

For immediate release

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Revisits Revolutionary Italian Design through the Landmark Collection of Dennis Freedman; First U.S. Museum Exhibition in Nearly 50 Years to Survey this Pivotal Movement in Design History

Radical: Italian Design debuts at the MFAH in February 2020 and tours to Yale University's School of Architecture in fall 2021

Through Freedman's gifts to the MFAH, and the acquisition of key objects from his collection, the MFAH has established foundational holdings of these now-iconic objects

Houston—In February 2020, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will examine Italy's postwar explosion of disruptive design in the exhibition *Radical: Italian Design 1965–1985, The Dennis Freedman Collection*. Nearly 50 years after MoMA's defining 1972 survey, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, this is the first major U.S. museum exhibition to assess this now-iconic movement from a historical perspective. The exhibition presents nearly 70 pieces of furniture, lighting design, architectural models, paintings, and objects; of these, about half are gifts of Dennis Freedman and half are acquisitions from his collection; in addition, Freedman has lent more than a dozen objects to the exhibition. Together, the gifts and acquisitions establish a foundational collection for the Museum. Rare prototypes, one-of-a-kind, and limited edition works by architects, designers, and collectives such as Archizoom Associati, Lapo Binazzi, Ugo La Pietra, Alessandro Mendini, Gianni Pettena, Ettore Sottsass, Studio Alchimia, Superstudio and others will be on view. In the words of critic Germano Celant—a contributor to the exhibition catalogue—these designers aimed to “disrupt the significance of thing's use” and create “practically perverse and senseless” objects in pursuit of a new language and new role for modern design.



Alessandro Mendini,
Monumentino da Casa, 1974.



Lapo Binazzi, UFO, “MGM” Table
Lamp, designed 1969, made c. 1975.

Radical: Italian Design will be on view in the Museum's Cullinan Hall **February 14 through April 26, 2020**. After the exhibition's debut in Houston, the exhibition will travel to the Yale Architecture Gallery at the Yale School of Architecture in fall 2021.

“Radical Design was a movement instigated by university students, who sparked critical dialogues about art, design, and society. This is an extraordinary

opportunity for our institution to share this unrivaled collection with this next generation of architects and designers. We are grateful to Dennis Freedman for making this possible, through his gifts to the MFAH and the acquisition of key objects from his collection,” said Gary Tinterow, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

“I am delighted that *Radical: Italian Design* will be coming to the Yale School of Architecture. The work in the Freedman Collection has distinct and important ties to the architecture of its era that is still of great interest to students and scholars,” said Deborah Berke, dean of the Yale School of Architecture. “Given the significant furniture collection at the Yale University Art Gallery, we also see a great opportunity for our students to make connections more broadly with the history of furniture design and its relations to interiors and buildings,”

Cindi Strauss, Sara and Bill Morgan Curator of Decorative Arts, Craft, and Design at the MFAH, also commented, “*Radical: Italian Design* presents a major opportunity to examine this important movement in design history. Dennis Freedman has collected rare pieces that provide an in-depth view into the period, its design, and its key figures; he is one of very few collectors to focus on Radical Italian design in the United States.”

Historical background and exhibition overview

Inspired by turbulent global events, young architects aspired to develop solutions to issues of urbanism rather than contribute to the “system,” unleashing an era of radicalization that would alter the course of avant-garde architectural thought and design in Italy. The resulting Radical design movement included architects, artists, and designers from the major Italian metropolitan areas. Emerging largely from the universities, the movement’s young protagonists developed ideologies shaped by specific research concerns relating to modes of living and urban life, social issues, and the environment, as well as a shared desire to effect significant change in response to consumerism.

Coined by Germano Celant, the term “Radical” described a specific strain of practice featuring conceptual, often one-of-a-kind, handmade art and design objects that abandoned practicality and defied consumerism. Influenced by Arte Povera, Pop art, Minimalism, and Conceptual art, imaginative designs explored form, color, and material that initiated critical dialogue about urbanism, social issues, and the environment. Though rooted in architecture and design, these projects often took the form of drawings and photomontages, happenings and performances, theoretical environments and object designs.

Three cities in Italy became the epicenters of the movement’s development. In Florence, architecture students from the University of Florence questioned the nature of design. Collectives Archizoom Associati, Superstudio, UFO, and architect Gianni Petti



Urano Palma, *Armchair*,
from the *Diapositive*
Series, c.1970–74.

others, ignited the Radical design movement in the city by developing its visual language and philosophy. The 1966 “Superarchitettura” show, held in nearby Pistoia and considered the first Radical exhibition, featured furniture and lighting by Archizoom and Superstudio in a completely designed environment. Superstudio displayed the *Passiflora Lamp* (1966–67), an abstracted flower form fabricated from the new plastic material and designed specifically for the exhibition. During the same period, Florentine architects Lapo Binazzi and UFO married conceptual art with performance, as well as produced lamps with symbolic imagery. The mountaintop ceramic base of the *Paramount Table Lamp* (1969) and the gold, curled aluminum of the *MGM Table Lamp* (1969) resemble iconic emblems of Hollywood’s Paramount Pictures and MGM Studios—beacons of the “American Dream” that UFO believed to be unattainable.

