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**Alessi and the New Domestic Landscape**

by  
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Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies  
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Bachelor of Design in Industrial Design

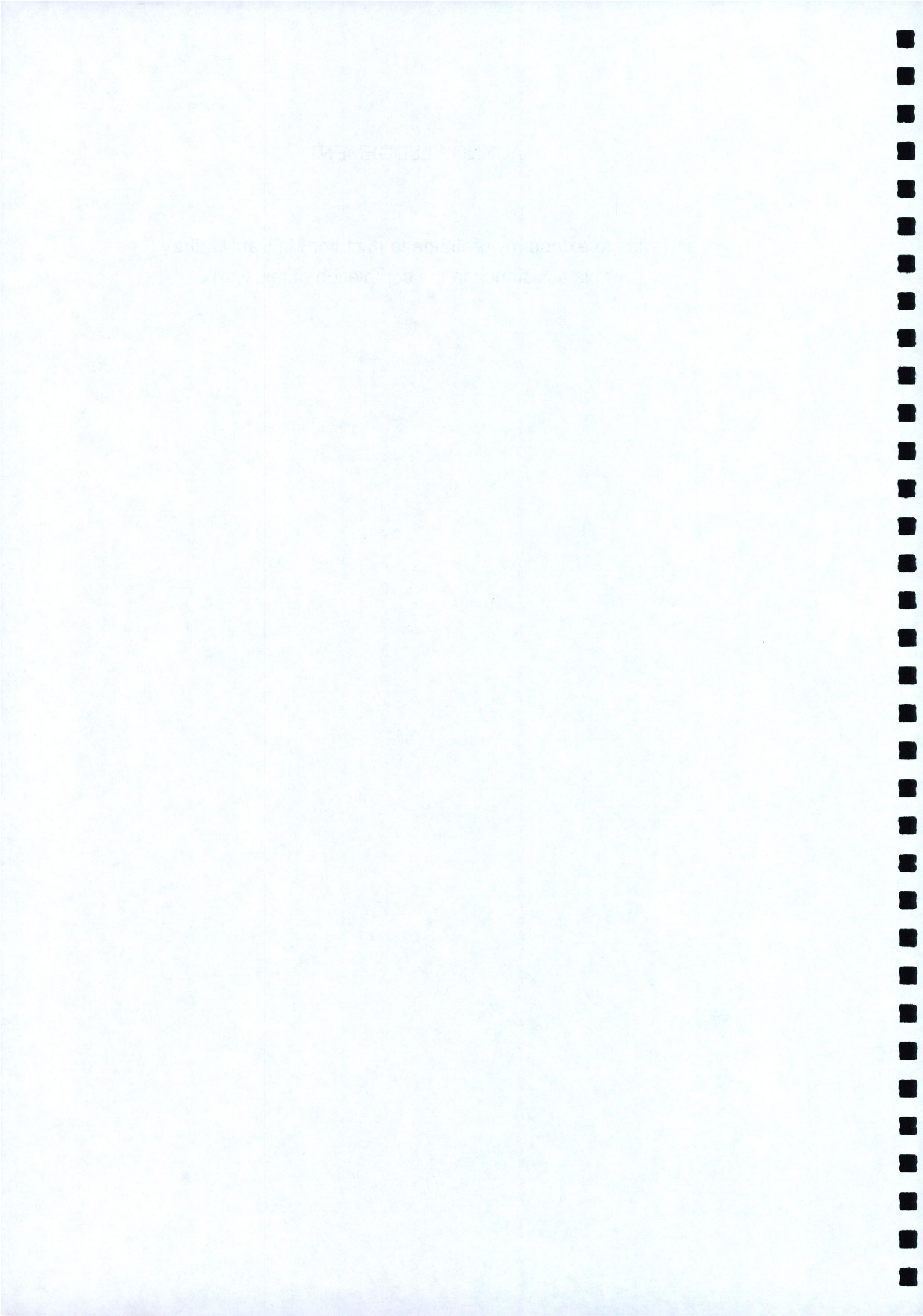
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Illus.1. The never ending kitchen toil.



## INTRODUCTION

The highly functional aspect of the kitchen has for many years dictated the design of the domestic appliances and utensils used there. The failure by many manufacturers and designers to rethink this has left the kitchen worktop without individual character. The objects we use every day (such as toasters, kettles, pots and pans) lack visual appeal due to their reliance on function and tend to fall into the category of the 'white goods', the often nondescript domestic object which populate the domestic landscape.

The aim of this thesis is to question the design of these kitchen utensils and some of the myths that surround it, to explore alternative forms of design and directions open to designers. Design for the tabletop is explored to determine its success in raising these artifacts that are used for the table above the limits of pure function. The result is assessed to determine the public's perception of the relationship between various disciplines such as craft, architecture and design.

The main focus will be on Alessi, the Italian company, manufacturers of household ware since 1921. Alessi has elevated the the world of kitchen design and its artifacts above that of just pure function. This thesis looks at the work Alessi has done and examines what the company has produced. Of particular interest is how this company has raised the status of household goods above that of the mundane and the reasons why a mass production company such as Alessi invest so heavily in alternative design.

This study is based on many examples of Alessi's work but centres on three kettles produced by Alessi, designed by Philippe Starck, Richard Sapper and Michael Graves. They are studied to question the relationship that exists between the form and function of such domestic objects as kettles. These kettles do not boil water efficiently, but they are more than just instruments to boil water, they are the icons of design of the 1980s. But what gives them this status, what do these







kettles have that others have not? How has their aesthetic value helped to create this? Why has Alessi been able to produce such objects that go so much against the norm of household wares?

These questions will be answered by looking at the Alessi company but more importantly, the external factors that influenced Alessi's design will be explored. The fact that the company is Italian is a central issue. Its effect is questioned and leads to the study of Alessi's more important input into the world of design. The relationship that this company has cultivated between the different disciplines of craft, architecture and industrial design is assessed to question what similarities craft and industrial design actually have and if it is any longer valid to see these as totally separate and different disciplines.

Various writers on design have discussed the different topics that this thesis will address. Adrian Forty in his book Objects Of Desire (1986) discusses the nature of the myth created around the kitchen appliance since the turn of the century. This account gives an explanation of why the domestic appliances attained this 'white goods' look that still remains with us today. However, his discussion is historical and fails to address the situation that came about during the 1980s with the advent of Post-Modernism and does not specifically mention the work of Alessi. Also, he fails to explore the relationship between craft and industrial design and instead categorises them with two separate incompatible roles.

Peter Dormer in his book The Meaning Of Modern Design (1990) does address the idea of high design and craft. However this he does in two separate chapters and while he does discuss their relationship briefly it is done through contrasting extreme examples (such as hand turned wooden boxes and Porches speedboats). The kitchen and the objects therein are also not written about and Dormer's brief mention of Alessi and his work is scant and rather dismissive

Michael Wolk's book, Designing For the Table (1992) gives the most



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comprehensive view of contemporary design for the tabletop/kitchen in the 1980s. The free mix of handcrafted and mass produced artifacts shown in this highly illustrated book demonstrates admirably the way that the crafts and design can and do coexist harmoniously. However as this book is mainly illustrative it does not discuss this relationship to a satisfactory depth. The International Crafts (1991) by Martina Margetts is also instrumental in illustrating the extensive nature of the contemporary crafts of the 1980s-1990s. Margetts also discusses briefly the relationship between the more commercial end of the crafts has with the mass produced high design artefact. However this is also very brief and as with Peter Dormer it is done in a contrasting way and is seen as been non-constructive, a view this thesis questions. The International Design Yearbook since its inception in 1984 offers a comprehensive view of tabletop and kitchen products over the last decade. The various editors have made different observations on the trends involved in this area of design. Emilio Ambasz in 1986 was however the only editor to touch on the idea of the crafts influence on the design of tableware.

The books by Jeremy Myerson for the Conran Design Guides called Kitchenware (1990) and Tableware (1990) analyse the development of these two fields of design since the turn of the century. These books give us the best view of mass produced household wares produced for the table and kitchen. It goes some way towards recognising the roles of craft and design and how they have mixed in this unique environment.

Steel And Style, (1987) Patricia Scarzella's book on Alessi offers the only fully comprehensive account of Alessi and his work up to 1985. It is a very factual account and does not question the issues addressed in this thesis, that is the other roles the company fulfils in the design world which this thesis addresses. However, it offers a strong base on which to build these ideas.

Whilst this thesis does consider the relationship between craft and







industrial design it is not naive to attempt to prove that craft and industrial design are the same. It is important to remember it is within the context of Alessi that this is done. The idea of nonfunctional and functional design and the synthesis that Alessi achieves between them within a mass manufacturing environment is central to this. The fact that the kettles and many of the objects discussed were produced during the 1980s obviously introduces the idea of Post-Modernism. Indeed many objects created by Alessi in the last decade have come to be perceived as icons of this movement. However, as this thesis is focusing on the relationship of craft and design an in depth analysis of this fact is outside its parameters (further research is necessary to fully access the contribution Alessi has made to the Post-Modern movement). Also it must be remembered that this thesis does not attempt to define the extent and role of the arts and crafts movements as it is today but to examine the links with industry that have been achieved by Alessi.





Illus.2. Kenwood Magimix food processor, 1965.



Illus.3. Braun's K M 321 Kitchen Machine, 1957



## CHAPTER 1

### THE DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE.

#### The Kitchen Appliance Myth.

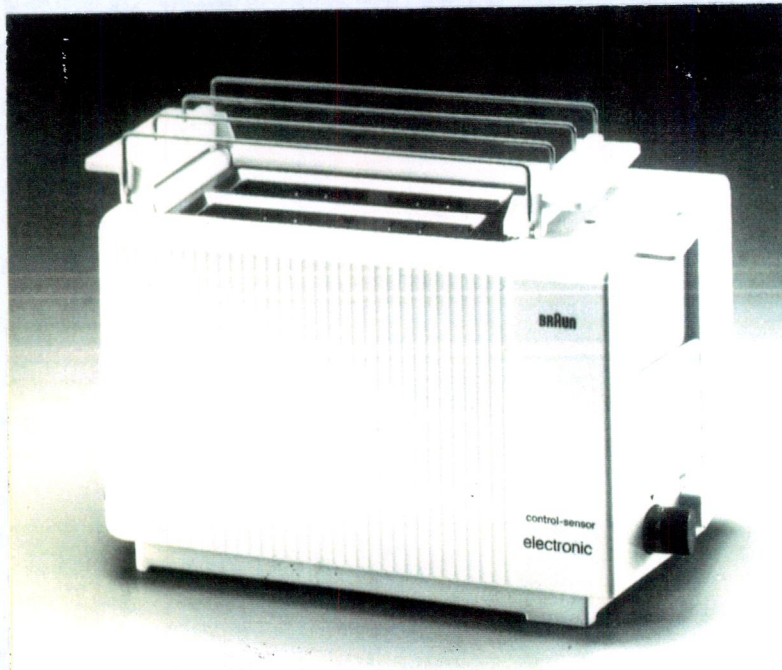
It was with the invention and widespread use of electricity that the face and nature of household work changed dramatically over the last century. In his book Objects of Desire, Adrian Forty gives an exacting account of these changes that took place. He explores the socio-economic changes that affected households from the turn of the century and explains the dramatic changes that took place in peoples attitudes towards housework. More importantly he develops the idea of the household appliance myth, of the labour saving device.<sup>1</sup> This myth he ascribes to the development of the 'white goods' look and style that has to come to symbolise household appliances, especially those destined for the kitchen. In striving for cleanliness, function and time saving, the kitchen has become a functional, sterile work zone reflected in the appliances used therein. The main pleasure that the housewife is to draw from these objects is this ability to function. There are many examples of this type of design

Dieter Rams famed work for the German electrical manufacturer Braun, has been praised time and time again for his revolutionary design. Whilst his designs departed from the very industrial solid heavy metal look of pre-World War Two electric appliances, it was mainly in basic styling that it was done, the two examples shown (one by Braun the other by Kenwood) function in almost identical manners, achieving the same results, they both blend and their layout also has varied negligibly in the ten years that separated them. In fact, mixers virtually identical in that same basic form can still be bought today. What is so noteworthy is that Braun had at their disposal a material that was probably the most revolutionary arrival to the kitchen ever and was the singularly most important influential factor in appliance design





Illus.4. The Kenwood range 1947 - 1982



Illus.5. The 'White Box' design. Toaster by Braun 1988.



since electricity. That material was plastic.

It was plastic that made it possible for Rams to create Braun products "in discrete, smooth, grey and white boxes, designed on proportional systems and had a purity of form that was recognised by the intellectual elite" (Forty, 1986, 219) But to the ordinary housewife they became the "white boxes" associated with the apron and the kitchen sink and the ever present toil involved in housework.

Plastics also brought about many other revolutionary kitchen objects. Non-breakable flasks, the classic Tupperware, the jug kettle and the most recent miracle, the microwave with its T.V. dinners. This, along with the use of aluminium and stainless steel left the kitchen a very bland and sterile place. The myth that kitchen and general household work was a station above that of ordinary work giving the housewife a higher sense of achievement and emotional fulfilment, somehow loses its appeal. However, this myth is the one thing that protects us from the reality and that is why it is still a major marketing tool used by manufacturers today.

#### The Table Top.

While ownership of these tools (the newer the better) serves to elevate the housewife above this reality, there is another aspect of the kitchen, an extension of it, that gives the housewife and home owners a much wider and satisfying chance of expressing themselves and deriving pleasure through design. It is a place untouched by Forty's exploration in Objects of Desire and unfortunately by many design historians. This is the tabletop.

Tables have played host to a myriad of objects and complex social activities in which rules and customs are observed. Table manners and table objects say so much about us, the culture to which we belong, the economic system to which we adhere and our sense of our own style and status. It is a place where the housewife could display





Illus.6. Dinner set by Dorothy Haffner for Rosenthal, Germany.



Illus.7. Table Glass by Markku Salo for Iittala, Finland, 1987.



her own self. There is no satisfaction to be found in the food mixers and microwaves that were merely gadgetry sanitised and sheathed in white plastic. Described by Peter Dormer as designs that

are in neither good nor bad taste, they are on the edge of visibility and their existence is to provide a background comfort of utility not the foreground stimulus of an aesthetic conversation piece (Dormer, 1993, p.153).

