

# Obituary: Bruno Munari

By Anne Hanley

In *The Independent*, Friday, 2 October 1998

ON THE fly-leaf of the catalogue to one of his last exhibitions, Bruno Munari described himself as an "inventor artist writer designer architect illustrator player-with-children". The list is not exhaustive.

This founding father of Italian design also dabbled in photography, lectured at Harvard, explored the artistic potential of light, and wrote over 70 books of fiction and non-fiction, including the only multi-lingual guide to Italian hand gestures.

A child-like fascination with the world around him fuelled Munari's unceasing activity over more than 70 productive years. "You must always have something to look forward to, because, if you have something in the pipeline, you stay young," he told *Telema* magazine in 1995. "If your life revolves around memories, you just get old."

According to the art critic Gillo Dorfles, a co-founder with Munari of the MAC (Movimento per l'Arte Concreta), though he lived to the age of 90 Munari never allowed himself to fall into that trap. "Right to the end, he remained the wonder-child of Italian painting and design. Right to the end - either because he was the last heir of the Futurists, or because of his vivacity, his openness, the alacrity with which he developed new forms and methods - he was a true child," Dorfles said in an interview with *Corriere della Sera*.

It was an impetuous juvenile desire to expand his artistic horizons which prompted the 18-year-old Munari to flee the hotel his Milanese parents ran in the Veneto region and place himself under the wing of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leader of the Futurist movement, in Milan. The relationship was short-lived. By the mid-Twenties the young artist had struck out on his own, to begin what was to be a lifelong exploration of the overlap between art, craft, science and technology.

Munari's *Useless Machines* - a kinetic homage to Dadaism in the shape of suspended structures of geometrical solids in constant motion - propelled him into the limelight when he exhibited them in Milan in 1932. They got the art world debating which had come first, the *Machines* or Alexander Caldwell's *Mobiles*. The comparisons failed to interest Munari, who was busy pushing ahead with his own wider fields of research.

In 1948, Munari, Dorfles, Atanasio Soldati and Gianni Monet formed the MAC movement "to develop abstract painting and sculpture, with no links whatsoever to the outside world". Within MAC, Munari continued his Convex-Concave sculptures and experimented with "Negative-Positive" works, "in which colour moves in the optical space between canvas and the viewer, the background becomes form and the form background," the artist explained in 1950. Two years later he was extracting pure colour from light with polarising shapes, projecting constantly moving tapestries.

In 1958 he allowed his famous sense of humour to take the upper hand, turning to *Talking Forks* - sinuous, beckoning variations on the eating implement, distorted into sign language - and creating "travel sculptures", tiny but exquisite objects to be packed along with a change of clothes and underwear and placed on hotel bedside tables to inject a personal note into impersonal surroundings.

But it was not only artistic experiments which went on within the MAC school: in those formative years between 1948 and 1958, Munari's talents were pounced upon by Italian industry, for which he produced many of the objects which were to become most immediately recognisable as "il design italiano".

The Pigomma company produced a much-loved toy monkey to Munari's design in 1954. His simple melamine cube ashtray (1957) for Danesi remained a best-seller for decades, his espresso machines and televisions became classics. His metal and fabric light which folded

from a fully extended height of 1.5 metres to a space of just three square centimetres was considered a breakthrough. His graphic designs turned the covers of books published by the Italian company Einaudi into works of art in their own right.

Long after the MAC movement disbanded, Munari continued exploring aesthetics and function in such works as the Abitacolo (1971), a module which could be transformed into a bed, shelves, or a children's play place. In 1991, at the age of 87, he came up with his last design classic, the Shinfu Kuse, a metal room-dividing screen complete with bookshelves and storage space.

Though the art world may now remember him for his immense contribution to the modern aesthetic outlook, Munari did not always find it easy to convince demanding critics of his credentials. "He said to me once, rather bitterly, 'It hasn't always been easy for me to make people take me seriously'," recalled Dorflès. "I play with children. And, in a society such as ours, anyone who plays or works with children runs the risk of being thought eccentric."

It was this very "eccentricity", however, which earned Munari, more than any other contemporary artist, a very particular place in the hearts of everyday Italians.

Munari wrote and illustrated his first children's story book at the end of the Thirties, following it up with Russian doll-like books-within-books for his son Alberto in 1945, with titles such as Little Red / Green / Yellow / Blue / White Ridinghood, which have become modern classics of Italian children's literature.

But he was also deeply committed to sharing with children his child-like approach to the world and the creativity which sprang from it. He invented what he called musical pseudo-instruments for exploring the nature of sound. He introduced the first hands-on workshops in Italian museums which even today are sadly devoid of activities for children. He developed sense-enhancing experiments with textures. And he brought all his considerable experience to bear in numerous "childhood laboratories" set up after the end of the Seventies.

"Munari was like that," recalled Dorflès. "He was a born entertainer. He was one big living toy."

Bruno Munari, inventor, designer, artist and writer: born Milan 24 October 1907; married (one son); died Milan 29 September 1998.