

Tradition as Transformation: Gio Ponti's Program for the Modern Italian Home, 1928-1933

Long-lived and seminal in Italian modernist architecture and design, Giovanni (Gio) Ponti (1891-1978) enjoyed a career as an architect, designer, and writer that spanned an impressive period of six decades. He promoted a modern Italian aesthetic in architecture and design through his writings, his aggressive support of the decorative arts exposition, the Biennale di Monza (later the Triennale di Milan), and the example of his own work. As a testament to his important contribution to Italian culture in the interwar period, especially in his role as director of *Domus*, one of Italy's most influential interior design magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, he was awarded the Royal Academy of Italy's prestigious *Premio Mussolini* (Mussolini Prize) in 1934.¹ Steeped in Italy's rich humanist tradition, Ponti chose the modern Italian home as his arena. Within this realm, he addressed many diverse issues, from Italy's cultural heritage to machine production.

Ponti presented his architecture and design program for the Italian home in a series of polemical essays that he wrote and published in *Domus* between 1928 and 1933. In 1933, he compiled them in *La casa all'italiana* and classified them under ten headings indicating some of his major concerns in the period: "the renewal of art production," "the renewal of architecture," and "the formulation of style."² The variations in his writings and works in this period reflect the transformation that occurred in Italian architecture and design from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s: the shift from the Milanese Novecento's emphasis on Neoclassical forms to the Italian Rationalists' emphasis on those of the machine age.³ The Rationalists and the Milanese Novecento architects shared, however, the desire to develop a modern idiom that would relate to historical Italian culture.

Ponti's Early Career

Ponti began his career in the aftermath of the First World War when the call for a return to order in political, economic, and artistic matters was heard in Italy as well as in other European countries. Although

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victorious, Italy emerged from the war in severe economic crisis. Politically, Mussolini's rise to power began in 1919 and culminated in an open dictatorship in November 1926. Inspired by the lessons of imperial Rome and Napoleon, Il Duce used the accouterments of imperialism (at its most basic was his choice of the fasces as a symbol of power) for his own aggrandizement and that of his regime.⁴ His aim was to raise a united Italy to the political and cultural level of its European rivals.⁵ Under state control, Italy's depressed economic situation began to change. A broad range of public works were undertaken, including new highways, improved ports, the electrification of the railroad, and new city plans. Jobs created by the increased industrialization of the north encouraged mass migration from the agrarian south. Northern cities grew and the middle and working classes became more affluent.

In Italy, where the classical tradition was the country's native tradition—its natural and rightful heritage—design in a classical vein was the preferred mode of expression in the 1920s and 1930s. The classical ideal was an ambiguous concept that not only encompassed works of art that were thought to transcend time, but also represented a canon of absolute formal values, based on form, proportion, and linear simplicity. In addition, the concept embraced the myth of the Mediterranean world as Arcadia, which generated recurrent rustic or folk images to support the notion of the continuity of peasant life. Italian designers, stressing the country's links with its celebrated past, explored the rich and varied potential of classical and vernacular motifs.

The most critical development in Ponti's career came in late 1927, when Ugo Ojetto offered him the directorship of the new magazine, *Domus*.⁶ The first issue was published in Milan in January 1928.⁷ Aimed at a cultured elite, it became a platform from which Ponti expressed his views on architecture, interior decoration, fine and applied arts, and Italian culture. Ponti chose the home as his arena for discovery and experimentation. As the eminent Italian architect Camillo Boito had explained in 1880: "In a democratic society such as ours, the essential monument, the dominant feature, so to speak, of the world of architecture must be the house. The Greeks had their temples and propylaea; the Romans their amphitheaters and baths; the first Christians their catacombs and basilicas; the knights in armor their cathedrals and city halls, and so forth. We have our dwellings."⁸

Both the magazine's title and Ponti's editorial "La casa all'italiana" (The Italian-style House) in the premiere issue set the tone of the publication until 1932, when both the format and the editorial opinion were modified.⁹ *Domus*, the Latin word for house, alluded to the domestic

environment of ancient Rome and symbolically evoked an idealized vision of the home as a shelter from public life.¹⁰ Ponti's drawing of a Latin ancestor holding a diminutive house in the form of a pedimented aedicula appeared above his first editorial (Fig. 1). As an emblem of the Italian home, the pedimented classical aedicula would typify the decorated Novecento style.¹¹ Through words and images, Ponti hoped to evoke in his readers a shared notion of Italian identity.

Reflecting the cultural climate in Italy in the years immediately following the war, Ponti endeavored to create an Italianate heir to the glories of Italy's historical past, but one not limited by them.¹² Like others of his generation, he used the language of classicism to develop a design program that could be both modern and traditional. Consequently, his works in all media, ranging from architecture and ceramics to metalwork and textiles, exhibit an extraordinary consistency.

Ponti's Concept of Neoclassicism

In 1921, following service in the First World War and earning a degree in architecture from the Milan Polytechnic, Ponti opened an architectural office in Milan with Emilio Lancia (1890-1973) and Mino Fiocchi (1893-1982). The influential and conservative periodical *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (Architecture and Decorative Arts), between 1922 and 1927 under the direction of the Roman architects Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947) and Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960), referred to the Milanese group as "a fasces of architects . . . ([Giuseppe] De Finetti [1892-1952], [Giuseppe] Fiocchi [1893-?], Lancia, [Giovanni] Muzio [1893-1982], Ponti) that seems oriented toward a return to the rhythm and equilibrium of the classics."¹³ Together they would develop a modern architectural idiom informed by neoclassicism that came to be known as the Milanese Novecento.¹⁴ Muzio, the unofficial leader of the group, wrote an impassioned article, "L'architettura a Milano intorno all'ottocento" (Milanese Architecture in the Nineteenth Century) in 1921, in which he characterized his work and that of his contemporaries as a reaction against the eclectic and historicist architectural styles that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Muzio aspired to "reestablish the principle of order" in the fabric of urban architecture.¹⁶ He noted that many of the architects of the group had been stationed in the Veneto region during the war, where they experienced and learned from the great architectural works of Andrea Palladio (1508-1580).¹⁷

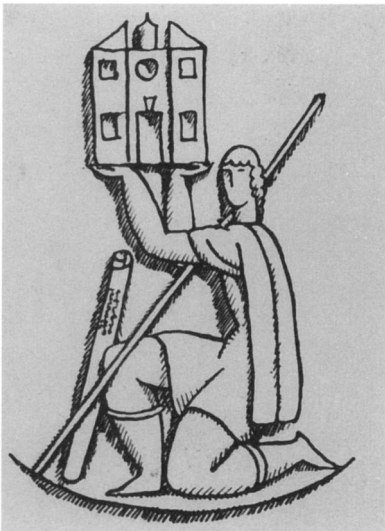


FIGURE 1
Gio Ponti (1891-1979), vignette for
inaugural editorial, "La casa all'italiana,"
Domus (January 1928): 7.

Moreover, Muzio noted that "the major impulse in the transformation of Milan, from a quasi-medieval city to a modern city, was given by

Napoleon.”¹⁸ Historically in Italy, Milan was not considered in the same category as Rome, Florence, or Venice, the great city states that had flourished in earlier centuries. With the rise of industry in the north of Italy, however, the Milanese bourgeoisie took on new importance. In an attempt to link themselves with the traditional Milanese aristocracy, they chose neoclassicism as their style.¹⁹

Muzio's so-called *Ca' Brutta* (Ugly House) of 1920-1922, a large apartment building in Milan, shows a fresh interpretation of classical architectural values.²⁰ The architectural historian Dennis Doordan has noted that “Muzio combined the severity of neoclassical forms with the complexity of mannerist compositions in a way that distinguishes the building from any possible interpretation as an exercise in period revival design. As a result, the *Ca' Brutta* appears unequivocally as a building of the Novecento, or twentieth century, and not one of the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries.”²¹ In 1931 Muzio provided an explanation of the Novecento architectural movement in his article “Alcuni Architetti d'oggi in Lombardia” (Some Architects Today in Lombardy): “An absolute Italian-ness was desired and zealously sought, and sometimes, perhaps, this lapsed into regionalism, but to have always remained faithful to our own great tradition, alive and continuous through the centuries, seems to me a great virtue. This happened because of [our] profound conviction that the essential schemes and the universal and necessary elements of architecture of the classical periods are always valid.”²²

Parallel developments were evident in the fine arts. Influential painters such as Carlo Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico used the words “classicism,” “craft,” and “order” to characterize the return to traditional values in their works. The founding in 1919 in Italy of two important magazines, *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda*,²³ gave life to this search for a recovered inheritance that reinforced the myth of the Mediterranean and the monumental tradition.²⁴ Writing in the early 1920s in *Valori Plastici*, Alberto Savinio, brother of de Chirico, called for “the restoration of an artistic, religious and social code.”²⁵ Already de Chirico and Carrà had created Metaphysical Painting, which sought to express a deeper reality beyond the visible.²⁶ By juxtaposing the columns, arcades, and broken statuary of antiquity to the train stations, flags, and other realities of the modern city, de Chirico imbued objects with personal, poetic meaning in an effort to synthesize inner and outer reality. Through his subject matter the painter seemed to seek the reconciliation of the past with modernity. Margherita Sarfatti, an influential Fascist art critic, recognized that Italian artists, such as the painters of the Novecento, could “absorb the

ancient Roman tradition with spontaneous freshness, avoiding copy or servile imitation,” as artists had done during the Renaissance.²⁷

Overall, Ponti’s editorial direction of *Domus* was grounded in his respect for the past, and his writings radiated nationalistic pride in the legacy of Italian culture. With poetic fervor, he expressed his love of the architectural forms (arches, niches, vaults, columns) and materials (stone, plaster, fresco) that to him gave order to architecture, and that stemmed from Italy’s rich historical heritage. Moreover, Ponti contrasted Italian vernacular forms developed as a response to its gentle climate with the functionalist architecture of the North, which he considered cold and impersonal.

Ponti’s writings were lessons on how to incorporate modern technology and functionality into the Italian home while respecting tradition. He proposed that “innovation was a natural fact of evolution.”²⁸ He wrote: “[the house] is not only a ‘machine à habiter.’ ”²⁹ “Its ‘comfort’ is in something superior . . . in the invitation that the Italian-style house offers to our spirit to amuse itself in restful visions of peace, that include, in the full sense of the beautiful Italian word, comfort.”³⁰ By referring to the *machine à habiter* (machine for living), the central theme of Le Corbusier’s work, Ponti hinted at the scope of his knowledge of contemporary architecture and design. He had visited and exhibited at the 1925 “Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes” in Paris. There he would have seen Le Corbusier’s progressive *Pavillon de l’Esprit nouveau*, Josef Hoffmann’s classicist Austrian Pavilion, and a variety of French *Art Moderne* structures.