No guest at the dinner table will comment on the food mixer obviously used in the preparation of the meal. Their admiration will be on what is laid before them. Indeed as Steven G Changaris, Executive Director of the National Table Top Association of America stated

Before sampling the cuisine their senses of sight and touch take control as they connect with the elements of the table setting laid before them. It is here at the table that utilitarian objects so important in the kitchen can transcend their function. Where object can offer deeply meaningful commentaries on the social significance of being alive - of breaking bread, engaging in social interaction (Wolk, 1992, p.5),

of sharing values common to many with family and friends across the table - partaking in tradition. This tradition is not only of the 20th Century, the table over the centuries has always held special social significance. The advancements of ancient cultures are judged on the complexities of their eating utensils and it is interesting to note that many of the daily table objects that we use have existed in various forms for centuries. It is this traditional aspect of the table that explains why objects destined for the table (and every home in the modern world needs such basic items as crockery, cutlery and glassware) have attracted the attention of people from professions as diverse as architecture, crafts (from all mediums) and industrial design.

It is a medium that offers great opportunities to explore creative expression, materials, technology and cultural change. A chance to influence popular taste and an irresistible opportunity, especially for those designers driven by social and moral imperatives,







to make a significant contribution to the improvement of material life (Myerson, 1990, p.7).

### Breaking Barriers.

It is at the table, one could say, that the designer, architect, artists and craftsmen can share a meal as one. Here the designer can find freedom from the "White Box" design, freedom from sterile plastic and stainless steel. Freedom from propagating the myth that has for so long restricted the scope of the kitchen appliance design. Here on this common ground of the table top, mass produced objects exist harmoniously with the individually hand crafted artefact. Plastics, metal, ceramics, textiles of all forms come together through the works of craftsmen and industrial designers alike. The highly functional objects become just as important as the non-utilitarian ones. The roles of the industrial designer/architect and artist crafts become less clearly defined and in fact lose their importance. Emilio Ambasz, in his editorial for the International Design Year Book of 1986-97 noted

The revival of interest in the craft approach particularly in Britain and America, has created a curious new category of artefact exemplified by the vase in which it is impossible to keep flowers and the jug which will not pour water (Ambasz, 1986, p.12).

This typical craft approach of the non-utilitarian (non-functional) object found its home in the mass produced market through tableware.

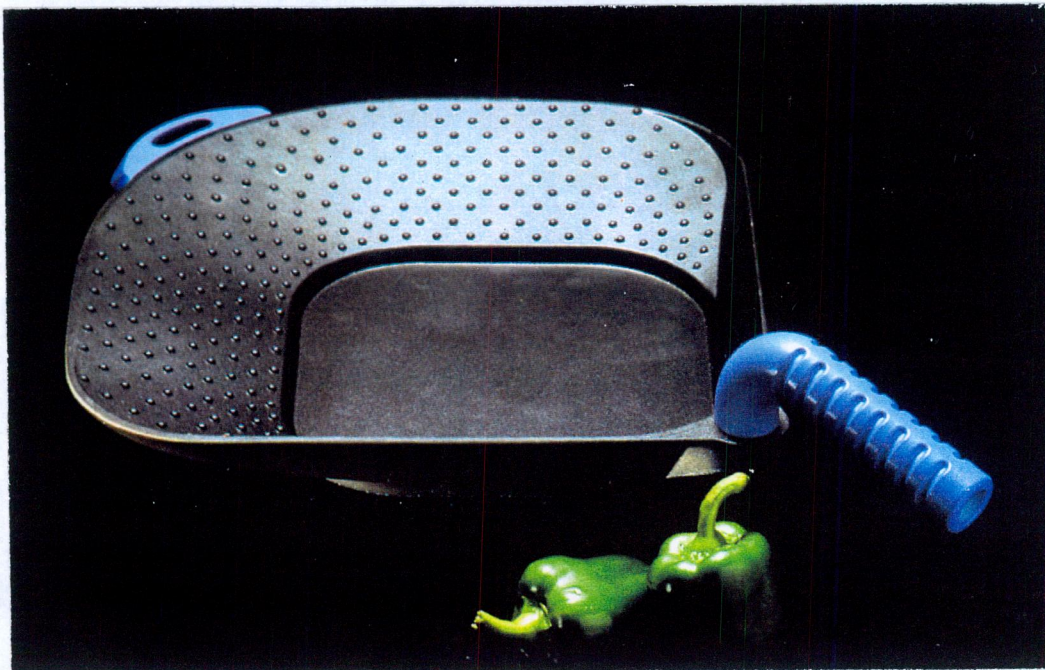
This notion was first displayed to the greater public through the efforts of Terence Conran with Habitat and David Mellors Kitchenware Shops in the late 1960's early 1970's. Both of these retail ventures were significant in that for the first time professional designers with conviction and taste were making a highly personal selection of items for the table with their merchandise. Mixing craft products with mass produced ones they influenced the homes of an entire generation of young affluent consumers.

This potent meeting and mixture of craft and design also created some





Illus.8. Cutlery by Lino Sabattini for Rosenthal, Germany.

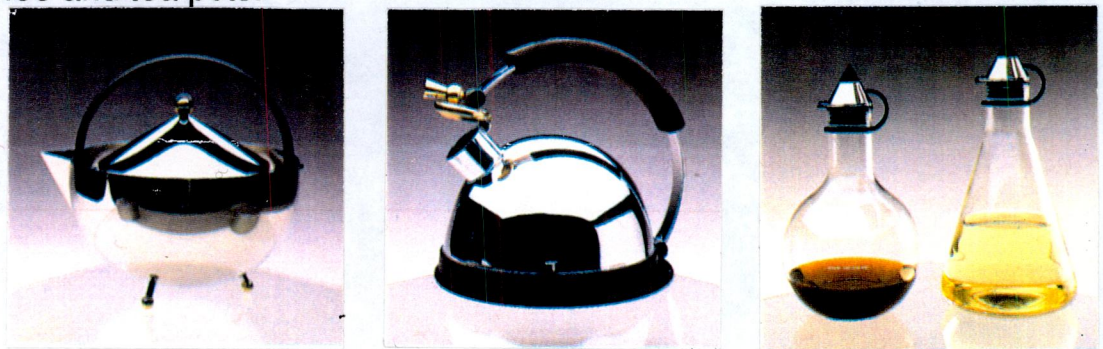


Illus.9. Wing Pan by John Houghton for Hackman, Finland.



of the most memorable and beautiful objects in the design world. Indeed the section given to tableware in the International Design Year Books for the last ten years demonstrates this admirably.<sup>2</sup> However, this is often to the expense of the not so favoured kitchen appliance. It is all too obvious that the gulf remains between materials and tools that are suitable for the informal day-to-day kitchen work and those judged appropriate for the more serious occasions such as entertaining guests at the table. With a few exceptions, those master architects, craftsmen and designers who so readily and whole-heartedly sat together at the dining table have hesitated at the door of the kitchen as though this private world of specialised function was not worthy of their talents. All too often these objects were left to less inspired members of appliance manufacturing companies to design. It was the notable lack of imaginative patronage by these companies however that was responsible for this gulf that leaves the housewife relying on the myth of kitchen work created at the start of this century to justify and try gain pleasure from the drudgery of kitchen work.

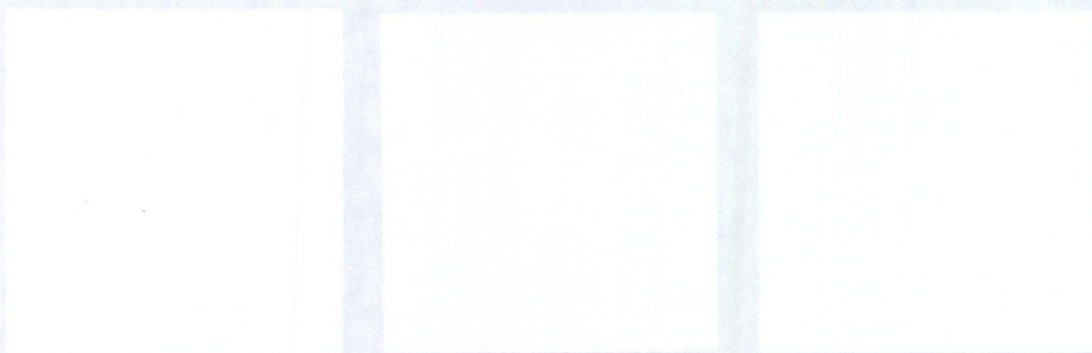
However, there have been notable exceptions over the decades. Firms including Rosenthal of Germany, Hackman/littala of Finland and Bodum of Denmark. These companies cater for a range of kitchen utensils from frying pans to kitchen cooking knives and cutlery to coffee and tea pots.



Illus.10. Tea pot, kettle and condiment set by Bodum.

2. See, The International Design Yearbooks, 1984 - 1993.







One company that is of particular interest is Alessi of Italy. This company, formed in 1921, is one of the best examples in the past few decades of an industrial manufacturer trying introduce a new fresh element into kitchen design. Under a number of different directors, Alessi has striven to inject a new direction of design that has resulted in the creation of objects in the mode of tabletop design. Using influence from design, architecture and craft and constant experimentation with form, material and manufacture, Alessi has created some of the most memorable and beautiful kitchen artifacts this century has seen. Artifacts which challenge the myth of the kitchen and which defy clear categorisation. Breaking the boundaries broken on the table top but with objects such as colanders, kettles and pots and pans and with materials such as stainless steel and aluminium, serving to create a new domestic landscape.





*Alessi, Paesaggio Domestico, 1921-1990. Particolare.*

Da 70 anni Alessi crea e distrugge. Da 70 anni disobbedisce a tutte le regole, a cominciare dalle proprie.

Come in un'avventura senza fine, gli oggetti Alessi hanno

costruito un nuovo paesaggio domestico in divenire, e ogni volta l'hanno stravolto, rivoluzionato e ricreato.

Oggi Alessi si getta dietro le spalle 70 anni di glorioso passato

e si prepara a partire, ancora una volta, verso un futuro inesplorato.

Illus.11. Alessi, Domestic Landscape, 1921 - 1990. Detail.

'For 70 years Alessi has been creating and destroying. For 70 years disobeying every rule, beginning from its own rules. As in an endless adventure, the Alessi objects built a new continuous domestic landscape and every time they messed it up, revolutionised and recreated it again. Today Alessi is disregarding 70 years of a glorious past, getting ready to leave, once again towards an unexplored future'



## CHAPTER 2

### THE ALESSI COMPANY.

Alessi was founded in 1921 by Giovanni Alessi Anghini who set up a plate turning work shop along with a foundry at Bagnella in Omegna, Italy.<sup>3</sup> From the outset the firm had a number of aspects which need to be highlighted in order to understand how and why Alessi achieved its success and a number of examples will be discussed to show this.

Initially the company turned most of the articles it produced on lathes. This resulted in a company that was not highly mechanised relying heavily on the highly skilled work force who operated the lathes. This was instrumental in two fronts. Firstly the quality was kept high with the personal input of the work force and the versatility of the workman was very often of a higher level than a specialised machine. Secondly, a typical characteristic of this artisan approach was the easiness in removing and adding articles with greater ease and speed in and out of production. This left the company free from expensive tooling costs and allowed them to experiment more using this fact coupled with the knowledge and skill that their work force had.

It was from 1932 onwards however that Alessi was beginning to show individual characteristics that could be seen as specifically Alessi. This was instigated under the management of Carlo Alessi, Giovanni's elder son. This fact also was a precursor to a second typically Alessi aspect. The business is (and always was) family run, a rather European trait and one which has served the company well. It can be seen as one of the most important factors that has helped Alessi become the success it has. Essentially the family were always free, free from shareholders they would have to answer to and please and from boardroom coups that would have to be defeated. Essentially they were free to do as they pleased which in essence is what they have done for the last seventy years.

3. For a detailed account of the history of Alessi see: Scarzella, Steel and Style, 1987.





Illus.12. Bombe Coffee Set by Carlo Alessi for Alessi, Italy.



## Investment in Design.

This freedom they had was invested into the design of new and exciting products. Carlo Alessi was the first to use this advantage in the realm of design. "He was an instinctive designer" wrote Patrizia Scarzella in the book on Alessi houseware success. Steel and Style "and he conceived several pieces of huge commercial success" (Scarzella, 1987, 17) one of these was a Bombe Coffee Set of 1945, famed because of its unusual handles shaped like Mickey Mouse ears. It was this unusual quirky shape that attracted peoples attention and thus made it the success it was. It was something different and soon became the look that came to symbolise the company for many years. Carlo recognised the power of the well designed object in his Bombe set (which was in production for nearly 30 years due to this fact) and continued to design for the company for a number of years to come. However it was after the Second World War that the company began to earn the reputation it has today.

## Material Research.

This reputation was due to a third aspect of Alessi which contributes to its success. This aspect of the Post War Alessi was its keen interest in research and development especially into metals. The war years created shortages of metals such as silver so the company began to look to stainless steel (which it experimented with briefly before the war) as a new way forward. Carlo Alessi recognised this material as having the ability to revolutionise household ware by saying

It should however be recognised that due to its qualities, it [stainless steel] constitutes an irreplaceable material in many domestic uses. This is demonstrated by the fact it is capable of replacing nickel, silver, brass, copper, aluminium, cast iron and enamelled steel (Scarzella, 1987, p.21).

The company began to implement the knowledge gained in the 1950's and by 1964, the entire production was in this material they had







mastered so well.

However Alessi was not the only firm to recognise stainless steel use. Full application in the production of household ware and its revolution of cookware in the kitchen can be likened to the way plastic revolutionised the electric appliances (Alessi's early use of stainless steel could be equated to Braun's use of plastic). Carlo Alessi recognised the fact that stainless steel was not enough to ensure Alessi's individualism when he stated

Today we have hundreds of competitors because anyone can manufacture steel. In the past only the most skilled craftsmen produced the most beautiful product, but now steel technology puts everyone on the same level (Scarzella, 1987, p.22).

