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Colours of the Sea and Design: The Upholstery of Riva Motorboats between Visual Identity and Luxury

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the chromatic and material evolution of the interiors of the Aquarama motorboat, an iconic model produced by the Italian shipyard Riva between 1962 and 1996. Positioned at the intersection of visual culture, design, and brand identity, the study investigates the strategic role of colour in shaping an aesthetic and symbolic imaginary aligned with both Mediterranean and international notions of luxury. Grounded in a theoretical reflection on colour as a cultural code and communicative device, the research explores the main formal and chromatic transformations of the upholstery, steering wheels, and waterline of the Aquarama and its variants (Super, Special).

Through a comparative analysis of archival sources, technical documentation, and firsthand accounts from restoration professionals, the study highlights how Riva's chromatic choices — including distinctive aquamarine, lobster, and cream hues — emerged from a careful synthesis of international influences (notably American automotive and aeronautical design of the 1950s and 1960s) and a refined design vision shaped by Carlo Riva and architect Giorgio Barilani. Materials such as Naugahyde and Italvipla vinyl coverings further contributed to defining the product's identity, not only in aesthetic terms but also in its sensory and symbolic dimensions.

The closing section of the paper focuses on the perceptual and communicative impact of the Riva colour palette, demonstrating how colour operates as a distinctive sign capable of activating mechanisms of brand recognition, desirability, and affiliation. The Aquarama thus emerges as an exemplary case of iconic construction through design—an object in which every element, from upholstery configurations to colour choices, contributes to the articulation of a coherent, refined, and recognizable visual language. In this sense, colour is affirmed not merely as a decorative attribute, but as a privileged key to understanding Riva's identity.

KEYWORDS Visual Identity, Nautical Design, Color Semiotics, Riva Aquarama, Material Culture, Luxury Aesthetics, Mid-20th Century Style

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1. Introduction

Colour is not merely a visual sensation nor simply an attribute of objects: it is an idea, a cultural code, a collective projection. Certain hues become inseparable from the objects that "wear" them, to the extent that imagining those objects in any other shade becomes almost impossible. Chromatic imaginaries are constructed in this way—either through spontaneous association or strategic intention. When a colour resonates with the public's taste, it enters the visual heritage of an era and ultimately comes to represent it. It is no longer one choice among many, but a signature, a symbol. In this sense, colours do not necessarily possess a univocal meaning; rather, they perform a function: they inhabit the imagination, convey identity, and often become brands in their own right (Falcinelli, 2017, pp. 8, 12, 265–267).

"The experience of colour is a matter of culture," emphasizes Swedish designer and artist Olafur Eliasson, adding: "Just as the senses and perception are linked to memory and identification, our relationship with colour is closely tied to our cultural habitat" (Fontana, 2007, p. 87). This cultural embeddedness of colour is evident in design history as early as 1907, with the introduction of Henry Ford's first and now-legendary automobile: the Ford Model T. A singular model, it was a basic yet efficient product rooted in an aesthetic that had little to do with abstract notions of beauty. Rather, it embodied the satisfaction of using an industrial product that was affordable and suited to individual needs.

Although the Model T may at first glance appear spartan, it did not compromise on technical quality: from steel to vanadium frames, to an ultra-simplified mechanical system that allowed for minimal and accessible maintenance. But above all, the vehicle's most iconic feature was its colour: black—giving rise to Henry Ford's famous remark, "The Model T can be any colour, so long as it is black!"

The model remained in production until 1927, when it was gradually overshadowed by competitors offering increasingly refined, comfortable, and colourful vehicles—such as the Volkswagen Beetle, whose bright, vibrant red became emblematic of the 1936 American market.

Red, in parallel, was also spreading throughout 1930s Italy—or at least in its more urbanised regions, such as Milan—thanks to a beverage that, since 1932, has been known as the most iconic "aperitif without a label": Campari Soda by Davide Campari. The son of Gaspare, the famed inventor of the Holland-style Bitter (a blend of aromatic and medicinal herbs, roots, and fruits that combined the properties of an aperitif and a digestive), Davide's ruby-red beverage was immediately recognisable at a glance. This vivid colour and the liquid it represented were further enhanced by artist Fortunato Depero, who created the now-legendary conical bottle—patented by the company in 1932—that has preserved its timeless appeal ever since. The bottle and its colour became inseparable, their combined imagery rooted in a chromatic imaginary constructed, once again, through spontaneous association or strategic design.