Domus was the vehicle through which Ponti intended to educate the Italian public about matters of style and taste. Many articles addressed the use of antique furnishings in the modern home, and others celebrated important historical examples of architecture and applied arts, including Palladian architecture, eighteenth-century Venetian furniture, and Turkish Ushak carpets. Ponti always included works by both native and foreign artists, and in late 1930 initiated a monthly review of “interesting things from other magazines” in which he reprinted illustrations from publications such as *House and Garden* (U.S.A.), *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (Germany) and *Art et Décoration* (France).³¹ *Domus* reported on progressive, functional architecture by Walter Gropius and Robert Mallet-Stevens. In 1928 the architect Enrico Griffini (1887-1952) contributed two articles that analyzed the achievements of the architectural program of the “Die Wohnung” (The Dwelling) exhibition at the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart in 1927. As director of *Domus*, Ponti had one enduring goal—to educate the taste of the Italian buying public. He



FIGURE 2

Ponti, *Le attività gentili: I progenitori* (Noble Activities: Our Ancestors), plate, designed 1923; made by Manifattura Ceramica Richard-Ginori, Doccia, near Florence, Italy, 1924. Glazed porcelain with gold; diam. 32.7, depth 3.2 cm. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Miami Beach, Florida.

advised his readers that the new architecture and decorative arts of the 1920s and 1930s were creating “the style of today.”³²

Ponti's Design Projects in Ceramics

Ponti's own design projects provide insight into his program for the modern Italian home. In 1923 he began what would be a very productive relationship with the centuries-old ceramics manufacturer Richard-Ginori³³ as the company's artistic director and product designer.³⁴ His designs were derived from traditional forms and decorated with classical iconography. Ponti studied and sketched ancient vessels on view in public institutions in Florence and Rome. His desire to create objects that were in “harmony with Italian custom” found expression in works that had a classical form language at their core.³⁵ The *Attività gentili: I progenitori* plate (Fig. 2), for example, convincingly combines several formal and symbolic values of Roman and Latin culture. Formally the design was inspired by both Roman and Etruscan precedents: the compartmentaliza-

tion echoes the hermetic layout of ancient Roman wall painting and the gold lines that delineate the figures recall the incised decoration of Etruscan bronze vessels. On a symbolic level, the plate's title and the figures representing the arts and industry embody *Italianità* (Italian-ness) and its basis in the abstract and humanistic constructs of the Italian classical tradition.³⁶

The Richard-Ginori Company participated in many important design exhibitions of the period. Ponti's ceramics received critical acclaim at the first two Monza Biennali in 1923 and 1925 and at the 1925 Paris international exhibition of decorative arts. The Biennale was organized in response to a debate in Italian cultural circles regarding the production of decorative arts, the quality of technical and artistic instruction, and the rapport between schools, stores, industry, and the Italian market.³⁷ The exhibition showcased the production of Italian artisans with the hope of making their products economically competitive in an international market. Quality craftsmanship and modern Italian design that would not copy past historical styles were encouraged. Ponti felt justified in using elements of the past in order to evolve a fresh, new interpretation of classical values, as the plate described above demonstrates. His work did not imitate past styles but was inspired and informed by the Italian classical tradition. More typically, however, the Italian installations at the first and second Biennali and the 1925 Paris decorative arts exhibition confirmed that disorder and eclectic historicism remained in design by Ponti's countrymen.³⁸

Nonetheless, Ponti's influence on Italy's small manufacturers of products for the home was far-reaching. He stressed that the applied arts were "unequivocally 'social' arts" representing the "collective achievement of the creator, the executor, and . . . the person who orders and uses them."³⁹ With Richard-Ginori's introduction of him as a product designer, the defined role of the Italian architect expanded, following the examples of Josef Hoffmann in Austria and Bruno Paul and Henri van de Velde in Germany, while the architect's imprimatur gave the consumer confidence that the product was well made. Ponti was paraphrased in *Le Arti Decorative* as saying, "his intent wasn't to make unique pieces of art, but to reeducate all workmen, to create types of ceramics that will not lose their value with serial production."⁴⁰ Ponti's point of view was not new or unique, for the design reform movement had been gathering momentum since the end of the nineteenth century. The Deutscher Werkbund, founded in Germany in 1907 as an association of manufacturers, architects, artists, and writers, played a leading role in this movement. The Werkbund inspired similar organizations in Austria, Switzerland,

Sweden, and England.⁴¹ By the 1920s, designing quality objects for industrial manufacture was seen as an economic necessity throughout Europe and the United States. Ponti's work for Richard-Ginori brought Italy into this mainstream.

Ponti's Architecture and Furniture of the Twenties

Ponti's fresh, new interpretation of the classical idiom may also be seen in his architectural projects of the mid-1920s, such as the condominium residence at No. 9, via Randaccio in Milan, in partnership with Emilio Lancia (1925; Fig. 3), and the Villa Bouilhet, in Garches, France, in partnership with Lancia and Tomaso Buzzi (1926; Fig. 4).⁴² Both share a clarity of volumetric space and an overall simplification of form, exemplified by the compartmentalized ceiling designs and the pure geometric shapes of the windows and doors. Using signs and symbols of Italian national identity derived from classical architectural forms (arches, pediments, obelisks), Ponti enticed the cultured elite to embrace Modernism. For example, at the center of the house on via Randaccio a rounded window was framed by a classical aedicula, which presented a stylized, miniature image of the entire building.⁴³ In addition, the house's yellow stucco façade echoed the traditional color of Milan's Neoclassical architecture.

The Villa Bouilhet illustrates Ponti's typology of the small villa (*villino*), which he proposed as the standard for the one-family dwelling. In the first issue of *Domus*, Buzzi wrote an article on Palladian villas, citing the villa as the "most Italian" form of domestic architecture.⁴⁴ His proof lay in the fact that even in foreign languages, "villa"—an Italian, in fact a Latin word—was used to describe it.⁴⁵ The Milanese Novecento architects revered Palladio. They saw in his architecture absolute, undatable values.⁴⁶ Ponti's one-family villas, created for an upper-middle class clientele, included multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, servants' quarters, large living areas with ample fenestration, and terraces and gardens integrating the home with the outdoors.

Another of Ponti's concerns was how to furnish the new Italian home appropriately. The first forum for his ideas was provided in 1926 by a competition to furnish an Italian embassy in a foreign country.⁴⁷ The competition was sponsored by *La Rivista Illustrata del "Popolo d'Italia"* in Milan.⁴⁸ Ponti and Buzzi envisioned an interior unified by frescoed wall and ceiling decorations and classicizing furnishings. Robust Renaissance-derived furniture forms were used in the ambassador's study (Fig. 5), whereas refined and elegant furnishings inspired by the late eighteenth century were used in the rooms for the ambassador's wife.



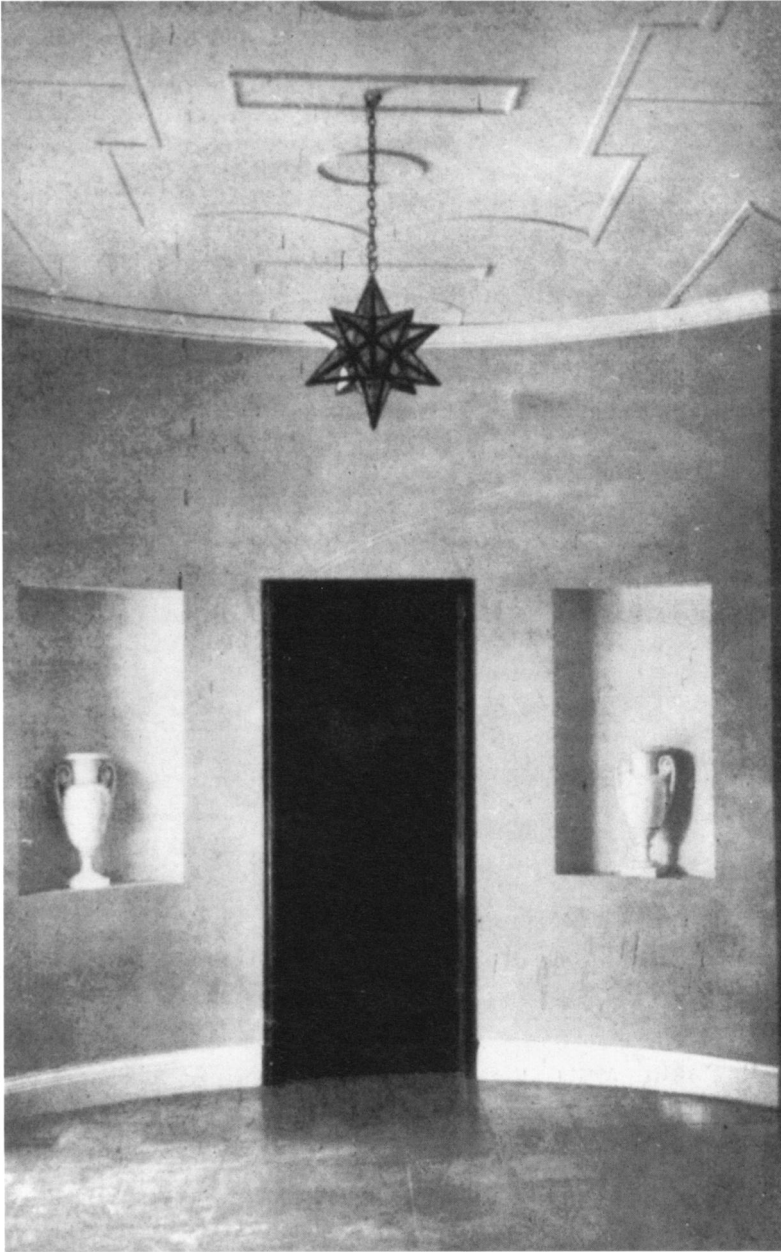


FIGURE 3 (facing page)
Ponti and Emilio Lancia (1890-1973),
house in via Randaccio, Milan, 1925. From
Architettura e Arti Decorative (1926-1927):
572.

FIGURE 4
Ponti, Lancia, and Tomaso Buzzi (1900-
1981), entrance hall of *L'Ange volant*,
Garches, near Paris, France, 1926. From
Domus (September 1931): 31.

