

ART & ANTIQUES JUNE 2009



Design: Wonder Child

By: Jonathon Keats

06/01/2009

"Suddenly, without any kind of warning, I found myself completely naked, in the heart of the city of Milan, on the morning of Oct. 24, 1907." With this astonishment began the fantastic life of Bruno Munari, an artist and designer whose every moment was imbued with the wonder of a child emerging from the womb. Picasso called him "the new Leonardo," an apt testament to Munari's multiple talents as a painter and sculptor, engineer and inventor, architect and illustrator and writer of some 70 books in his 90 years of life. Yet Picasso's tribute also spoke to the playful curiosity of a man who conceived a lizard-driven engine for tired tortoises, who composed poetry combining the glyphs of meteorologists and railroad tramps and who perceived that, as good a designer as he might become, he'd never engineer a product as perfect as an orange.

None of this was a natural outgrowth of Munari's upbringing. Shortly after his birth his parents moved from cosmopolitan Milan to a village on the river Adige, where they opened a small hotel. As soon as young Munari could walk, he was put to work receiving guests. One was a traveling salesman, who startled the provincial adolescent by sporting a kerchief instead of an ordinary necktie and, even more peculiarly, by chatting about Futurism, a movement already 16 years old in Milan and Rome (its centenary is being celebrated this year with a variety of exhibitions in Italy and around the world) yet decidedly radical to a boy whose whole experience of art was his mother's embroidery and his own homespun drawings. At the age of 18 Munari returned to his birth city.

That his playfulness survived Futurism is even more remarkable than the fact that his creativity survived his petit-bourgeois upbringing. Famously humorless, the Futurists solemnly stood behind the Italian poet F.T. Marinetti's founding manifesto, which held war to be "the only hygiene of the world" and proclaimed, "no work lacking an aggressive character can be considered a masterpiece." Munari seems simply to have ignored the toxic politics—no mean feat given that Marinetti ran for national office on a ticket with Mussolini in 1919—and concerned himself with depicting standard Futurist motifs (technology and speed) while absorbing new Futurist techniques (such as the use of the airbrush). His work ensured him a place in the Milan Futurist exhibitions beginning in 1927, as well as in the Futurist pavilions of the Venice Biennale. It also got his name in self-important publications such as the 1930 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Aeroplastics*.

Yet Munari's lack of nationalistic fervor, and perhaps his youth compared to Marinetti and painters such as Giacomo Balla, allowed him to absorb other influences. Specifically, he was alert to the Bauhaus and the abstraction of Piet Mondrian. The former, in particular Paul Klee's investigations of nature, revealed to Munari an aesthetic limitation of Futurism: "Working as the Futurists did meant using static techniques to show dynamic things," he later recalled. At the Bauhaus Klee had shown the difference between drawing the contour of a leaf and drawing its lines of growth, urging that the course of botanical development motivate the pencil's movement. This was the opposite of the Futurist application of formulae appropriated from Cubism as a sort of mannerist exercise in the depiction of motion.

Mondrian, on the other hand, awakened Munari to the essentially illustrative role of painting in Futurism. Pure abstraction provided an escape. Munari's startling idea was to make abstraction dynamic. To accomplish that, he cut sheets of cardboard into simple geometric shapes, painted each side a solid color and suspended them with thread from the ceiling in balanced arrangements. As he later explained, his impetus was "to free these forms from the static nature of a picture and to hang them up in the air, attached to each other in such a way as to live with us in our own surroundings, sensitive to the atmosphere of real life, to the air we breathe." Producing the first examples in 1934, he provocatively called his inventions "Useless Machines."

Munari had already obliquely made fun of the Futurist fixation on technology in imaginary gadgets such as his lizard-driven engine for tired tortoises, one of 13 Rube Goldberg-inspired parodies ultimately published in the 1942 children's book *Munari's Machines*. The Useless Machines were not, he later insisted, an extension of this game, and he complained quite bitterly about these works being taken less than seriously by his colleagues, who condescendingly displayed them in their children's bedrooms.

He was further disconcerted by the coincidence that Alexander Calder independently conceived his mobiles at the time, and that the mobiles came to be seen as prototypes for Munari's machines. They were not. And while there were similarities in the two men's interests, the divergent directions their careers took shows vast differences in their purposes. For Calder, the mobile presented a primal aesthetic solution. For Munari, the Useless Machine presented a battery of new aesthetic problems.

On one level, the Useless Machines specifically addressed Futurism, not only in terms of the movement's false dynamism but also in terms of its mechanical fetishism. Munari's constructions were machines in the basic sense that a lever is a machine, yet were also not machines in that they performed no work. They pointed to a core contradiction in Futurism, which exalted technology as an end in its own right rather than as an aid to humans. The Useless Machines wryly reflected Futurism's sterile futility and gently critiqued the mindless embrace of technology by the larger society.