In Turin, designers and collectives were politically engaged, but perhaps best known for their material exploration of plastics. Artist and designer Piero Gilardi was instrumental in developing a polyurethane skin for molded foam furniture for the atelier Gufram. Gilardi’s *Sassi* seating (1968) took the form of a rock, highlighting his interest of the natural world. Studio65, on the other hand, employed Pop Art-inflected iconography in its *Capitello* (1971) chair—a large scale classical Greek column that was a direct critique of high culture and class divisions.

Milan was the center of media activity as the headquarters to leading design journals *Domus*, *Casabella*, *Modo*, and *In*. Architect-editors, including Alessandro Mendini, Ugo La Pietra, and Franco Raggi were essential resources for radicals to disseminate their philosophy and new vocabulary of anti-design. They also served as vital connections between architects, designers, and contemporary artists of the period—forging relationships between Radical design and Arte Povera, Pop Art, and Minimalism. Works such as Urano Palma’s *Armchair* (1970–74) and Ugo Marano’s *San Picasso Chair* (1978) exemplify the link to Arte Povera through their woodworm-enhanced hole pattern.

The Radical design movement also informed the work of visionaries outside these cities of activity, including Riccardo Dalisi and Gaetano Pesce. Based in Naples, Dalisi’s work entailed research and projects within the city’s poor communities. His *Wooden Throne* (1979)—one of two produced—is made from humble materials and inspires dreams. Pesce, who was based in Padua at the time, experimented with materials and form—notably in his 1969 *UP* series. The *UP7 Piede* chair—a monumental foot, as if remaindered from a classical sculpture—is an inventive fusion of art and design that draws connections between humanity and society. Both men, as well as the major collectives, architects, designers, and thinkers of the movement, later participated in *Global Tools*—a counter-school operating from 1974 to 1976, which aimed to transform society’s issues through workshops and manifesti.

Radical: Italian Design exhibition will feature the work of the following designers and collectives: Alessandro Guerriero, Alessandro Mendini, Andrea Branzi, Angelo Cortesi, Archizoom Associati, Bruno Contenotte, Claudio Salocchi, Dario Bartolini, Donato D’Urbino, Ettore Sottsass, Fabio De Sanctis, Fabio Lenci, Fabrizio Cocchia, Franco Raggi, Fulvio Ferrari, Gae Aulenti, Gaetano Missaglia, Gaetano Pesce, Gianfranco Fini, Gianni Colombo, Gianni

Pettena, Gianni Villa, Gigi Capriolo, Giorgio Ceretti, Guido Ceretti, Jonathan De Pas, Lapo Binazzi, Livio Castiglioni, Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitzky), Marco Zanini, Mario Bellini, Marion Baruch, Piero Gilardi, Riccardo Dalisi, Rinaldo Cutini, Studio A.R.D.I.T.I., Studio Tretarch, Studio65, Superstudio, Ugo La Pietra, Ugo Marano, and Urano Palma.

Publication

The catalogue, *Radical*, features interviews with seven of the movement's influential figures—Andrea Branzi, Alessandro Guerriero, Alessandro Mendini, Franco and Naná Audrito of Studio65, Franco Raggi, Lapo Binazzi of UFO, and Ugo La Pietra; an interview with collector Dennis Freedman; and essays by Germano Celant and MFAH curator Cindi Strauss. Co-published by the Museum and Yale University Press, the publication will be available in February 2020.

About the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Established in 1900, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is among the 10 largest art museums in the United States, with an encyclopedic collection of nearly 70,000 works dating from antiquity to the present. The Museum's photography collection of more than 30,000 works spanning the history of the medium is internationally renowned. The main campus comprises the Audrey Jones Beck Building, designed by Rafael Moneo and opened in 2000; the Caroline Wiess Law Building, originally designed by William Ward Watkin, with extensions by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe completed in 1958 and 1974; the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, designed by Isamu Noguchi and opened in 1986; the Glassell School of Art, designed by Steven Holl Architects and opened in 2018; and The Brown Foundation, Inc. Plaza, designed by Deborah Nevins & Associates, Inc., and opened in 2018. Additional spaces include a repertory cinema, two libraries, public archives, and facilities for conservation and storage. Nearby, two house museums—Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, and Rienzi—present American and European decorative arts. The MFAH is also home to the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA), a leading research institute for 20th-century Latin American and Latino art. mfah.org

Organization and Funding

Radical: Italian Design 1965 – 1985, The Dennis Freedman Collection is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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Illustrations

1. Alessandro Mendini, *Monumentino da Casa*, 1974, wood and Formica, the Dennis Freedman Collection. © 1974 Estate of Alessandro Mendini
2. Lapo Binazzi, UFO, *"MGM" Table Lamp*, designed 1969, made c. 1975, aluminum, enamel, and bulb, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Dennis Freedman Collection, Museum

purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund. © 1969 Lapo Binazzi (UFO)

3. Urano Palma, *Armchair*, from the *Diapositive* series, c. 1970–74, wood, possibly silk, and foam, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Dennis Freedman Collection, Museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund.