From the Embroidery to the Construction. Women in Design and Architecture: "Domus" 1928-1950

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MoMoWo · 100 Works in 100 Years
European Women in Architecture and Design · 1918-2018

Edited by Ana María FERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA, Caterina FRANCHINI, Emilia GARDA, Helena SERAŽIN

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English language editing by Marta Correas Celorio, Alberto Fernández Costales, Elizabeth Smith Grimes

Design and layout by Andrea Furlan ZRC SAZU, Žiga Okorn

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**Curator**
Ana María Fernández García

**Assistant curator**
Esther Rodríguez Ortiz

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Thematic Essays
Women’s presence in architecture and design has been ignored for a very long time. However, thanks to specialised magazines, their visibility in the public eye began to advance, albeit with great difficulty, during the first half of the twentieth century and social conventions induced it to change only slowly immediately after the second post-war period.

Founded by architect Gio Ponti in January 1928, the Domus magazine provided updated information on the ‘living culture’ at an international level. A close examination of articles published in 253 issues from the magazine’s foundation up to 1950 gives us a significant overview of how women’s design culture was recognised.

Since its first issues, Domus has been attracted to women artisans’ activities although always less so than their male colleagues. On the other hand, women architects’ works did not get sufficient space reflecting the magazine editor’s conviction that embroidery “ [...] is the natural work of woman, it should be the only work for a woman, it is work which does not take her away from her home and does not distance her from cradle or hearth. [...] A woman who embroiders is close to Our Lady”.¹

According to Ponti, women’s creative contribution, which was not negligible for the national economy, should have been focused on specific artisanal activities. Therefore, from the end of the 1920s to the Second World War, creative women found in Domus’ issues a place to show their talents in artisan products such as embroidery, textiles, glassware and ceramic ware. Their artistic and professional sensitivity experimented with shapes and materials suitable to modernity, and their works were able to stimulate the crucial transition from crafts to design.

Textile accessories were conceived almost entirely without decorations in order to make them appropriate for the Modern Style simplified furniture, as Ponti’s wife, Giulia Vimercati, outlined in one of her articles.² For this purpose, new drawings for embroidery were created for Aemilia Ars (in Cernobbio) when it was revived under the leadership of Countess Carla Visconti of Modrone Erba (1880–1939).³

New geometric decorative motifs appeared on Italian textiles. In 1930, Emma Robutti designed very modern textiles using recurring and modular graphic patterns.⁴ They were created for curtains, but they were also offered to the automobile industry as ‘Voltaire’s’ for covering car seats.⁵

Emilia Rosselli (1905–58)⁶—later known as the founder of the Novità periodical that would become Vogue Italia in 1966—wrote articles about innovative fabrics for interior design.⁷ She pointed out the functionality of the ‘Voile of Rhodia’ which, being waterproof, was not too subject to the accumulation of dust and therefore, suitable to be used for ‘hygienic’ curtains.⁸

Anita Pittoni (1901–82) from Trieste created refined textiles which had remarkable international success using new autarkic Italian materials such as hemp, Snia short-fiber flock, Lanital, yarn of inoxidable metal.⁹

Since the early 1930s, Domus drew readers’ attention to the profitable partnerships among artisans, artists and designers abroad. The experience of the Wiener Werkstätte was taken as an example to be replicated in Italy. In that context, patterns for laces and textiles by Maria Likarz (1893–1971) and Mathilde Flögl (1893–1950) were appreciated for their plain lines and essential geometry which appeared very refined and modern.¹⁰ New Swedish embroideries and fabrics were presented by Emilia Rosselli...
highlighting the modernity of artisanal works for interior design by Astrid Sampe (1909–2002). (Fig. 1)

In the field of glass design of the prestigious Viennese Lobmeyr, Ena Rottenberg (1893–1962), Valerie (Vally) Wieselthier (1895–1945) and Marianne Rath (1904–85) distinguished themselves on Domus for the design of new functional and elegant artefacts. (Fig. 1)

Women in ceramics design were the most represented in the magazine which, from the late 1930s to the 1950s, focused mainly on Scandinavian production with the exception of the Parisian atelier Primavera of the Printemps department store. For this atelier, designer Colette Gueden (1905–2000) created everyday tableware with a squared and unusual geometry reflecting her Indochinese style. They were exhibited at the VI Triennale di Milano (1936) and at the exhibition of decorative arts in Paris. (Fig. 1)

