

Italianità* and internationalism: production, design and mediation at Alessi, 1976-96*

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Summary

This article considers the Italian household product design company Alessi as quintessentially Italian and international. The interplay of mass-production and craft techniques at Alessi, an extended design process and the presentation of the family in company publicity exemplify the ambiguities identified within Italian design. The extent to which Alessi typifies Italian post-war design is questioned with reference to the company's international design team and the marketing of its products to foreign consumers as manifestations of Italianità. The findings are based on primary research in Milan and the Alessi factory, including a series of interviews with designers, retailers, curators and media workers, combined with secondary material centred upon design history.

Positioning the object: Italian design historiography

In comparison with the massive output of fully industrialized nations, the smaller number of goods 'Made in Italy' have received a disproportionate amount of media attention throughout the post-war period. Italian design has been lauded and debated in an extraordinarily passionate and polyvocal manner, from post-war reconstruction and the early industrial successes of the 1950s discussed in architecture and design magazines *Domus*, *Casabella* and *Stile Industria*, to the solid reputation for design excellence and innovation with materials and techniques of the early 1960s recorded by the *Triennali* and the *Compasso d'oro*, and even to the trough of the late 1960s and early 1970s, addressed in the 1972 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* in New York. The 1988 survey *Design in Italy* by Penny Sparke, a leading design historian, and Nally Bellati's book *New Italian Design* of 1990 reflect the resurgence of the design industries in the 1980s based on a wider boom in Italy and a confidence borne of the success epitomized by Studio Alchymia and Memphis. In view of the amount of publicity and discussion accorded to Italian design, it is remarkable that Sparke views academic treatment of Italian design as incomplete. Her critique of Italian design historiography for Modern Italy used Huyssen's binary concept of gender in modernism to argue that the feminine phenomena 'nature, craft, domesticity and consumption' have been neglected and their opposites celebrated in the masculinist mediation of Italian design. 'Documenters have stressed the slick, organic forms, the use of technologically sophisticated new materials and the bold, bright, synthetic colours which, for them, were the characteristic features of many of Italy's most renowned design icons of these [post-war] years'.¹

Alessi s.p.a. was set up in 1921 to produce utilitarian household goods in metal, but since then the company has been popularly presented as the epitome of 1980s postmodern high design, especially using Michael Graves' 'Kettle with a Bird-Shaped Whistle' (Figure 1). Both the masculine and the feminine characteristics identified by Sparke appear to describe Alessi and yet little rigorous attention has been given to the extent to which Alessi typifies Italian design. Published writing about Alessi has been nurtured by the company itself, through the numerous catalogues and books produced under the aegis of the general manager Alberto Alessi Anghini, a businessman of uncommon historical and theoretical design awareness. While the company has been important internationally, Alessi has presented itself through vanity publishing as quintessentially Italian in a number of ways. First, there is an emphasis on the Northern Italian craft tradition that offers a counter-point to the medium-sized mass production fundamental to the breadth of the Alessi catalogue. Secondly, the company literature places great importance on a particularly rarefied design

process closely tied to the theoretically charged nature of Italian design in both industrial and educational contexts, even while Alessi employs an international team of designers. Thirdly, Alessi publications place the company's output firmly within the canonical modernist history of western design, and Italian design history in particular provides inspiration for the company's activity. Fourthly, the importance of the family in Italian culture, business and industry is reflected at Alessi both through the workings of the business and in the development of consciously styled product 'families'. This family status has meant that while the company has diversified both up- and down-market in developing its catalogue, the business organization has remained highly centralized.² Each of these four factors may be viewed as embodying a duality; a distinctly Italian design character is as diffuse as the nature of being Italian and each may be seen to represent a refusal of singularity.³

Characteristics of Italian production: 'A kind of handicraft made with the help of machines'

Alessi's expansion has occurred during a period in which Italy has negotiated the Americanization of its production and consumption. Duggan's assertion that 'the majority of industrialists showed little desire to explore new ideas or methods' in the 1950s needs to be considered in the context of Italy's post-war development which involved extensive capital investment and rapid expansion in industry aided partly by the injection of US dollars under the Marshall Plan.⁴ The 'American system' of manufacture based on the standardization of products, a single-product strategy in the case of Fordism, use of single-purpose equipment, degradation of skill through division of labour, close supervision and day-

[p.39] or piece-payment, was developed in Italy in the context of 'flexible specialization' based upon 'general purpose equipment and a skilled, adaptable labour force'.⁵ Duccio Bigazzi's study of car manufacture shows an actively critical and questioning approach to mass production.⁶ State-of-the-art machine production influenced and sometimes supplied by the United States was embraced just as the relatively small-scale manufacture typical of pre-war production in Italy was partly retained, especially in the South. 'Flexible specialization' occurred across Italy's strongest areas of production, including textiles, automotive technologies and household goods. Bigazzi's praise for the development of 'striking formal design' based on scant use of energy and scarce raw materials and economical, low running costs by companies such as Olivetti, Borletti, Piaggio, Innocenti, Candy and Zanussi serves to exemplify Sparke's observation that previous studies have neglected craft practices and the feminine aspects of Italian design.⁷ Sparke points for example to Vico Magistretti's 'Carimate' chair of 1960 which fuses an Italian craft tradition based on work in cane and wicker with an industrial sensibility.

Alessi was founded by Giovanni Alessi Anghini in the Valley Strona outside Milan in a region known for metal production.⁸ The standard Bialetti coffee machines are produced in a neighbouring factory founded by the maternal grandfather of the current Alessi managers. 'Industrial districts' are cited by Zamagni as the key to the success in Italy of small and medium-sized enterprises based in a regional environment spreading know-how and innovation and relying on a local specialized workforce, adjacent services and sub-contractors, the convenience for buyers of grouped brands and mutual trust as a catalyst for low transaction costs and informal co-ordination.⁹ Initially, Alessi produced metal parts such as springs but by 1932, under the directorship of Carlo Alessi, production developed from turning to pressing and the company began to make household and catering trade goods such as trays.¹⁰ Design was undertaken in-house, with a best-seller of the 1940s being director Carlo Alessi's 'Bombe' tea service of 1945 which is still in production today, albeit in different materials. Initial output at the Alessi factory was in brass and nickel silver, but by 1954, stainless steel was the major material. This change in materials accompanied a change in method from small-scale, utilitarian, specialized production to medium-sized mass production. Alberto Alessi Anghini, co-general manager since 1970, has referred to this

period of Alessi's development as 'a kind of handicraft made with the help of machines ... I find it difficult to clearly define the difference between "industry" and "handicraft"'.¹¹ This ambiguity explains the placement of an image of Northern Italian women knitting in Alessi marketing (Figure 2). Hence the 'Alessofono' saxophone, Alberto Alessi's tribute to the region and to his Grandfather Giovanni's involvement in saxophone production, and an attempt to revive saxophone production in the area.¹² 'In short we want the Alessofono to prove that it isn't true that the entire consumer world should be reduced to standardized large scale manufacturing, whether that means the advanced automation of Japanese manufacturers or eastern European price dumping.'¹³

Surveys of post-war Italian design may have neglected craft, but it is one of the key motifs of Alessi practice and publicity. Local traditional production also motivates Alessi's involvement in Twergi wooden products. However, Alessi's output is not confined to regional traditions: ceramic goods are subcontracted under the label 'Tendentse', and in the 1990s a highly successful new venture in plastic was initiated under the epithet 'Family Follows Fiction'. The latter brand has been presented as an innovation designed to facilitate collaboration with younger designers, and it has also enabled Alessi to reach a wider market through cheaper goods and a more populist aesthetic. However, even Family Follows Fiction is informed by the history of Italian design: plastics have a special resonance here because the heyday of Italian design in the 1960s featured the seminal production of objects of high-design value made of plastic.

Alessi is known for its technical innovation, with designers challenging existing capabilities of materials and function. Furthermore, Alessi aims to innovate stylistically as the company has increasingly sought to differentiate its products from those of competitors through design and form. Small production runs and versatile hand and machine processes, cited by Tolliday and Zeitlin in their definition of flexible specialization, are suited to and form the basis of production for niche marketing and differentiation through design. Alessi's catalogues list 2,000 items, which militates against single-purpose production methods and requires flexible production methods and a proportion of relatively skilled staff. 400 people are employed in the Alessi factory (another 120 work externally on polishing), which places them firmly within the category of medium-sized mass-production. Production runs are similarly flexible. Whereas an average 70,000 of the best-selling Graves' whistling bird kettle were produced each year at the height of its popularity, it is normal for Alessi to keep in production an item selling only 1,000 units annually.¹⁴

Evidence of the flexibility of production processes at Alessi is provided by comparison of the production methods for various products in the catalogue. Fish plate 125 designed by Carlo Mazzeri and Anselmo Vitale of 1962 is one of the simplest items to produce, with seven production stages. The steel is cut, oiled, pressed, trimmed, stamped with the Alessi mark, polished and washed (Figure 3). The most labour-intensive product is Ricardo Dalisi's 'Neopolitan Coffee Maker' (1979-87), which requires 120 different operations, ironically in view of the fact that it was intended as a tribute to the development of vernacular models. The Dalisi piece is sold under the Officina Alessi brand which denotes a higher level of hand-crafting using more expensive materials such as silver (Figure 4). Alessi typifies Italy's small to medium-sized manufacturers in that it does not invest heavily in technologically advanced equipment.¹⁵ Rather, the company has a reputation for stylistic innovation using traditional methods.

The design process: 'Designers are treated like gods'

The characteristically Italian approach to design exemplified by Alessi can be attributed to the nature of design education in Italy wherein a high proportion of designers train as architects. In Britain the route from architectural study to product design is not obvious, but in Italy, where an architectural education focuses on more widely applicable theories, a move

towards industrial design is not illogical. In the 1972 catalogue *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, Mendini lamented the generality of Italian design education.¹⁶ Nally Bellati's positive view of the education of Italian designers is rooted in the success of the 1980s which her book *New Italian Design* of 1990 itemizes in a celebration of the resurgence of Italian design. Bellati summarizes the work of Italian designers as typifying: 'an intellectual approach that unites a humanistic view of culture with science ... rather than just a division of industry, design takes on wider intellectual applications, becoming a kind of institution with its own history and dignity.'¹⁷

A characteristically Italian approach to design differentiates the cultural and ideological work of the designer from the practical considerations of production.¹⁸ Alessi has two technical departments to mediate between its designers and its factory, and Alberto Alessi notes that the technical team finds it easier to work with architects, who are not concerned to defend their designs in detail, than with designers.¹⁹ Alessi aims to be sensitive to methodological differences between individual designers, but largely the designers produce sketches for interpretation by technical teams into information suitable for use on the factory floor using CAD/CAM. This approach suggests that the designer functions more as an artist than as a practical problem-solver. Philippe Starck has described his approach to design thus: 'when you start creating, you generally do so for yourself' which his interlocutor Marco Meneguzzo pointed out as being 'common among artists'.²⁰ Such an approach is strongly contested:

Producing images is a superficial way of working that demeritizes [sic] design as a profession. It turns it solely into creating a form. Alessi is the only example of Italian industry that has succeeded with image-based design due to their heritage of design.²¹

Designer Claire Brass is the product of a British design education comprising workshop practice, materials knowledge and technical drawing. Brass felt atypical at Alessi (even though successful) because she based her designs on an industrial process. Brass's 'Kalisto' containers were inspired by the press-moulding process, with subsequent hand turning to produce surface texture.

The numbers of goods in simultaneous development at Alessi necessitates a lengthy development period for each product of between two and five years. The industry norm stands at around one year, and so the five years sometimes needed at Alessi contribute to a premium price point, although overall technical research and development costs stand at a mere 5 per cent of the £30 million turnover.²² In addition, since the move away from in-house design in 1954 Alessi designers have worked on a consultancy basis, like the design consultants employed by Reggio Emilia-based fashion company Max Mara, and are paid in royalties.²³ The catalogue often supplies two dates for the products, indicating first inception and final release. Ironically, this time-lapse is irritating to designers. Mendini has claimed he forgets about his Alessi projects between design and production.²⁴ Ettore Sottsass cites time as a reason for ceasing to work with Alessi:

For instance ... the inside of this thermos is made by vacuum glass, mirrored. They went to Japan but it was too expensive to produce. Finally, after two or three or four years they found in Bombay a company that is producing these things very well, very cheap, very precise. I had to wait, to wait so much that in the end when it comes out, I would design it totally differently. You know because I am bored ... and I don't care any more.²⁵

However, designing for Alessi carries status, and the company is considered to be extremely sympathetic to designers: 'Designers are treated like gods when you are developing a project. They will do anything to get it right.'²⁶ When Guido Venturini expensively changed his mind at a late stage about the colour of his 'Firebird' gas lighter, the company had faith that his choice was correct and made expensively late changes to the specifications (Figure

5). While slight modifications were made to Joanna Lyle's 'Ovolini' spice jars based on economic factors, no changes were made to her first design for Alessi, 'Chimu' of 1992.²⁷ Alberto Alessi usually supports production of the designs submitted, because he oversees their development and falls 'in love' with them, but only one-quarter of the projects in simultaneous development are expected to reach the consumer.²⁸

When Alberto says 'Design is perhaps a word which is no more sufficient to express what I want to say', he refers to the fact that 'design' commonly signifies utilitarian and aesthetic problem-solving, and does not infer the level of cultural concerns of Alessi.²⁹ Gert Selle is critical of the theoretically driven approach considered to be characteristic of certain aspects of Italian design:

Mellini, as theoretician of the Italian avant-garde, maintains that a sort of redesign of the everyday beauties creates things that are 'meaning-charged' instead of 'meaning void'. This is an error due to a practical misassessment of design for all. These things have already for a long time revealed their density of meaning in socially differentiating use. A reshaping of their image would at best be disturbing; it is superfluous, like any prescribed guardian design.³⁰

Alessi is guilty of Selle's charge: through the design process, marketing and publications, Alessi invests its objects with ready-made meanings.³¹ Alberto

Alessi discusses reasons for purchase other than use-value, identifying these as 'art and poetry': 'I know that saying that I will attract criticism from a certain kind of intelligentsia, in particular Anglo-Saxon, and during this last period I well know that a certain kind of neo-functional guidance is always in wait, behind the door, isn't it?'³² National variations in definitions of design activity lead to problems of reception: if British design commentators assess Alessi through a 'neo-functional' framework they fail to view the objects in their intended context.

Nature and nurture in Italian design: from Linea Italiana to Linea Internazionale

Further questioning of the extent to which Alessi epitomizes Italian design requires consideration of the aspects of the company that are best described as international, rather than Italian: the designers and the market. Up to 1954, Alessi designs were produced in-house, notably by the director Carlo Alessi and less notably by anonymous technical staff.³³ From 1954, when Italy was almost a decade into its post-war reconstruction and had developed an international reputation for excellence in design, Alessi began to employ designers on a consultancy basis. This move, representing a new seriousness about design as a discrete activity, took place during a period of intensifying discussion of the role of design in Italy, as voiced through the publications *Domus*, *Casabella* and *Stile Industria*, through the discourse surrounding the Triennali, and through the development of the Compasso d'Oro design awards in 1954 by Milan's leading department store, La Rinascente. The tenth Triennale of 1954 dwelt on the links between industry and art, design and technology. By 1955 the design publication *Stile Industria*, launched the previous year, had opened an enquiry into the relationship between the fields of design and industry which involved discussion of the link between production process and object form, and between designer and technician. The eleventh Triennale of 1957 was similarly concerned with interdisciplinary links, adding architecture and craft to the concern for art and industry.³⁴ Such concerns were apposite: between 1957 and 1961 Olivetti's production of typewriters quadrupled.³⁵

The initial designs for Alessi by the young architects Luigi Massoni, Carlo Mazzeri and Anselmo Vitale in 1954 maintained the 'banal' utility of the existing pieces, albeit with an enhanced concern for aesthetics.³⁶ This approach continued as Alessi began to work with

the group Exhibition Design and with Ettore Sottsass from 1972. Sottsass had participated in the debates about the role of design in Italy and had achieved international recognition with his designs for the office equipment company Olivetti. Sottsass' 5070 Cruet Set can be viewed retrospectively as heralding the humour, wit and typological innovation of the better known and more recent Alessi products (Figure 6). Alessi changed tactic again when developing the 'Alessi d'apres' art multiples from 1972 to 1977 by commissioning five European artists to design tabletop sculptures (Figure 7). Alessi moved beyond the clique of Italian industrial designers towards encompassing art and design with wider European horizons. The activity of working on occasional series projects appears to have led Alessi into employing a more geographically diverse range of designers.