It was design that was to be responsible for success in the market place. However Alessi had another advantage due to its past history. The design spotlight was again upon European companies during this period. Industrial companies in the USA were large unwieldy in their mergers and takeovers and smaller, often family owned European firms were much more open to change and soon took up the design baton.

Alessi was amongst the first of these family firms, seeing design as a way to separate them from the competition (as first learned with the Bombe set) to respond to this trend. Due to the low technology high skilled workshops, the introduction of new items that were of high design and difficult to copy was a relatively simple operation. Also the semi-artisan workshops allowed objects to be created that high technology alone could not produce and thus could separate Alessi products from the mainstream. However Alessi used this freer base in another innovative manner that was to attract more attention from foreign and domestic markets. Carlo began to bring in outside designers to design and work within this highly conducive atmosphere, a practice which has become a stated company policy which is worked to this day.



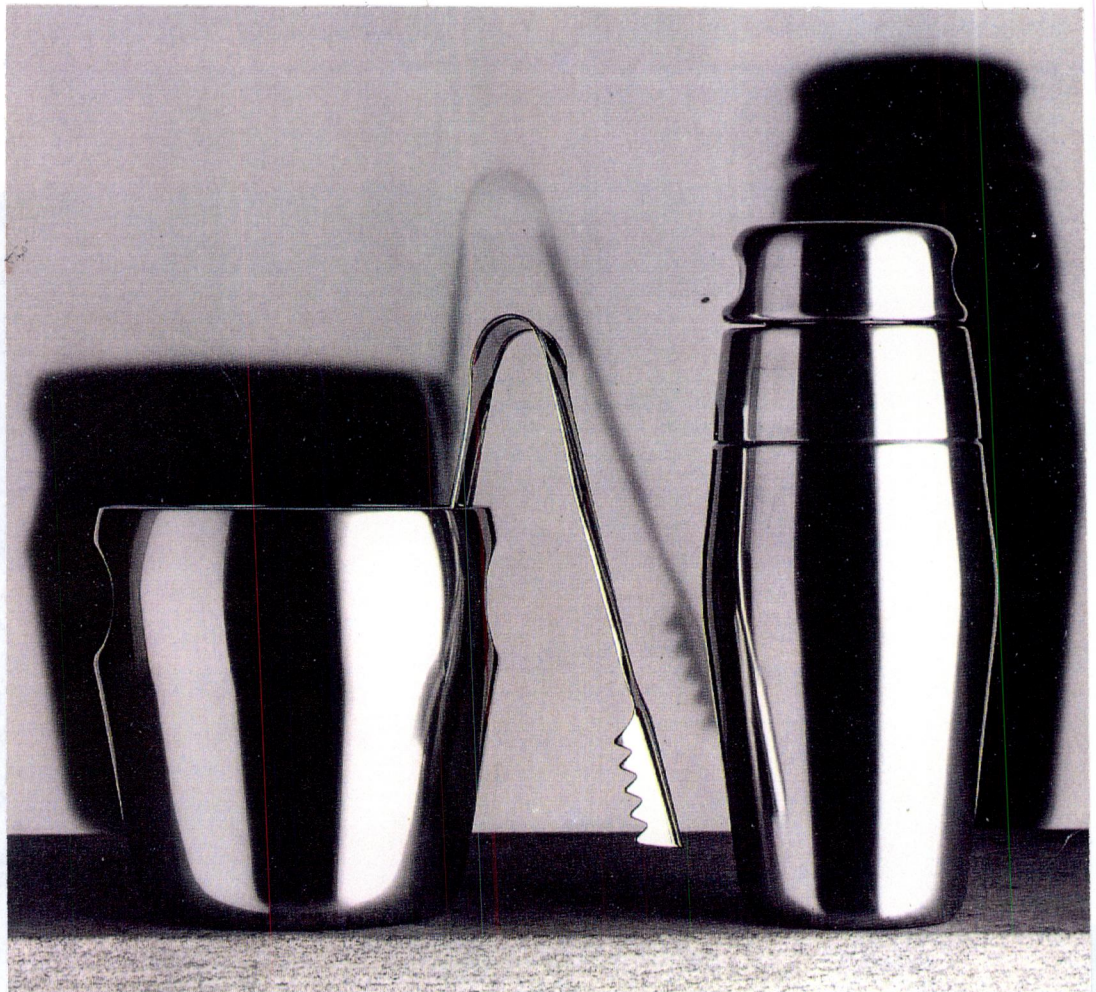




New Design Direction.

It was in 1957 that Alessi first introduced an outside designer when Luigi Massoni and Carlo Mazzeri designed the cocktail shaker and ice bucket. The cocktail shaker was an instant success (that is still in production today) and was favoured by many barmen. Alessandro Mendini wrote of it

The extraordinary success of the shaker, particularly in the hotel trade, depends largely on its perfect functionality which complies with the severe roles of professional use. Easy to handle and watertight. It is considered an unequalled utensil by skilled barmen (Scarzella, 1987, p.35).



Illus.13. Cocktail shaker by Luigi Massoni and Carlo Mazzeri, Produced by Alessi, 1957.



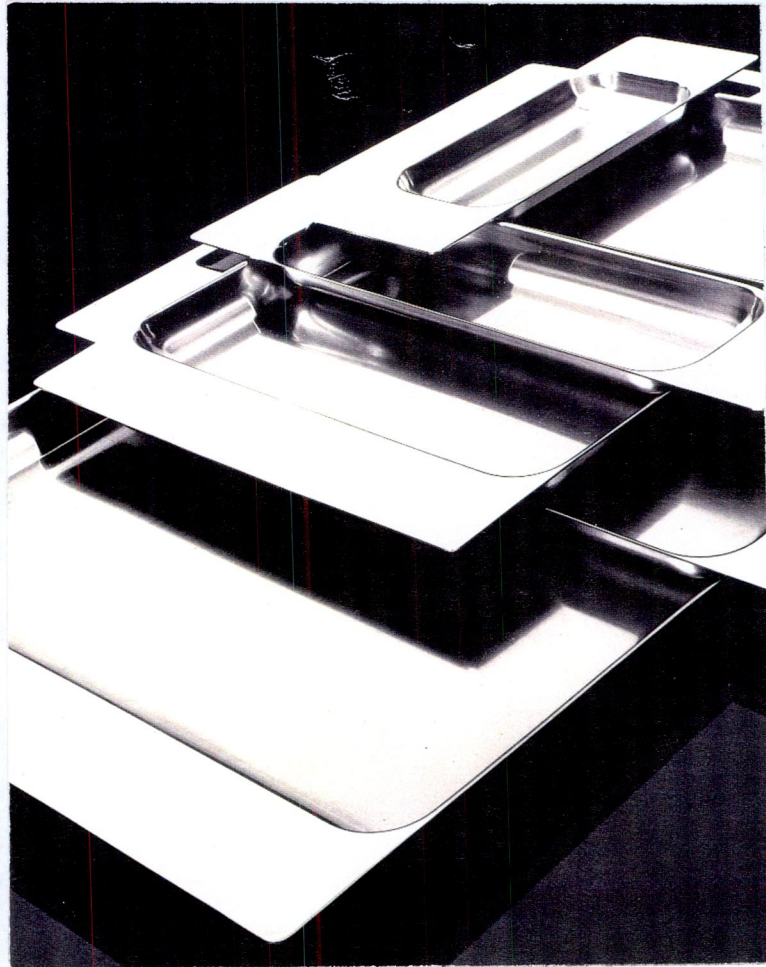


Illus.14 (Above) 101 Coffeepot service.

Illus.15 (below) Stacking tea and coffee service.



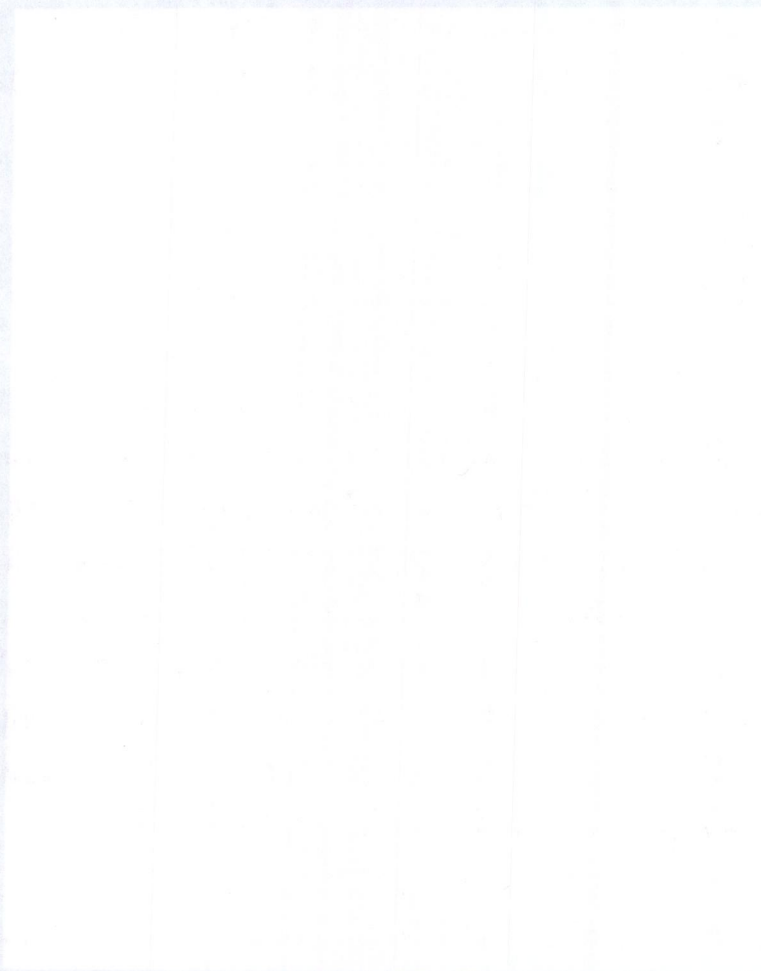
Also its form and line is representative of the look given to objects in stainless steel in the years of mass production. Alessi was to produce many more such objects for the food and drinks catering market, such as the 101 coffeepot service 1965, the stacking tea and coffee pot with milk jug and accessories.1980 and the programma 8 modular and sectional trays 1975.



Illus.16. Programma 8, modular and sectional trays, 1975

All got the same response and praise for their beauty of form and functionality and all are still in production. However it transpired that these objects were also finding another place of use and that was in the home. People saw these objects with their high quality and looks being produced by Alessi and saw them as an alternative to existing products designed for the home. Although these objects were still strictly functional, they had something a growing section of the public wanted, beautiful functional objects for their kitchens. What is more







they wanted beautiful, functional objects that were designed by real designers not mere faceless cogs in the mass manufacturers wheel.

This idea of the designer object was not new. Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss had already covered that ground in the 1930s and 1940s in America. What was new was the objects that were being designed, trays, pots and pans, coffee pots etc. Ordinary mundane objects so long associated with the ordinary mundane kitchen were getting a new lease of life through Alessi and its innovative and daring experimentation with design and its brave patronage of designers.

#### A New Decade of Design.

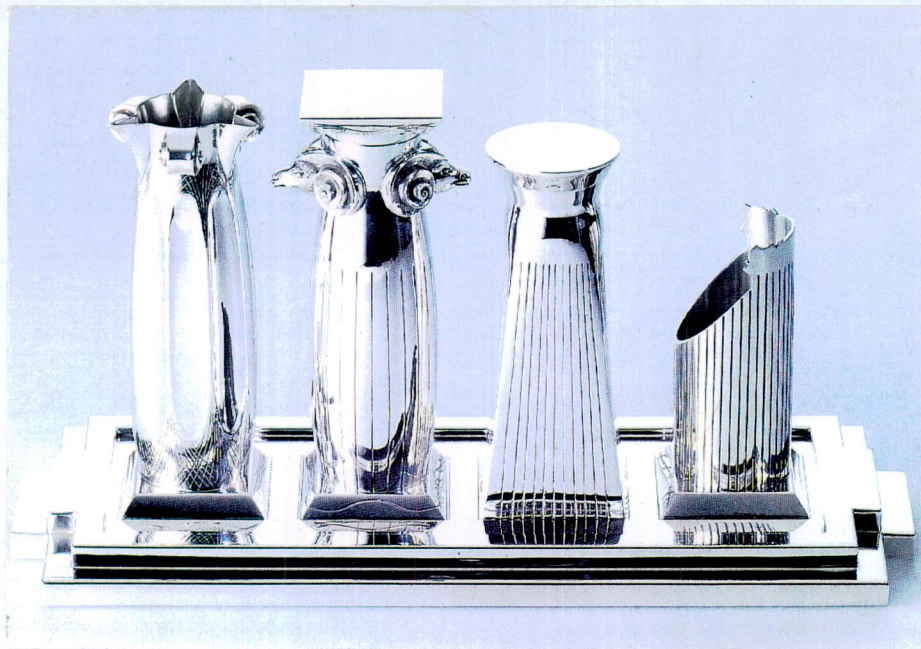
It was to be Alberto Alessi, Carlo's successor, a lawyer by profession, who was to take this new and exciting concept of kitchenware to a scale unheard of before. The lessons learned in the 1960s and 1970s were to be put to good use in Alessi's most prolific decade, the 1980s. Alberto Alessi did much to inject high design into the artifacts of every day life. He responded to the pressure of unbeatable competition from Japan, Taiwan and Korea by being the first European manufacturer to inject unprecedented resources into design research and development in order to beat them outside of the price war.

