

*“A Peter Pan with the calibre of a Leonardo”* by Pierre Restany

That air of eternal childhood, never lost in the 90 years of his existence, was both the secret and the innermost identity of Bruno Munari. Born on 24 October 1907 in Milan, where he died on 29 September 1998, he was the Leonardo and the Peter Pan of Italian design. By which my intention is to emphasize the span of his expressive crossover – and that, I think, is how Munari himself would have understood it: a titanic genius who expressed himself with the lightness of a will o’the wisp. The cover of this issue of *Domus* highlights this spirit of inventive richness.

An incessant seeker in fact, he explored and dabbled in everything, from drawing to painting and sculpture, to architecture, books, photography and the cinema, and to the processes of photo-mechanical reproduction. He experimented with everything, and always with inspiration. In the course of his multimedia explorations he came up with surprising and original solutions, by allying strict analysis with simple imagination. Creativity was for him an asset common to humankind; he didn't have to wait for Joseph Beuys to proclaim a self-evident truth. I remember him in 1968, after reading my *Red Book of Revolution in Painting*, in which I had developed the idea that society secretes an “art for all”, saying: “What could be more normal, art is everybody's, or rather, by everybody”. You just have to find it, at the right moment. Munari's life and oeuvre are studded with happy coincidences. When a major retrospective of his work was held at the Palazzo Reale in Milan in 1986, Munari referred to himself as “Quello di” or “Quello delle” (“the man who did...”): the useless machines of 1930, the negative/positive paintings of 1950; the polarised light of 1952; the fountains and playing waters of 1954; the talking forks of 1958; the original xerographs of 1964. Negative/positive; original/multiple; gratuitous/functional: it was on the “infra-thin” space of those conceptual antinomies that Munari's creative imagination spread its wings widest. His answers to those contradictions bore the seal of the most striking simplicity, from his travel sculptures to the famous cubic-section ashtray. To use a favourite expression among designers, Munari will have been the century's greatest producer of timeless objects.

He was just 18 years old when he joined the second Futurism movement, in Milan; and by 1927 he was already exhibiting with Prampolini, Depero and Dottori. In 1932 he took up the photographic researches launched by Man Ray with his Rayogrammes. An admirer of the Bauhaus and of the simplicity of Kandinsky's formal geometry, he participated after the war, in 1948, in the foundation, with Soldati, Dorfles and Monnet, of MAC (Movement for Concrete Art) – the Italian version of the Parisian prewar Cercle et Carré. As an inspired autodidact, he took part in the great period of active reflection on design in the 1950's, free from all compromise. Gio Ponti admired him for the elegant distance which he had succeeded in keeping from the “Civiltà del fatturato” (the “turnover civilisation”). And it was thus, in the late 50s and early 60s, that his most famous timeless objects came onto the scene: the cubic ashtray (1957) and lamp (1958), the Lampada di maglia (1964) and the Abitacolo (1971), the structure that could be converted into a bed, table and children's game.

Munari used to say that “Art belongs to all”. He was extremely active in the world of communications, too, through his object-books, or “Prelibri”; and his books on design (*Rose in insalata*, 1973; *La scoperta del quadrato*, 1978). he was even more active as a teacher, and he taught in various prominent universities, including Harvard. But it was above all to children that he devoted the best of himself. He even went so far as to invent musical instruments for them, and structures to be folded and assembled, to help them understand the nature of sounds and forms. His work at the Brera Academy, too, was to leave a lasting trace in the field of children's teaching, as did all his “workshops” in Italy and abroad. On a lecture tour in Venezuela two years ago, I had occasion to see for myself just how alive had remained, in Caracas and in Ciudad Bolivar; the impact of his teaching and of his children's performances done there in the early 1980s. Munari loved children for themselves, and also for himself. He would readily declare that all through his life he had always wanted to retain the spirit of childhood. For that was the most natural means of preserving his own curiosity to find out, and the pleasure of understanding, the urge to communicate. This Peter Pan with wingspan of a Leonardo has left us, in addition to his elegance and lightness, a most masterly lesson in humanism. At the height of cultural globalization, he succeeded, as he did all through his lifetime, in reconciling the spirit of geometry with the spirit of finesse.