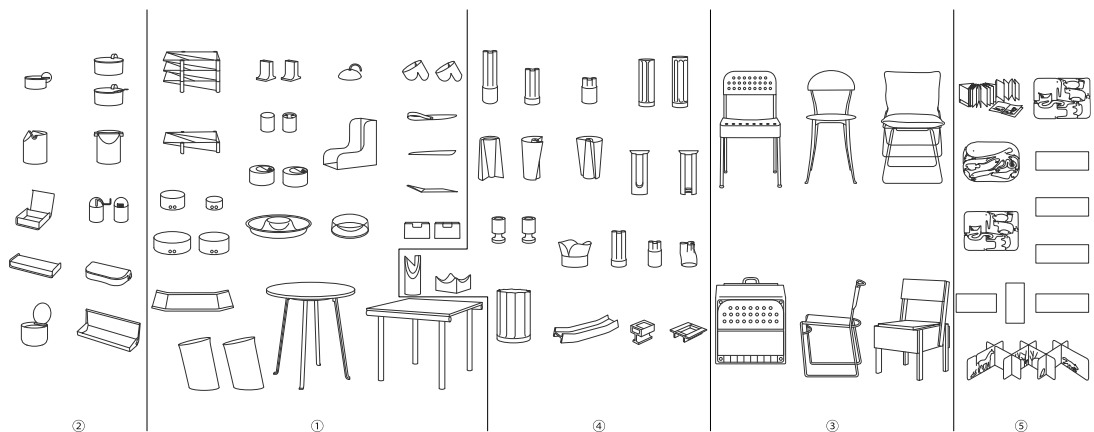
In this exhibition, Mari's ideas (projects) are classified into five categories.

- 1 Standard / The Utopia of Everyday Things
- 2 Joints / How are the Parts Assembled?
- 3 Archetype / Branches and Leaves Growing from the Roots
- 4 Beauty / Thoughts Hidden behind the Form
- 5 Play / The Origin of our Project

What does Mari tell us through his project? Please view the exhibition using this booklet as a 'clue' to find out.

'The Chestnut Tree Project' begins with curiosity.

Exhibition Layout



1 Standard / The Utopia of Everyday Things

The etymology of the word 'standard' is the French word '*étendard*', meaning 'flag'. In design, 'flags' represented a certain high standard.

'Standard' can be understood as in the same way as 'criteria'. But Mari says 'The etymology of 'Standard' is '*étendard*', the French word for 'flag'*', and the origin of the word 'standard' does in fact have the meaning of 'flag' or 'banner.' The word '*étendard*' appears in the lyrics of La Marseillaise, a revolutionary song of the French Revolution which later became the French national anthem, and this history has a specific meaning for Mari. But why French Revolution and Design? There is actually a clue to the answer of this question, as one of the flags raised for the French Revolution actually symbolises 'equality'. It is Mari's theory that the revolution, which aroused from the thirst for equality, was one of the historical events that would lead to modern design. There used to be a time when very few people could possess things, but suddenly people could experience ownership thanks to mass production. Mari exclaims that here, it is the people who hold the 'flags' high must make sure that standards do not get compromised. While Mari probably has the awareness that the utopia of equality would never exist anywhere, he has nonetheless raised the 'flag' of a utopia that would come true through 'things'. As he worked on projects, Mari would continue to voice out this theory to people who had misunderstandings. Good designs can make a change. It may be worthwhile to return to the origin of the design once more and think about the potential of 'things.'

* The origin of the word flag is '*estandard*' in old French

One of Mari's concern is to figure out how to bring out the maximum effect by using industrial standard materials and simple machines. Three papers knives, *Benbecula*, *Ameland*, and *Giglio* are created with the simple ideas of cutting, folding (or bending) and polishing stainless steel. The beauty of both form and function are realised in these items.

While working for *Danese*, Mari has set a standard for high quality daily necessities made from PVC, melamine and various plastics. At the same time, he had also considered a manufacturing method that saves on the cost of plastic injection mouldings. *Adal* and *Atollo*, are fruit bowls which forms are produced by heating and vacuuming 2mm thick pieces of PVC sheet dotted with holes. The holes serve to allow air to circulate to the bottom of the bowl and in this sense, the function became the design.