For Alessi, the Eighties signified research in the broadest sense. Technology, image, new kinds of household utensils and diversified markets are among the many subjects to which this research applied, of which Alberto Alessi said

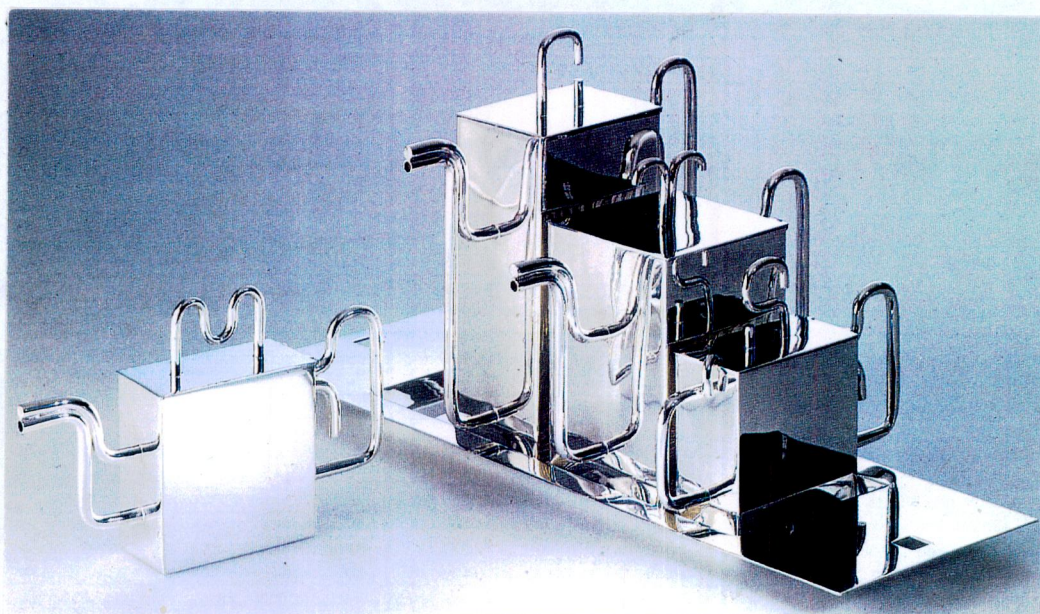
It was a conscious choice, but also an 'historical necessity'. The age of popular mass produced household articles has had its day. The public has changed deeply in the meantime: that same public that showed its willingness to absorb 'modern' mass produced articles for domestic use has critically matured and makes its own demands quite clear (Scarzella, 1987, p.87).

In order to try understand and meet these demands it was decided that





Illus.17. Tea and coffee piazza set by Charles Jencks.



Illus.18. Tea and coffee piazza set by Kazumasa Yamashita.

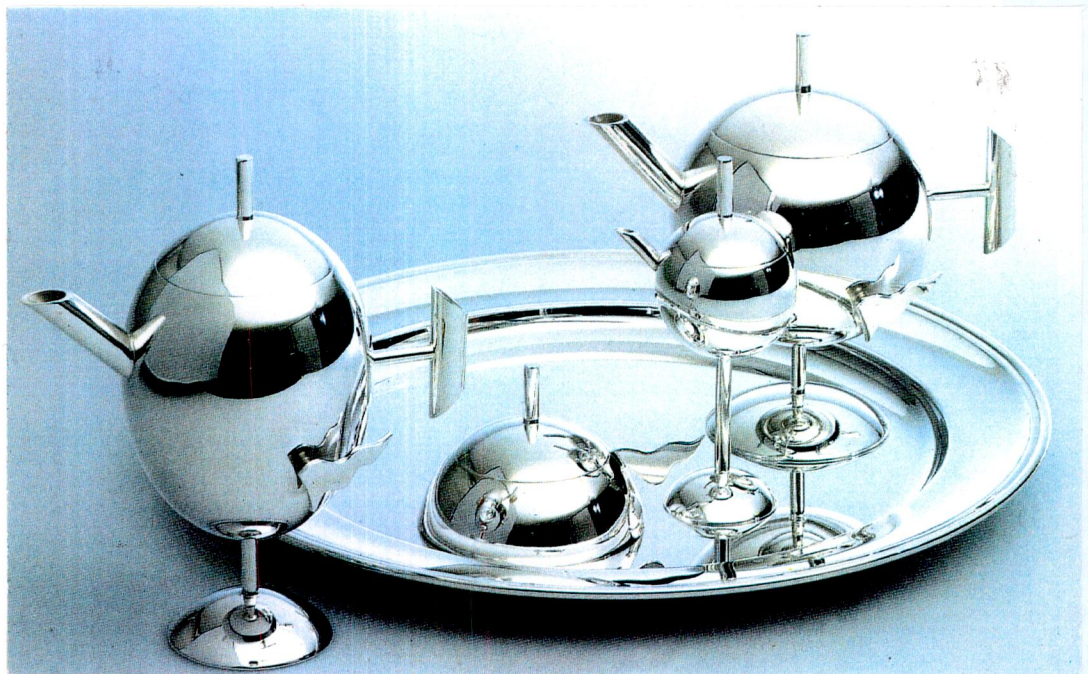


Illus.19. Tea and coffee piazza set by Oscar Tusquets.



a broad ranging research unit within the company was to be set up in 1979, this was called 'Programma Six'. It was never sure exactly what was to be created at the outset. The idea was to offer architects and designers a place where they could work out and put forward experimental methods, forms and styles in the thick of the current debate on neo and post modernism and on the claims of the new Italian and international design. The initial result was astounding.

The objects to be explored and designed were to be tea and coffee sets consisting of tea and coffee pots, sugar bowls, milk jugs, creamers and trays. Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Charles Jencks, Richard Meier, Alessandro Mendini, Paolo Portoghesi, Aldo Rossi, Stanley Tigerman, Oscar Tusquets, Robert Venturi and Kazumasa Yamashita were the 11 architects/designers that undertook this project which culminated in the launch of the Alessi Tea and Coffee Piazza in 1983. 90 copies in 925/1000 silver plus three artists proofs in different metals were produced and sold to museums and collectors in record time.



Illus.20. Tea and coffee piazza set designed by Alessandro Mendini

The reaction was no mere storm in a tea cup. It opened up discus-





Illus.21. Rosenchale by Joseph Hoffmann.



Illus.22. Cocktail shaker by Marianne Brandts.



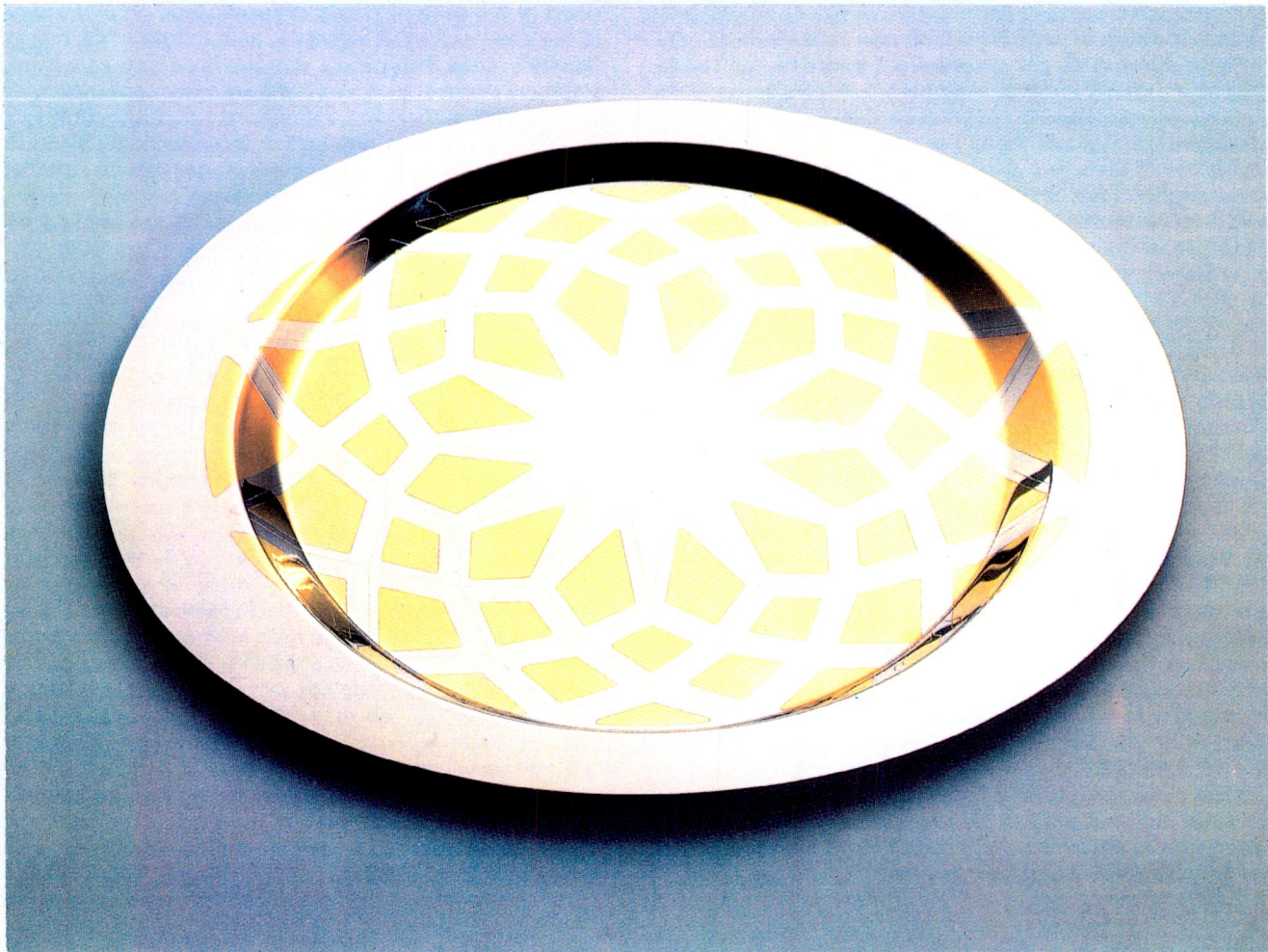
sions worldwide. Design magazines were full of images and articles about these objects. Alberto Alessi, with his team took such ordinary objects as tea pots, sugar bowls and milk jugs and transformed them into objects of pure desire and beauty. Objects that are firmly imprinted on the map of design history. They were objects that were created for mass production but were individually made by the firms craftsmen. These objects are as much craft objects as mass produced ones but they defy clear definition. With such success behind him Alessi took his company into a decade of high design discovery.

### Officina Alessi

To facilitate this new departure, a new branch of Alessi was opened with a separate brand name and structure called "Officina Alessi". This section developed its own workshops which resembles more of a slightly mechanised craft workshop and highly skilled workers trained in such outdated skills as silver-soldering with oxyhydrogen welding which was superseded years ago by electro-soldering. It also has a stable of some of the worlds foremost architects and industrial designers working to create some of this decade's, if not this century's, most beautiful provocative and impressive household wares. Also it served to bring us back to times forgotten, back to the early part of the century to the origins of mass industrial design (and its relationship with fine art and the crafts).

'La Tavola di Babele' was one such programme, described as an intellectual journey through the history of small metal houseware. It introduces us to some of the centuries most influential metal designers such as Christopher Dresser, Eliel Saarinen, with noteworthy reproductions such as Joseph Hoffmann's Rosenschale (Rose bowl) and Marianne Brandt's cocktail shaker, both very representative of their respective times and schools (the Wiener Werkstatte and the Bauhaus). Neither of these pieces ever reached production (as they were meant to) until Alessi's interest in historic pieces did so. Robert Venturi's Campidoglio produced in 1985 within the same programme is



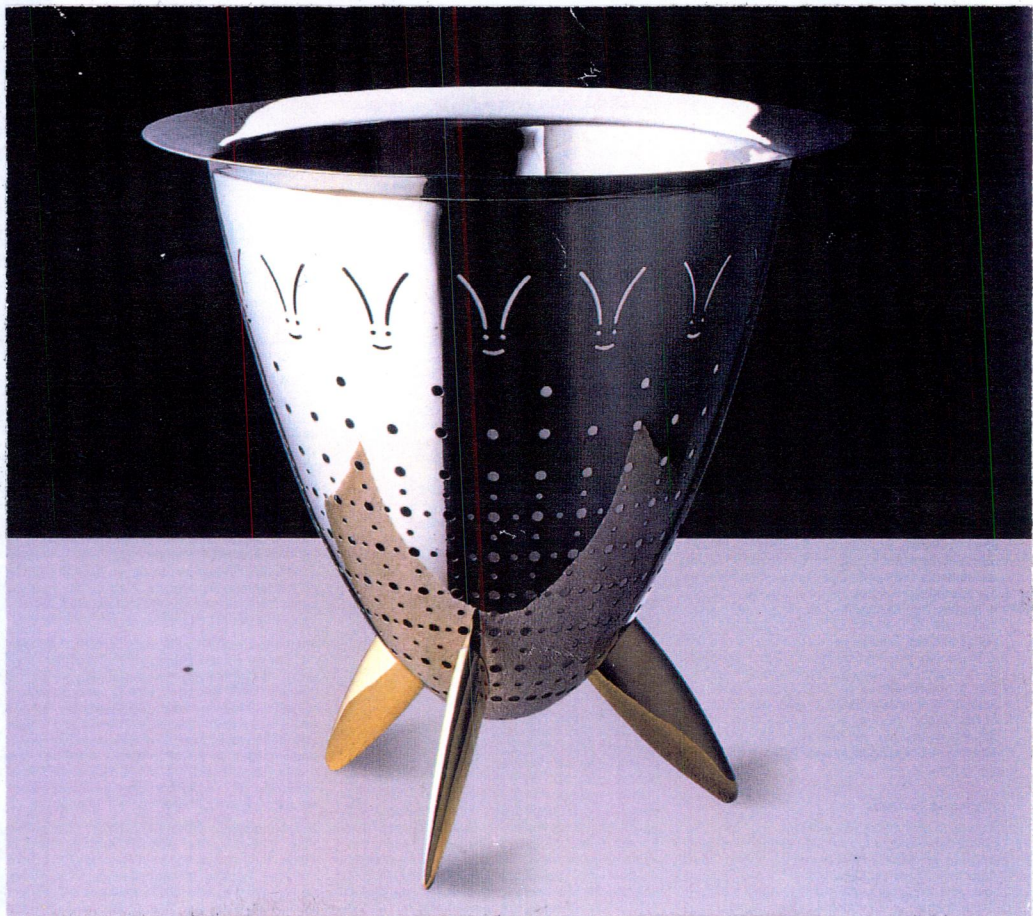


Illus.23. Campidoglio by Robert Venturi.



a stunning but simple piece that reminisces of times past and master metal workers now gone and acts as a reminder as to the state of modern technologies.

