

This image from the 1996 Alessi catalogue shows Mattia Di Rosa's bottle stops of 1994, called *Egidio, the little man has lost something*. This, and three other product types designed by Di Rosa, form a part of the 'Family Follows Fiction' range, as do the contributions of Stefano Giovannoni and Guido Venturini, working both separately and together as King-Kong. Biomorphism is particularly strong in 'Family Follows Fiction'.

This takes a straightforwardly anthropomorphic slant in the bottle stops shown

Grace Lees Balancing the object The reinvention of Alessi

The Italian household goods company Alessi is currently enjoying revived media coverage of its household goods. Currently celebrated, however, are Alessi products very different from those deemed iconic of the 1980s, such as Philippe Starck's 'Juicy Salif' lemon squeezer¹ and Michael Graves's 'Kettle with a Whistling Bird'.² Victims of their own success in expressing the aspirations and heightened design awareness of the 1980s, those products were rejected by the design cognoscenti at the turn of the decade. Alessi's recent 'Family Follows Fiction' range largely dispenses with the company's characteristic use of stainless steel and silver, instead using plastics.³ This places Alessi alongside companies such as Germany's Authentics and Denmark's Bodum in an interiors trend for colourful, 'designerly' pieces, and rides the wave of enthusiasm for plastics in the home.⁴ As we shall discover, Alessi's awareness of changing trends, evidenced through its continual theoretically charged published rhetoric, has enabled the company to remain fashionable in two stylistically and philosophically opposed decades, and to be championed by media sources as the epitome of both.

Although Alessi is most widely known for products developed in the 1980s, the company's move towards 'high design' has been gradual.⁵ Alessi was founded in 1921 in the Strona valley, north of Milan. The company began producing anonymous design, for example bed-springs, trays and other utilitarian household items. By the 1940s, Alessi's premier product was the 'Bombe' tea and coffee service designed by the company chairman, Carlo Alessi Anghini. Alessi has been, and to some extent still is, considered an ordinary brand in Italy, far removed from British perceptions of the company as chic and imbued with Italianicity.⁶ In the 1970s, Ettore Sottsass-designed cruet sets of humorously phallic shape were sold through Italian hardware stores and ironmongers with no indication of their design pedigree. Thus association with the reputation of a man feted at that time for his Valentine typewriter for Olivetti was not capitalised upon. That Sottsass is now accorded a biography in Alessi marketing material relates not only to his seminal position in the famous Memphis design



Programma 5 bar and tableware designed for Alessi by Ettore Sottsass from 1974. The objects are shown here in a Heal's display entitled 'Whatever happened to good design' in spring 1983

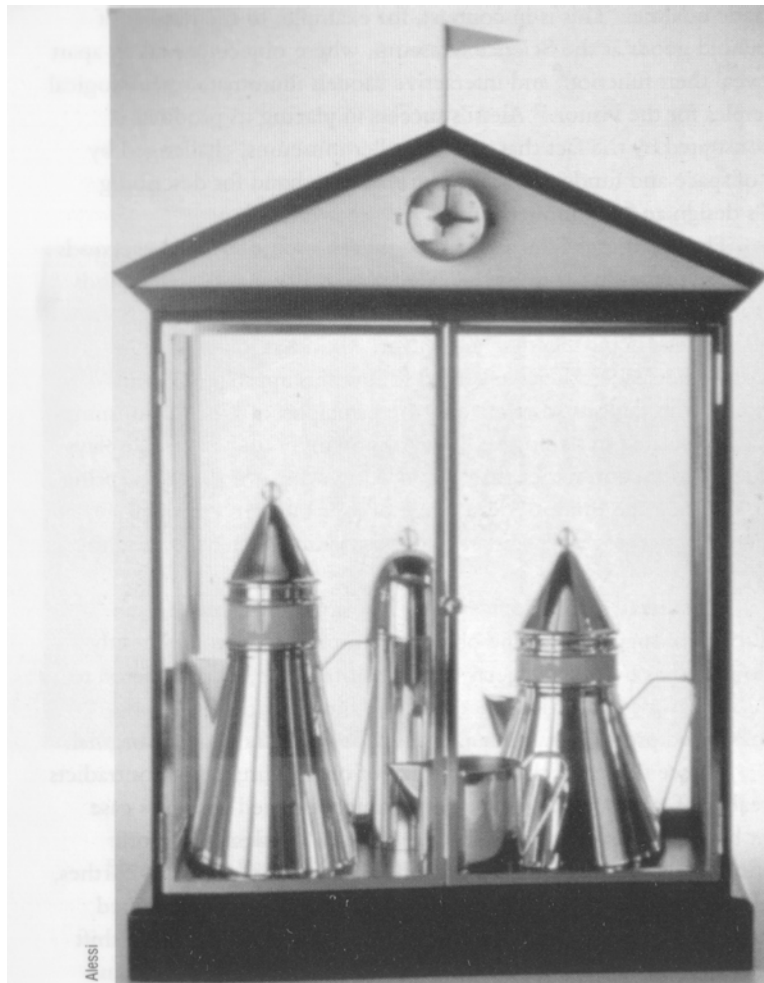
aesthetic qualities. This is in contrast, for example, to the display of household goods at the Science Museum, where objects are taken apart to reveal their function, and interactive models illuminate technological principles for the visitor.¹² Alessi's success in placing its products is demonstrated by the fact that many smaller museums, challenged by lack of space and funds, use its products as shorthand for describing 1980s design and postmodernism.¹³