The inception of the 'Tea and Coffee Piazza' project in 1980 resulted from Alessandro Mendini's discussions with Alberto Alessi about publicity and marketing for the brand (Figure 8). With direct reference to his involvement in Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, Mendini selected twelve international architects to devise 'domestic landscapes' in the form of architecturally inspired tea and coffee services that made 'explicit reference to the origins of the Italian design phenomenon: even then, in the early fifties, a few "pure architects" had begun to design objects'.³⁷ The results of the Tea and Coffee Piazza project are patently influenced by examples from the history of design outside of Italy, such as the work of modernist Eliel Saarinen (whose Tea and Coffee Service with Samovar of 1934 is also reproduced by Alessi) (Figure 9).

According to Mendini and Alberto Alessi, the decision to employ architects from Europe, the United States and Japan was based partly on a desire to open an international debate about design and Italian design in particular, and partly on Mendini's assessment of who was doing the most interesting work at that time. The Tea and Coffee Piazza was followed by other series of ventures with international contributors such as 100 Per Cent Make-Up of 1989 to 1992, which involved a hundred designers each providing a decorative scheme for a blank urn designed by Mendini. Initially, one hundred of each design were produced and followed by unlimited production of the ten bestsellers in imitation of natural selection. Architecture and design writer Deyan Sudjic notes the use of international designers as a marketing benefit: 'A Taiwanese electronics company, for example, may not be known in Europe, but if it employs Mario Bellini to style its products, then it can be sure that his name at least will open doors.'³⁸ As Italian production is associated with modification rather than technical innovation, this process is clearly of mutual benefit.

Ironically for a company so involved in enhancing awareness of historical and contemporary Italian design, the designers most famous for their association with Alessi are the American Michael Graves, who designed the 'Kettle with a Bird-Shaped Whistle', and the Frenchman Philippe Starck, who has said: 'Since the last war we have all had the chance to get to know the planet ... when you have been to Club Mediterranee four times-once in Brazil, once in Corfu, and once in, I don't know, Thailand-when you watch the television a bit, you understand.'³⁹ This internationalism raises the question of whether a kettle designed by an American can be considered an example of Italian design or, more widely, whether nature (birth) or nurture (social context) is dominant in attributing provenance. Alessandro Mendini provides a simple summary of national stereotypes or strengths:

I think Italian design is considered outside as an aesthetic design, a kind of design in which the aesthetic component is the most important part of the project. For example, the German design is the function, the first one. And in Japan the electronic design is the first problem. In England I think there is this very important tradition of quality.⁴⁰

Mendini's geographical model is disputable. In 1972 Carl Argan dismissed the notion that design in Italy was purely Italian: 'to the extent that industrial design tends to establish an international style of mass-production one might say, paraphrasing a famous witticism of

George Orwell, that Italian style aspired to be the most international of all.⁴¹ Such internationalism rests on Italy's ability to attract celebrated practitioners from across the globe as a result of its post-war success:⁴² 'The famed Linea Italiana of the 1950s has made way for a Linea Internazionale, whose contours are much more difficult to make out.'⁴³

Mellini's second assertion, that Italian design is primarily aesthetic, is also questionable. The social role of design dominated design discourse during the high period of Italian design in the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout his career Sottsass has placed social improvement—a kind of utopianism—at the heart of his work while also maintaining design consultancy roles with Olivetti and Alessi, and working for the furniture company Cassina. In her *Design Directory Italy*, Claudia Neumann suggests that Sottsass's work reflects 'a purely Italian phenomenon ... the two divergent movements in design - classic industrial design and its utopian counterpoint - occasionally ran together in the work of individual figures'.⁴⁴ The pragmatism required to subordinate utopian ideals to commerce is also found in a modified form in the philosophies of younger Italian designers. Matteo Thun speaks for his generation as he retains Sottsass' awareness of the necessity of working with industry while rejecting his utopian aims:

I'm a servant to the new capitalist system ... simultaneously at the service of Tiffany and Company, Swatch, or Alessi. I want to believe that professional duty asks you not to create subjective poetic messages of personal utopia: the first thing one must do is to permit a client to sell as much as possible, to increase his profits and turnover.⁴⁵

Thun's disregard for utopianism, the use of design for social improvement, is also a rejection of the earlier generation of designers who have maintained their concern about the designer's role in consumerist obsolescence.⁴⁶ Alessi designers and architects Stefano Giovannoni and Guido Venturini share Thun's generational distaste: 'We've had enough of erudite designers like Mendini or Branzi, you need to have a degree in architecture to understand their designs.'⁴⁷ In turn, Sottsass deplores the way in which Italian designers have forgotten the special political dimension of Italian design resulting from post-war reconstruction in favour of consumer seduction and obsolescence:

You know the new trend of Alessi, I must say I don't very much agree, because as I told you before, I think they are using design as a seducing possibility. No more as the creation of objects which may help your life or your awareness of life ... I am old, and I cannot change my previous basic idea about design and architecture... In fact, I almost don't design any more for Alessi.⁴⁸

Marketing Italianità: craft, design and family

The high design value of Alessi goods, coupled with what the company considers to be superior quality, means that Alessi goods are distinguished by price from those of comparable manufacturers such as Denmark's Bodum and Germany's Authentics. Consequently, the marketing and publicity for Alessi goods has sought to invest them with added value. The extensive catalogues and books the company publishes about its work as a framework for media and consumer responses form a significant aspect of Alessi marketing. The three most in-depth studies have been produced by people related to the company: Patrizia Scarzella, author of *Steel and Style* was an employee of the company; *Alessi: The Design Factory* is a collection of writings by people working for Alessi; *Paesaggio Casalingo* is by Mendini, Alessi design consultant. In addition, Alessi promotes itself through exhibitions many of which are listed in Alessi catalogues, such as the 1979-80 *Paesaggio Casalingo* exhibition at the 16th Milan Triennale, and *L'atelier Alessi: Alberto Alessi et Alessandro Mendini: dix ans de design, 1980-1990* at the Paris Pompidou Centre, 1989-90. There is also the Museo Alessi. These methods of adding value can be usefully understood

in terms of two key themes that together form a highly persuasive interpretation of italianità: design heritage and the family.

In questioning the role of Alessi goods as expressions of italianità, it is useful to view Alessi as serving two distinct markets: home and abroad. In Italy, Alessi objects are ubiquitous and quotidian. Outside Italy, import expenses contribute to the fact Alessi objects occupy the higher end of the price range for household goods. This is not a deterrent because Alessi epitomizes designer housewares for its non-Italian market.⁴⁹ Worldwide, Alessi employs approximately 200 agents and distributors with national briefs, whereas agents are used in each region of Italy. Alberto Alessi explains his relatively high domestic sales with reference to the national character: 'People in Italy are more motivated to buy art through design: they want to use art, to have it close to hand, to experience the emotions of the museum while they are at home.'⁵⁰ Germany is the second largest market, closely followed by Scandinavia. Alessi sales are lower in France, Britain and the United States. Australia has been a growing market for Alessi but sales in Africa are negligible.⁵¹ So whereas Alessi goods are tantamount to ordinary in Italy, overseas they carry the lustre of italianità: 'We should not be surprised that trade begins with exotica, with goods and objects that acquire value precisely because they are removed from their own context and presented as novelties from afar.'⁵² Bourdieu notes that this 'culture grazing'⁵³ is mutual: French words hold the same allure in New York as English words in Paris.⁵⁴ Italianita may be perceived only from the outside. Italian consumers do not perceive Alessi as symbolic of Italy.⁵⁵ In accordance with the inherent ambiguity of Italian design, Alessi produces stylistically opposed products for varying tastes.⁵⁶ For Alessi to market its goods as bearers of italianità, the company needs a self-conscious understanding of how it is viewed elsewhere, and this is expressed not least in its bi- and tri-lingual catalogues.

Marketing design heritage

Design heritage and company history are emphasized in even the most basic Alessi publications. Alessi ranges are organized chronologically, charting design progress, including illustrations of discontinued archive items and extensive bibliographies to contextualize current production. Alessi reproduces work by Italian designers such as Joe Colombo alongside foreign designers whose work is aesthetically compatible with the company catalogue, effectively placing Alessi and Italian design within a historical trajectory founded on pre-war design excellence located outside Italy. The *Officina 'Archivi'* and *'La Tavola di Babele'* ranges add cultural value to the catalogue, even though sales are low. Daniel Weil states in *Alessi: The Design Factory*:

the Alessi catalogue ... has taken on the characteristics of an archaeological dig through a century of design. All the different strata are showing, stretching back from postmodernism through the Modern Movement, to the Bauhaus and Arts and Crafts, right back in fact to Christopher Dresser who is widely acknowledged as the world's first industrial designer.⁵⁷

Alessi reproduces Dresser designs in both their intended silver, and in bright plastics such as the 'Christy' bowl which has undergone sufficient mediation as to be classifiably exemplary of Italian postmodernism. Conversely, Alessi's Marianne Brandt reproductions are examples of international modernism, a design philosophy that attempted to overcome vernacular characteristics, as noted by Jeremy Aynsley.⁵⁸ It is contradictory for Alessi, a company so concerned to uphold regional production, to promote designs borne of international modernism, even though architectural Modernism had been associated with the Fascist regime of the 1930s.⁵⁹

In this cultural activity Alessi follows the precedent of the much larger Olivetti, and its exhibitions about the company and Italian design, as part of a programme of Cultural