Present day examples of Alessi's own work with the idea of kitchenware are also readily available. These pieces demonstrate the extent to which Alessi is committed to exploring the possible forms and expressive content of functional household and kitchenware, to question the relationship between craft and design. Along with his designers and team of researchers and metal technicians, he has created some memorable products from some simple objects.



Illus.24. Max Le Chinois colander by Philippe Starck.

Philippe Starck's Max Le Chinois colander was designed and produced from 1987 to 1990 and made in 18/10 stainless steel with cast brass feet, an object worthy of Starck's name that would add so much to any kitchen.





Illus.25. Falstaff cooking pots by Alessandro Mendini & Giorgio Gregori



Alessandro Mendini and Giorgio Gregori designed the falstaff range of nine cooking pots, pans and colanders (1989). All are produced in 18/10 stainless steel with radiant aluminium and steel sandwich bottom. However these highly functional utensils come with a choice of four polyamide or thermoplastic rubber lid knobs by Michael Graves, Arata Isozaki, Yuri Soloviev and Philippe Starck, giving the consumer an option to reflect themselves in a more unusual fashion through these knobs, surely a first in the field of kitchen ware.



Illus.26. Espresso coffee maker by Richard Sapper

Richard Sapper's espresso coffee maker was designed and produced from 1979-1983, made in 18/10 stainless steel handle of brown unpolished steel, with two finishes natural or coloured with black silicone resin. This extremely functional coffee maker affectionately was referred to by Sapper as "my little steam engine". Its simple striking form belies the highly complex production which requires over one hundred different operations to make one pot. It's also on permanent display at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.





Illus.27. Pasta set by Massimo Morozzi



And Finally, Massimo Morozzi's pasta set, produced from 1983 to 1985 again in 18/10 stainless steel with black polyamide handles. The all-in-one pasta maker functionally isn't new, it has been restricted to the confines of restaurant kitchens, but its transportation to the domestic field and its transformation into a specific object is new. Only through Alessi's continuous research into the field of food preparation was this innovation and beautiful piece of cookware possible.

The pasta set is an object that has very specific functions and belongs to the philosophy of design adopted for others of the Alessi firm. The intention is to create a collection of very specialised equipment and utensils for the kitchen and for gastronomy that not only are functional but must be highly visually and formally stimulating. The objects must, however be connected to very diffuse customs. The kettle, a commonplace everyday item used exclusively to heat water is a typical example (Taken from a promotional brochure produced by Alessi, 1987).

Indeed the kettle is an excellent example of what Alessi can achieve when designing objects of the specialised nature of kitchen appliances and utensils.

The kettle is, as stated, a 'commonplace everyday item'. This fact is reflected in a very strong way in the designs that exist for the domestic mass market, the typical design being that of the plastic jug kettle, the design development of which has consisted of creating the cordless versions, exploring the many shades of cream and the fitting of excessive L.E.D. power indicators. The ever efficient jug kettle offers the house owner such a restricted choice that it ends up being just another white box on the kitchen shelf. However, it is not the jug kettle that is at fault. It is undoubtedly a great innovation in the use of plastics and the efficient boiling of water. It is the distinct fault of the designers and manufacturers that produce these objects for leaving these products in the doldrums of uninspiring design. A fact that once again leaves the housewife facing the mundane nature of housework with no escape from the functional necessity of these appliances that should serve to

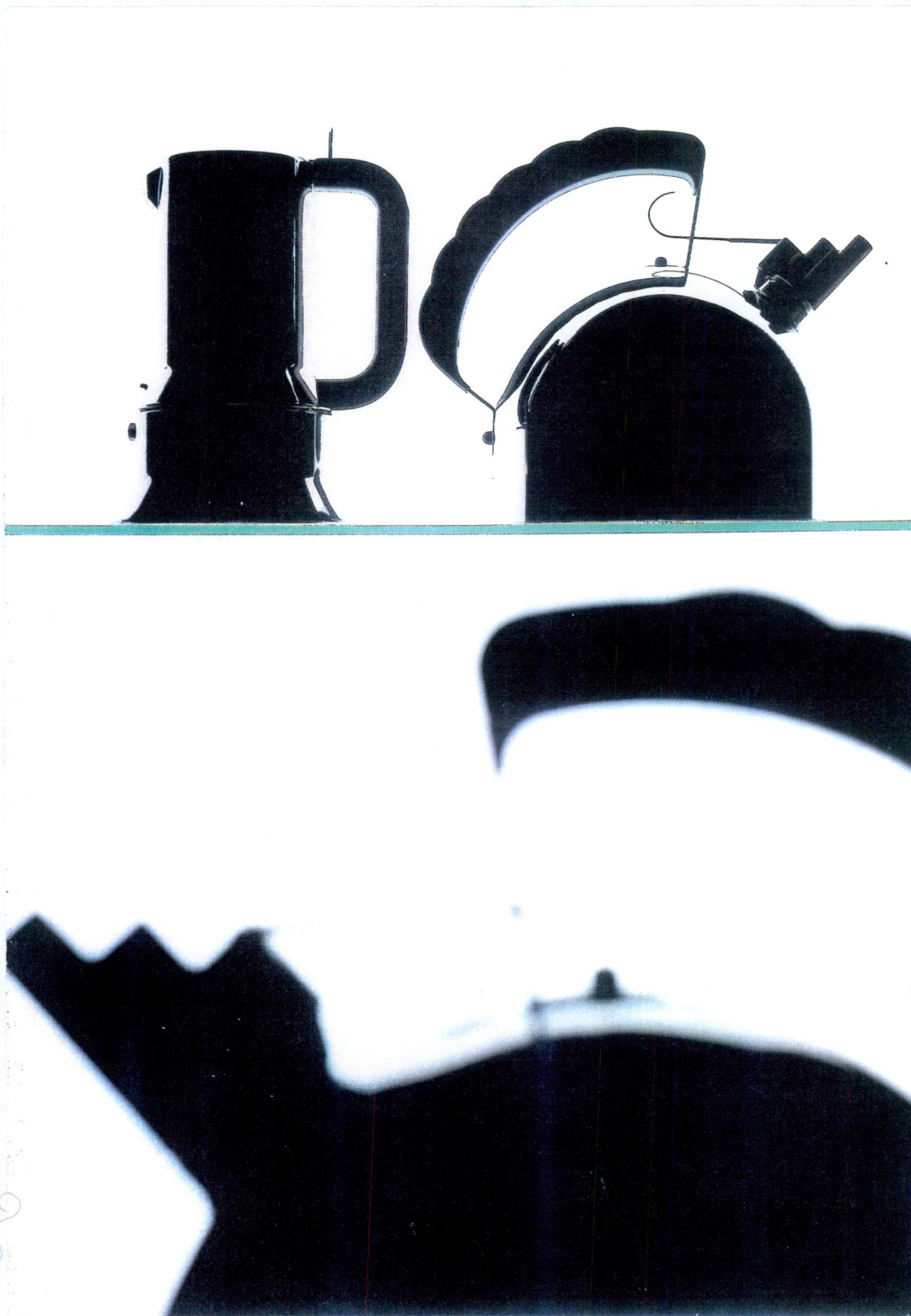






make their life easier. It is here that Alessi's worth can be demonstrated, how Alessi pushes design to its limits and create objects that serve to break many boundaries within the design world.





Illus.28. Kettle by Richard Sapper.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE ART OF BOILING WATER

The kettles designed by Richard Sapper 1984, Michael Graves 1985 and Philippe Starck 1990 respectively, are indeed objects which transcend their function and enter the world of beautiful objects. Each one has created a mark in the design world that will not be removed (or indeed surpassed). They are frequently referred to and discussed for their impact on the contemporary domestic market attracting both criticism and praise. They also have attained strong market success. But exactly what are these kettles like? How do they perform? These are questions rarely discussed, all too often it seems to be enough that they merely exist. This chapter sets out to explore these kettles to see how their form and their function relate in such a functional object. To see how they have gone beyond just being kettles and created a new form of artefact

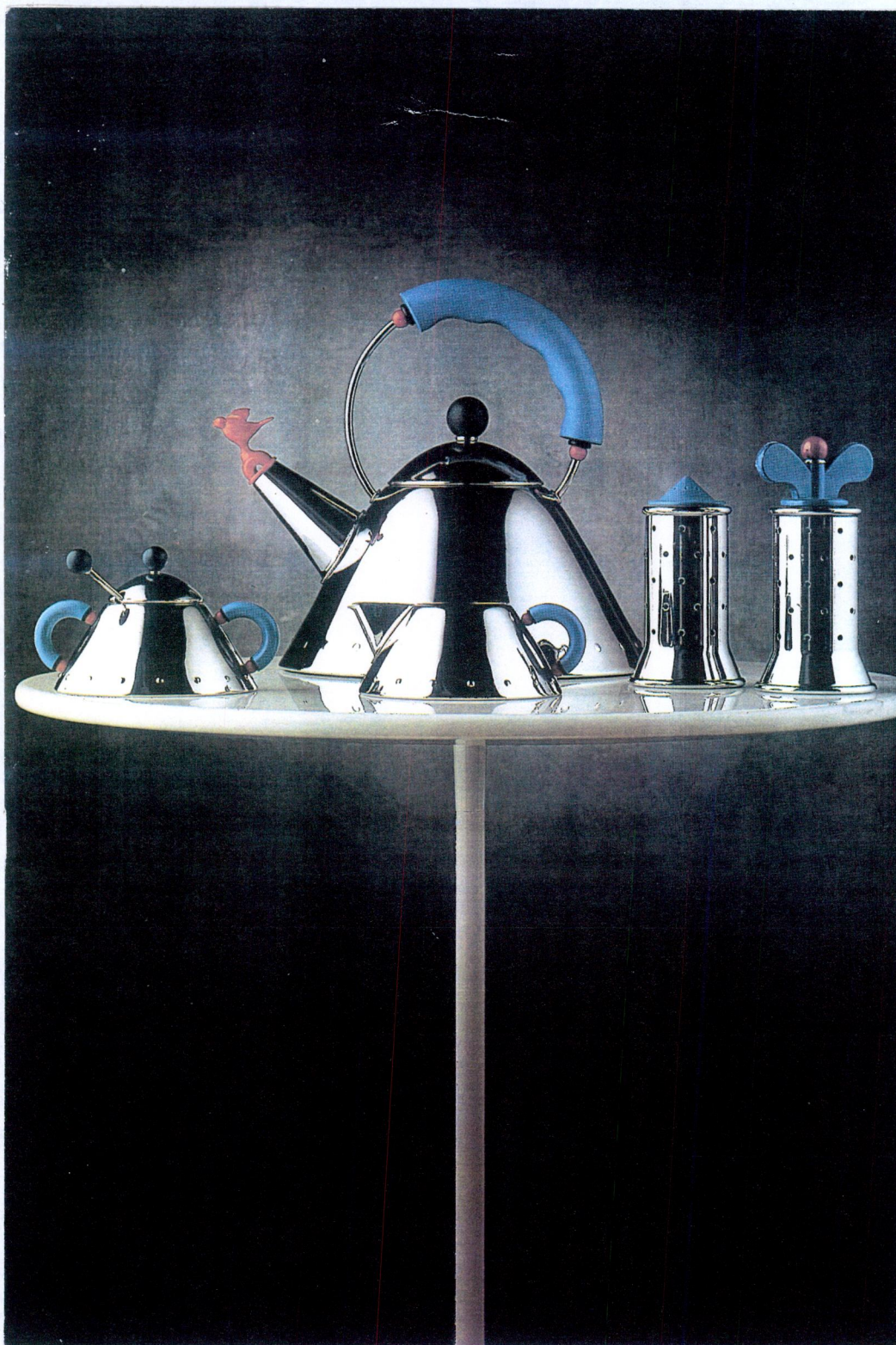
#### Form.

Richard Sapper's kettle was the first in this series to be designed and produced by Alessi. Sapper is an industrial designer by profession, having worked for Mercedes, Gio Ponti, Artemide (the famous Tizio Lamp), Knoll International, Fiat and as chief design consultant for IBM since 1980. This kettle has a rather distinguished shape, the large heavy looking dome crowned with an equally striking handle and a spout that resembles the barrel of a gun for many. The whistles in the spout gave rise to the most interesting aspect of the project. Sapper stated

I asked myself what bothered me about kettles. It's the whistle, I hate the normal kettles whistles. I just don't understand why they have to have a whistle that shatters one's ear drums (Scarzella, 1987, p.124).

Thus he undertook to create a kettle with a melodic whistle and it





Illus.29. Kettle by Michael Graves.

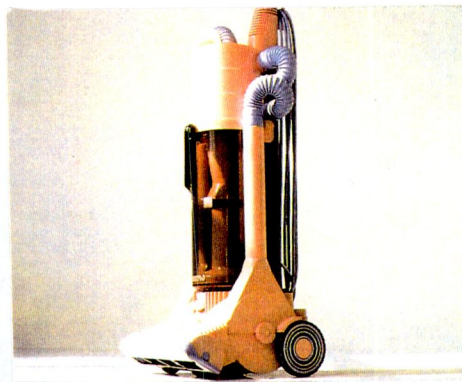


proved to be some undertaking. It took Sapper 18 months to discover an artisan in the Black Forest who would change his lifelong habit of making tuning forks in 'A' only, to produce versions in 'E' and 'B' for the kettle. This he did and has been doing so ever since. These whistles are placed in the lid and produce a sound reminiscent of American steam engines. This lid is hinged on to the main body with a jigger which is lifted when pouring (so as to avoid loss of the lid). Its highly reflective body help create its high visual impact.