As pointed out by Åke Stavenow’s article, a collaboration between industry and artists/designers in Sweden turned out successfully and Swedish ceramic was able to conquer the European market thanks to its excellent value for money. Couple Anna–Lisa Thomson (1905–52) and Sven Erik Skawonius (1908–81) designed some terracotta items with stylised flower patterns for the company Upsala–Ekeby. Another couple, Ingrid (1905–82) and Erik Triller (1898–1972) was specialised in stoneware inspired by Chinese and Danish ceramics, while sisters Lisbet (1909–61) and Gocken Jobs (1914–95) created ceramic items in authentic Swedish style. (Fig. 1)

Among Swedish women artists and designers Tyra Lundgren (1897–1979) was the most internationally famous and the most cited by Domus due to Gio Ponti’s admiration. She designed for Arabia and Sèvres, and after having travelled throughout Europe testing new techniques and materials, she returned to Sweden after the outbreak of war and worked for Gustavsvärg. She applied her skills in Wien, Paris and in Paolo Venini’s workshop in Murano. (Fig. 1)

Tyra Lundgren’s artistic expression had a strong influence not only in Sweden but all over Europe. She also wrote an article for Domus about the Swedish designer and entrepreneur Estrid Ericson (1894–1981) who had used pewter for her items before working on furniture and interior design founding the renowned shop Svenskt Tenn (Swedish pewter) in Stockholm. (Fig. 1)

Like Tyra Lundgren, Estrid Ericson had also collaborated with the Modernist Austrian/Swedish architect Joseph Frank (1861–1941), since 1935. She created an original style of interior design that took the name of her shop. In 1950, Gio Ponti wrote an extensive article to support Svenskt Tenn’s participation at the coming IX Triennale di Milano. In preparation for this important international event, the magazine highlighted the Finnish contemporary production of lamps such as those designed by Lisa Johansson-Pape (1907–89) and crystal ware by Helena Tynell (1918–). (Fig. 1)

In 1950, Domus was looking at Swedish mass production of functional, plain and low-cost furniture able to combine tradition and modernity. The great commercial success of Scandinavian furniture design was also due to the publication of articles such as the one by Swedish interior designer Lena Rabenius Larsson (1919–2000), which thoroughly analyzed the design of home furniture produced by Nordiska Kompaniet (NK) recognizing them as the epitome of practicality to be emulated. (Fig. 1)

Practicality in the home has been the main topic of women columnists since the first issues of Domus. Between the late 1920s and early 1930s, technological progress came into the home and the magazine promptly started reporting on it: gas cookers, electric fans instead of range hoods, electric machines for laundry, kitchen robots and others useful electrical appliances. Rational furnishing solutions for domestic interiors became necessary for
the development of modern living.

Architect Elena Campi was the first woman to publish her projects for functional interior design by providing examples of wall-cupboards, tip-up tables and seats, walled bookcases with embedded steps and fitted furniture. She suggested removing visible cupboards and bulky or useless furniture from small apartments, stating that modern furniture should be easily movable.\(^23\)

Campi focused her projects on the most functional spaces in the house: the kitchen, bathroom and the French office situated between the kitchen and the dining room.\(^24\) She stated that a kitchen is functional if small, bright and decorated in light colours and she suggested the use of easy to clean materials such as white tiles, enamel paints and linoleum for both kitchen and bathroom.\(^25\)

*Domus* columnist Mery Fontana dedicated two articles to the modern kitchens.\(^26\) Women were the first to study the kitchen analytically using the rationalist method. They were the first to apply Taylorist ideas to reach solutions for saving time and energy in preparing food, cooking and house cleaning. They used new materials which were best suited due to their practicality, resistance and hygiene: steel, aluminium, nickel-plated and polished materials, and new ones such as xylonite.

Following the works by American pioneers — Catharine Beecher (1800–78) and Christine Frederick (1883–1970) — Europe finally reached the ‘L-shaped’ kitchen designed by German architect Erna Meyer and the famous ‘U-shaped’ *Frankfurter Küche* designed by Margarete Schütte Lihotzky (1897–2000). The later was celebrated on *Domus* by two renowned architects and furniture designers, Ignazio Gardella (1905–99) and Marco Zanuso (1916–2001). Gardella considered it suitable to satisfy functionality as well as the look of a modern kitchen, while Zanuso showed each of its advantages.\(^27\)

Going back to women architects’ contributions to *Domus*, in addition to Elena Campi, another woman architect regularly published her articles in the magazine between September 1930 and June 1938. Landscape architect Maria Teresa Parpagliolo (1903–74) wrote more than thirty articles about all kinds of gardens and plants but only in one of these did she present her garden projects.\(^28\) There were, in fact, very few women architects’ works published in *Domus*.