The courting of the aura of the museum object for Alessi goods is echoed in retail displays of the objects. Alessi tries to keep its goods together as a range on the shelves, as practised at Harrods, which shows a wall of Alessi items together. However, Alessi has found it more difficult to persuade other retailers to follow this approach.¹⁴ John Lewis, with its famous adherence to the principles of rational consumption, encapsulated in its slogan, 'Never knowingly undersold', displays products by function rather than brand. However, it relented in spring 1996, showing the Philips-Alessi range of four bulbous electrical kitchen products together, rather than positioning each according to type.

Alessi retail sites invariably display a single example of each product. This suggests that the objects are unique, and consequently precious, just as museum objects have traditionally been considered to be. As in Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, each mass-manufactured product is simultaneously a copy of itself and an original.

We see therefore that the display of objects implicitly contradicts the reality of sales. But the single Alessi object isolated in a glass case might be viewed as a more appropriate symbol of Alessi's semiotic significance. Post-structural and post-modern writers – Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu among them – have described how the significance of things is not fixed: all objects continually shift around in a slippery matrix of meaning. However, the meanings and associations of some objects are more open to intervention by the consumer than others.

Alessi works very hard to inject more or less utilitarian objects with associative significance. The company feels that in order to distinguish its products from those of competitors, and to increase sales, it can provide emotional attractions through visual tropes such as biomorphism. This process reflects upon the company's characteristically Italian approach to the design process: Alessi likes to cast its designers as artists producing impressionistic sketches which are then developed by a production team. Claire Brass, designer of the particu-



Alessi

One example of the 12 stylistically individuated contributions to 'Tea and Coffee Piazza' is by Aldo Rossi, shown here because it illustrates most clearly the architectural theme of the project. The flag is a humorously postmodern addition. The set was designed in 1979 and produced in 1983 in iron, brass, copper, glass and quartz. 'Tea and Coffee Piazza' forms part of the Officina Alessi brand, which is generally more expensive than the main Alessi line because of the higher level of hand-finishing and more expensive materials