Michael Graves was initially requested to undertake his project to fill a perceived gap in the American market which had many cheap ones but none with a special design. This kettle has often been seen as a rare representation of true post-modernism industrial design (the 1980's movement of which Graves was a major exponent)

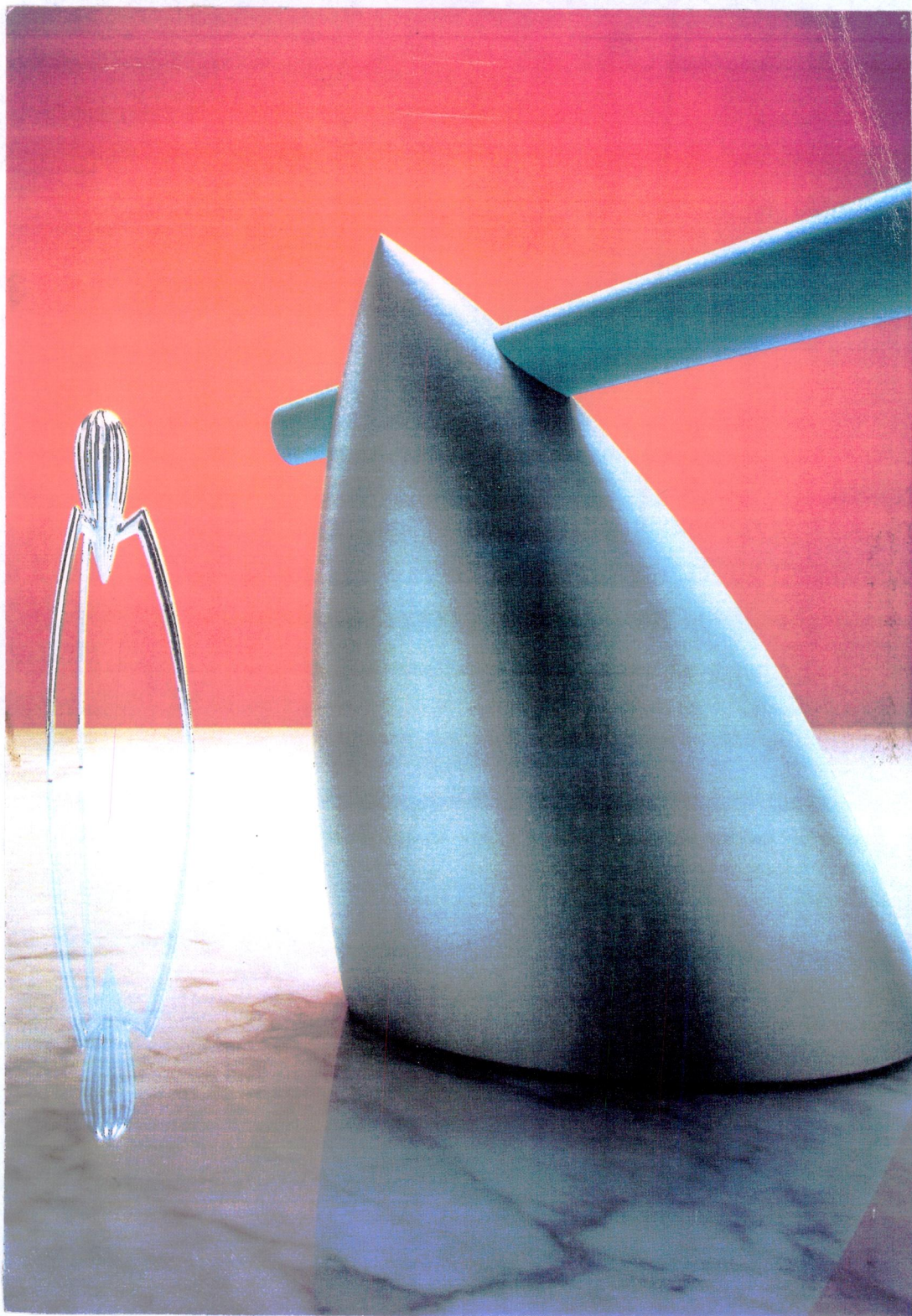
Its shape sums up the concentrated vision of the past without being nostalgic, in a very precise way that borders on aggression: the contemporary American consciousness, which is still looking towards the future (Andensey-Williams, 1992, p.37).

However, it often found its way into people's hearts on visual power alone. Its bird whistle was in true Kitsch form (indeed it also was noted as one of the first forms of audio Kitsch!) of post-modernism but it gave this kettle a form of amusement until then unheard of in kitchen design. In fact this was possibly one of the first examples of post modern product design in the 1980's. Up until Alessi's experimentation with the idea, post-modernism was typified through architecture and furniture, by Memphis. (Another example was Apex Inc's vacuum cleaner)



Illus.30. Hoover Designed by James Dyson for Apex Inc., 1986





Illus.31. Kettle by Philippe Starck.



The bright colours used, red (bird) and blue (handle), also added a new element to this erstwhile mundane object. These factors along with its striking overall visual appeal, also assured it a place in the mind and hearts of those who did not have the pleasure of its company in the home.

However, of the three, Philippe Starck's kettle is probably the most visually striking. But then again Starck's work is notorious for its high visual impact and ability to astound. Produced for Alessi in 1990-91 it was an object worthy of both their names. Initially its function as a kettle is not at all obvious. It breaks with every norm the kettle ever represented even for Alessi. Firstly, it is made from aluminium, there is no whistle, the water is introduced through the handle and most important, it in no way resembles a kettle. It is though, a very seductive piece of design that epitomises Alessi's ability to raise everyday design consciousness in household equipment. With such an object on one's stove, it allows us to escape the reality of housework and raise our daily expectations.

#### Function.

There is one aspect of these kettles that serve to separate them from the mainstream kettles on the market today. This is their ability to function. Of the three, Sapper's is possibly the most functional. It has a copper base which is ideal for heat conduction. Also the handle is plastic which prevents it heating up too much. However, when used on a gas flame cooker, this handle eventually scorches and melts, making it necessary to replace it. The Jigger also heats up making it difficult and sometimes impossible to operate it successfully. Finally, the whistles to which the design owes much of its success are not robust enough to withstand the wear and tear and need to be replaced at regular intervals.

The Graves kettle, though it has fewer problems with maintenance, nevertheless is less efficient at boiling water. It can only be filled to







half its capacity (due to the positioning of the spout) and its base does not have the copper base of Sapper's, thus it must be carefully monitored lest its base be scorched beyond repair.

It is the kettle by Starck that is the least functional of all. Since its introduction it has been the basis of much discussion centring on its relationship between form and function. This discussion was brought to a logical conclusion when in June 1993 'Design' ran an article on Starck's kettle to coincide with the staging of a major retrospective of Starck's work in the Design Museum of London. (Design June 1992, 26-27).

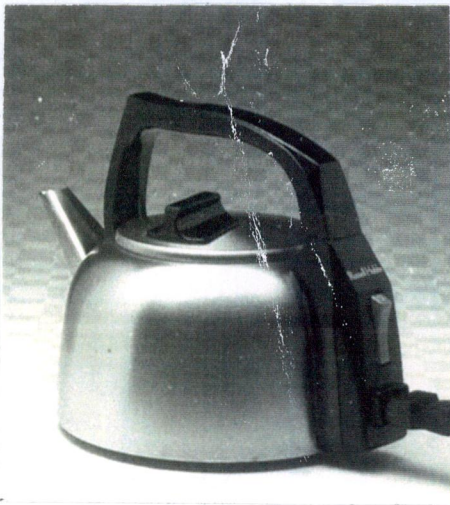
The article called "Starck Reality" put the kettle through its paces. The magazine gave seven people from varied backgrounds the kettle for a week to use and see how it coped with the day to day reality of brewing up.<sup>4</sup> Functionally it didn't fair well at all.

David Villiers, a product designer from Fitch Design, said of it "on the few occasions I used the kettle I found it impossible to use - I only used it twice and scalded my hands both times". Other comments were "it wouldn't fit under my tap, you can't tell when you've filled it up either" (Ian Renwich, Habitat Marketing Director) "as for boiling, if you keep the flame on the base, as recommended, it boils terribly slowly" (Michael Lunningham, Freelance translator) "and I found that when you start to pour, you get a back spill of steam up your arm; you definitely need a cloth to hold it with as the handle gets very hot" (Amanda Gush, Managing Director for a contract furniture company) "..as a pourer, it was atrocious: it doesn't have one smooth stream, it spat" (Penny Bunton, Actress) "and of course being aluminium, it wouldn't work on an induction hob" (Bill Wilson, Electronics Engineer).

Far from rave reviews from these users, but it does have its faults and there is no denying that. Even Alessi recognises this as in the information brochure there are numerous apologies and points of safety.

4. See, Gardner, Carl, "Starck Reality", Design, No.533, June 1991, pp. 26-27





Illus.32.(Left) Russell Hobbs, K3 kettle.  
Illus.33.(Right) New Maid, Whistling Kettle.



Illus.34. Russell Hobbs, Futura kettle.



## Form versus Function

However, with this knowledge there is still the undeniable beauty in its form, even our angst users had praise for its form.

"The Starck form is very provocative when used for a functional object like this" (David Villiers) "It's beautiful.... I liked it from an aesthetic point of view" (Ian Renwick) "I loved the look of it, it's a bit loony and doesn't look like a kettle which appeals to me" (Michael Lunningham) "I thought it was visually stunning ... few kettles are attractive as objects. It would look brilliant in a hi-tech kitchen" (Amanda Gush).

This point of aesthetic value is very strong in Alessi's works including the other two kettles. It is worth noting though that Starck's lack of functional efficiency is not typical of Alessi's objects. However, the three kettles could never compare with such functional classics as New Maid's whistling kettle, 1957 the Russell Hobbs K3 Series, 1982 or the Russell Hobbs Futura plastic kettles, 1975. They could only contrast and it is in the manner they contrast that they succeed as kettles.

Certainly you can boil water in a Sapper kettle but the price made that almost beside the point, what you bought was an object that was desirable in itself (Blueprint, Sept. 93, p.36).

Price immediately set them apart from the mainstream as they each cost over £100. Outside of price these kettles are remarkable in the way that they stand apart from the bunch. The very fact that they are non-electric raises many interesting points. They represent a return to the past, they would have to be stove heated and thus would automatically re-associate the kettle with the cooker/stove and bring with it images of the traditional black kettle over the fire. So far removed from the present kitchen scene. Lack of electronics meant in two cases the re-introduction of the steam whistle and another old and admirable trait with a history unrecognised in the modern kitchen. The user would now have to be more interactive with the kettle encouraged by the whistle. Also they offer the owner user a point of distraction, novelty,







beauty, a point of conversation. The freedom from electricity also gives the kettle freedom from the preconceived forms so commonly associated with the modern kettle, which, with the extensive use of plastic, is synonymous with the jug kettle and the white box with a sheaf of corn embellished on its side. Alessi's extensive use of stainless steel alone serves to sever these connections. Just exactly how these two poles of kitchenware are separated on visual aesthetics alone can be seen when they are merely placed together. Immediately one can see they don't belong together and the Alessi kettle stands out clearly appearing as if handcrafted. It is only when one looks at rows of these together that their mass manufactured birth can be fully seen.

### Poetry and Pleasure.

Here we can see Alberto Alessi's ideal form of design at its best. For him

A true work of design must be moving, it must convey feelings, evoke memories, surprise and transgress, it must be able to make us feel more intensely that we are living the only life we've got, in short it must be poetic (Promotional brochure, Alessi, 1989).

This sentiment echoes throughout Alessi's objects. However, some people find this coming from a business man a little too poetic. It seems that good poetic design is not something one should profit from. Indeed Alessi's objects are often relegated to the ranks of those "ugly things" so favoured by a certain type of middle class and the "wish we were rich". Also these items were regarded as expensive, giftware, a thought epitomised by articles in Christmas glossies such as this one

Collector's items rather than typical exponents of domestic drudgery transcends the domestophobia that overcomes some women at Yuletide. Take for example, a kettle (or teapot). The conventional sort might cause a storm in a teacup but if you present her with an Alessi original which is more sculptured than utilitarian, expect a grateful outpouring (Esquire, Dec 1990, p.160).







This trend doesn't bother Alessi. Neither does the critics of the lack of function in some of his objects. He states

There is a tremendous need for art and poetry in society. People want intellectual and spiritual nourishment from objects since traditional forms of aesthetic enjoyment offered by fine arts and poetry are hidden away in museums and books. People don't buy our pots, kettles and squeezers only because they have to boil water and squeeze lemons, but because they want aesthetic pleasure and what better form of gift is there to give than one that gives such pleasure (Form Function Finland, No. 4, 1991, p.42).

People do buy Alessi objects for this pleasure and poetry. It is a chance for people to own a piece of Philippe Starck or Richard Sapper, to share in this designer world of art objects

Art is primarily transmissions of feelings and so I see my products as art objects, Alessi's designers are artists that is the only word I can use for them (Alberto Alessi quoted at a speech given at the University of Industrial Arts, Helsinki) (Form Function Finland, No. 4, 1991, p.40).

It is also a chance for people to elevate their kitchen above the ordinary by owning a Starck or Sapper kettle. People can lift themselves above the functional drudgery of kitchen work through these kettles. Many of the 'norms' are challenged and broken by these 'functional' objects. The very relationship between utilitarianism and non-utilitarianism so strict in kitchen utensils no longer holds true. What happens to the kettle under Alessi's guidance could be likened to the manner that design for the table top has developed.

Alessi mixes many different design methods and thinkings. Sapper is an industrial designer. Graves is an architect and Starck is 'multi media' almost having no specific training and having worked in most disciplines in a most sculptural manner. This mixing of approaches







within Officina Alessi open research ethos creates a 'dining table' for the likes of Sapper, Graves and Starck to meet at and explore the rich and limitless elements of design.

It is not sufficient though to accept that Alessi has achieved this ability to produce such remarkable objects. There are certain elements outside of Alessi's control that serve to assist the company in gaining the respect it has. The most interesting being that it is an Italian company, steeped in the Italian way of design. A critical factor that explains why Alessi did what it did and why it not only survived in its field but excelled.

It is also important to analyse exactly what Alessi's achievements have been. What the company has done to influence the way we look at the relationship between art, craft, design and architecture. To see if it has achieved a synthesis between these disciplines in a mass manufacturing environment.







## CHAPTER 4

### DESIGN IN QUESTION

The fact that Alessi is an Italian firm raises many interesting points that can explain why Alessi has been able to succeed in the manner it has. These aspects of Italian design heritage were outside the control of Alessi and its owners, but created a firm base on which the company could experiment with relative security. Without these factors Alessi would not have succeeded and so their exploration is important and serve as a basis on which to discuss how the relationship between craft and design has developed through Alessi's work.