In 1929, architect Emilio Lancia published an article about *Villa Orsetta*, near Florence, designed by the Swedish artist Anna Akerdahl Balsamo Stella (1879–1957) with the help of Lancia. Anna Akerdahl planned her house as an ancient Tuscan villa with a modern style.\(^29\)

Another project focused on a modernist interpretation of ancient architecture typology is a house overlooking the sea in Sicily designed by architects Lina Bo (1914–92) and Carlo Pagani,\(^30\) subsequently deputy editors of the magazine.\(^31\) Like a Roman *domus*, this modern villa was designed around a patio and surrounded by a Mediterranean garden in order to embody the *genius loci* and to become an integral part of the landscape.

The concern about landscape was crucial in the project for the Rapallo seaside promenade (fig. 2) designed by young architects Giovanna Pericoli (1924–74) and Alberto Mazzoni, and engineer Pippo Pestalozza. This is a unique case of urban renewal which saw the involvement of a woman professional.\(^32\)

By promoting modern architecture, *Domus* narrated the cultural and historical changes. The magazine’s international stance let the public know about some of the women’s works abroad.

The plain and rational small house built in 1940 in Asmara by
Elena Fondra Asti can be regarded as the singular event of women’s involvement in the modernisation of Eritrea fostered by the Fascist regime (fig. 3). Elena Fondra also conceived the interior design for this house based on white surfaces—white linoleum on the floor and white lime on the walls—while the furniture was in pastel colours, recalling the interiors she had designed for the Viceroy of Ethiopia and the Governor of Addis Abeba, already known to Domus readers. These works were then harshly criticised in Carlo Enrico Rava’s article.

From the end of the Second World War, the magazine started to publish works by USA women architects. A small village on the upland of the Brown Mountains in Tennesse was planned by architects Jane West (1907-2003) and Alfred Clauass (1906–98) and commissioned by some families who wanted to build as a cooperative in 1946.

A Californian wooden house was entirely built and furnished for herself by Swedish/American designer and architect Greta Magnusson Grossman (1906–99) and published in Domus in 1950. Greta Magnusson was already a renowned furniture designer in Europe and one of the few women professionals to gain prominence during the mid-twentieth-century architectural scene in Los Angeles. Her furniture was largely published in later Domus issues.

While the USA was building country-houses, Italy was dealing with the reconstruction and housing shortage. Italian women architects contributed with their projects to the so-called “Piano Fanfani”, approved in 1949, and managed by Gestione INA–Casa. This was an ambitious public programme to build low-cost houses and it was also aimed at revitalising the Italian economy after the war.

Gio Ponti, once again editor of Domus, published two projects for terraced houses. Architect Vittoria Maria Calzolari’s project suggested the use of Mediterranean barrel vaults and a number of open-air ovens to give a rural appearance, while architect Zita Alt Mazza published her project for a two-family house with loggias, built in natural stone.

Thanks to women designers’ participation in several exhibitions since the second, post-war period, women working in the field of furniture and interior design have gained more visibility on Domus. The seats designed by architects Lucia Ponti Bonicalzi and Emma Pasquinelli Peressutti with textiles by Fede Cheti (1905–78) were appreciated for their plain, flexible and ergonomic design. In 1936, Fede Cheti founded her textile firm in Milan and advertised it in Domus. She provided the home textiles for the experimental prefabricated residential district known as “T8” built for the VIII Triennale di Milano in 1947.

Magazine editor, architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, dedicated an issue to the sections of this historical Triennale, the first after the war, as well as a number of works designed by women, such as: a metal desk and a chair by Luisa Castiglioni (1922–2016), a bent wooden armchair by Anna Ferrieri Castelli (1920–2006) and a
sectional kitchen designed by the same architect in collaboration with Ettore Gentili.\textsuperscript{42} In a section dedicated to objects, the magazine published fabrics designed by Fede Cheti, Vanna Chiaretta, a dish set by Lyda Levi for Ugania and a tea set by the Austrian designer Helénè Fisher.\textsuperscript{43}

In the following years, coloured perspectives for some adaptable solutions of interior design were published by architect and later professor at the Polytechnic of Milan Liliana Grassi (1923-85),\textsuperscript{44} (\textit{fig. 4}) and architect Vincenza Espositi from Genova.\textsuperscript{45}

The magazine continued publishing furnishings with functional and unconventional shapes with abstract motifs such as those designed by Ada Bursi (1909-96),\textsuperscript{46} and multifunctional furniture such as the “bar-radio-desk” by Luisa Aiani (1914-90) and her husband Ico Parisi (1916-96).\textsuperscript{47}

Curiosity lies in an article about two married architects Eugenia Alberti and Gian Luigi Reggio, who opened the doors of their studio to \textit{Domus} showing their twin armchairs as a symbol of their professional equality.\textsuperscript{48}

