



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARIO DONDERO/GALLERIA MASSIMO MININI, BRESCIA

etti was also working with the young Italian architect Ettore Sottsass, who collaborated with Roberto Olivetti and the engineer Mario Tchou on a series of innovations, including the E1a 9003, Italy's first mainframe computer.

Sadly, Adriano Olivetti died in 1960, followed by Tchou a year later. Roberto sustained the company's cultural activities, notably by inviting some of the young artists and designers in the kinetic art movement, like those in Gruppo T and the Padua-based Gruppo N, to participate in workshops on the then-nascent concept of programming. Struck by the parallels between their work and Olivetti's research into computing, Roberto Olivetti agreed to support Munari's 1962 exhibition and to host it in the Milan showroom.

The exhibition toured around the world for three years, but by the end, the company was so stricken by debt, management problems and competition from Japanese imports that it had been forced to sell its once dazzling electronics division to General Electric. Yet its design legacy has lived on in other companies, starting with I.B.M., where Watson and Noyes forged long and productive collaborations with gifted designers, including Charles and Ray Eames, and Paul Rand. There are still echoes of Olivetti's design strategy today, notably in the way that Vitra, the Swiss furniture group, has embedded architectural patronage within its corporate culture, as well as in the design and architecture buffs who flock to the exquisitely restored Scarpa showroom in Venice and Museo del Novecento's tribute to Bruno Munari's kinetic art exhibition.

ONLINE: ALICE RAWSTHORN ON DESIGN

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The Italian photographer Mario Dondero documented the opening of "Programmed Art" at Olivetti's Milan showroom in 1962. Above, Enzo Mari, left, outside the opening of the exhibition, which showcased the early 1960s kinetic art movement. Near left, Mari with artists from Gruppo T. Far left, another scene from the exhibition. Olivetti's sponsorship of the exhibition was a sign of his commitment to pushing the frontiers of design.

mid-1950s, he visited Olivetti's New York showroom on Fifth Avenue and was so impressed by the space and its contents that he flew to Italy to see its corporate headquarters. Determined to instill Olivetti's commitment to design quality and modern sensibility in I.B.M., Watson hired a former MoMA design curator, Eliot Noyes, as I.B.M.'s equivalent of Nizzoli.

For its part, the Olivetti company became even more adventurous in its approach to design throughout the 1950s, encouraged by Adriano Olivetti's son, Roberto, who shared his father's passion for both design and technology. By the end of the decade, the company had constructed a beautiful showroom on Piazza San Marco in Venice, designed by a local architect, Carlo Scarpa, and invited the Modernist graduate Le Corbusier to produce a design proposal for an electronics factory near Milan. Olivetti was also influencing the way other businesses were run. When Thomas J. Watson Jr. was preparing to succeed his father as chief executive of I.B.M. in the



Not only did MoMA devote an exhibition to Olivetti's design coups in 1952, it acquired several of its products for its permanent collection. By then, Olivetti had trained in other disciplines, like the architect Marcello Nizzoli, who became Olivetti's chief design consultant in the late 1930s, their approach to design tended to be intuitive, ingenious and strong on lateral thinking.

Italy's postwar economic revival. Central to its success was its enlightened patronage of contemporary design and art, and the inesse with which they were integrated into its commercial interests. Olivetti's contribution to the design culture of postwar Italy is now being celebrated in another exhibition, "Programmare l'arte: Olivetti and the new kinetic avant garde" at Museo del Novecento in Milan. Running through March 3, the new show presents some of the works from a 1962 exhibition of kinetic art and design, which experiments with light and movement, presented at the Olivetti showroom on the opposite side of Piazza del Duomo in Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. It also traces the preparations for the 1962 exhibition in the correspondence of one of its cocurators, the influential Italian designer and design theorist Bruno Munari.

Museo del Novecento has created an engaging and intriguing exhibition that evokes the intellectual dynamism and the playful spirit of the young Italian designers and artists who were at the forefront of the early 1960s kinetic art movement, and Olivetti's interest in them. Munari's exchanges with the participants were jovial and friendly, and photographs of the 1962 opening, taken by Mario Dondero, show the designer Enzo Mari gooning around Olivetti's showroom with friends from Gruppo T, the experimental art group.

Using one of its most conspicuous commercial buildings to exhibit the work of a radical, yet obscure, cultural movement, like kinetic art and design, would have seemed distinctly odd for most bastions of the Italian corporate establishment, but not Olivetti. Founded in 1908 by Camillo Olivetti as a typewriter manufacturer in Ivrea, a

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Culture

Olivetti's artful breakthroughs

MILAN

The Italian company pushed beyond standard industrial thinking of era

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Any Italian visitors who ventured into the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the autumn of 1952 would have discovered something surprisingly familiar: one of the gigantic tubular metal structures that usually flanked Italy's motorways advertising the typewriters, calculators and other office machines made by Olivetti.

The billboard was part of an exhibition to toast Olivetti's design achievements. At the time, the company was hailed as a role model of intelligent, imaginative employees.

As well as commissioning gifted illustrators and graphic designers to produce posters, brochures and advertising campaigns, Olivetti worked with talented architects, including Luigi Figini and Gino Pollino, who designed an elegant factory in the Modernist style at Ivrea with social housing for its employees.

But the most radical aspect of Olivetti's those fields in his corporate role. He would have discovered something surprising in the autumn of 1952: Art in New York in the autumn of 1952. Any Italian visitors who ventured into the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the autumn of 1952 would have discovered something surprisingly familiar: one of the gigantic tubular metal structures that usually flanked Italy's motorways advertising the typewriters, calculators and other office machines made by Olivetti.