2 Joints / How are the parts assembled?

Changing parts also changes its entirety; relating everyone involved to every part of the project.

One of the ground-breaking details created by Mari is the 'joint'. For instance, the container '*Java*' is a masterpiece that eliminates complicated parts to instead function with only two parts - the body and lid, which composes of a very simple mechanism that opens and closes the container. Mari has been passionate about creating joints focusing on simplicity in other designs too. This is Mari's unique intention to get closer to utopia through these projects. 'These joints save time for the factory people who would have had to struggle with the repetitive work of screwing.' Mari continued on and said, 'The world started talking about ecology, but ecology to me implicates human dignity!' The *Progettista* (Designer) is in a position to understand the overall flow of manufacturing and the work of all the people involved. In this sense, they also possess the potential to change the movement of the hands of these working people as well as their working style. As times change, in a future where artificial intelligence might be at the forefront of manufacturing to replace any inhuman work, problems relating to 'work' would still take on other forms and remain in this world. The issues that need solutions will never disappear. The joint is a symbol of how small changes can build towards an ideal where everyone actively participates in the work. It also raises the question, how do you engage in your work?

/Java

This is the project created from Mari's idea of utopia, where factory workers aren't consumed all day by tasks like the screwing of joints. The lid can be opened and closed with only two parts: the main unit and a completely flat lid. The handle part acts as a joint and is designed to be removable by sliding the lid back. There is also a specific version where the lid can be closed with the spoon inserted. (Right) Mari's study sketch.

/Flores

A container that enables the opening and closing of the lid only with two parts - the body and the lid, with the joint incorporated with integral moulding. The lid can be removed by sliding it up in its closed position. This design was awarded the *Compasso d'Oro* award. (Above) Sketches of various joints for projects.

/Fraglioni

The metal handle of the pepper mill (right) is connected to the slit of the melamine resin body and can be removed. Sold in a set with a salt shaker. Below is a disassembly drawing.

3 Archetype / Branches and leaves growing from the roots

Can we create more 'new' chair designs in the future? The archetypes that lies in the tens of thousands of chairs.

Somewhere in the world today, 'new' chairs are being designed. However, Mari mentioned that in modern design 'There are few chairs in history which can be said as truly innovative and new.' He would refer to such kind of design as 'Archetype'. One representative example is the bentwood *Thonet* chair, invented by Michael Thonet in the 19th century. The bentwood technology enabled mass production and compact transportation with ready-to-assemble kits. Mari exhibited five chairs of his own archetype at the exhibition '*Enzo Mari, il lavoro al centro*,' which was held both in Barcelona and Milan in 1990. In this exhibition, four of his archetypes were exhibited and a fifth chair, *autoprogettazione*, which was not designed for any manufacturers, was also added. In 1974, Mari held an exhibition '*autoprogettazione?*', where 19 pieces of furniture were displayed. The exhibition included roughly-finished tables and beds assembled by carpenters. Free drawings were provided to encourage one to build their own pieces, including the fifth chair. Although this unprecedented exhibition was criticised at that time as a form of 'infringement on design', it has increasingly gained understanding over the years. Younger generations are appreciating for work done by hand and welcome the idea of open-source information. Perhaps this kind of design might even become an archetype. As Mari said, 'We don't need a design just so to make something look different!' and indeed we don't need 'new works' anymore. It may be more meaningful to 'grow' such archetypes, their derivatives and useful variations, just as healthy branches and leaves can grow from the roots. It is perhaps time that we ought to get to know this tree.

/Box

The chair was sold in a compact package composing of the seat and the backrest, which are made of polypropylene and packed along with the steel structure. It became a popular item as an innovative ready-to-assemble plastic chair in the 70s. On the left is the package. The initial version had a backrest made of fabric.

/Sof Sof

A comfortable dining chair with a removable cushion set on a steel rod skeleton structure.

/Delfina

Made from electrically welded steel rods, a fabric seat and backrest that are removable by zippers, this chair can be beautifully and compactly stacked. It was awarded the *Compasso d' Oro* award in 1979 as an innovative chair at that time. The chair was first produced by *Driade*, then through *Robots*. It is currently manufactured by *REXITE*.