As Alessandro Mendini once remarked in an interview with Stefano Casciani about his own work: "It often happens that my objects are not monochrome but bichrome, trichrome, or polychrome," and he clarified, "More than the colour itself, I'm interested in the linguistic outcome—entrusting it to the relationship between colours, to their juxtaposition… to the idea of colour as language, as alphabet" (Mendini, 1996).

In design, chromatic identity often precedes the perception of form or function (Branzi, 2010), becoming a fundamental element of visual communication. It is within this semiotic system that the present contribution situates itself, by analysing the chromatic and material evolution of the interiors of one of the most iconic objects in the history of design: the Aquarama speedboat, designed by Carlo Riva for the Riva boatyards in Sarnico (BG) in 1962.

2. The Context

Between the late 1940s and the 1970s, Riva — a renowned Italian company specializing in the construction of luxury boats and now part of the Ferretti Group — developed a highly recognizable visual language in which colour played a strategic role in shaping the brand's identity. In particular, the use of hues such as aquamarine and orange — in dialogue with the wooden tones of mahogany and metallic detailing — contributed to transforming Riva's speedboats into true icons of Mediterranean and international lifestyle, capable of evoking the aesthetic trends of the *Dolce Vita* era. These colours, drawn from contemporary design and fashion aesthetics, were reinterpreted by the shipyard to evoke values of elegance and prestige, turning every chromatic detail into an integral part of a visual and symbolic experience.

A design line becomes "classic" when it succeeds in becoming rooted in the aesthetic heritage of a brand, gradually acquiring iconic value. In the case of Riva's motorboats, the chromatic and material choices for the interiors — especially those applied to cushions and upholstery — were directly inspired by the American visual imaginary of the 1950s and 1960s. As stated by Carlo Riva himself in the volume edited by Frassi (2002), key sources of inspiration were the catalogues of American airplanes

and automobiles, which constantly populated the desk of the engineer and inventive mind behind the shipyard. Today part of his personal archive, these materials attest to his deep engagement with an international design culture, reinterpreted through a personal and visionary lens.

The allure of those images—steeped in modernity and technological optimism—found concrete expression in Riva boats also through the use of exclusive materials imported from the United States, such as the vinyl upholstery produced by Royal Naugahyde (Frassi, 2002). The design of the hulls and their colour schemes were thus far more than mere decoration; they constituted a sophisticated synthesis of aesthetic influences, innovative materials, and visual positioning strategies aligned with the codes of modern luxury.

3. Contrasting Chromatic Cultures in Industrial Design (1960–1990)

While in Riva yachts colour served a narrative and symbolic function—embodying prestige and elegance through the refined use of glossy mahogany, ivory leather, and metallic details—other sectors of industrial design during the same period developed their own distinctive approaches to colour and materials. In the automotive field, upholstery became a site of experimentation: technical fabrics, velvets, embossed vinyls, and geometric patterns were offered in vivid tones such as burnt orange, olive green, and deep brown, echoing the chromatic trends of contemporary furniture and fashion (Fiell & Fiell, 2013). Carlo Riva looked with particular interest to the American automotive world, drawing inspiration from Chrysler design and the broader Streamline aesthetic—a technological and optimistic imaginary that he deeply admired and reinterpreted for the nautical domain through sleek forms, premium materials, and bold colour combinations (De Fusco, 2002).

At the same time, Italian car manufacturers such as Fiat and Alfa Romeo embraced colour as a tool of personalization and emotional appeal, coordinating interior upholstery with metallic finishes. In stark contrast, the German company Braun, under the direction of Dieter Rams, adopted a minimalist chromatic philosophy: functional greys, blacks, and whites influenced by the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, where colour was considered an element of visual clarity and user coherence (Rams, 1998). These divergent approaches reveal how, between the 1960s and the 1980s, colour assumed markedly different aesthetic, communicative, and symbolic roles, reflecting specific industrial values and cultural contexts across design domains.

Beyond the automotive and nautical sectors, the Italian typewriter industry also developed a distinctive and identity-driven use of colour. Olivetti stands as a paradigmatic case: since the 1930s, the company employed colour as a tool for visual communication and cultural positioning. A pioneering example is the MP1 (*Modello Portatile 1*), introduced in 1932, mechanically designed by Riccardo Levi with a metal casing by Aldo and Adriano Magnelli. Initially released in four colour variants—glossy black, red, blue, and green—the MP1 anticipated a sensitivity to aesthetic variety in a sector previously dominated by functional orthodoxy (Torchio, 2011).