Activities in the Department of Corporate Image.⁶⁰ Both are steel-based industries in Northern Italy, with Olivetti founded in 1908 and Alessi in 1921. However, the comparison extends only to cultural involvement to enhance the brand image; the two companies make very different products. Kircherer suggests that Olivetti's 'cultural commitment' helped to alleviate 'a situation where nobody was able to locate the human and social consequences of the new technology' and provided consumers with a means of differentiation and recognition.⁶¹ The self-conscious injection of culture into business has worked for other Italian companies such as the furniture producer Cassina and its 'Cassina i Maestri' collection. Established in Milan in 1927, Cassina first reproduced a Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand chaise longue in 1965 followed with designs by Marcel Breuer, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Gerrit Rietveld. Alessi author Enzo Fratelli describes such reproduction as 'an undeniably cultivated act, adding a physical, tangible, three-dimensional and verifiable aspect which complements the cultural contribution of the design historian, who places an object within the framework of his critical analysis'.⁶² Featherstone discusses 'the use of art as a vehicle for public relations by large corporations' as a result of the 'aestheticization of everyday life', meaning a widening concern for style and aesthetics.⁶³ Alessi does not stop at presenting its work as part of the Italian design tradition, but rather seeks placement within an international design canon: 'After a few months I began to receive sketches and drawings which filled me with joy: I really felt these were projects that were destined to change the history of design.'⁶⁴ For Alessi, Olivetti and Cassina, the introduction of fine art into corporate activities allows designed products to be viewed in a more elevated context: 'Design and advertising thus not only become confused with art, but are celebrated and museumified as art.'⁶⁵

The Italian family firm: production strategy and marketing motif

Using Baudrillard's suggestion that appreciation of historical objects represents regression into childhood, Michael Collins suggests that Alessi's reproductions of design classics are part of a quest to locate familial origins, and posits Brandt as a mother figure and Dresser as a father.⁶⁶ Contrived as this may be, it is nevertheless particularly apt in relation to Alessi because the company presents the family as a motif for understanding its work wherever possible, as in *The Dream Factory: Alessi Since 1921*, which begins 'Since time immemorial the Alessi family has been firmly established on Lake Orta ... The first Alessi I've traced was called Giovanni; in 1633 he married a certain Caterina Gozano in Luzzogno.'⁶⁷ The frontispiece to Alessi: The Design Factory of 1994 shows the Alessi family firm: two older men in suits and ties, and four younger ones with open-necked shirts (Figure 10). The new generation wishes to be seen as relaxed and approachable. One sits on an upturned 'Falstaff' cooking pot and they all brandish Starck's 'Juicy Salif' lemon squeezer. The improbable positioning of the many squeezers, for example tucked into a belt, subverts the dignity of the family portrait with humour and masks the serious business of a corporate board. Wives are absent in accordance with the patrilineal tradition.⁶⁸ Alberto has described the way in which the family status of the company has impacted upon the design process.⁶⁹ Michele Alessi has also emphasized the importance of family relationships to the company's present structure: 'it wouldn't be possible ... to match together if we weren't brothers. So that's one of the advantages of, a characteristic, in this case an advantage, of the Italian family companies. We have a lot of family companies.'⁷⁰

Alessi's status as a family firm is reflected in its product names, for example 'Family Follows Fiction' and 'Graves Family'; this is a clear expression of pride in the family ethos. Alessi markets its familial status as a positive asset, but this can be counter-productive, as with the negative publicity that surrounded the Gucci family collapse.⁷¹ The implosion of such a dysfunctional family business would have had less widespread journalistic appeal without the human interest provided by a familial dimension. Milan has the highest concentration of private family companies in Italy.⁷² The family ethos that permeates Alessi is dependent upon the company's location and size. Haycraft notes that in the 1980s 65 per cent of

Italians were dependent upon a family economy.⁷³ In her review of Italian business history, Francesca Carnevali points out that while state intervention has had a marked effect on the major Italian businesses, both state-owned and private, 'the dominance of family enterprise even in the 100 major Italian firms has resulted in a fear of diversification and multidivisional structures'.⁷⁴ Carnevali refers to La Rinascente, Olivetti, Montedison and FIAT as examples.⁷⁵ Kircherer's study of Olivetti uses foreign occupation as an explanation for this: 'The Italian understanding of man and society had been shaped over thousands of years by the frequent experience of occupation by foreigners. The family environment has become a stronghold of individuality and self-determination against an imposed system.'⁷⁶ Zamagni points out that, for different reasons, both Communist and Catholic traditions favourable to family firms have resulted in a disappointing international profile for the country, owing partly to rivalry between public and private firms, and the impact of a high proportion of small companies on the similarly small size of banks and on the Italian stock exchange.⁷⁷ Duggan sketches the deleterious impact upon nationalism of the pre-eminence of family loyalty.⁷⁸

Carnevali uses the construction company Dioguardi as an example of how small family-run Italian firms have progressed to medium-sized manufacture and international markets by decentralization and the use of a tier of semi-autonomous managers involved in sub-contracting.⁷⁹ Diversification has occurred at Alessi mainly in the product range. While Alessi diversified relatively late and both up- and down-market, such a move has been extremely successful, both through the Officina Alessi marque, which denotes skilled craftsmanship and highly valued materials, and through the Family Follows Fiction plastic goods from 1991 onwards. Little organizational change has occurred save for the influx of a new generation with Alberto Alessi joining the company as co-general manager with his brother Michele in 1970. The company remains highly centralized and Alberto Alessi's involvement is intense. Michael Graves says: 'with Alessi, tradition extends to the idea of the family. As a designer you and your people are brought in and treated as a member of a family.' Collins points out in contradistinction that it is usual for only the Alessi name to appear on the products, but we may consider that Graves has joined the family to the extent that he takes its name.⁸⁰ While Collins neglects to mention that the Tea and Coffee Piazza is stamped with designer monograms in addition to the Alessi marque, his point is interesting as a consideration of the importance of designers at Alessi. It may be that the internationalism of the designers fails to compromise the *italianità* of the company because the latter subordinates the former; the Alessi brand and its associations are taken to be more significant than the nationality of its designers.