The drawings for the embassy competition⁴⁹ serve as precursors to the furnishings that Ponti first publicly introduced at the Third Monza Biennale in 1927, where with Ugo Ojetto's encouragement he joined the governing council.⁵⁰ Ponti's work was shown in two installations: *Il Labirinto* and *Domus nova*.⁵¹ While both collections presented modern furnishings, they differed in their production costs.⁵² Stylistically, how-

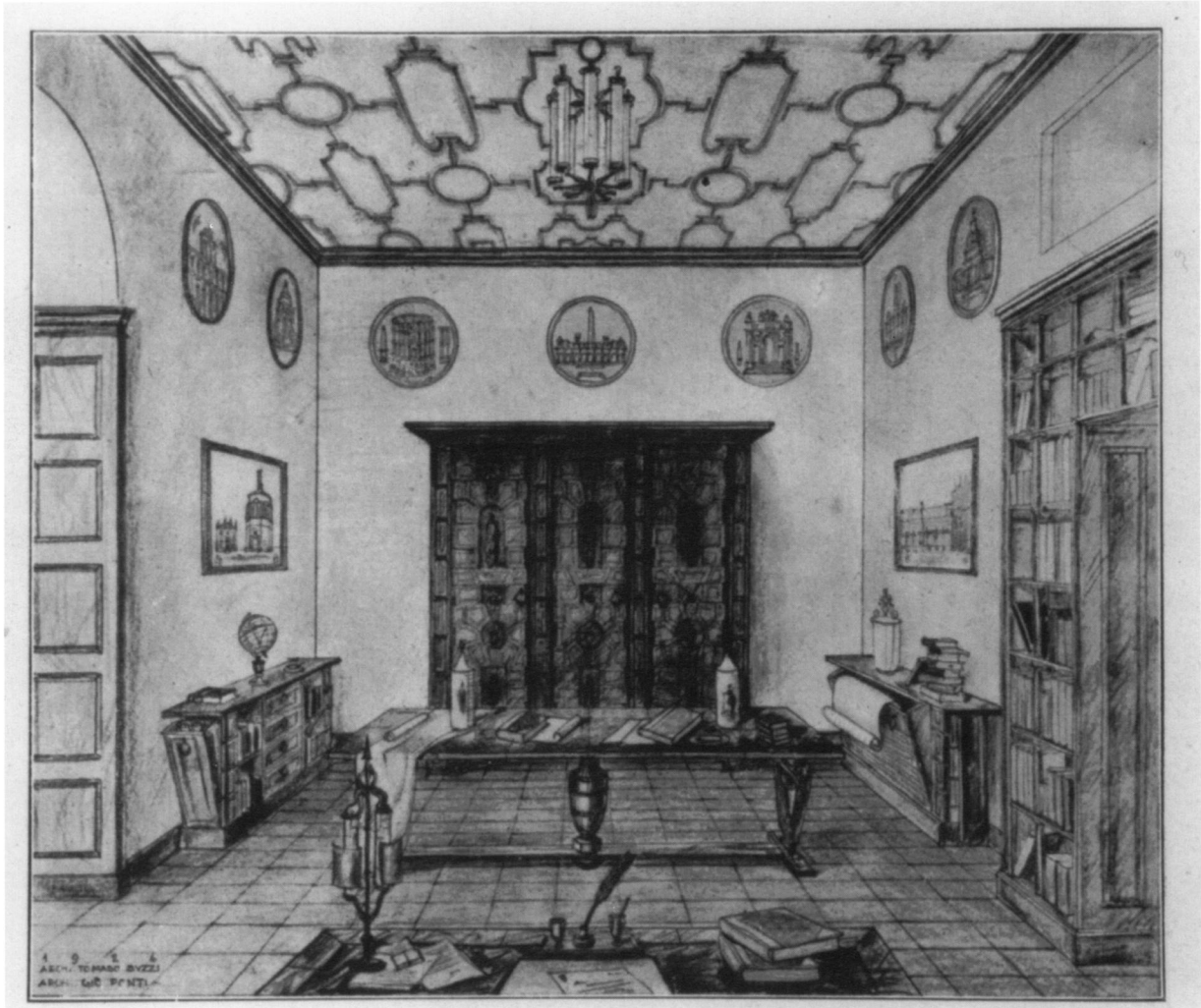


FIGURE 5
Ponti and Buzzi, Italian ambassador's study,
design for a competition sponsored by *La
Rivista Illustrata del "Popolo d'Italia,"* Italy,
1926. From *Architettura e Arti Decorative*
(December 1926): 184.

ever, the works in both collections were very similar. Ponti believed that it was important "to arrive at being rich by means of grandness, not . . . of preciousness."⁵³

The section of the exhibition devoted to *Il Labirinto* included the work of the architects Ponti, Buzzi, Lancia, and Michele Marelli, as well as the designers Pietro Chiesa, Paolo Venini, and Contessa Carla Visconti di Modrone Erba.⁵⁴ The objects shown were presented as part of a rarefied collection of decorative arts: luxury items for an upper-middle-class clientele. Ponti's contribution to the *Il Labirinto* installation comprised furniture, Richard-Ginori ceramics, and Christofle pewter (Fig. 6). His furniture, including case pieces, étagères, a divan, and a tea table, were all handcrafted in small workshops.⁵⁵ The shape of the divan distantly resembled that of ancient Roman bronze couches, such as those found at



Boscovale. Its taut profile was enhanced by the strong markings of the walnut-root wood and the metal mounts that serve as capitals for the columnar legs.⁵⁶ The cabinet (Fig. 7) was first seen in the embassy competition drawings.⁵⁷ This ultra-refined piece, produced in gray maple with gilded accents, took its graceful form from the bold convex and concave undulations of seventeenth-century Baroque architecture.

A reference to *Il Labirinto* in the magazine 1927: *Problemi di Arte Attuale* credits the architects of the group with an “acute sensibility to the woods used in the making of furniture, playing on the hot and lively colors of the materials, making the most rational use of them.”⁵⁸ Ponti’s designs were elegant and refined, employing expensive wood veneers and inlaid or applied ornament to give the simple, linear forms of the furniture visual excitement. During this period, he utilized some wood inlays and woods with distinctive markings that enhanced their surface beauty—walnut, especially walnut-root wood, mahogany, and ebony. He limited ornament to metal mounts in brass, bronze, and green patinated bronze, usually applying them as capitals and as mounts on the feet of long tapering legs. Roberto Papini stated that, “Gio Ponti redresses the criteria of purely rational furniture with the rarity of the

FIGURE 6

Il Labirinto group, installation *Il Labirinto*, Third Biennale of Decorative Arts, Monza, 1927. From Guido Marangoni, *La III Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative a Monza 1927* (Bergamo, 1927), 16.

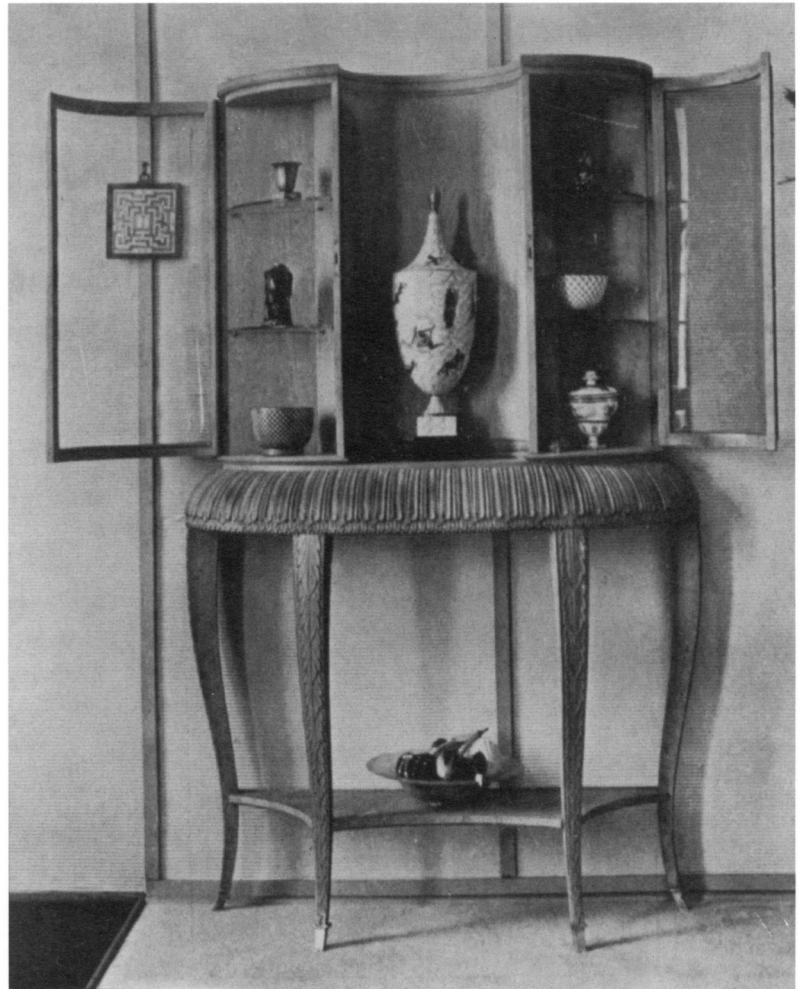


FIGURE 7
Ponti, cabinet for *Il Labirinto*, Third
Biennale of Decorative Arts, Monza, 1927.
From *Domus* (February 1928): 4.

material and the refinement of forms.”⁵⁹ In this luxury line, Ponti may have been looking at the furniture of contemporary French designers, such as Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, who used figured woods often with ivory inlays; Eugène Printz, who experimented with exotic veneers; or Jean-Michel Frank, who arranged veneers into geometric patterns. Moreover, the use of walnut with wood inlay was a traditional Italian furniture treatment.⁶⁰

The *Domus nova* Line

Also displayed at the Third Monza Biennale, the *Domus nova* line, on the other hand, was designed by Ponti and Lancia as low-cost furniture for La Rinascente department store in Milan.⁶¹ The use of the Latin phrase *Domus nova* (New Home) was a marketing tool meant to link this

modern furniture with traditional Italian craftsmanship and design in the mind of the consumer. The project was serious, for La Rinascente had already established itself as the most important of the Milanese department stores,⁶² and its main headquarters, in Milan's historic Piazza del Duomo, was a visible symbol of the increasing affluence and consumption in Milan. Ponti also knew of contemporary French designers who had worked for department stores, such as Maurice Dufren , who in 1921 established the design studio La Ma trise at Les Galeries Lafayette.⁶³

Created for a middle-class consumer, the *Domus nova* line, like the designs for *Il Labirinto*, incorporated elements used by the Novecento architects such as niches, obelisks, and columns. Constructed from traditional woods like walnut and mahogany, with mounts in brass or copper, the furniture was produced at moderate cost because of its spare use of metal garnitures and avoidance of wood inlays and expensive woods. Some of the pieces were painted with a synthetic lacquer and often given a straw rather than upholstered seat. The latter evoked the traditions of chairs with straw, rush, and cane seats frequently used in Italian interiors. They ranged from the simplest vernacular forms of the ladder-back chair and its evolution as the *chiavari* chair,⁶⁴ to types in high-style furniture.⁶⁵

The four rooms of "modern furnishings" presented by La Rinascente at the Biennale included a living room, dining room, master bedroom, and girl's bedroom.⁶⁶ Ponti and Lancia designed the furniture, interior decorations, and table service in the dining room, as well as the carpets in the bedrooms. Each of the rooms had wall decorations executed by Ettore Colombo and Arturo Songa after designs by Ponti and wall panels painted by Hilda Semenza. Other furnishings included glass designed by Pietro Chiesa Jr. and Napoleone Martinuzzi, ceramics designed by Ponti for Richard-Ginori, and mural decorations designed by Buzzi. Leading into the La Rinascente installation was a vestibule furnished with ladder-back chairs with rush seats (Fig. 8).

Ponti based his work on the notion that the Italian home would be "furnished with loving comprehension of its material and ethical functions," would not represent "transitory fashion," and would be testimony to Italian "intelligence, life, [and] culture."⁶⁷ Essentially, the furniture he designed for *Il Labirinto* and for *Domus nova* embodied these ideas by bowing to tradition through references to neoclassical and vernacular forms.

Roberto Papini, the art critic for *Emporium*, noted in his review that, "the architects Emilio Lancia and Gio Ponti have resolved well the

double problem of economical and aesthetic furniture at the same time; they have resolved it with much taste tending toward the simplicity of neoclassical forms. . . . La Rinascente, offering them to its clients of limited financial means, has done a good job.”⁶⁸

Yet Ponti’s designs for *Domus nova* were extremely conventional in contrast to many avant-garde designs produced in Germany in the same period. Marcel Breuer’s and Mies van der Rohe’s furniture in tubular steel had created an entirely new aesthetic. Tubular steel furniture was light-weight, readily movable, and easy to care for. Furthermore, while Ponti promoted well-designed, low-cost products, he did not always produce them.⁶⁹ The *Domus nova* line was criticized by the architect and

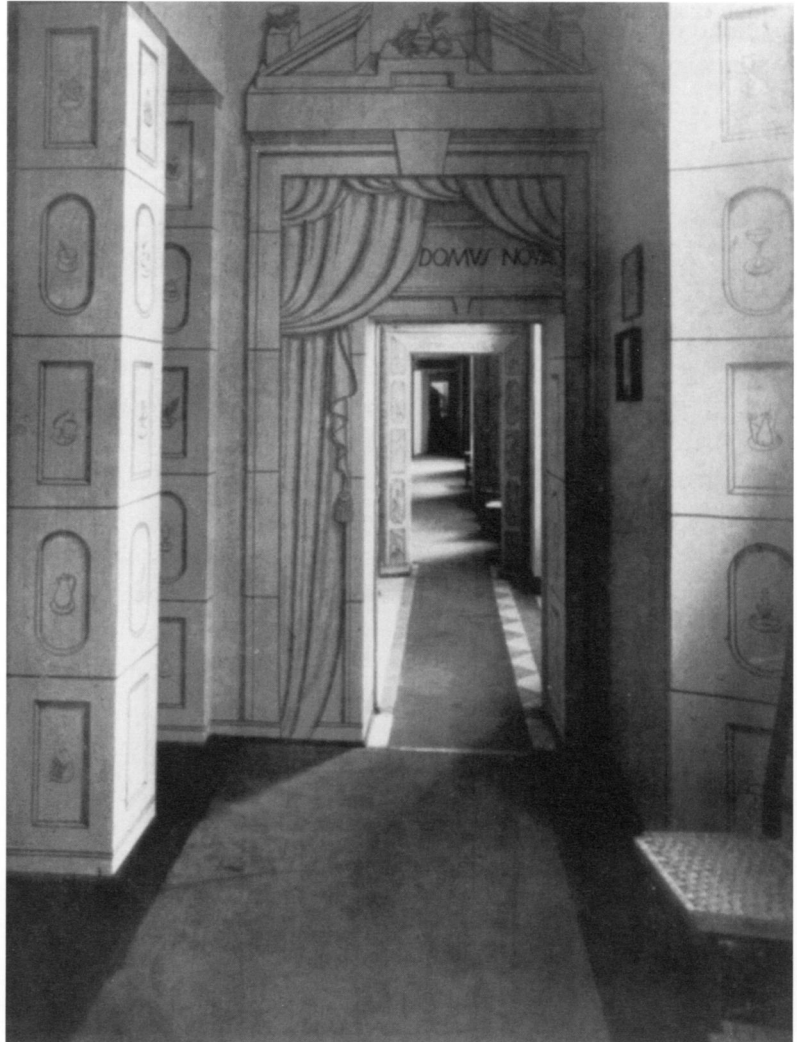


FIGURE 8
Il Labirinto group, installation *Domus nova*,
Third Biennale of Decorative Arts, Monza,
1927. From *Emporium* (August 1927): n.p.

design critic Ferdinando Reggiori, who wrote, "Art, for now, of genuine luxury: even the prices displayed and in demand bear witness to it, including those of *Domus nova*, furnishings that La Rinascente wishes to have pass as a bargain. Six thousand or more lire for a bedroom, a few nude and crude pieces of furniture, seem to be really a lot, the value of the art included; nor do they persuade the public . . . to prefer these to other traditional mahogany and bronze furniture."⁷⁰ Considering that the average salary of an Italian worker was five hundred to eight hundred lire per month, Reggiori's remarks were fair.⁷¹

His criticism of Ponti's prices aside, Reggiori went on about the Biennale: "We Italians begin, at last, to make decorative arts in the full sense of the word; since the need to think and operate with method is finally understood."⁷² Yet the Biennale's importance as an international exhibition was limited, and foreign participation was low. Writing in *Emporium*, Roberto Papini noted that the French had sent a rather lackluster representation of their decorative arts industries. He even criticized the premier French *ébéniste* of the period, Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, for presenting a work that was "absolutely unworthy of his good name."⁷³ Nonetheless, while the Biennale attempted to get Italian manufacturers and consumers to embrace a new era in the decorative arts industries, it also achieved recognition outside of Italy for the quality of Italian artistic production.

In 1927, the group of Il Labirinto also furnished and decorated *Alla penna d'oca*, a Milanese restaurant run by and for the Lombard Press Syndicate, a center of information on the state of Italian society. While the Fascists stressed the sanctity of Italy as the inheritor of ancient Roman values, they also believed in the inherent merit of traditional Italian folk culture.⁷⁴ Thus the designers relied on Italian vernacular tradition to evoke an overall feeling of pride in Italian culture. The caption in *Domus* referred to the dining room as a "sacellum," an ancient Roman votive chapel (Fig. 9). By using a Latin word, an ordinary club dining area was supposed to be elevated in the mind of the patron to a sacred place.

The artists of Il Labirinto deftly combined classical and vernacular motifs, from the folkish simplicity of the wall paintings to the traditional furniture forms. The restaurant was decorated with cavelike enclosures which highlighted its basement-level location. The walls were painted with "small views of Italian towns (from Soave to Capri) from which famous Italian wines take their names."⁷⁵ By depicting the wine-producing regions of Italy on the walls of *Alla penna d'oca*, the members of Il Labirinto celebrated an industry, but, more important, an Italian skill passed on from generation to generation. The furniture included a long

table with two upright supports based on Italian Renaissance prototypes, as well as simple stools and a bench.

Ponti's designs of the late 1920s reflected his desire to create a modern analogue to the Neoclassical forms that had unified the Milanese landscape in the Napoleonic era. Like other European architects of the period, he saw classicism as a way of regaining order in a visual landscape that had been cluttered by the eclecticism of the late nineteenth century. Whether Ponti was emulating the work of his contemporaries in France or Germany or exploring Northern Italian Neoclassicism, his designs of this period were remarkably uniform. In order to appeal to the Milanese bourgeoisie, Ponti used the symbols that resonated with meaning for them.



FIGURE 9
Il Labirinto group, Milan, interior of *Alla perma d'oca* restaurant, Milan, 1927. From Gio Ponti, ed., *L'ambiente moderno in Italia* (Milan, 1930), 168.

Ponti in the 1930s

Ponti's changing design aesthetic was put into focus at the Fourth Triennale in 1930. While Ponti's own work maintained Neoclassicizing overtones, he was acutely aware of the work of progressive architects in Italy and elsewhere in Europe and America. He straddled the fence between favoring luxury handcrafted objects over economical machine-made ones in his positions both as an organizer of the exhibition and as an exhibitor. The governing board, which included Ponti, the architect Alberto Alpago-Novello, and the painter Mario Sironi, summarized the four most important tenets of the exhibition as: modern interpretation, original invention, perfect execution, and efficient production.⁷⁶

As a full-scale representation of his program for the modern Italian home Ponti conceived the *Casa delle vacanze* (vacation house).⁷⁷ He described it as "a true and real single-story 'typical little house' [villino tipico], an example of the most studied and convenient modern weekend house."⁷⁸ *Domus* reported that it was not an "economical house" but rather "belongs to those manifestations characteristic of a class educated to taste and comfort."⁷⁹ Ponti's attempt to unite disparate styles, however, fell flat in this project. He unsuccessfully combined elements of the decorative Novecento style, such as the classical pediments above the windows, and machine-age components, such as the tubular metal railing on the roof and stairs (Fig. 10). Moreover, the interiors, decorated using *Domus nova* furniture and De Angeli Frua textiles, evoked rural, peasant traditions.

A much more notable contribution—the *Casa elettrica* (Electric House)—was made by the architects of Gruppo 7 (Group 7).⁸⁰ At the previous Biennale in 1927, Gruppo 7 exhibited several projects. Now, the Electric House served as a full-scale prototype of their new, rationalist architecture. Regarding the inclusion of Group 7, Ponti wrote: "Whoever has learned to know the characteristics of the architecture and interiors of Muzio, Buzzi, Alpago, and those of Pagano, Rava, Frette, can see for themselves the extremes of these two tendencies. But they both bring a wealth of references, one of historical experience, the other of rich experience determined by technique and new aspects of plan and scale."⁸¹ In a letter to Luigi Figini regarding the Electric House, Gino Pollini wrote: "Ponti said that he would like it if we would make a thing [a pavilion] of some luxury, because it [the Triennale] is already full of projects for small economical rooms with the usual colorful paint."⁸² Gruppo 7 advocated a modern idiom that "combined national identity and international values without sacrificing the integrity of either."⁸³ They asserted, along with the Novecento architects, the traditional

Italian primacy in the arts, and relied on the classical tradition to guide their creations.