The specialised magazine increasingly continued to disclose its international point of view. It reported on the Japanese experience of Charlotte Perriand (1903-99).\textsuperscript{49} The eminent designer, who worked with Le Corbusier, took part in the cultural avant-garde in Paris and worked in Japan from 1940 to 1946. She studied the techniques and traditional materials—bamboo, wood, lacquer and ceramic—belonging to Japanese handicraft. Even on her return to Paris, where she had furnished a very small, practical and comfortable attic-flat for herself,\textsuperscript{50} she maintained a close bond with the East and designed new furniture which could be mass produced in Japan using their traditional materials but improved on by western Modern Movement experience.\textsuperscript{50} The bamboo fiber seats linked to metal tubes and bent plywood were an example of this.

\textit{Fig. 4}

Articles published in specialised magazines—and \textit{Domus} is an exceptional representative—are an essential source for identifying women designers and their works as well as for studying their reception.
See Caterina Franchini, “From the Embroidery to the Construction.”

3 See “Alcuni nuovi disegni per i cuscini,” Domus 16 (1929), 33-48. Ponti’s wife collaborated with Domus since its first issue.

5 See Emma Robutti was editor of the magazines Fili (Domus’ publications) between the 1940s and 1950s.

6 Emilia Rosselli Kuster was editor of the Fili periodical before Emma Robutti.


8 This textile took its name from its producer, the Rhodioatoce S.P.A. that became renowned for nylon 6,6 production. See Emilia Rosselli, “Tende e drappaggi,” Domus 94 (1935), 38.

9 Julia Bertolotti called Anita Pittoni an “artist-artisan” who was able to translate her invention into substance. See Julia Bertolotti, “I nuovi tessuti di Anita Pittoni,” Domus 124 (1938), 42. The curtain “La Danza” designed and embroidered by Pittoni had already been published in 1932, see “Tende moderne e Ricami: L’Arte nella Casa,” Domus 49 (1932), 44. In 1942 the magazine dedicated a long article to Anita Pittoni’s exhibition at the Permanente di Milano. See R., “La mostra di Anita Pittoni,” Domus 173 (1942), 203-7.


14 See Elsa Robiola, “Ceramiche di Colette Gueden,” Domus 125 (1938), 44-45. Colette Gueden’s works inspired other women designers working in the atelier, such as Thérèse Mallenhauer and Marcelle Thiènot. See D.T., “Una poetessa della casa,” Domus 87 (1935), 24-25.


17 See “Tyra Lundgreen a Murano,” Domus 145 (1940), 32-35. A Trya Lundgren’s work was also published in “Svezia, forme astratte,” Domus 230 (1948), 50.


28 See Maria Teresa Parpagliolo, “Due progetti di giardini di Maria Teresa Parpagliolo,” Domus 57 (1932), 558-59.


30 Lina Bo collaborated with Gio Ponti before she moved to Brazil in 1946 with her husband Pietro Maria Bardi. She was the author of an article about interior design published by Domus. See Lina Bo, “Sistemazione degli interni,” Domus 198 (1944), 199-209.

31 See Lina Bo and Carlo Pagani, “Casa sul mare di Sicilia,” Domus 152 (1940), 30-35. In 1944 (March-December when the magazine stopped publishing for a year) Lina Bo and Carlo Pagani became deputy editors when the magazine’s editor was architect Melchiorre Bega.

32 This urban plan was regarded as suitable both the circulation by increasing demand and the requirements of coastal
tourism without being academic or traditionalist. See Gio Ponti, "Buone notizie da Rapallo," Domus 236 (1949), 4-7.

33 See "Una casetta all'Asmara," Domus 146 (1940), 42-43.


35 See Carlo Enrico Rava, "Per la casa e la vita in colonia," Domus 158 (1941), 63.

36 See "Un villaggio in cooperativa," Domus 210 (1946), 4-8.


39 See "Due espositrici: Arch. Lucia Ponti Bonicalzi: Arch. Emma Peressutti Pasquinelli," Domus 212 (1946), 12. This furniture was produced by Fratelli Cassina (Meda) and by Brenna e Cazzini (Milan) and exhibited in the Palazzo dell’Arte dalla Rima in 1946.


41 Replacing Melchiorre Bega, Ernesto Nathan Rogers become the editor when the magazine was relaunched in 1946 after its ceasing in 1945.


47 See “Mobili semplici e mobili complessi,” Domus 238 (1949), 43. A table with ‘X-shaped’ legs by Luisa and Ico Parisi was published in 1948. See “Il sostegno a X,” Domus 226 (1948), 64. The Parisi were the authors of an exhibition set design published in the magazine. See “Centenario del giornalismo,” Domus 231 (1948), 10.


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