Conclusion

Alessi typifies larger currents in post-war Italian design through its negotiation of mass-production and craft processes and through a particularly extended design process. The company has enlisted an international group of high-profile designers, and produces designs that are as international, aesthetically, as they are Italian. Alessi's marketing addresses a global audience by using a hybrid of national identity and internationalism. Alessi therefore exemplifies the complexity and ambiguity raised by Sparke in her analysis of the feminine in Italian design and this assessment is ironically in opposition to Collins's critique of Alessi's patrilineal structure and overwhelmingly male design team. Alessi not only embodies both the feminine and masculine aspects of Italian design but is also pre-eminent in its self-conscious manipulation of tropes of *italianità*.

Notes * '*italianità*', meaning 'Italian-ness', is a term for which there is no adequate translation in English.

¹ Penny Sparke, 'Nature, craft, domesticity, and the culture of consumption: the feminine face of design in Italy, 1945-1970', *Modern Italy*, 4, 1 (1999), pp.59-78, p.61.

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- 2 On familial networks and pyramidal groups of power in Italian business see Dermot McCann, 'The "Anglo-American" model, privatization and the transformation of private capitalism in Italy', *Modern Italy*, 5, 1 (2000), pp.47-61.
- 3 John Dickie challenges stereotypical notions of nationhood and acknowledges their 'discordant, slippery and imprecise' reality in 'Imagined Italies', in David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (eds), *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 19-33.
- 4 Jonathan Woodham, *Twentieth Century Design*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp. 121 ff.
- 5 John Heskett, *Industrial Design*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, pp.50 ff. Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin, *Between Fordism and Flexibility: The Automobile Industry and Its Workers*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 20. Tolliday and Zeitlin present flexible specialization as a 'qualitatively new system of production', but Phil Scranton has shown that mass production and flexible specialization co-existed in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization 1865-1925*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
- 6 Duccio Bigazzi, 'Mass Production or "Organized Craftsmanship"? The Post-War Italian Automobile Industry', in Jonathan Zeitlin and Gary Herrigel (eds), *Americanization and Its Limits: Reworking US Technology and Management in Post-War Europe and Japan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 236-268.
- 7 Ibid., p. 295; Sparke, 'Nature, craft, domesticity', pp. 59-78.
- 8 The status of the Milanese hinterland as a metalworking centre was furthered during the 'economic miracle' when the number of metalworkers increased by 200,000. Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 223.
- 9 Vera Zamagni, 'Evolution of the Economy', in Patrick McCarthy (ed.), *Italy Since 1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 42-68, p. 57.
- 10 Penny Sparke, *Design in Italy*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1988, p. 69.
- 11 Alberto Alessi, 'The design factories: Europe's industrial future?', in Meret Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi: The Design Factory*, Academy Editions, London, 1994, pp. 9-15, p. 9.
- 12 Fay Sweet, *Alessi: Art and Poetry*, Lewes, The Ivy Press, 1998, p. 56.
- 13 Alberto Alessi, 'Alessofono, 1983', in Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi*, p. 137.
- 14 Carlo Richetti, Director of Production, interview at Alessi factory, 19 March 1996 and Alberto Alessi, interview at Alessi Factory, 20 March 1996.
- 15 The basic equipment at the factory dates from the 1960s although the electro-chemical polishing equipment was purchased in 1980 and recent developments include laser-cutting, CAD/CAM technology and equipment associated with the plastic goods. Richetti interview.
- 16 Alessandro Mendini, 'The land of good design', in Emilio Ambasz (ed.), *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972, pp. 370-379, p. 373.
- 17 Nally Bellati (ed.), *New Italian Design*, Rizzoli, New York, 1990, p. 15.
- 18 Sweet, *Alessi: Art and Poetry*, p. 10.
- 19 Alberto Alessi, *The Dream Factory: Alessi Since 1921*, Electa/Alessi, Milan, 1998, p. 55.
- 20 Marco Meneguzzo (ed.), *Philippe Starck Distordre*, Electa/Alessi, Milan, 1996, p. 41.
- 21 Claire Brass, interview at her home, Milan, 23 March 1996.
- 22 Small investment in research and development results from the lack of capital investment by family firms. Vera Zamagni, 'Italy', in Max-Stephen Schulze (ed.), *Western Europe: Economic and Social Change Since 1945*, Longman, London, 1998, pp. 321-335, p. 332. This needs to be distinguished from Alberto Alessi's presentation of Alessi as one of Italy's design factories 'which have a unique international reputation as laboratories for research in the field of the applied arts' in Meneguzzo (ed.), *Philippe Starck Distordre*, pp. 26-14, p. 35.
- 23 Michael Collins, *Alessi*, Carlton Books, London, 1999, p. 12; Nicola White, 'Max Mara and the origins of Italian ready-to-wear', *Modern Italy*, 1, 2 (1996), pp.63-80; Aiden Walker, 'Serious make belief', *Designer's Journal*, 60, September 1990, p. 16.
- 24 Alessandro Mendini, interview at Atelier Mendini, Milan, 21 March 1996.
- 25 Ettore Sottsass, interview at Sottsass Associati, Milan, 21 March 1996.
- 26 Brass interview.
- 27 Joanna Lyle, interview, Milan, 22 March 1996.
- 28 Alberto Alessi interview; Walker, 'Serious make belief', p. 16.
- 29 Alberto Alessi, 'The design factories: Europe's industrial future?', unpublished script of lecture given for the Design Museum and Pentagram at the Royal Geographical Society, London, June 1993, p. 5.
- 30 Gert Selle, 'There is no kitsch, there is only design!', in Victor Margolin (ed.), *Design Discourse*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, pp. 56-58.
- 31 Grace Lees, 'Balancing the object: the reinvention of Alessi', *things*, 6, Summer 1997, pp. 74-91; Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design*, Sage, London, 2000, pp. 72 ff.