By the mid-1930s, under Mussolini's guidance, Italian industry was making a concerted effort to improve the economy and elevate the national consciousness of Italian design through the use of new and indigenous materials.⁸⁴ For example, Ponti designed furniture with a new material, aluminum. His furniture designs in aluminum "demonstrated the possibilities of the noble use of this metal, which is abundant in Italy."⁸⁵ A large table commissioned by the Montecatini Company was constructed from modern materials with new manufacturing techniques but in an overtly ancient form (Fig. 11).⁸⁶ Ojetti described it as a "table . . . with legs formed of graduated disks . . . like the legs of antique chairs and tables in the museums and the paintings of Rome and Pompeii, of exquisite invention and workmanship, and pleasing in color by the contrast of the black top and the opaque silver tone of the hard aluminum."⁸⁷

Ponti's concept of modern architecture and interior design included the "moral reference to the antique, as a motif and example of grandness, not as a repertory of stolen and corrupt motifs."⁸⁸ The table designed for

FIGURE 10
Ponti and Lancia, vacation house, Fourth
Triennale, Milan, 1930. From Lidia Morelli,
La casa che vorrei avere (Milan, 1931), 574.



the Villa Vittoria in Florence (Fig. 12) was created to complement the owner's collection of Novecento paintings. Its archaic form, realized in bronze and marble, embodied the movement's ideals.

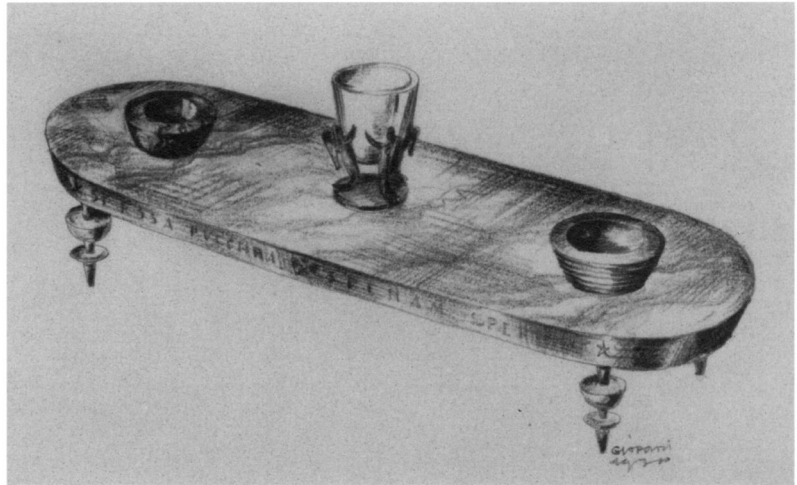
Ponti was explicit in his ideas regarding modern furniture, stating that the fundamental requirements were for pieces to be "well executed, of top materials, logical conception, easy to use: these are the qualities of modern furniture."⁸⁹ He saw these issues as separate from the "beauty of furniture," which entailed "taste, education, experience, intelligence, fantasy in design, and the harmonizing of colors and materials."⁹⁰ The first set of parameters were inherent to all good design, the second set related to personal taste and style. In *Domus* Ponti proposed models that could reconcile the traditional with the modern. His furniture designs changed according to the requirements of the client and according to the materials used, but all of them freely demonstrated his skillful interpretation of the classical idiom. The sideboard seen in Figure 13 was inspired by sideboards and pier tables popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The extreme attenuation of the leg with its tapered

FIGURE 11
Ponti, table, Fourth Triennale, Milan, 1930.
From *Domus* (July 1930): 16.



FIGURE 12

Ponti, design for a table for the Contini-Bonacassi residence, Villa Vittoria, Florence, 1931. Crayon and pencil on paper, 39.4 x 49.5 cm. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian.



line gives the table a crisp modern shape. Regarding the use of classicism, he wrote: “From classicism comes a fully spiritual lesson of logic, clarity, simplicity, and humanity, which comforts and guides architects toward work that adheres freely to the principles of today.”⁹¹

Ponti’s new reductivist manner was evident in his *Case tipiche* (typical houses). These multiple-dwelling housing units erected in Milan were given the names Domus Fausta, Domus Julia, and Domus Carola, overt instances of Ponti’s continuing interest in associating modern design with the great works of ancient Rome. On their façades the housing units retained a classical profile, with the use of alternating rounded and squared arches for windows, yet they shed extraneous decorative devices (Fig. 14). Seen in the context of the Milanese streetscape of this period, Ponti’s houses presented a crisp, clean vision of modern life, unencumbered by the encrustation of decoration so prevalent on houses built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the interiors, Ponti worked with a flexible open plan, allowing usage to be determined by the occupants. The dining room furnishings by Ponti (Fig. 15) also exhibit the same overall simplification of form as the Domuses.

While the *Case tipiche* may be seen as Ponti’s response to the building typologies promoted at the Weissenhofsiedlung in 1927, the houses never strayed far from their Mediterranean sources. Ponti promoted and embraced new architectural forms and techniques, but fervently believed that the machine aesthetic had to be reconciled with native traditions. Regarding the renovation of the home, Ponti wrote: “If you are determined to make a clean sweep of things, eliminate only the things that have no character, that are not authentic. . . . Make a fresh and



FIGURE 13

Ponti, sideboard from the Schejola residence, Milan, designed c. 1928, probably made by the cabinetmaker Stefano Turri, Bovisio, Italy. Walnut-burl veneer with brass; height 93.4, width 150.5, depth 30.7 cm. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian.

FIGURE 14 (overleaf)

Ponti and Lancia, *Domuses* in via De Togni, Milan, 1931-1932. From *Domus* (December 1933): 636.

serene house, without pretext and without poses, with a sincere and honest simplicity, with a harmonious and bright order: you will be secure in creating a truly beautiful house. A modern house.”⁹²

In the mid-thirties Ponti moved toward a more encompassing and fluid conception of classicism in his designs, one independent of decoration. He went to the heart of classicism as abstract geometrical form and used the principles of mass, volume, and proportion to define his work. “There exists a classical continuity beyond classical forms and examples,” he wrote.⁹³ Overall Ponti created a feeling of modernity through his choice of materials and through the streamlined design of his individual furnishings. Guided by the experiments of Italian avant-garde architects including the members of Gruppo 7, he gradually moved away from a strict reliance on Neoclassical decorative motifs to a more rational use of materials. The Dahò grocery store (Fig. 16) demonstrates his deft handling of chromed metal and glass (materials promoted by the international avant-garde) in order to create a unified and hygienic atmosphere. “Modernity,” Ponti stated, “is selection, and only active, impassioned, and meditative selection.”⁹⁴

The tenth anniversary of the Triennale in 1933, the fifth of the series, provided an opportunity for reflection regarding the progress that had been made in Italian decorative arts since the event’s initiation in 1923. When Roberto Papini recapitulated the strengths of the four preceding exhibitions, he mentioned Gio Ponti’s work as a high point in each of them: the ceramics for Richard-Ginori were deemed his “first



successes" and his designs for *Domus nova* were called "the first Italian attempt to popularize modern furniture and furnishings."⁹⁵ Ponti stated that the "practical program of the Triennale" was "to signal the most significant models in the evolution of style."⁹⁶ He wrote that interior decoration was "where art and technique are both the expression of the life and customs of people, namely their civilization, their morality, their health."⁹⁷

The bedroom Ponti designed for the installation was inspired, he said, by the "Italian manner . . . without being deformed by 'modern style' " (Fig. 17).⁹⁸ Referred to as "typically Italian in character," this truly deluxe installation employed materials that had a long history of use in Italy: silk, walnut, and bronze.⁹⁹ The armoire, for example, relied on its strong contrast of materials—walnut, bronze, and crystal—for its visual impact. Here Ponti completely discarded the Neoclassicizing conceits that were present in his earlier furniture designs, and chose geometric, architectonic forms.

In December 1933, Ponti wrote: "The year that closes has signaled a leap forward in the adhesion to modern forms of life, in the affirmation of Italian arts and industries that are of interest in the home."¹⁰⁰ To a certain

FIGURE 15

Ponti, dining room of a via De Togni apartment, Milan, c. 1933. From Giancarlo Palanti, *Mobili tipici moderni* (Milan, 1933), 45.



degree he had realized his program to educate Italian consumers and to promote modern design through a synthesis of the old and the new. Edoardo Persico defended him as having “more logic than his adversaries suspect. . . . For Ponti . . . the conquest of modern taste has consisted of rediscovering the sense of his own work in a world of ideas that could go beyond the narrow limits of a peasant tradition.”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Ponti’s architectural and design output in the period from 1928 to 1933 was grounded in his program for the *Casa all’italiana*. His designs evolved from citations of the classical idiom, with decorative features such as niches and obelisks, to a fuller, more self-confident personal expression of the classic. He wrote: “From classicism will derive a ‘new classicism’ intending—as Cocteau has said—that a classic work isn’t that which has the appearance, but that which has the elements to become classic.”¹⁰²

After the Second World War, Ponti continued to develop his very personal style. His design output grew to include not only items of

FIGURE 16

Ponti and Lancia, Dahò grocery store, Milan, c. 1931. From *Domus* (November 1931): 41.





small-scale serial production, such as those he had created for Richard-Ginori, Christofle, and Fontana Arte, but also those of industrial manufacture, including bathroom fixtures for Ideal Standard, the La Pavoni espresso coffee machine, and the Visetta sewing machine for Visa. Late in his life, Ponti wrote: "Time is measured (even 'created') only by the transformation of things. Where things do not change, time does not exist and history does not exist."¹⁰³

Out of Ponti's architectural and design work emerged the idea of the individual consumer's ability to transform history by continuing to evolve Italy's humanist traditions. While his personal aesthetic was steeped in the classical tradition, in *Domus* he presented the work of all schools from the traditional to the avant-garde. Overall, his program was not fiercely dogmatic. Ponti met the demands of the modern Italian consumer by basing his works on the formal values of classical order, integrity of materials and production techniques, and a reasoned response to human needs. Through the example of his own work, he encouraged his readers to transform their home environments to meet their personal requirements. His interpretation of classicism from 1928 to 1933 would prove to be the most influential aspect of his career.