#### Italian Design.

Italian design has for many years been perceived to epitomise the most desirable and exciting design. Objects created with this Italian culture have been actively sought after for years; Ferrari's cars such as the Testa Rossa, Gucci's fashion, Artemide's lighting design and Cassina's furniture. These products may not necessarily be functionally or technically superior to others in their field. However, in this designer cliché world we live in, these products tend to attain a desirability that can be attributed to their Italian origin. This view comes directly from the Italians and their designers. They have a strong belief in their design and are often quite passionate about it. Giovanni Albera voiced this opinion in his book "Italian Modern"

We are simply the best, we have more fantasy, more culture and we manage better in the role of mediators between the past and the future. That is why our design is more beautiful and up to date than that of other countries (Albera, 1989, p.5).

With that sort of belief in their design (a belief echoed by many) it is possible to understand how Alessi could challenge the world of kitchen design and produce such products as the three kettle discussed previously. It is necessary to explore how this form of Italian design came







about.

Historically Italy has a rich and diverse culture to draw from. From being one of the most powerful empires ever to rule, it created some remarkable architectural feats. Again Italy flourished during the Renaissance when it gave us some of the most beautiful objects of art and architecture. The objects and theories from this time still abound and within which, the Italian people have lived for centuries, giving them a rich sense of being, culture and learning that they may draw from continually.

It was this basis that created the ability for Italians to overcome the effects of World War Two. It was the period after the war (that is now called the Ricostruzione - the reconstruction) that really created Italian design as it is now. There was a remarkable determination to rebuild the country and in less than ten years Italy was transformed. Designers, free from the constraints of Fascism, identified design as a democratic expression of the new Italy. An opportunity to disregard the formalist style of the dictatorship. They did this with vigour with designers striking out in completely new directions. There were no inhibitions either for they had nothing to lose and, as their history told them, they had everything to gain. It was during this early stage that industry and the designer began forging the relationship they now have today. At the start of the post-war era, their mutual need ensured a firm bond.

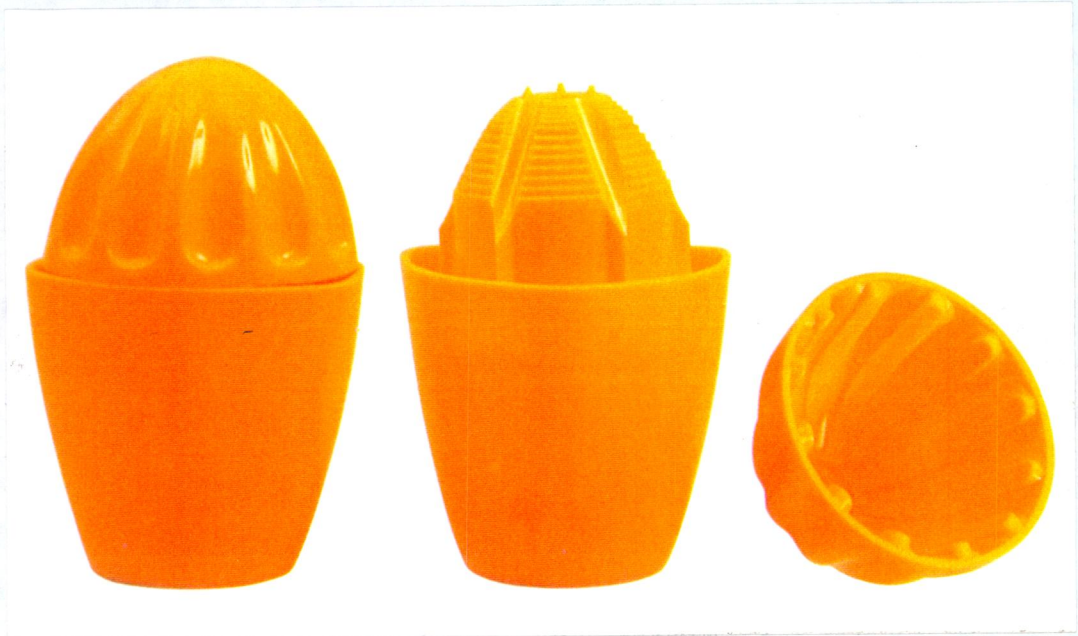
Along the way there were certain events that served to strengthen Italy's belief in design and make it what it is today. The earliest of these was the Compasso D'oro. The Compasso D'oro awards were founded in 1954 by Aldo Borletti of a Milano department store La Rinascente to encourage designers and industrialists to strive for higher standards. Compasso D'oro was significant because it encouraged designers working in Italy to regard mundane domestic items such as kitchen buckets and colanders as legitimate opportunities for artistic and sculptural statements. Indeed Gino Colombini's 1958 lemon squeezer for Kartel won a Compasso D'oro in 1959 while a plastic







bucket by the same manufacturer was selected for the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

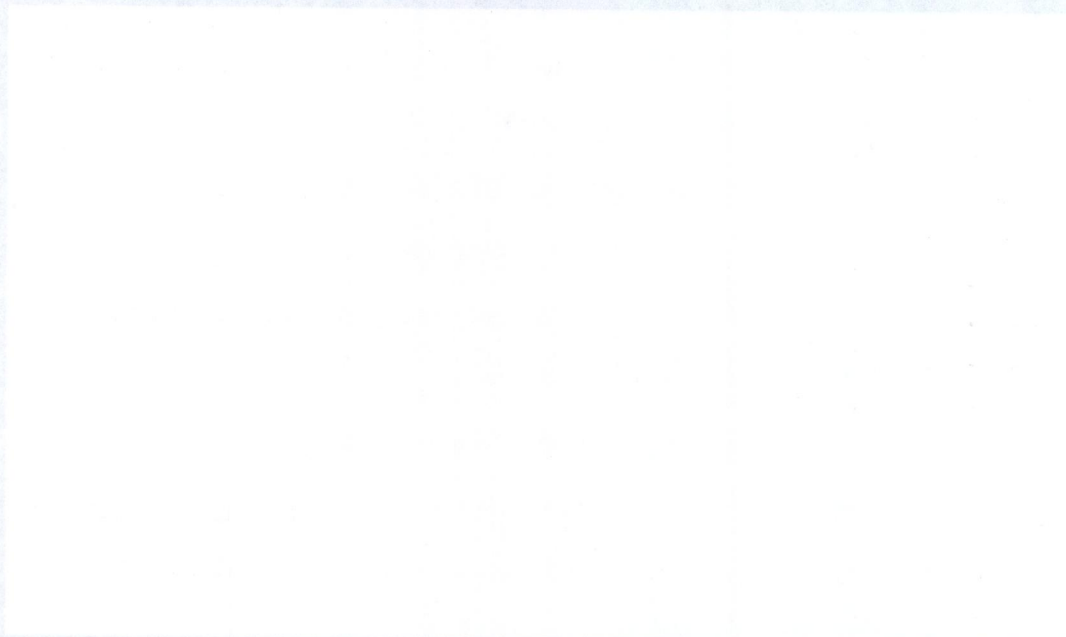


Illus.35. Lemon squeezer by Gino Colombini for Kartell.

Designers began to emerge in Italian society as the visionaries of the future, their stylish interpretations of home products would give the nation a new status in world trade. Although the Compasso D'oro was not the only design award of its time (the British Design Awards began in the 1950's also) they were unique in the way they served to truly unite design with industry in a commercial framework (the awards were after all run by a retail outlet, and not a quasi official design body). This early combination between the three major aspects of product design (designer, industry and consumer) ensured that the Italian people were at home with the pure commercial side of design. A trait which left them free to enjoy the designs for design sake. Another more important point was that domestic products were seen by the designers and consumers alike as being worthy of serious design. It was obvious to them that it was not enough for the product to be functional and fit inoffensively on the kitchen ledge. It could and should be an object of beauty also.

This happy co-existence had many positive effects and it was demonstrated to great effect at the exhibition held in 1972 in the Museum of







## Modern Art in New York called Italy. The New Domestic Landscape.

It had a deep pervasive impact not least in the strands of evolution [in Italian design since World War Two]. For the first time the American people were invited to conceive of design not only as a product of creative intelligence but also as an exercise of the critical imagination. The exhibition aimed at helping visitors to realise that design in general and Italian design in particular did not simply mean creating objects to satisfy functional and emotional needs: it illustrated that the process and products of design could be used to make a critical commentary on our society (Ambae, 1986, p.8)

This exhibition marked a high point of Italian design as a free wheeling creative process firmly rooted to the culture it works in and for. Worth noting also were the Triennial shows in Milan.

These Triennial meetings were held in Italy, where industry may have been younger than elsewhere but it was livelier too, for Italy still kept alive the traditions of a culture in which art and craftsmanship had been leading actors since Renaissance times.

The shows displayed highly sophisticated products of modern technology alongside the latest creation in fine Venetian glass and the ceramics of Faenza, mixing art and industry craft and design which was to have a great effect on Italians. To them the difference between craft and design was shown not to be of great importance, they saw the two disciplines mix freely at these shows and thus, were shown a new fresh way of looking at them.

### The Shop/Museum Cult

The Italian public thus have had a greater immersion in design and the designer myth of the past decades. This is a strong factor in Alessi's early success with his designer objects. Italians appreciate a well designed object and were willing to pay for them. What's more







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 (Albera, 1989, p.13).

This trend was particular to the 1980s when design filtered into every aspect of popular awareness, advertisement exploited the new consumer awareness (typified by Italians), while more established institutions like museums also took up this new public interest. Traditionally focused on design as an historical activity, museums now concentrated on exhibitions highlighting more recent design trends. A typical example was Memphis, the innovative Italian design power-house of the 1980s. The work it produced had no clear popular appeal and it was not clear if it was intended to. However, museums bought up its pieces and exhibited them world wide and they rapidly became collectors pieces. The Memphis Group created a new trend, a new handicraft industry where production was limited to small series of more or less experimental work, where the production of pieces were not strictly tied to commercial logic, but yet, were commercially successful. A trend reflected in Alessi's 'Programma 6' and the basis for 'Officina Alessi'.

It was the likes of Terence Conran's (Habitat) purpose built "Design Museum" that helped propagate this very Italian trend. The Museum of Modern Art, involved for so long in profiling design and designers of the day, also started the most popular offcut of this trend, when it opened 'The Design Shop' which sold the 'classics' of the century. This made those objects held for so long in awe accessible to the public (at a price of course). The offshoot of this was the explosion of 'Museum Shops' onto high streets and shopping malls in cities all over the world. Alessi's work now had an outlet in these shops that would permit and justify the experimental design work he undertook through the 1980s. Now people could buy the art and poetry they so desperately wanted in his objects. These shops so often knocked as being gift shops for the rich, effectively took the museum into the homes of the people and gave them, through Alessi's products especially, a







chance to escape the repressive black and white box mentality of mass produced appliance design.

Also because such an outlet was created where extreme design, alongside classic, could be sold it, meant that Alessi was free from the restraints encountered on the purely domestic mass market scene.

A typical industrial designed product such as the jug kettle is heavily connected to the mass marketplace. It sells well because of its high functional aspect and because it fits so well with existing 'white box' products. It is market led. If the design of the jug kettle becomes too radical (it doesn't comply with the kitchenwork myth), then it surpasses its market. This alienates the buyer who is buying it in the supermarkets or discount electric stores and thus it fails financially, however, this does not make it a bad design. In fact it could be a kettle just like those designed for Alessi, the reason for this failure is lack of acceptance of radical design in the mass market. Alessi's kettles are a commercial success because they avoid this restrictive market, instead they are sold in these 'museum' shops and high design stores. The market in which they not only fit into but flourish.

#### Aspects of Architecture Design and Poetry.

Another aspect of Italian Design is how Milan has become a form of design mecca in Italy and indeed the world. It was again after the War that this fact came to be. Milan came to represent the commercial success of Post War Italy. Its industries were the largest and most varied in the country and soon the powerful financial centre of Italy and Europe began to trade there. Naturally, this was a centre of interest for designers from all disciplines. From the 1960s onwards, this fact, coupled with the new exciting design that was flourishing in Italy, caused Milan to attract some of the most acclaimed designers and architects this century has seen. This early mix, and the manner in which they were trained created an interesting phenomenon typical to Italy. Being







"the first country where the industrial design and architecture profession were not separated" (Monti, 1989, p.8). It is where the architect/designer could find company's that would willfully employ them, a trend that was taken up by Alessi. Dr Paul Thompson noted this when he said

By consistently commissioning houseware products from architects (Graves, Rossi etc) Alessi no doubt aims to achieve a synthesis between architecture and industrial designed objects (Thomson, 1990, p.49).

Architects easy acceptance is also helped by the status they hold in Italy due to its architectural histories. Gio Ponti wrote

Italians should love architecture because Italy is make half by God and half by architects. God made the plains, hills, water and skies, but the profiles of the domes, facades, steeples and towers are things created by architects (Albera, 1898, p.8).

It's no wonder architects the likes of Michael Graves found it so easy to work in Milan and in design with Alessi. Even the education of architects and designers in Italy is indicative of the lack of differentiation of design professions. In Politecnico di Milano they are a total of 20,000 students in the architectural department. However, all the students are not training specifically to be architects, nor will they all work as architects, many will go on to be interior designers, industrial designers or furniture designers for example. But they will all have the same background and will have the ability and training to transgress from profession to profession with ease and are actively encouraged to do so.

Another important trait of Italian design is the way designers (be they architect or industrial) are rarely actually an employee of the company they do work for. This allows them to

Keep a cultural independence (that could sometimes seem excessive and even detrimental, but that is implicit in his development as a free-lancer) that allows him to keep in sight the







social and cultural context in which he operates and into which he must fit his creations (Sartogo, 1982, p.15).

A view like this would not fit easily into the ethos of many international companies, but it is the very essence of the Italian design industry and one which has helped Alessi become the company it is today. Alberto went as far as saying, "Italian design will continue to exist regardless of Italian designers because of Italian industry" (Aldensey-Williams, 1992, p.82).