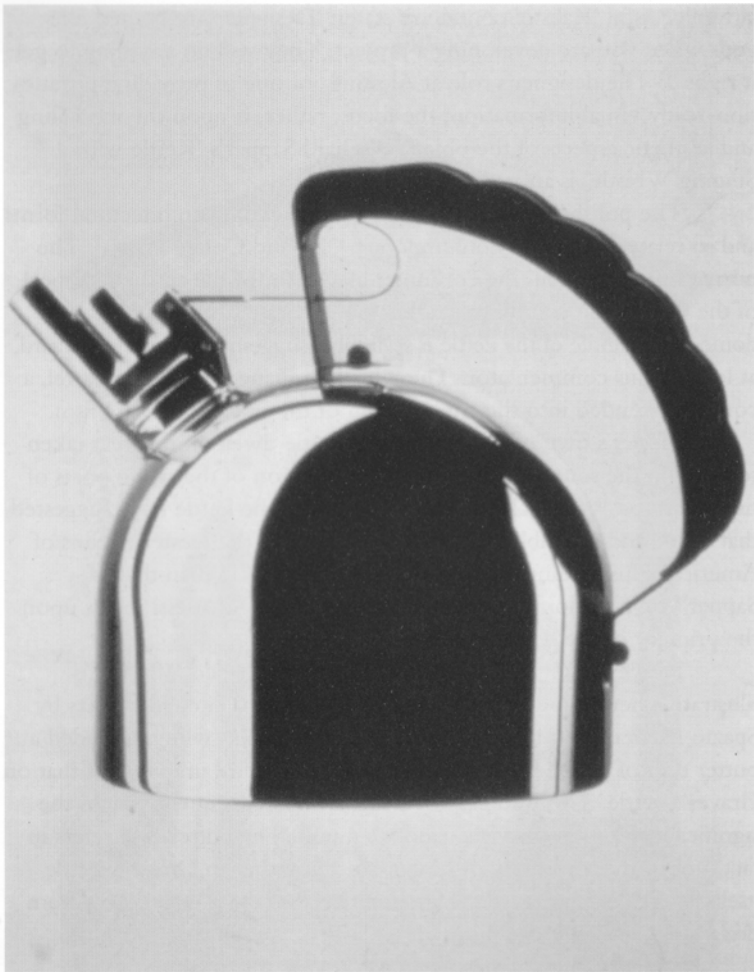
larly successful 'Kalisto' containers states: 'Designers are treated like gods when you are developing a project. They will do anything to get it right.'¹⁵ The designer's role at Alessi is not one of providing production-ready visual information; the focus, rather, is upon the modelling and aesthetic aspects of the object. Richard Sapper's 'Kettle with a Singing Whistle' is an example of this focus.

The polished dome of Sapper's kettle evokes architectural forms and so relates to Alessi's contemporary 'Tea and Coffee Piazza'. The mirror finish positions the consumer as a factor of the aesthetic appeal of the object; the consumer's reflection decorates the surface of the dome. The handle of the kettle is scalloped, suggesting a turkey's gizzard, at least to this commentator. The whistle is shaped like a gun barrel, a conceit extended into the trigger form of the opening mechanism.

Sapper's own comments on the kettle dwell on the year taken to develop the sound of the whistle in imitation of the steam boats of his childhood.¹⁶ Journalistic interpretations of the kettle have suggested that the sound resembles that of a train crossing the western plains of America. This reading – like mine – is no less valid than that of Sapper's own notion, but the approach to design at Alessi insists upon the primacy of the designer's intentions.

However, Graves's 'Kettle with a Bird-Shaped Whistle' is illustrative here. Liberty briefly stocked a range of kitchen objects by Spazio Mepra, a company little known in Britain,¹⁷ which included a butter dish of pitched-roof form topped with a bird imitative of that on Graves's kettle. This bird cannot whistle, and consequently lacks the significance of Graves's visual and aural pun. The butter dish refers in fact, not to the musicality of bird-song, but rather to Graves's kettle itself. So we see how futile the attempt to fix meaning is, and how from designer to designer meanings are modified like Chinese whispers.

Even so, Alessi's marketing activity strives to strengthen the significance of the products by, as it were, pre-packing them with associative meanings. This differentiates the company from many others. In addition to the normal channels, Alessi's marketing methods include energetic publishing of book-length discussions of its work. The company retains Di Palma Associati, considered to be one of the finest publicity agencies specialising in the promotion of Italian design, to promote its image and products.¹⁸ The visual interest of these lush publications, enhanced by quality transparencies and regular gift mailings, makes Alessi an extraordinarily media-friendly company, and the self-analytical strain in Alessi texts lends itself to direct reproduction in the editorial pages of design journals.¹⁹ In this way, deliberate



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Richard Sapper, 'Kettle with a Singing Whistle', 1983.

The domed form suggests the architectural strain of other Alessi products, most notably the 'Tea and Coffee Piazza', also produced in 1983.

The reflective surface provides recognition for the viewer or user by reflecting his or her image. The scalloped handle, gun-barrel spout, trigger opening mechanism and melodious whistle may be taken as symbols of America, a country important in the imaginations of European children of the post-war generation who grew up watching Westerns

associative meanings designed into the goods are reinforced through marketing and the media so that the consumer is relieved of the burden of having to create his or her own meaning, and knows how to respond to the product in advance.

