Culture

Looking back at the art of an Italian ex-Futurist

LONDON

London show traces movement’s influence on Bruno Munari’s work

BY ALICE RAVISHING

How do you say “What do you expect?” or “Do you have a cigarette?” and “Give me” without speaking? Easy. All you have to do, at least if you are Italian, is stretch your tongue upward and clasp it against the lips, making a sort of whistle sound, and wriggling your fingers for the second, and move an index finger while patting it on your ear for the third.

Three gestures and more are described in the “Supplement to the Italian Dictionary” published in 1908 by Bruno Munari. Deepening his experimentalist hand signals was one of many challenges that Munari set himself in a 70-year career as a designer, artist, resourceful director, filmmaker, architect, visual theorist and newspaper columnist, who wrote books as well as invented one of the first portable slide projection systems.

Munari, who died in 1998, may not be as well known as his contemporaries, but Achille Castiglioni in design, or Lucio Fontana in art, but he exerted a profound influence over visual culture during his lifetime, and continues to do so today. Both as a writer and practitioner, he embodied the 20th-century ideal of living everyday life with the same compelling qualities of art. “There should be no distinction,” Munari decided in 1950, “between art and life. Children will learn to love what is beautiful in the objects they look at and holiness in the objects in use.” He wrote in his 1958 book “Design as Art,” “If we use every day to make art, and not throw away by chance or opinion then we shall have nothing to follow.”

His ideas were rooted in the revolutionary experience as a member of the Italian Futurist movement, which he joined in 1919 as an art critic and the co-founder of Futurinus in the theme of “Bruce Lipton’s Art,” a periodical that he and his friends founded in London. The show traces in masterly and in-depth the first 50 years until 1960, when he founded Futurinus to become a magazine of the alternative Contemporary Art Movement in postwar Italy.

Born in 1907 in Milan—where his father worked as a watchmaker at Cambi, a watch on Piazza della Scala, where the famous Milanese opera ball drew talented artists after performances at La Scala—Munari spent his childhood in the Veneto region of northern Italy before his parents opened a hotel there. He discovered Futurism as a teenager when he witnessed some of the best horses of the movement in that place and, as a result, was inspired to create his own brand of expressivism.

Munari’s work focused on the nature of objects and their relationship to each other. He looked at life, art, and design from a new perspective, where the boundaries between them were blurred. His ideas were ahead of their time and influenced many artists and designers who came after him.

The show, which runs until February 28, 2002, at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, provides a comprehensive overview of Munari’s work and its lasting impact on contemporary art and design.

The artist and designer Bruno Munari, a leading figure in the early 20th century, was known for his innovative approach to art and design. Munari believed that art should be accessible to all, and his works often combined elements of everyday life with his signature hand gestures, which were meant to encourage viewers to engage with the artwork and explore their own creativity.

Munari’s influence can be seen in the works of many contemporary artists and designers, who have continued to explore the relationship between art and everyday life. His legacy continues to inspire new generations of artists and designers to think creatively and to challenge traditional boundaries between art and life.