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Italian Designer Enrico Marone Cinzano Creates Furniture With A Conscience

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Armadillo console made from hand-brushed steel, recovered glass, recovered wheels and cork gaskets (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)

Talk about shock tactics. The Lost Art black leather jacket by New York City-based Jordan Betten that Enrico Marone Cinzano is wearing says it all: just because it looks toxic and unethical doesn't mean it really is – it is in fact handmade out of recycled leather hides. In the same way, Marone Cinzano is challenging preconceived notions of what ethical furniture should look like. “I think it's important to start the conversation: I want people to get angry, to be happy and to be engaged emotionally in what I do because it helps me further the message of sustainability,” says the self-taught Italian designer. His calling card is aggressive, imposing, utilitarian and complex pieces that won't leave one indifferent. At the same time, they aim to advance the cause of sustainability in a modern and visually-pleasing way, as he believes that products can be made better, more efficiently and with less waste, making way for objects that are useful, durable and timeless.

Keeping in mind today's homeowners, who prioritize quality and aesthetics, but also value performance and sustainability, he designs collections where all parameters have been carefully thought through. Therefore, you'll often find him scavenging junkyards for unexpected treasures and combing factories to recover scraps, which he will then transform into sculptural furniture that blends art and function with the help of locally-sourced craftsmen, while adhering to his mantra of reuse, recover, recycle and repurpose. Handmade in Italy, the US, the UK and China to the highest ethical and quality standards that speak of longevity, his products use locally-sourced salvaged materials like wood, metal, glass and leather and new sustainable materials, as well as eco-friendly construction techniques.

“My work is about sustainability, which is a subject that is very relevant in today’s world, with incidents of environmentally-related cancers going up,” Marone Cinzano states. “We’re starting to really see, feel, smell and breathe the consequences. Also, from my spiritual development after having led a very unsustainable, fun and crazy life, I realized that I had to morph and be more respectful of all sentient beings. I think that luxury is about sustainability because you really want to only have what you paid for. You don’t want to buy water that has all sorts of other things in it; you just want water. So purity is part of sustainability and it’s part of luxury. I think that economic crises could have been avoided if people were sustainable, even financially. Sustainability is also a field where you meet really cool, interesting people.”

Marone Cinzano delights in coming up with surprising designs that don’t look the least bit sustainable, although they show a deep respect for people and the environment in reality. Straight from last April’s Milan Design Week, his brand-new Dondolo rocking chair appears to be anything but conventional, combining mechanization with a furniture classic. Reminding one of a dentist’s chair, it is built from stainless steel, recovered mahogany, recycled hand-embossed leather from the furniture industry and reused car parts like an original Alfa Romeo 166 leather seat that reclines and heats up powered by an eco-friendly gel-based battery. Via two periscopic arms, it has a swinging, retractable worktable lined with a radiation- and magnetic-shielding fabric and an efficient dimmable, warm-toned LED light housed in a vintage metal Fiat 500 headlight. Entirely sourced and made in Turin, the chair was inspired by his hometown’s industrial roots.

Recently launched, his locally-sourced and made Guiltless bedspread is composed of luxurious Astrakhan fur recycled from fur coats and cashmere woven from recycled yarn, for why should it be unethical to use animal products? Then there is the gigantic, heavyweight and expandable Armadillo console built from reclaimed glass and steel boasting 60 steel arms, 78 bolts and a dozen casters, which was influenced by the retractable toolsheds found in the industrial parks around Turin with their steel pantograph arms. Or a highly-engineered desk set featuring a blackened steel structure clad with discarded *pinus cembra* wood from the Alpine mountains in Piedmont, which appears suspended with only one point of contact with the ground.

As a designer, Marone Cinzano hopes to remind people that beautifully-crafted, luxurious furniture can be passed on from generation to generation. Nature is a guiding principle in his work, incorporating the closed-loop utilization of materials, biomimicry, naturally-occurring patterns like the Fibonacci Sequence and proportions dictated by the Golden Ratio. Although he never received a formal education in design, he was gifted with a strong visual memory and was raised in Italy’s architecturally-rich cities such as Florence, Rome and Turin, which gave him valuable training in the eye and allowed him to think outside the box without being restricted by rules. The shapes of his creations come about almost subconsciously; he has a vision of what the final product should look like, in contrast with how most designers work.