Theoretically well-versed, Alberto Alessi quotes from the psychologist D.W. Winnicott,²⁰ among others, to explain such projects as 'Family Follows Fiction'

Prompted by a number of consultants, and by our own curiosity, we felt the urgent need for an operation which would attempt to balance the authoritativeness, expressive impact and culturalisation of the projects developed for us by the 'great masters' in the 1980s.... The challenge was to reproduce in terms of design the animistic process of an object, common to the world of representation among children and primitive cultures. The process in any case occurs in the reality of all objects, and is spontaneously triggered by personal, or collective, emotive necessities and by the impact of the object itself. We wanted to discover other materials – plastic for example – in order better to explore the world of colour and the sensorial dimension of objects.²¹

Here we see how Alessi aims to perform a process usually played out after purchase by the consumer. Clearly, the personal associations of an object for one particular consumer across a period of time cannot be replicated by a design team self-consciously manipulating concepts of collective meaning based on theoretical writings.

There is scope for divergent readings of Alessi's output. Laura Polinoro, who heads the Alessi-funded Centro Studi Alessi in Milan, cites the move into plastics as an aesthetic exploration. However, despite Alessi's coaching of its sales force through lectures by designers and through textual sources, the commercial instinct prevails, as I found in conversation with retailers:

... you've got to look at the past two or three years as a completely new departure for Alessi and for us. They've introduced cheap things. These bottle stops – I don't dislike them, but I think they're a bit unnecessary. But they are a gift and they're £4.95. That's what they are, they're £4.95 first and foremost.²²

Unsurprisingly, this reading of the company's plastic output is not



Michael Graves, 'Kettle with a Bird-Shaped Whistle', 1985.

This design has achieved enormous popularity, perhaps because of the knowingly twee charm of the bird, which whistles when the kettle boils, and perhaps also because it is considerably cheaper than the Sapper kettle. It is only in Britain that the kettle has faced charges of compromised utility. Continental and American markets are not as dependent upon electric kettles as tea-drinking Britain. The playful aspects of the kettle, so characteristic of post-modernism, are enhanced by the blue and red colour-scheme of the fittings. Indeed, Graves's 1996 kettle for Disney takes the toy-like character of his Alessi kettle to its conclusion, modifying the arc of the handle into Mickey Mouse ears

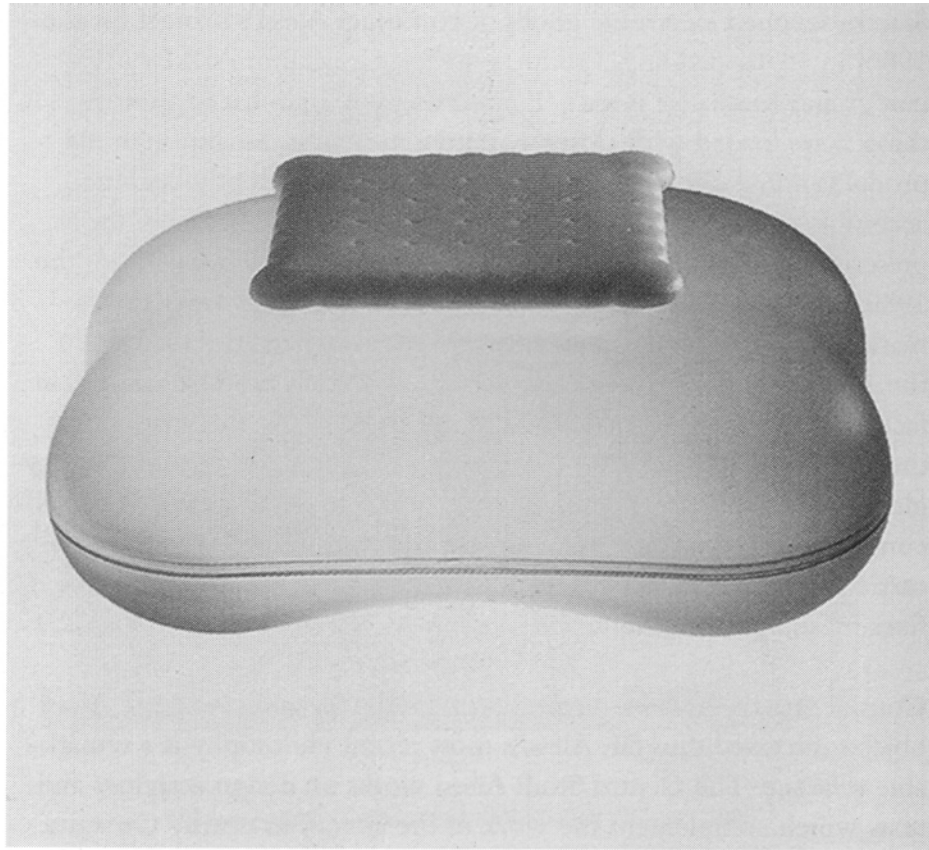
mentioned in the large body of Alessi publications. Despite concern about compromising the high design reputation of the Alessi brands,²³ the company achieved a master stroke on several fronts by introducing 'Family Follows Fiction'. However, the idealistic aim of this as stated in company literature masks a commercial aim and even so contains contradictions of its own.