FIGURE 17

Ponti, bedroom installation, Fifth Triennale, Milan, 1933. From *Domus* (July 1933): 377.

NOTES

I wish to thank Derek E. Ostergard, Associate Director, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. My research on Gio Ponti's design program for the modern Italian home was begun under his guidance at the Master's Program in the History of the Decorative Arts, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum/Parsons School of Design, New York.

1. Anon., "Il Premio Mussolini a Giovanni Ponti: La Reale Accademia d'Italia," *Architettura* (April 1934): 256.

2. Gio Ponti, *La casa all'italiana* (Milan, 1933). The section headings included, "il rinnovamento delle produzioni d'arte," "Il rinnovamento dell'architettura," and "formazione dello stile."

3. Richard A. Etlin sums up this transformation in *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1991), xvi-xvii: "In the years following World War I, Milan became the leading center in the creation of Italian modern architecture. A new movement, known today as the Milanese Novecento, dominated the city's postwar housing boom and endowed Italy with its first widespread and enduring manifestation of modern architecture. . . . The historically oriented stylistic appearance of Milanese Novecento architecture was challenged by a younger generation of recent graduates from the Milan Politecnico in December 1926. Forming the Gruppo 7, these architects declared the birth of what they called Italian Rationalism, a term intended to convey the values championed by the architecture and polemics of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923) and Walter Gropius's *Internationale Architektur* (1925)." See also Dennis P. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy: Italian Architecture 1914-1936* (New York, 1988).

4. The National Fascist Party was formed in 1921. The fasces, an ax placed on one side of a bundle of rods fastened together, was chosen for its symbol. In ancient Rome the fasces were carried by minor Roman officials, known as lictors, who went before the chief magistrate to clear the way during processions. This symbol of power was also revived during Napoleon's empire. Alexander de Grand, *Italian Fascism: Its Origins and Development* (Lincoln, Neb., and London, 1982), 30.

5. De Grand, *Italian Fascism*, 142.

6. Ugo Ojetto (1871-1947), letter dated November 4, 1927, to Gio Ponti, quoted in Annalisa Avon, "Uno 'Stile' per l'abitare," *Casabella* (April 1986): 52, n. 4. Ponti's relationship with Ojetto, the

conservative Florentine writer and art critic, apparently began at the time of the First International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Monza in 1923 (the first Biennale). Ojetto was the director of the magazines *Dedalo* (1920-1933), *Pegaso* (1929-1933), and *Pan* (1933-1935), and wrote for the Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. He was fiercely nationalistic and was opposed to foreign, avant-garde influences on the arts in Italy.

7. *Domus: Architettura e Arredamento dell'Abitazione Modern in Città e in Campagna* (Domus: Architecture and Furnishings for the Modern House in the City and the Country). Ponti was the founding director and editor of the magazine from 1928 to 1940, and from 1948 to 1979. In 1941 Ponti left *Domus* to found the magazine *Stile*, which he directed from 1941 to 1948.

8. Camillo Boito, *Architettura del medio evo in Italia con una introduzione sullo stile futuro dell'architettura italiana* (Milan, 1880), viii-ix; text quoted in English in Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, xx.

9. The magazine was increased in size in January 1932 and it lost some of its preciousness. The change in layout and editorial opinion reflected a growing acceptance of modern, rational design.

10. In ancient Rome, a *domus* was a house for a single well-to-do family, usually a one-story and inward-looking structure. This type of dwelling was distinctly different from other types of ancient Roman housing, including, for example, *insulae*, which were apartment houses of the middle class.

11. I owe this observation to Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, 195-96, 198.

12. Ponti described his goals in "Domus lictoria," *Domus* (January 1934): 1.

13. "Un fascio d'architetti . . . (De Finetti, Fiocchi, Lancia, Muzio, Ponti), che sembra orientato verso un ritorno al ritmo e all'equilibrio dei classici"; Paolo Mezzanotte, "La Prima Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative a Monza," *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (September/October 1921): 299, 304.

14. In 1922 the term "novecento"—meaning literally "nine hundred[s]," i.e. '900 (1900), or twentieth century—was first used by the painter Anselmo Bucci in reference to a "group of seven twentieth-century painters." The seven were Bucci, Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, Emilio Malerba, Piero Marussig, Ubaldo Oppi, and Mario Sironi. See Rossana Bossaglia, "Il Novecento di Sironi, il Muralismo, il clima novecentista," in *Gli*

anni trenta: Arte e cultura in Italia, exh. cat. (Milan: Comune di Milano, 1982; 2nd ed. 1983), 79.

15. Giovanni Muzio, "L'architettura a Milano intorno all'ottocento," *Emporium* (May 1921): 241-58.

16. "Il ristabilimento del principio di ordine"; *ibid.*, 258.

17. In addition to his Veneto buildings, in which Palladio aimed to recapture the splendor of Roman antiquity, the group was probably aware of his influential publications including *Le antichità di Roma* (1554) and *Quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570).

18. "Ma il maggio impulso a questa trasformazione di Milano, da città di carattere quasi medioevale a città moderna, fu dato da Napoleone"; Muzio, "L'architettura a Milano Intorno all' Ottocento," 243.

19. As early as 1914 the Futurist artist Marinetti had railed against "the superimposition of carnival decorative incrustations justified neither by structural necessity nor by our taste, and having their origins . . . in that astounding outburst of idiocies and impotence known as 'neo-classicism'"; see "The Manifesto of Futurist Architecture," repr. in Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes of 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 34-36.

20. See Antonio Nezi, "Nostri architetti d'oggi: Giovanni Muzio," *Emporium* (October 1931): 195-212, ill. on p. 205. For additional information about Muzio, see Giuseppe Gambirasio and Bruno Minardi, eds., *Giovanni Muzio: Opere e scritti* (Milan, 1982), and Doordan, *Building Modern Italy*, 31-34, and figs. 13 and 14.

21. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy*, 33.

22. "Gelosamente fu ricercata e voluta l'assoluta italianità, e talvolta forse si cadde nel regionalismo, ma mi sembra un merito grande l'essere sempre rimasti fedelissimi alla maggiore nostra tradizione viva e continua nei secoli. Ciò avvenne per la convinzione profonda che gli schemi essenziali e gli elementi universali e necessari dell'architettura dei periodi classici sono sempre veri"; Giovanni Muzio, "Alcuni architetti d'oggi in Lombardia," *Dedalo* (August 1931): 1092-93.

23. *Valori Plastici* (Rome, 1918-1921) and *La Ronda* (Rome, 1919-1923). See Renato Bertacchini, *Le riviste del novecento* (Florence, 1980);

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, *Les réalismes 1919-1939* (Paris, 1980).

24. The myth of the Mediterranean may be described as the perception of the Latin countries as having an ideal environment nourished by the warmth of the Mediterranean sun. This view was especially popular among artists of the Northern European countries in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Concurrently in progressive architectural circles the example of the ancient Greeks and Romans was explored. See Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (1923), a compilation of articles first published in the review *L'Esprit Nouveau* in which Le Corbusier referred to Greco-Roman building types. For writings that explore this subject in Italy, see Luciano Patetta, *L'architettura in Italia 1919-1943: Le polemiche* (Milan, 1972): 13.

25. "La restaurazione d'un codice artistico, religioso e sociale"; quoted in Luigi Cavallo, "Classicità, classicismo: Una traccia fra pittori, critici, riviste," in Elena Pontiggia, ed., *L'idea del classico 1916-1932: Temi classici nell'arte italiana degli anni venti*, exh. cat. (Milan: Comune di Milano, 1992), 77.

26. De Chirico's style was formed around 1911-1912; Carrà, originally a Futurist, joined him after the war. For more on Metaphysical Painting, see *Les réalismes 1919-1939*, sect. 1, "Italie," 52-109; and "Éclectisme et modernité," 320-53; esp. Cesare de Seta, "Peinture et architecture en Italie dans les années 20: Un dialogue difficile," 320-31.

27. Text quoted in English in Emily Braun, "Political Rhetoric and Poetic Irony: The Uses of Classicism in the Art of Fascist Italy," in *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, de Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930* (London, 1990), 356, n. 42.

28. "La novità è un fatto naturale della evoluzione delle opere e dell cose coi giorni"; Gio Ponti, "Le ceramiche," *L'Italia all'Esposizione internazionale di arti decorative e industriali di Parigi* (Milan, 1926), 70.

29. "Non soltanto una 'machine à habiter.'" Ponti referred to this passage in Le Corbusier's 1923 *Vers une architecture* (Toward a [New] Architecture) (London, 1931; repr. New York, 1986), 227: "If we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts in regard to the houses and look at the question from a critical and objective point of view, we shall arrive at the 'House-Machine,' the mass-production house, healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments which accompany our existence are beautiful."

30. "Codesto suo 'comfort' è in qualcosa di superior . . . nell'invito che la casa all'italiana offre al nostro spirito di recarsi in riposanti visioni di pace, nel che consiste, nel pieno senso della bella parola italiano, il confort"; Ponti, "La casa all'italiana," *Domus* (January 1928): 7; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 9-11. Ponti's essay was reprinted in *Domus* (December 1928): 18.

31. "Cose interessante dalle altre riviste," *Domus* (November 1930): 72-73.

32. "Lo stile d'oggi"; Gio Ponti, "Distinzione di giudizio fra il 'pezzo' antico e l'arredamento 'in antico,'" *Domus* (February 1928): 13; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 19.

33. Marchese Carlo Ginori established the factory in 1737 in Doccia, outside of Florence. Known as the Doccia Porcelain Company, it remained under the control of the Ginori family until 1896 when it was incorporated with the Società Richard of Milan under the name of Richard-Ginori.

34. The father of Ponti's wife, Giulia Vimercati, and the father of the Semenza sisters, close friends of Ponti's, were both on the board of directors of Richard-Ginori. Lisa Licitra Ponti, Gio Ponti's daughter, believes it is likely that family contacts helped him to attain the position as artistic director at Richard-Ginori (Lisa Licitra Ponti, interview by author, October 1987).

35. "Una salute per i nostri costumi"; Gio Ponti, "La casa all'italiana," *Domus* (January 1928): 7; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 11.

36. See Marianne Lamonaca, "A 'Return to Order': Issues of the Classical and the Vernacular in Italian Inter-War Design," in Wendy Kaplan, ed., *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945*, exh. cat. (Miami Beach: The Wolfsonian Foundation, Miami Beach, Fla., 1995): 195-221.

37. The Triennale di Milano (Milan Triennial), which traces its origin to this exhibition, was an important forum for the debate over modern decorative arts and architecture throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Milan Triennale continues to the present day.