He divulges, “Sustainability is like going down a rabbit’s hole – it could go anywhere. I draw a lot from nature and from numerical sequences in nature. I look at natural, locally-sourced, locally-made, recycled, recyclable and chemical-free materials. I look at the second law of thermodynamics to make sure that I don’t add toxicity to the environment. Then I look at function and at the materials within the function. By the time I have assembled everything together, the product comes out, so to a certain extent, everything is a consequential process. The message is the most important thing. You can make products that are better, healthier and more economically, and they can still perform well and be luxurious and elegant, although I have to say that the esthetics are the last step. So possibly I approach design in a different way. For me, design is about content, and form comes last.”

Born in 1963 in Turin to a family of successful entrepreneurs – the Cinzano vermouth brand on his father’s side and the Fiat automobile company on his mother’s side – Marone Cinzano was instilled with a strong work ethic. “There is a spirit of entrepreneurship and of adventure, which has been very helpful,” he notes. “We’re workers and that is really an ethic that you can’t beat. Work and discipline have really been the backbone of what I’ve done.” After going to boarding school when he was nine, he then graduated from a military academy in the UK. Studying business administration at Babson College in Massachusetts, he has had careers in advertising, banking and real estate development. In 2000, he cofounded the sustainable fashion label Project Alabama using highly-skilled local artisans to manufacture clothes, showing that it was possible to mix commercial and green principles, before turning to industrial design to spread his message of sustainability and ethics.

Discovering that a large part of the world’s carbon emissions came from buildings and that people spent most of their time indoors, he decided to help create healthy spaces devoid of toxicity through the medium of thoughtful design. Thus, he established his eponymous label, Enrico Marone Cinzano, which focuses on designing ethical and sustainable products and homes. In 2012, he launched his first line of furniture, a self-initiated collection comprising an armoire, bookcase, couch, armchair, table and lazy Susan, all one-offs, which was inspired by nature and again showed off the work of local craftsmen and natural or environmentally-friendly materials like black walnut reclaimed from discarded fragments found in Turin, recycled steel and homemade glue.

He discloses, “It’s very dry. I was being incredibly conservative, coming from a very austere moment of my life, and I didn’t want to go out on a limb on my first collection. I was also a little bit insecure: was I doing this right, does it look beautiful? So I played it safe.” Nonetheless, it was immediately snapped up by Rossana Orlandi when she finally granted him an audience a year after he had first contacted her office. Boasting an impeccable eye for spotting new talent, the design doyenne continues to represent him at her gallery in Milan today. Ranging in price from US\$15,000 to \$100,000, his works are also sold by Pearl Lam Galleries and online at Pamono.com, a specialty design website.

After having solely produced hand-crafted creations in the past, Marone Cinzano has designed his first-ever machine-made pieces for contemporary Chinese furniture brand Stellar Works. Focusing on reducing transportation and packaging costs, Cinzano conceived the Flat Pack chair and table in stainless steel and recycled beech wood and leather, with the chair available in nine color options. Adopting functional flat-pack codes without compromising on the design, he tried to promote sustainability by designing with quality and ethics. Shipped flat-packed for a reduced carbon footprint, this is furniture you can take home with you in a box and transform into a few minutes into a chair or table. He remarks, “I was incredibly surprised by the depth of Asian art over the course of millennia. The colors that you see in Asia can be exquisite, especially the more tenuous colors, really unbelievable the pinks, blues and greens. Craftsmanship like embroidery or lacquer-making can be absolutely elegant. It’s a big source of inspiration. Specifically in China, among young people, there is a form of China cool, which is really interesting: clean lines, unfussiness, practicality, a complete lack of connection with Western dressing. It reminds me a bit of hip-hop culture where you’ll see maybe a rapper wearing a bowtie on a hat. There’s something that would be considered irreverence in the West but that’s totally refreshing. There is a lot to learn.”