A project that began with the owner of *Zanotta* suggesting the use of forged aluminium technology in the construction of furniture. It was inspired in particular by pitons used in mountaineering, of which the construction is stronger and lighter than cast versions. Faced with this challenge and in line with the entrepreneurial spirit, Mari designed an 'essential' chair. At the end however, the structure of the chair was manufactured by casting, with the back and the seat made of synthetic resin covered with leather. There is also another version without leather.

4 Beauty / Thoughts Hidden Behind the form

'Beauty' dwells in industrial products. There are many processes in the background of any design and there is much know about the thoughts behind the form.

The beauty in Mari's works is evident in the forms where the essence of materials can be found. The young Mari, who was working in visual arts in the 1950s, was discovered by Bruno Munari and soon after that he began designing for *Danese*. The beauty of the form shone brilliantly in the many daily items Mari designed for *Danese*, however, Mari disliked how the success of industrial products are evaluated based on the idea of 'beauty'. He would explode in anger when the viewer stops thinking as soon as they are captivated by 'beauty'. For example, in the category of flower vases one of Mari's experiments was to find ways to reduce the manufacturing cost. The result had *Bivalve** costing the most, followed by *Pago-Pago*, *Trifoglio* and *Bambu*, which was the least expensive to produce. At the end, Industrial PVC pipes, or as Mari called it 'sewer-pipes' was used as a material, which was finished by vacuum forming with a simple mould. Cutting the form after moulding to create variations of the form was also ground-breaking at the time. For *Trifoglio*, Mari also tried an unglazed version by combining moulding and manual work (though in this experimentation, it increased the production cost).

** The *Putrella* and *Paros* series were conceived from experiments dealing with integrating industrial designs and handcrafts, where the skills of craftspeople met with industrial materials and machinery. It was difficult to read the experimental nature behind the forms so an evangelist, Mari continued to speak up about the kinds of issues of such projects had to encounter. Sometimes he would even explode in anger, and this only engraves his words deeper into the listeners' memory. It is probably also this evangelistic behaviour of his which contributed to the success of such projects. The words of Mari only remind us of how he brought forth the beauty of industrial products.

* Only a prototype was made in 1968 and due to its high cost, it was not commoditised. Not included in the exhibition list.

** Despite tackling the cost issue, it was not possible to decrease the price to that of an everyday item. The issue of how to think about the relationship between price and quality still remains.

/pago-pago

This is a design where two vessels, each of different sizes and openings are combined into one unique flower vase. Mari designed this to be made with single-injection moulding. The ABS resin material is impact-resistant and has a lustrous, beautiful appearance, and was widely used for products at that time. (Left) Blueprint of the drawing in 1969 with detailed instructions.

/putrella

This is an experimental project where craftspeople used processes such as bending, cutting and welding of construction materials to the likes of H-beams, T-beams and L-beams. Mari produced 40 variations and held an exhibition at the *Danese* showroom in 1959. The tray on the left in particular is a Mari masterpiece, as it brings out a simple beauty to an industrial-grade product. *Putrella* means girder in Italian.

/paros

An experimental project that introduced the essence of art into design by utilising the functions of machine tools for marble. Mari considered the design and operation of such machinery as craft technologies. Not only for this project, he often observed factories and the machineries before he started on new projects.

5 Play/ The Origin of Our Project

Children's play is the start of the self-sustaining project. An experiment in design to explore the origins.

One of Mari's very early projects was a toy for children. *16 Animali* is a puzzle where 16 animals fit perfectly in a rectangular box is something that appeals to both children and adults. When Mari in his twenties in the 1950s, he became a father and started gaining some insights while observing his children. From the time of birth, children learn every day at an astonishing speed, and would feel great joy when they discover and understand something by themselves through play. However, the best-selling children's toys at the time also had the fastest cycle of consumption. For Mari though, time must be invested. For example when working on picture books, every single illustration was a result of an enormous amount of studies and research (at the time, he collaborated with Iela Mari to create picture books and posters). They delivered not only quality to children's play, but also tried to encourage children's independence by introducing play without a manual. He also said, 'Young children cannot choose their things so in other words, parents should be educated.' He talked about his childhood, 'I was born into a very poor family. It was a time when we had little food and possessions.' Mari was a child who spent every day trying to discover and create ways to play, thinking for himself and devising toys. When children learn something while playing, they experience great joy. This sense of pleasure remained even in Mari's adulthood, and this was the origin of the 'passion' which he brought to each project. Mari shows us that one of the most important things in life is the ability to sustain a project and maintaining it with passion.