38. See Mezzanotte, "La Prima Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative a Monza," 298-304; "Commenti: L'Esposizione di Monza," *Dedalo* (September 1923): 263-64; Emidio Agostinone, "La prima 'biennale' delle arti decorative," *Emporium* (January 1923): 20-32. For more on Italy's participation at the Paris exposition, see Piero Torriano, "L'arte decorativa contemporanea e l'esposizione di Parigi," *Emporium* (January 1926): 38-50; Roberto

Papini, "Le arti a Parigi nel 1925," *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (April 1926): 354ff.

39. "Le arti applicate sono arti 'sociali' espresse con realizzazioni collettive di creatori, di esecutori, ed ancora di chi ordina le opere e le impiega"; Gio Ponti, "La Triennale di Monza," *Domus* (May 1930): 13.

40. "Egli [Ponti] diceva un giorno ch'era suo intento non di fare pezzi unici d'artista, ma di rieducare tutta una maestranza, di creare cioè dei tipi di ceramiche che nulla perdessero del loro valore con la produzione in serie"; S.P., "Omaggio a tre artisti," *Le Arti Decorative* (November 20, 1923): 31-33.

41. For more on the Deutscher Werkbund, see Lucius Burckhardt, *The Werkbund History and Ideology 1907-1933* (New York, 1980).

42. Tony Bouilhet, the president of the Christofle firm, was married to the niece, Carla Borletti, of Ponti's wife. Named *L'Ange volant* (Flying Angel), the villa was built in Garches, a fashionable suburb of Paris developed during the 1920s (Lisa Licitra Ponto [Gio Ponti's daughter], interview by author, October 1987). (It was there that Le Corbusier constructed the Villa Stein-DeMonzi in 1926-1927.)

43. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, 192-93.

44. "Italianissima creazione, geniale forma di architettura domestica, è la villa"; Tomaso Buzzi, "Invito ad un viaggio," *Domus* (January 1928): 20-21.

45. "Che anche nelle lingue straniere è chiamato col nome italiano, anzi latino, di 'villa'"; *ibid.*, 20.

46. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, 177.

47. It is not clear if this project was realized. See "Il secondo corso," *La Rivista Illustrata del "Popolo d'Italia"* 4, no. 1 (January 1926): 2, and "L'esito dei concorsi per le Terme Littorie e per l'arredamento di un'Ambasciata indetta dalla nostra rivista," *La Rivista Illustrata del "Popolo d'Italia"* 5, no. 1 (January 1927): 43-45, ill. on pp. 44-45.

48. The daily newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* was founded by Benito Mussolini on November 15, 1914. He directed it personally until he became prime minister in 1922; it was then directed by his brother Arnaldo until 1931, and then by Arnaldo's son Vito. In March 1919 it became the organ of the new Fascist movement and after 1922 was the quasi-official newspaper of the regime, ceasing publication in July 1943. The *Rivista Illustrata* was a color-illustrated magazine supplement to the newspaper. *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, ed. Philip

V. Cannistraro (Westport, Conn., and London, 1982), 432–33.

49. The drawings were signed by Ponti and Buzzi and dated 1926; “L’esito dei concorsi,” 44–45.

50. Ugo Ojetti, letter dated July 27, 1927, to Gio Ponti; Collection of Lisa Licitra Ponti, Milan. The role that Ugo Ojetti played in Ponti’s career was significant. A biographical note in a 1928 publication described Ojetti as “the greatest defender of Italy’s art treasures as well as the most modern of critics”; see Ugo Ojetti, *As They Seemed to Me*, trans. Henry Furst, intro. Gabriele d’Annunzio (London, 1928), xxv.

51. Ugo Ojetti’s daughter, Paola, had proposed several names for the group, and Ponti responded to her in a letter dated March 11, 1927: “Abbiamo scelto come nome ‘Labirinto’ perché labirintescas sono le nostre idee. [We have chosen as our name ‘Il Labirinto’ because our ideas are labyrinthine]”; letter excerpted in Fulvio Irace, *Gio Ponti* (Milan, 1988), 52, n. 72.

52. *Catalogo ufficiale della III Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative* (Milan, 1927), 22.

53. “Giunge ad esser ricca con i modi della grandezza, non con quelli soli della preziosità”; Ponti, “La casa all’italiana,” *Domus* (January 1928): 7; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all’italiana*, 10.

54. Ferdinando Reggiori, “La Terza Biennale delle arti decorative a Monza,” *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (March 1928): 316, 317, ill. on pp. 302–4; *Catalogo ufficiale della III Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative*, 28–29, ill. on p. 59; Gio Ponti, ed., *Il mobile moderno in Italia* (Milan, 1929), 8, ill. on pp. 35, 89; Roberto Papini, *Le arti d’oggi: Architettura e arti decorative in Europa* (Milan, 1930), pl. CXXXII, fig. 205; pl. CXL, fig. 218; pl. CXLVII, fig. 232.

55. The entry on Milan in the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states: “The manufacture of furniture of all kinds is still extensively carried on, Milan being the chief Lombard market and center of exportation. The towns of Cantù, Meda, Lissone, and Carugo supply Milanese firms with most of their merchandise, the furniture being made by the workmen in their homes with materials being supplied by the Milanese buyers, who also advance the capital necessary for working expenses.”

56. The divan was executed by Paolo Liotti, Cantù; ill. in Ponti, ed., *Il mobile moderno in Italia*, 89. Ponti sketched a very similar design for a girl’s

bed in a notebook that is in the collection of Lisa Licitra Ponti, Milan.

57. The cabinet was attributed to Gio Ponti and Emilio Lancia in the *Catalogo ufficiale della III Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative*, ill. on p. 29. See also *Domus* (February 1928): ill. on p. 4; Reggiori, “La Terza Biennale delle arti decorative a Monza,” ill. on p. 304; and Papini, *Le arti d’oggi*, pl. CXXXIII, fig. 205.

58. “È per esempio negli architetti del gruppo Il Labirinto è venuta nascendo una acuta sensibilità dei legni usati nella fabbrica del mobile, giocando sui colori caldi e vivi delle materie, facendone i più razionali impieghi”; Domino [Raffaello Giolli], “Consigli per la casa,” 1927: *Problemi di Arte Attuale* (October 20, 1927): 10.

59. “Gio Ponti riveste i criteri di pura razionalità del mobile con la rarità della materia e la ricercatezza delle sagome”; Roberto Papini, “Le arti a Monza nel 1927,” pt. 1, “Gli italiani,” *Emporium* (July 1927): 19.

60. In 1919 William M. Odom characterized eighteenth-century Italian furniture as “simple marquetry pieces without carving [that] obtain their decorative effect through the pattern of the veneered woods employed. Walnut predominated, it was sometimes crotched, of the burr, and often placed in panels outlined with contrasting bands of veneer”; William M. Odom, *A History of Italian Furniture* (New York, 1919), 146, 148. Several cassoni in the collection of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan may have provided Ponti with an example of this method of inlay. See Carlo Vicenzi, “Mobili Lombardi del quattrocento nei Musei del Castello Sforzesco di Milano,” *Dedalo* (January 1923): 482–501.

61. According to Lisa Licitra Ponti (Gio Ponti’s daughter), Aldo Borletti, the vice president of La Rinascente, was married to the sister of Giulia Vimercati Ponti, making him Gio Ponti’s brother-in-law (Lisa Licitra Ponti, interview by author, October 1987).

62. La Rinascente, Milan, *Quarant’anni di vita de “La Rinascente”* (Milan, 1957); and La Rinascente, Milan, *Cinquant’anni di vita italiana* (Milan, 1968).

63. For a brief description of this collaboration, see Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco Furniture* (New York, 1984), 13. Throughout the 1920s, Parisian department stores such as Au Printemps and Les Galeries Lafayette served the needs of the bourgeois consumer through the promotion and sale of up-to-date, moderately priced home furnishings.

64. Ponti used the *chiavari* chair as the point of departure for his most famous chairs: the *leggera* (1952) and *superleggera* (1957) produced by the Cassina firm in Meda outside Milan. Chiavari, in the Liguria region of Italy, was noted for its lightweight, elegant chair designs. See Lisa Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti: The Complete Work 1923–1979* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990): 174–75.

65. Rush and cane seating elements were traditionally used in Italy. For examples, see Odom, *History of Italian Furniture*, 52, figs. 64–66; 386, fig. 483; 388, fig. 486; 394, fig. 497; and Giulio Ferrari, *Il legno e la mobilia nell’arte italiana* (Milan [1929]), 361, fig. LXXIX.

66. Roberto Papini, “Le arti a Monza nel 1927,” pt. 2, “Gli Stranieri,” *Emporium* (August 1927): 71–86, ill. facing p. 74; Reggiori, “La Terza Biennale delle arti decorative a Monza,” ill. on p. 301; 317; *Catalogo ufficiale della III Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative*: 22–24, ill. on p. 55; Ponti, ed., *Il mobile moderno in Italia*, ill. on pp. 38, 40, 49, 83, and 101.

67. “Arredata con amorosa comprensione di queste sue funzioni materiali ed etiche . . . [la casa] rappresenterà non le tracce di mode caduche e successive ma la testimonianza della nostra intelligenza, della nostra vita, della nostra cultura e della nobiltà delle cose che amiamo”; Gio Ponti, “La Casa di moda,” *Domus* (August 1928): 11; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all’italiana*, 25–26.

68. “Gli architetti Emilio Lancia and Gio Ponti hanno risolto bene il duplice problema dei mobili economici ed estetica al tempo stesso; l’hanno risolto con molto gusto tenendosi alla semplicità di quelle forme neoclassiche”; Papini, “Le arti a Monza nel 1927,” pt. 1, “Gli italiani,” 19.

69. See Irene de Guttry and Maria Paola Maino, *Il mobile déco italiano* (Rome–Bari, 1988), 41–42.

70. “Arte, per ora, di schietto lusso: ne fan fede perfino i prezzi esposti e richiesti, compresi quelli della *Domus nova*, arredamento che La Rinascente vorrebbe far passare a buon mercato. Seimila e più lire per una camera da letto, pochi mobili nudi e crudi, mi sembran davvero troppe, valore d’arte compreso; nè invogliano il gran pubblico, tentennante fra gusti non determinati, a preferire questi agli altri mobili tradizionali mogano e bronzi”; Reggiori, “La Terza Biennale delle arti decorative a Monza,” 317.

71. Other manufacturers were producing comparable furniture at much lower prices. See de Guttry and Maino, *Il mobile déco italiano*, 41–42.