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- 32 Alberto Alessi interview.
- 33 Patrizia Scarzella, *Steel and Style: The Story of Alessi Household Ware*, Arcadia Edizioni, Milan, 1987, p. 33.
- 34 Pauline Madge, 'Italian design since 1945', in Nicola Hamilton (ed.), *From Spitfire to Microchip: Studies in the History of Design from 1945*, The Design Council, London, 1985, pp. 31-38, p. 33.
- 35 Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 263.
- 36 Scarzella, *Steel and Style*, p. 34.
- 37 Alessi, 'Tea and Coffee Piazza 1983', in Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi*, pp. 38-43, p. 38.
- 38 Deyan Sudjic, 'Design as a consumer durable', in Emilio Ambasz (ed.), *International Design Yearbook 1986-7*, Thames and Hudson, London, pp. 18-19.
- 39 Meneguzzo (ed.), *Philippe Starck Distordre*, p. 32.
- 40 Mendini interview.
- 41 Carl Argan, 'Ideological development in the thought and imagery of Italian design', in Emilio Ambasz (ed.), *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972, pp. 358-369, p. 359.
- 42 Nina Bornsen-Holtman, *Italian Design*, Taschen, Cologne, 1994, p. 8.
- 43 Claudia Neumann, *Design Directory Italy*, Pavilion Books, London, 1999, p. 83.
- 44 Neumann, *Design Directory Italy*, p. 73.
- 45 Matteo Thun quoted in 'Matteo Thun', in Bellati (ed.), *New Italian Design*, p. 144.
- 46 An ambivalent attitude towards the 'waste and excess' of US consumerism as a by-product of an economy based on production is discussed by Bigazzi, 'Mass Production or "Organized Craftsmanship"?', pp. 269 ff.
- 47 Alessi, *The Dream Factory*, p. 91.
- 48 Sottsass interview.
- 49 Mintel Report, Kitchen Gadgets, June 2000, pages unnumbered.
- 50 Alberto Alessi in Walker, 'Serious make belief', p. 16.
- 51 Alberto Alessi interview.
- 52 Franco la Cecla, 'The soul and fetishism of objects', in *Rebus sic*, FOA, Crusinallo, 1992, pp. 142-250, p. 214.
- 53 Peter Lunt and Sonia M. Livingstone, *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1992, p. 97.
- 54 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1984, p. xii.
- 55 Mendini interview.
- 56 A comparison between 'Nutty the Cracker' (a plastic squirrel-shaped nutcracker) and 'La Cintura do Orione' professional-standard saucepans illustrates what Fay Sweet has referred to as the 'dual personality' of Alessi, *Alessi: Art and Poetry*, p. 9.
- 57 Daniel Weil, 'This is not a pipe', in Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi*, pp. 140-143, p. 142.
- 58 Jeremy Aynsley, *Nationalism and Internationalism: Design in the 20th Century*, Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1993, passim.
- 59 Ibid. p. 48.
- 60 For example, the Olivetti show at MOMA in 1951. Sparke also emphasizes the 'use of modern architects for its factory buildings and showrooms', *Design in Italy*, pp. 140-143.
- 61 Sibylle Kircherer, Olivetti: A study of the Corporate Management of Design, Trefoil, London, 1990, p. 89.
- 62 Enzo Fratelli, "'Cronotime'" Pio Manzu (1966) 1988', in Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi*, p. 92.
- 63 Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Sage, London, 1991, p. 25.
- 64 Alberto Alessi, 'Tea and Coffee Piazza 1983', in Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi*, pp. 38-3, p. 38.
- 65 Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, 1991, p. 25. See also Lees, 'Balancing the object', pp. 74-91.
- 66 Collins, *Alessi*, pp. 15-16.
- 67 Alberto Alessi, *The Dream Factory*, p. 5
- 68 Percy Allum sketches a corrective to the mythical ideal of family, based on a sharp decline in the birth rate, smaller families, increased co-habitation and childbirth outside of wedlock, 'less and later marriages', increased divorce and remarriage and the awkward and challenging juggling of paid work with domestic labour. Percy Allum, 'Italian Society Transformed', in McCarthy (ed.), *Italy Since 1945*, pp. 10-1, pp. 34-35.
- 69 Alberto Alessi, 'Tea and Coffee Piazza', in Gabra-Lidell (ed.), *Alessi*, pp. 38-43, p. 39.
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- 73 John Haycraft, *Italian Labyrinth: Italy in the 1980s*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1985, p. 117.
- 74 Francesca Carnevali, 'A review of Italian business history from 1991 to 1997'. *Business History*, 40, 2, April 1998, pp. 80-94, p. 84.

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- 75 Bigazzi, 'Mass Production or "Organized Craftsmanship"?', p. 294; Zamagni, 'Italy', p. 333.
- 76 Kircherer, *Olivetti*, p.77.
- 77 Zamagni, 'Italy', p. 332.
- 78 Duggan, *A Concise History*, p. 260.
- 79 Carnevali, 'A review of Italian business history', p. 89.
- 80 Collins, *Alessi*, p. 14.