/16 Animali

This puzzle of 16 animals was born from a considerable number of study sketches. Since each animal is an object in itself, children can create their own ways to play rather than just solving the puzzle. Later on, using the motifs of these animals, Mari created a picture book with no words called *L'Altalena* ('seesaw' in Italian).

/Il gioco delle favole

Mari researched iconic illustrations of animals and plants for children with his brother, Elio Mari between 1957 and 1965. *Il gioco delle favole*, or 'the fable game' is an educational toy in which children play with a combination of illustrated cards depicted with icons. Depending on how the cards are combined, animals meet up unexpectedly with one another and a random story is born, expanding the children's imagination. A selection of the animals illustrations were singled out later on to become a series of posters titled *Serie della natura*.

Mari and Me

I remember that it took some time for me to recognise the name Enzo Mari after buying his products.

In the 1960s, I knew about *Danese* via Bruno Munari's ashtray *Cuba*, and then I received the paper knife *Ameland*; it was the first piece in my Enzo Mari collection. While I pursued products of that particular form, which for me bear a sense of *yokane* (meaning 'nice' in the Hakata dialect of Japanese), I ended up collecting so many of his works without knowing it. Once when preparing for an exhibition, I dug through my warehouse and found more than one hundred of Mari's works, and that collection was exhibited at the Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum in the *Enzo Mari 100 Progetto* exhibition (2008).

In Japan in the 1960s through 1980s, *Danese** products were rare, so I still remember the stores and people who handled their products. Iwao Sawayama opened the first *Danese* showroom in Japan and there were shops such as 'Kokaido' in Roppongi, 'Heart Art', 'Aoyama Sarun' and so on. I also bought one from the MoMA shop in New York via a friend living in the United States. I met Mari in person through a workshop facilitated by Kosei Shirotani, a designer living in Nagasaki prefecture. From the sound of his name 'Mari', I had thought he was a woman, so I was shocked when a big, scary-looking guy appeared in front of me. Mari sometimes shouted 'Stupid!' when I judged things by their 'form'. But after that, he would teach me with great sincerity about the idea behind it. It was a low-budget workshop, so he rejected any special reception or treatment, and stayed with the other staff members in a lodging camp. I saw his hard-working attitude in the workshop classes with the craftspeople. Without even sparing time for a meal, it revealed to me his fervent soul. Among the many designers, Mari has become a maestro who remains deep in my memory.

Keiji Nagai

Much of this exhibit is composed of products from *Danese*, a brand of design products founded by Bruno Danese and Jacqueline Vodoz in 1957 in Milan, Italy. While Bruno Munari and Enzo Mari led the work, Achille Castiglioni, Angelo Mangiarotti and others also contributed. The brand exerted a significant

influence on the design world at the time by creating various outstanding industrial designs which were dissociated from mass consumption, and experimental products that introduced the handiwork of craftspeople. Unfortunately, the *Danese* shop located in the centre of Milan, closed in 1991. But the brand was revived in 2001 by a new owner who inherited the spirit of the brand. The first Japanese agency handling *Danese* was Iwao Sawayama, and after several transitions, since 2001 it has been handled by Kuwano Trading.

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The shop, handling kimono and contemporary art, opened by Takeo Fujisawa, the right-hand man to Soichiro Honda, after his retirement at Honda.

The design shop Fujie Textile. It is no longer in business.

The furniture shop that was a predecessor of ACTUS.

/No.57

The animal puzzle *16 Animali*, which was first produced in wood for the 'La Rinascente' department store in 1959, was subsequently produced using various materials such as polyurethane. Keiji Nagai saw a version of the puzzle made of *wenge* wood in Paris and fell in love with it. He then bought the material and had the puzzle recreated by pleading with Saburo Oguro, who was a leading expert in the jig saw, making this a valuable part of the collection.

*This product was produced three times for personal use with the permission of Mari during the period when *Danese* had stopped making it.