72. "Noi Italiani si comincia, infine, a far dell'Arte Decorativa nel senso più compiuto della parola; dacché, finalmente, s'è capito che bisogna pensare ed operare con metodo"; Reggiori, "La Terza Biennale delle arti decorative a Monza," 300.

73. "I migliori mobili francesi sono quest'anno assenti: il solo Ruhlmann è presente e manda un mobile tirato fuori che sa da dove, massiccio, pesante, sgraziato, indegno assolutamente del buon nome che egli s'è fatto"; Papini, "Le arti a Monza nel 1927," pt. 2, "Gli stranieri," 71.

74. The designers involved with the project were Gio Ponti, Emilio Lancia, Tomaso Buzzi, Michele Marelli, Pietro Chiesa, Rosa Giolli Menni, and Paolo Venini. See Papini, "Le arti a Monza," pt. 2, "Gli stranieri," ill. on p. 116; Carlo A. Felice, "Bacco e la puttura murale," *Domus* (October 1928): ill. on p. 31; Soccorsa, "Il Bar," *Domus* (February 1929): ill. on p. 22; Gio Ponti, ed., *L'ambiente moderno in Italia* (Milan, 1930), ill. on p. 168; "The 'Penna d'oca' Restaurant, Milan," *Studio* 96, no. 24 (July 1928): 4-11.

75. "Le pareti sono decorate da piccole vedute dei paesi italiani (da Soave a Capri) dai quali vini famosi traggono il nome"; Ponti, ed., *L'ambiente moderno in Italia*, 168.

76. "Modernità di interpretazione, originalità di invenzione, perfezione di tecnica, efficienza di produzione"; Gio Ponti, "Gli italiani alla Triennale di Milano," *Domus* (June 1931): 24. See Gio Ponti, "La Triennale alla Villa Reale di Monza," *Realtà* (March 1, 1930): 225-39.

77. *Catalogo ufficiale della IV Esposizione triennale delle arti decorative ed industriali moderne* (Milan, 1930; 2nd ed. 1930): 283-88; "La 'Casa delle vacanze' alla Triennale di Monza," *Domus* (September 1930): 19-25; Ponti, ed., *L'ambiente moderno in Italia*, 37, 119; Lidia Morelli, *La casa che vorrei avere* (Milan, 1931), ill. on pp. 574-84; Ponti, "La Triennale alla Villa Reale di Monza," 225-39; Ferdinando Reggiori, "La Triennale di Monza: IV Mostra internazionale delle arti decorative," *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (July 1930): 492, 494, ill. on p. 485; Renato Pacini, "La IVª Triennale di arti decorative a Monza," pt. 2, "Le sezioni italiane," *Emporium* (November 1930): ill. on p. 275; "In casa nostra: La 'Casa per le vacanze,' alla Triennale di Monza," *Le Echi de 'La Rinascente'* (July 1930): 35.

78. "Un vero e reale 'villino tipico' a solo piano terreno, studiatissimo e convenientissimo esempio di abitazione moderna per villeggiatura"; Ponti, "La Triennale alla Villa Reale di Monza," 236.

79. "Non si tratta di una 'casetta economica': questo tipo di costruzione appartiene anzi a quelle manifestazioni caratteristiche di una classe educata al gusto ed al comfort"; "La 'Casa delle vacanze' alla Triennale di Monza," 23.

80. Founded in 1926, Gruppo 7 included the architects Sebastiano Larco, Guido Frette, Carlo Enrico Rava, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Giuseppe Terragni, and Adalberto Libera. Their manifesto, published in 1926 in the magazine *La Rassegna Italiana*, stated: "The new architecture, the true architecture, should be the result of a close association between logic and rationality"; trans. and excerpted in Vittorio Gregotti, *New Directions in Italian Architecture* (New York, 1968), 13-14. "La nuova architettura, la vera architettura deve risultare da una stretta aderenza alla logica, alla razionalità"; quoted in Vittorio Gregotti, "Milano e la cultura architettonica tra le due guerre," in Silvia Danesi and Luciano Patetta, eds., *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante fascismo* (Venice, 1976): 18.

81. "Chi ha imparato a riconoscere i caratteri delle architetture e degli interni di Muzio, di Buzzi, di Alpago e quelle di Pagano, di Rava, di Frette, avverte da sè gli estremi di queste due tendenze. Ma esse portano entrambi una ricchezza di riferimento e di esperienza storica l'una, e ricchezza di determinata esperienza di tecniche, di materiali nuovi e di nuovi aspetti di pianta e d'alzata l'altra"; Ponti, "Sulla 'Casa elettrica' alla Triennale di Monza," in *La casa all'italiana*, 103. The text quoted here is slightly altered from that originally published in *Domus* (August 1930): 26-34.

82. "Disse [Gio Ponti] che desiderava che noi si facesse una cosa piuttosto di lusso, perché è già pieno di progetti di stanzette colle solite vernicette a colori"; Giacomo Polin, *La Casa elettrica di Figini e Pollini*, 1930 (Rome, 1982), 147, appendix 1.

83. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*, 248.

84. For information on material restrictions, see de Guttry and Maino, *Il mobile déco italiano*, 46.

85. "Fossero mostrate le possibilità di nobile impiego di questo metallo che l'Italia possiede in abbondanza"; Ponti, "La Triennale alla Villa Reale di Monza," 228.

86. Sanctions on the use of materials were not officially put into law until the mid-1930s. It is significant, however, that the managing director of the Montecatini Company, Guido Donegnani, was a member of Parliament from 1921 and a member of Mussolini's Chamber of Deputies. Donegnani

would have been personally involved with the economic direction of the Italian state. See "Big Business, Italian Style," *Fortune* (July 1934): 82; ill. in *Domus* (July 1930): ill. on p. 16; and in "Il concorso per l'ornamento della tavola alla Triennale di Monza," *Domus* (November 1930): ill. on p. 61.

87. "Una tavola disegnata dal Ponti, con le gambe a dischi degradanti, come le gambe di sedie e di mense antiche nei musei e nelle pitture di Roma o di Pompei, squisita d'invenzione e di fatture, e piacevole di colore per il contrasto tra il piano nero e il tono argento opaco del duralluminio"; Ugo Ogetti, "L'Esposizione delle arti decorative a Monza," *Corriere della Sera* (May 11, 1930): 3.

88. "Un riferimento tutto morale all'antico, come motivo ed esempio di grandezza, non come repertorio di motivi da svaligiare e corrompere"; Gio Ponti, "Ieri e oggi," *Domus* (October 1932): 580; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 85-92.

89. "Buona esecuzione, ottimo materiale, concezione ragionata, buon senso della facile utilità, ecco le qualità del mobile moderno"; Gio Ponti, "Casa di Ferrarin," *Domus* (February 1932): 83; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 27-28.

90. "Altra cosa è invece la bellezza del mobile: . . . ad essa concorrono gusto, educazione, esperienza, intelligenza e fantasia nel disegno, nell'intonare i colori e le materie"; Gio Ponti, "Casa di Ferrarin," 83; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 27-28.

91. "Del classicismo rimane una lezione tutta spirituale di logica, di chiarezza, di semplicità, di umanità, che guida e conforta gli architetti verso opere liberamente e immediatamente aderenti agli usi d'oggi"; Gio Ponti, "Quale sarà la casa domani?" *Domus* (January 1932): 2; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 39-41.

92. "Se siete invece determinati a fare un po' di repulisti, eliminate solo ciò che non ha carattere, solo ciò che non è autentico. . . . Se il concetto che vi guiderà è quello di farvi una dimora fresca e serena, senza pretesa e senza pose, con una semplicità sincera e onesta, con un ordine armonioso e chiaro, potete esser sicuri di riuscire a crearvi anche veramente una bella casa. Una casa moderna"; Gio Ponti, "San Michele: Rinnoviamo la casa," *Domus* (September 1932): 515; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all'italiana*, 22-24.

93. The text is in Italian, French, and English in Daria Guarnati, ed., *Espressione di Gio Ponti* (Milan, 1954), 98.

94. “Modernità è selezione, è solo attiva appassionata meditata selezione”; Ponti, “Casa di Ferrarin,” 83; repr. in Ponti, *La casa all’italiana*, 27–28.

95. “Prime affermazioni . . . di Gio Ponti, nella ceramica . . . quella della *Domus nova*, primo tentativo italiano di popolarizzare il mobile e l’arredo moderni”; Roberto Papini, “La Quinta Triennale a Milano,” *Emporium* (December 1933): 332, 334.

96. “Per quanto riguarda il programma pratico delle Triennali, esse intendono segnalare i modelli più significativi nella evoluzione dello stile”; Gio Ponti, “La Triennale di Milano del 1933,” *Realtà* (February 1, 1932): 152.

97. The text was written in five languages: Italian, French, English, German, and Spanish in Gio Ponti, “La Triennale di Milano,” *Domus* (May 1933): 223.

98. “É stata mia ispirazione il modo italiano . . . senza deformarli ‘alla moderna’”; Gio Ponti, “L’arredamento alla Triennale,” *Domus* (July 1933): 376.

99. Text printed in English: “a bedroom by Ponti himself where is clearly seen the tendency to go back to a character tipycally [sic] Italian”; *ibid.*, 372.

100. “L’anno che ora si chiude ha segnato un balzo in avanti nella adesione alle forme moderne di vita, nella affermazione delle arti e delle industrie italiane che interessano la casa”; Gio Ponti, “1933-1934,” *Domus* (December 1933): 623.

101. “Nell’opera di Ponti c’è sempre più logica di quanto non sospettino gli avversari. . . . Per Ponti . . . la conquista del gusto moderno è consistita nel

ritrovare il senso della propria attività in un mondo di idee che superasse i limiti angusti della tradizione paesana”; Edoardo Persico, “L’architetto Gio Ponti,” *L’Italia Letteraria* (April 29, 1934); repr. in Giulia Veronesi, ed., *Edoardo Persico: Scritti d’architettura (1927-1935)* (Florence, 1968), 137–38.

102. “Dal classicismo deriverà dunque un ‘nuovo classicismo’ intendendosi—come diceva Cocteau—che un’opera classica non è quella che ne ha l’apparenza, ma quella che ha gli elementi per divenire classica”; Gio Ponti, “Quale sarà la nostra casa domani?” in Ponti, *La casa all’italiana*, 39–41. This part of the text does not appear in the version published in *Domus* (January 1932): 2.

103. Gio Ponti, *In Praise of Architecture*, trans. Giuseppina and Mario Salvadori (orig. pub. as *Amate l’architettura* [Milan, 1956]; New York, 1957), 239.