The success of this system was highlighted when Richard Sapper responded to the question by Chee Pearlman in ID Magazine

Do you ever feel like an outsider in the midst of the scene? The reply Never. Italian designers and industry have always been open minded and Milan has always been very international, unlike Germany, Italians are very tolerant which I think is important because to be creative, you have to be tolerant. (ID Magazine, May/June, 1991, p.34).

What better example of this tolerance than Alessi waiting a year and a half for Richard Sapper to find the whistles for his kettle. This tolerance of such long term product development would strike many U.S. and British managers as irresponsible. But when one is in pursuit of art and poetry in household objects as Alessi is.....

You have to be open" smiles Alessi, "You have to understand the process you are working with... we are very critical of the whole mass produced logic, we are not true industry (Designer Journal, No. 60, p.16).

Market trends that so often influence which project or products will make it to the production line don't interest Alessi, as he sees Alessi as an applied art research lab, with designers as the market experts. However, Alessi's ideals and aspirations for his company and his "artists" often get a less than sympathetic hearing. People seem to find a business man talking of poetry hard to take seriously. As Peggy







Schenin put it

commercial enterprises that claim to aim for something higher than money can always count on being met with cynicism (Form Function Finland, No. 4, 1991, p.42)

But why is this, why has poetry and beauty of form in objects been seen as something beyond commercial enterprise and kept for the domain of the crafts since the arts and crafts movement began.

### Craft and Design: A New View

The advent of the design museum and its representation in our cities in the form of the design shop has, in the minds of many art and design historians, led to the confusion of design and art and the apparent misconception that manufactured artifacts are works of art. This 'misconception' being typified by the statement "Industrial design is the art of the twentieth century" (Bailey, 1979, p.10) which, as Adrian Forty deduced, seems "calculated to obscure all the differences between art and design" (Forty, 1986, p.7). He sees the difference between them in that the art object are usually conceived and produced by the artists alone and that conceiving and producing their work allows them considerable autonomy. " which has led to the common belief that one of arts main functions is to give free expression to creativity and imagination" (Forty, 1986, p.7). However, he sees design in capitalist societies differently.

The primary purpose of the manufacture of artifacts, a process of which design is part, has to be to make profit for the manufacturer. Whatever degree of artistic imagination is lavished upon the design of objects, it is done not to give expression to the designers creativity and imagination, but to make the products saleable and profitable (Forty, 1986, p.7).

When taken in the context of household ware and tabletop design, this







view tends to suggest that the crafts, (typically seen in Forty's view of an artist as a potter that throws his own clay), have a much more artistic and fulfilling element to give as against mass produced objects because they don't exist to create wealth. I will not argue that industrial design is not a profit making profession, but I do protest to it being portrayed as an unclean, unpure money grabbing exercise. Especially when modern contemporary crafts (again typified by tableware) are taking up the same position of high design in the art galleries and museums and the design shops and art show in our cities and towns. Martina Margetts noted this trend in her introduction to *International Crafts*, a book celebrating the new contemporary crafts.

Today the crafts flourish in the market place and art galleries as never before. Designers, artists, collectors, museum curators and consumers have given them a new status by recognising both their innate qualities and their positioning at the cutting edge of creativity (Margetts, 1991, p.7).

This status is remarkably similar to that held by Alessi, yet the fact Alessi is a manufacturing company, a business, design is not allowed to take on any form higher than a profit making tool.

But what of craft and their boom in the market place. Craft artists surely don't live off the satisfaction of creativity alone. No, they sell their wares just like Alessi does and many others besides. The Craft Council of Ireland have opened a shop and exhibition space in Dublin in the Powerscourt Townhouse, an upper market shopping mall set in an old Georgian courtyard. One of the most interesting aspects of this enterprise is its commercial nature. It is not possible to hold an exhibition there unless the items on display are for resale. The profits out of which the Council take a commission. The very idea of the shop and its layout is also very similar to the design shops mentioned earlier. Each piece clearly displays the artists name and a normally large price, to assist people in buying their little piece of Tom the potter much the same was as one can buy a little piece of Philippe the designer. This is not a once off case either. It is more the norm than the exception







worldwide. But within such a commercial frame work what happens to the artists autonomy. Alison Britton had this to say of the problem.

The crafts are now on the horns of a dilemma: the range and quality of contemporary work will inexorably propel it and its creators into the culture and media spotlight. But at the same time, status stakes, the superficial categorisation and the need for ever changing styles of work at keener prices to satisfy demands may suck the crafts into a vortex akin to the contemporary art and design world. The result may damage its independent free radical spirit which at the moment gives the work and its makers their remarkable quality (Margetts, 1991, p.9).

It appears that craft, so long a haven from the commercial guile of designed mass produced on the one hand and the provocative dangers of fine art on the other was now slipping into that 'vortex'. It is unfortunate that the meeting of these discipline should be seen as crafts descent into hell. Rather than they finding a mutual plane of existence through the houseware market and the work of such broad minded companies such as Alessi as an example, these disciplines can and do exist together just as architecture and design does with in Alessi and Italian design. With tolerance and understanding the formal barriers shrink to almost nothing.

There is another area that needs to be addressed and that is the question of producing the artifacts, i.e. the hand made craft objects verses the mass produced product. It is here on the commercial battleground of the tabletop that craft can claim that certain superiority they always clamber for. Deborah Farber-Isaacson, Co-owner of Mindscape in Chicago, one of the oldest craft galleries in the U.S. sums up this difference by saying..

There is appeal, as well, in the endless variations to be found in things made by hand. A set of wheel-thrown porcelain bowls is guaranteed to vary in size. The glazes will differ from piece to piece, depending upon where things were placed in the kiln during firing. Bubbles or seeds appear in even the finest studio blown glass. What we think of as flaws in ware produced under







strict factory control may be viewed as desirable when the object is made by the artist. Collectors don't simply forgive such inconsistencies, they actively enjoy them (Wolk, 1992, p.9).

With this point one can't argue as it is undoubtedly true. But ceramics and glass have always been synonymous with the pure crafts for centuries. For metal it changes slightly, as perfection in execution and finish has always been the aim of metal working. 'Flaws' are not so readily accepted, indeed in the past such perfection was regularly sought after but it relied entirely on the skill of the craftsman to ensure this perfection. However, since the advent of the industrial revolution, the skills of these crafts have been adapted (not superseded) by industry and mechanised to ensure this much sought after perfection. This did not hinder the progress of the craftsman however. Throughout the century craft and factory skills have co-existed, interchanging ideas and approaches at different times. Hand techniques have become possible by machine and new materials have emerged to stimulate radical changes. The process continues today and an intricate interweaving of art, craft and industrial design has emerged in houseware production.

There is no greater example of this than Alessi. For centuries precious metals such as silver and gold have been associated with the fine craft of metal working. Indeed this association has its closest links in household artifacts and tableware, in particular, Alessi worked with these materials for many years and adopted the methods used by those skilled craftsmen onto his factory floor. An adaption that still required a considerable level of skill for an automated system. However, with the introduction of stainless steel (so often associated with 1960's canteen cutlery) and Alessi's extensive use of it, he achieved a synthesis between these historic practices he adapted and a new mass manufactured material. This was possible because of his commitment to research combined with the company's respect for craft skills and a "Factory that could more accurately be described as a mechanised craftwork shop" (Design, Sept 1990, p.53).







With the addition of the companies stated mission to "bring poetry to the people" it is little wonder Alessi produced some of the most beautiful and striking objects for the houseware market, in craft and mass produced circles.

There are two good examples of work from Alessi which demonstrates this. Firstly, Josephs Hoffman's Rosenschale or Rose Bowl. Hoffman, founder the Wiener Werkstatte, designed this bowl in 1906. This beautiful object embodied Hoffman's dream of joining the high craftsman of the Nineteenth century with the technological capabilities of our century.

To establish intimate contact between public, designer and craftsman and to produce good simple domestic requisites (from the Vienna Werkstatte Programme 1903) (De Noblet, 1993, p.113).

However, only one prototype was ever made and only a handful of photographs remain of that. Hoffmann's dream only came through because of Alessi's interest in what can be learned from the past and his interest in the arts and crafts movement and what that stood for and created. But what is most interesting is the fact that until such complex techniques such as stamping and laser cutting were perfected, Hoffman's bowl could only ever be produced by an individual craftsman having to work for hours, painstakingly cutting out each rose and still the finish of the metal would not have been any better. Its cost would have been exorbitant and its ownership would have been limited to a precious few. Another aspect of this project was the use of computer technology that helped to create the working drawings needed to produce such an item from photographs alone. An extraordinary mix of technology, design, idealism and skill from one man and a company separated by almost ninety years.

The second example is that of Robert Venturi's Campidoglio tray inspired by the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. This tray represented one of Alessi's few serious explorations into surface decoration which was significant in itself. But what is more representative of the







mixing of old and new craft and design techniques in metal making. The leaf shapes on the tray are gold. In order to achieve this effect, Alessi's technicians had combined some very old engraving techniques and state of the art galvanic gold-plating to try join the gold to the steel. The old to the new. It took months of long painstaking research and experimentation in order to perfect this latest technique of the old art of surface decoration.

But still people might argue that these efforts are purely for profit and that Alessi's merely uses his designers to create marketable objects, that their work is done "not to give expression to the designers creativity and expression" (Forty 1987, p.7) but to use their names. It is true Alessi makes money (30 million turnover in 1991) and lots of it and it is also true his products are designed by some of the most famous designers in the world. But it is incorrect to ascribe money as Alessi's only objectives and his work with designers and architects as a mere market ploy.

Over the past three decades, Alessi's has injected an extra element into the design world. Something that at times is more akin to architecture or craft, that breaks with modern technologies and form. Offering us a choice of objects that reject the standards of the mainstream. Offer us a lift above the mundane, creating emotions and feeling about objects long considered as objects, that offer us nothing but function. Giving us new ways of seeing the everyday objects that surround us. Giving us a sense of true values not imposed myths. This role in objects and their creator were for too long considered the role of the artist craftsman. However, companies like Alessi are fulfilling this role also and Alessi does not do this by having a total aim of achieving wealth and by exploiting designers and their profession.

Currently the company has ninety designers from around the world working on one hundred and sixty different projects. Only 25% of these will make it to prototype stage and less into full production. Most of these projects are started with almost certain knowledge that the







public will never see them on their shelves. This type of broad based experimental research is what sets Alessi apart from standard manufacturing companies. This is why Richard Sapper and 5 international chefs could spend 7 years developing a range of cookware. Also Alessi has no in-house designers. All are employed on consultancy terms and are paid on a strict royalty basis and the designers are working literally for themselves and taking the same risk as the company. Their dedication to research on all levels from form through to materials is essential to the reasons for their success. Officina Alessi provide the umbrella for this, sheltering it from pressures of external markets. Indeed it is reminiscent of a craft workshop. A trait Alberto Alessi sees clearly and likes.

I want Alessi to be more open to influence from craft. I hope to be able to continue working on projects that marketing won't ruin projects not based on some hypothetical market standards that do not correspond to real expectations of the real public, which is continuously evolving, more amenable than we think and above all, always looking for poetry. (Form Function Finland, No.4 1991, 41)







## CONCLUSION

Craft and mass <sup>production</sup> design will always exist as separate disciplines, of that there is little doubt. At their extremes their ideals are incompatible however on the table top the two disciplines have found a common ground on which they can exist harmoniously. Such different artifacts as hand thrown bowls and mass produced stainless steel cutlery, can look well together on a table despite their different processes of creation. This fact demonstrates how the crafts and industrial design can attain a close relationship. Through tabletop design it can be seen how well-designed mass produced objects such as the cutlery shown in illustration .8 (p.11) can have high and positive formal social values that are somewhat similar to craft pieces for the same task. It is at the table that people actively see and use craft and mass design for the same purpose and attain the same pleasures from both

However this is not a common aspect of our day to day lives and this is especially true of the kitchen. To this day in the ever present conflict between form and function in kitchen artifacts the function of the object seems to win out. Function that serves to reminds us of the work and toil involved in keeping a house and preparing food. However we are told that this is not real work, that these tools are there to make our lives easier by saving us time, to do the other things that give us pleasure. This unfortunately is a myth and an unpleasant one at that. It should not be that these tools just help us to finish our tasks quicker and then escape the kitchen. In this advanced world we live in it should be possible to enjoy these tools, not as a result of their sheer function but also through their form, much in the same way as at the table.

It is possible for a frying pan or a cooking pot or a kettle to be visually pleasing. It is possible to challenge our perceptions of what kitchen tools should be like and in challenging this, serve to bring art and life closer. To bring poetry and pleasure to the kitchen, a place that con-







tains so much activity and life.

This Alessi has done and continues to do so. The company, its owner, designers and workmen, has continually challenged this preconceived idea of the functional tools of the kitchen and given us objects that can and do bring art and pleasure back into household work. This fact can be seen in the work shown through out this thesis and especially in the kettles discussed. These high function based utensils have for decades relied on innovation in materials and operation to give them desirability. However Alessi and his designers have given these kettles something now

Alessi however does not stop at challenging our view of the kitchen and the items it holds. He also questions some of the traditional and basic roles of design, architecture and craft in our society today.

The destiny of the work of art is the air conditioned eternity of the museum; the destiny of the industrial object is the trash barrel.  
(Paz, 1974, 24)

This view was presented by Octavio Paz in his book In Praise Of Hands which celebrated the work of the artist craftsman the world over. It echoes the superiority felt at times by those involved in the crafts over the world of art and design. But Alessi has shown that such extremist views on the industrially produced artefact no longer are justified. The individually nonutilitarian handmade piece of work such as a hand thrown vase or a hand blown glass bowl are undoubtedly extremely beautiful and achieve a purity of form that can be unique to the crafts.

It must also be realised that in the realm of the kitchen\tabletop that these items are not the only artifacts that can offer us this beauty of form without the constraints of total function. It is possible for the industrial designer to explore form and materials for the sake of creating visually appealing objects that will give individual pleasure. It is possible for the designer to create these objects, without the ever present market pressures. It is possible for designers to work in much the







design process as those in crafts, with the same creative freedom and yet still have it mass produced. Indeed it is possible for people from various different discipline to work in the same way. This has been achieved by Alessi.







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