In the pipeline are three real estate projects built to be sustainable and that include innovative technologies for removing electro-toxicity and radiofrequency radiation, which are scheduled to be completed at the end of the year: a highly-sustainable house constructed on top of a building in New York; a nature-driven estate in Tuscany that proposes beautiful views and is one of the last properties that has access to a completely private beach; and a micro-apartment in London that is all about purity, using only recycled materials for the furniture and joinery. Made of natural materials, the sleeping area has complete audio-visual privacy, free from electromagnetic fields. The use of light is paramount: UV light for sterilization and for cleaning certain parts of the apartment, LED light for the day and incandescent light at night because LEDs disrupt melatonin production. Off-the-shelf technology monitors air quality and optimizes the space to make the user experience more agreeable, while a very advanced water-cooled air-conditioning system cools without exhaust or noise.

With no fixed studio, splitting his time between New York, London and Tuscany, and traveling 270 days out of the year, Marone Cinzano claims he hasn't had a holiday in nine years and checks in to hotels for the convenience even in places where he has homes. He can't complain though, being very happy for the opportunities. Addicted to work and never short of ideas, he is considering launching into fine art using natural pigments and recycled materials, but in the meantime he has set his sights on another interesting exercise: going over his old designs, refining them, and developing them from one-offs to being potentially machine-made. "It's a challenge to take something that you make, simplify it and make it for a machine," he says. In his vision of the future, sustainability will be synonymous with quality and, once production becomes more sustainable, consumption and materialism will no longer be viewed negatively. While we are a long way off from that reality, joy may be found today in the process and not just the outcome, as Marone Cinzano keeps the faith in the possibilities that most dare not imagine.

China Clean

For his first solo show held at Pearl Lam Galleries last March during Art Basel Hong Kong, Marone Cinzano launched a limited series of collectible furniture combining eco-design and artistry. Designed and made in China, the six functional sculptures hand-built through sustainable methods celebrate the country and its traditions in a modern way, exploring its role as a leading industrial economy mass-producing the world's goods yet boasting a rich heritage in craftsmanship and strong links with the natural world. With the help of Chinese artist Danful Yang of Pearl Lam Design, Marone Cinzano spent more than half a year visiting crafts workshops in Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Jingdezhen, Xiamen, Dehua, Guilin, Suzhou, Baoying, Hebei and Quanzhou to study ancient Chinese techniques, source recovered materials collected directly from site visits and locally-produced industrial materials, and work with local artisans. He recalls, "I came to China nine times. We must have gone to 30, maybe even 40 places. I examined the processes vertically, so if I was looking at the making of porcelain, I would look all the way from how they mine the stone, grind it, sift it and mix it with water to how they shape it, bake it and sell it. And the same thing for lacquer and silk."

In the process, he discovered a different side to China he never knew existed before, while contributing to cultural dialogue between the East and West and stretching the limits of traditional Chinese art and craft techniques. The Double Happiness cabinet and Qing chair made from recycled elm wood beams crafted by carpenters in Shanghai, assembled using traditional Chinese joinery and finished with beeswax and natural lacquer feature Western iconography of hand-carved skulls or sailor tattoos. The 350-kg Fibonacci table in stainless steel, petrified wood and tempered glass draws inspiration from Italian mathematician Fibonacci whose sequence of numbers is often found in nature, while the one-off Fibonacci coffee table in a single block of recovered African wood treated with beeswax with a natural lacquer finish appears simple yet is very complicated thanks to a hidden internal construction based on traditional Chinese joinery. The Geode console could be mistaken for a massive rock in hand-forged stainless steel. All the pieces were made in different workshops in Shanghai, except for the petrified wood legs of the Fibonacci table, which were produced in Quanzhou.



Dondolo rocking chair in stainless steel made of recycled car parts, recycled leather and recovered mahogany, and powered by a rechargeable gel battery (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)



Dining table featuring a blackened steel structure clad in Pinus Cembra treated with linseed oil (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)



Italian designer Enrico Marone Cinzano (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)



*Stellar Works Flat Pack chair in stainless steel and recycled beech wood and leather, available in nine color options
(Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)*



*Double Happiness cabinet made out of hand-carved recycled elm wood, beeswax with natural lacquer finish,
traditional Chinese joinery and eco-friendly certified glue (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)*



One-off Fibonacci coffee table in African wood (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)



Armchair in Pinus Cembra, Cor-Ten steel, recycled glass, Isinglas and goose down-filled natural hemp slipcover (Photo courtesy of Enrico Marone Cinzano)