On another, deeper level, the Useless Machines embodied a positive move by

Munari, more apparent when viewed in tandem with another project begun the following year. Again he worked in geometric abstraction, though this time on a conventional picture plane. At a glance one would think he'd retrenched. But the title he gave these works, which are painted all the way to the edge of the board, tells a different story. They're called *The Frame Too*. In other words, nothing offsets them from their surroundings. Like the Useless Machines, unpedestaled sculptures sensitive to the air we breathe, these paintings are worldly things. In the 1930s, working in the rarefied realm of pure abstraction, Munari sought decisively to bridge the divide between art and life.

It didn't happen. Several years later, the world was immersed in war, and Munari, excused from the battlefield on account of his health, was assigned to art direct a Fascist newspaper, a job he did with quiet indifference until peace was declared.

In most respects Munari was unchanged. He remained playful and curious, and he was convinced that those two qualities, so important to a life worth living, could be communicated through art. He maintained that art could fulfill that role only by being integrated into life, that there should not be "a false world in which to live materially and an ideal world in which to take refuge morally." What shifted in the 1940s, and even more in the '50s, was his approach. He no longer sought to turn art out into the world, but rather to turn the world into art. The designer, he declared, "is the artist of today, not because he is a genius but because he works in such a way as to reestablish contact between art and the public."

While Munari made many designs in the conventional sense - most famously the Campari logo - his concept of design, still widely influential, was far from conventional. Munari sought to make design dynamic like nature, which is why he set such stock in the orange, or the tree leaf. "A leaf is beautiful not because it is stylish but because it is natural, created in its exact form by its exact function," he explained. "A designer tries to make an object as naturally as a tree puts forth a leaf." In at least several cases, Munari succeeded. For instance, in the '50s he made lamps with a bare minimum of materials and labor: several feet of knit hose, stretched open with half a dozen steel hoops of various widths, hung from a ceiling-mounted light socket. The simple action of gravity on those everyday wares gave them their sinuous shape, and the light within cast complex shadows on the walls, making the lamps at once sculptural and graphic.

Art that was useful and could be afforded by almost anyone, Munari's lamps could enter into life more seamlessly than a set of painted cardboard squares suspended from strings. Munari's early interest in abstraction had been operational: He made abstract art in order to make art less pictorial, less exclusively artistic. It was an action against frame and pedestal, no longer relevant in the realm of product design. Was Munari's lamp abstract? Is a leaf abstract? "An exact project produces a beautiful object," he wrote in his classic 1966 book *Design as Art*, "because it is only like itself."

Munari won a Golden Compass, the highest design award in Italy, in 1954 and again in 1957. Yet even in his success, he seemed to have recognized a flaw in his system. For years he'd been collecting the best-designed objects he could find -

bottles and padlocks and fishing nets and coffee pots - all by unknown inventors. He rightly surmised that the design quality had to do with the maker's anonymity. Lacking the self-consciousness of authorship, the unknown artisan works as purposefully as nature. But the corollary was that the society in which these items were made didn't sufficiently appreciate their design, or the inventor would be remembered. In other words, good design, which by definition didn't call attention to itself, could not serve the purpose that Munari saw in art, which was to jolt people from their complacency, inspiring curiosity and playfulness. "Culture," he claimed, "is freedom."

Increasingly, in the '60s, he attempted to address this problem by making "programmed art," mechanical works inexpensively available as multiples. For example, there was one work with four multicolored cones turning at different speeds inside a box. "Their aim is to propagate even simple notions of optics, chromatic perception, phenomena of accumulation," he wrote. They were educational toys—dull and didactic.

However, Munari was incapable of being tedious. His interests and talents were too varied to keep him focused on a single project. As he aged and saw his programmed multiples fail in the marketplace, he devoted himself more and more to direct interaction with children, who he believed were less conditioned than adults and could evade the entrenched complacency of their parents. His art became interactive. He realized that the transformative power of art or design was not in the appreciation but in the making. He didn't teach, exactly. Rather, he opened up his creative process for all to experience. Instead of striving to make "art for everyone," as he phrased it, Munari sought to inspire "everyone's art."

One day in 1969 Munari climbed a tower in Como with dozens of children in tow, and together they dropped hundreds of sheets of paper, variously cut and folded, watching them fall. He called the piece *Showing the Air*, and as they witnessed currents made visible, imperceptible moments before, his face flashed the naked wonder first seen on Oct. 24, 1907.