In the following decades, Olivetti would further develop this vision through iconic models such as the Studio 42 (1935), the *Lettera 22* (1950), and the celebrated *Valentine* (1969), designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry King. The latter marked a radical break from traditional chromatic sobriety, with a bright red ABS plastic body that emphasized portability and introduced an almost playful quality, consistent with the pop and anti-conformist aesthetics of its time (Branzi, 1988). Colour was no longer merely a finish; it became content, a symbolic value, and a sign of the democratization of design.

Olivetti thus used colour to make products more recognisable, personal, and closer to the end user. This approach can be interpreted as a form of industrial humanism, consistent with the corporate philosophy promoted by Adriano Olivetti, where beauty was seen as an integral part of function (Toschi, 2018). The Olivetti chromatic experience therefore stands as a relevant model in the discourse on colour in Italian design, capable of integrating technique, aesthetics, and corporate culture.

4. The Aquarama as an Object of Study: A Symbolic Icon of Its Era and Production

In 1950, Carlo Riva officially took over the family shipyard, bringing with him an innovative entrepreneurial vision and a deep passion for boating. In post-war Italy — animated by industrial rebirth and the myth of speed, embodied by racing cars, airplanes, and aerodynamic design — Riva interpreted the spirit of the time, transforming the Sarnico shipyard into a centre of excellence for the production of luxury motorboats.

Starting in the 1950s, Carlo Riva introduced a line of wooden boats that combined artisanal craftsmanship with a more rationalized production approach, increasingly focused on establishing a brand identity. A key moment in this transformation was his collaboration, beginning in 1956, with designer and architect Giorgio Barilani, who played a pivotal role in the development of Riva's

coordinated image and formal boat design. The synergy between the two led to the creation of what would become the brand's ultimate icon: the Aquarama.

Officially unveiled in 1962 at the third *Salone Internazionale della Nautica* in Milan, the Aquarama combined high technical performance with elegant design, earning comparisons to the most celebrated luxury automobiles, such as Ferrari and Rolls-Royce. Over the following decades, the model underwent several updates and upgrades: the first version, 8.02 meters long, was equipped with two Chris-Craft 8V engines producing 185 HP each. Later versions saw a gradual increase in both hull length—up to 8.75 meters in the 1971 Aquarama Special—and engine power, reaching up to 350 HP per engine and speeds of nearly 90 km/h.

Alongside these technical improvements, the design also evolved, always maintaining visual consistency with Riva's stylistic legacy. Barilani's redesign of the stern in 1971, which introduced a central walkway to facilitate access from the swim ladder, is an example of how form responded to functional needs without ever compromising aesthetic quality.

Produced in 765 units until 1996, the Aquarama became not only one of the most emblematic Riva models but also a true cultural icon, embodying values of elegance, power, style, and social status (Ferretti Group, 2022). It is precisely from this object that the article proposes a reading of colour and material choices as keys to understanding a consciously constructed visual identity.

5. Chromatic and Formal Evolution of the Aquarama: Upholstery, Steering Wheel, and Waterline

The Aquarama was introduced in 1962 with upholstery made from Resinflex vinyl—a synthetic leather developed by an Italian manufacturer starting in 1947—characterized by black edge bands and horizontally channelled cream-colored cushions, trimmed with coral-coloured piping. The seats consisted of two foldable elements. In the same period, the convertible top was also updated: no longer made from green makò cotton as in the previous Tritone model, it now featured a cream-colored fabric.

Starting in 1964, with Aquarama no. 27, Carlo Riva introduced a new type of American-imported vinyl, Naugahyde, which was softer and easier to clean. Although the upholstery pattern remained unchanged, the piping colour began to shift from coral to a more orange hue. The sun pad cushions were also produced in orange, still featuring a two-piece configuration.

Fig.1 Historic photograph of "Lipicar", Carlo Riva's personal Aquarama, featuring a distinctive upholstery in orange, black, and ivory. Courtesy of Archivio Storico Riva (Ferretti Group).

In 1967, the Aquarama's upholstery—along with that of the *Aquarama Lungo* version from 1971—was made from Italian vipla by the Italvipla brand. The design featured turquoise side bands, with cream-colored seating and backrest surfaces, vertical stitching, and channelled padding; piping was tone-on-tone. The seats received a formal update: the backrests became more enveloping, and the steering wheel's lower semicircle, previously orange, was replaced with a turquoise version. The sun pad was now arranged in three parts: two turquoise lateral cushions and one central ivory one, each divided into two foldable sections. The waterline was also revised: the original configuration of three stripes—white (2 cm), black (2 cm), and orange (3 cm)—was replaced with a new scheme composed of a 1.8 cm white stripe, a black one of equal height, and a 4.8 cm turquoise stripe.

The Aquarama Super model, introduced in 1963, initially followed the base model's colour scheme: vinyl with black side bands, vertical cream padding, and piping that was coral at first and later (from 1964) lobster orange (a darker shade of orange). The sun pad cushions were also orange. From 1967 onward, the upholstery reflected the updates introduced for the Aquarama but with one key difference: turquoise was replaced by a warmer tone—lobster orange—which also appeared in the waterline stripe and the steering wheel, now featuring a two-tone scheme of lobster orange and cream. From unit no. 359 onward, the

convertible top was made from white Dacron, replacing the previous cream cotton fabric. From that year—specifically from hull no. 174—the following colour schemes were standardized: cream and turquoise for the Aquarama, cream and lobster orange for the Super.

In the Aquarama Special, produced from 1971, the initial livery echoed that of the last series of the Aquarama Super: glossy transparent varnish, hull bottom painted white, and a 5 cm wide waterline stripe in either lobster orange or turquoise, depending on the chosen upholstery combination. Above this stripe was a 2 cm black line, followed by another 2 cm of white paint blending into the clear coat. From 1973, the waterline was simplified by removing the black stripe.

The initial upholstery of the Aquarama Special was available in two variants: the version with turquoise bands derived from the classic Aquarama and one with lobster orange bands already seen in the Super. In both options, seat surfaces were cream-colored, with vertical channelled padding. The lateral sun pad cushions were also either lobster orange or turquoise, while the central one remained cream.

In the final production series from 1990, the standard upholstery became turquoise and cream, a combination also adopted in the below-deck cabin interiors, where the cushions were striped in those two colours. However, in the last two years of production, the rigidity of the colour combinations was abandoned: some hulls intended for dealerships, where buyer preferences were unknown, were completed with monochromatic cream-colored upholstery (Gibellini, 2013; Assouline, 2022).

The information concerning the chromatic and material evolution of the Aquarama was reconstructed through a comparative analysis of various primary and secondary sources: the historical register compiled by architect Gibellini of the Riva Historical Society (2013), which catalogues and documents the technical and formal features of Riva boats; the volume *Riva Aquarama* (Assouline, 2022), produced in collaboration with the company; and archival documents provided by Riva itself, including folders and sales records that contain marginal notes detailing the colours and materials used. To complete the investigation, direct input was gathered from expert restorers and visits were conducted at *Riva Classiche*, the shipyard department responsible for the maintenance, restoration, and storage of historical boats.

6. Chromatic Symbols: Meanings and Associations in Riva's Visual Language

The use of colour in the upholstery of Riva motorboats is not solely driven by aesthetic or functional needs but actively contributes to the construction of a distinct and recognizable visual imaginary. The chosen colour palette—particularly lobster orange, aquamarine, and ivory/cream—activates a symbolic system that engages with the realms of luxury, distinction, and the material memory of the brand.

Fig. 2. Detail of the Aquarama's front seats, dashboard, and steering wheel featuring the signature aquamarine and ivory upholstery. Courtesy of Archivio Storico Riva (Ferretti Group).

The "lobster" shade of orange, a warm and saturated tone, conveys values of energy, vitality, and prestige. Orange is frequently associated with the timeless elegance of brands such as Hermès, where it assumes a distinctive and iconic status. The colour is widely recognized as a central element in brand personality definition, characterizing brands as creative, bold, and sophisticated (Wang et al., 2022).

Aquamarine, now emblematic of the Riva brand identity, stands out for its evocative power. With its fresh and

luminous tones, it evokes the marine world as well as a broader notion of exclusivity and refinement. It is no coincidence that this hue is often compared to "Tiffany Blue," which, according to numerous studies, influences perceptions of prestige and sophistication in the brands that adopt it. Research by Baxter, Ilicic, and Kulczynski (2018) demonstrates that iconic and recognizable colours, when integrated into a brand's visual language, function as cognitive cues that shape consumer judgment regarding brand personality. Aquamarine acts as a visual emblem capable of triggering recognition, affiliation, and desirability.

Cream, although a neutral tone, also plays a specific symbolic role. When used in contrast with brighter colours, it serves as a visual backdrop that enhances the overall elegance. Its consistent presence in Riva upholstery—from the earliest models to the most recent—testifies to a desire for visual continuity and reassuring classicism, aligned with the expressive codes of luxury.

Over time, these chromatic choices have contributed to shaping a coherent visual identity, in which each colour is not merely an aesthetic component but a communicative device. The Riva palette can be understood as a chromatic grammar that conveys values, tradition, and desire.

7. Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

8. Funding source declaration

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