'Family Follows Fiction', introduced in 1993 and is currently Alessi's most fashionable range. Together with the company's recent Starck-designed electronic goods, it continues Alessi's project for the 1980s in 1990s cladding. Products such as Giovannoni's 'Mary Biscuit',²⁴ and Mattia Di Rosa's 'Egidio, the little man has lost something'²⁵ are loaded with closed narrative meanings. So although the products utilise cheaper materials, and have consequently become accessible to a wider market, there is little difference between the prescriptiveness of Alessi's meaning-generation in the goods from the 1980s and the 1990s. The kettles continue to sell to a trickle-down market as early adopters deny that they ever owned Alessi kettles in the 1980s.²⁶ In a semiotic sense, therefore, Alessi's product range is in fact a coherent whole, even though the aesthetics of the series from the 1980s and 1990s diverge. Whether matt black and chrome, or day-glo and pastel plastics, Alessi objects remain semantically fixed and self-conscious as a result of a particular approach to household objects as carriers of meaning, and of the design process through which Alessi fixes meanings on behalf of the consumer.

Considering the awkward relation of continuity and change in Alessi objects discussed thus far, Alessi's most recent philosophy is a remarkable *volte face*. The Centro Studi Alessi works on design activities and texts which complement the work of the factory in nearby Omegna. *L'oggetto dell'equilibrio* ('The balanced object') of 1996 functions as an updated Alessi manifesto:

The objects of the future are those which unite functional and high technical/aesthetic standards with 'therapeutic' qualities, objects capable of creating well-being, of generating harmony.... They are objects which are born, in the most natural possible way, from contact with diverse cultural expressions, from diverse technique and diverse aesthetic inspirations.²⁷

The grandiloquent idealism here is what earlier writings have led us to expect from Alessi. However, the most potent significance of *L'oggetto*



Alessi

Stefano Giovannoni's 'Mary Biscuit' is intended to capture what Alberto Alessi refers to as the 'biscuitness of a biscuit'. Examination of the prototypes reveals a series of attempts to perfect a form internationally recognisable as a biscuit, from an impressionistic final sketch submitted by Giovannoni

dell'equilibrio surfaces in Bruno Pasini's description of the 'unbalanced object' from which the Centro Studi has purportedly tried to 'maintain a healthy distance':

It is an object which refuses to 'soften' in the passage from the showcase to the home; an object so highly charged with personality that it cannot be personalised. It is an object whose identity becomes confounded with its advertising, which doesn't age yet falls out of fashion. It is often merely an imitation of something truly functional: an object that doesn't invite use, but whose similarity to one that does serves as an alibi for its decorative essence.... From the second half of the 1980s onwards these objects have crowded our stores, our magazines, our homes: indistinguishable, narcissistic, self-aggrandising, pretentious, unjustifiably authoritative: objects which wear you out just looking at them, which you're afraid to touch, which fail to suggest their own purpose....²⁸

This highly critical passage describes Alessi's *bête noire*, and yet might also be read as a fine characterisation of Alessi objects themselves. Alessi goods are ornamental, often at the expense of utility. They appear to carry a self-conscious design ideology by subverting traditional type-forms in formal bids for attention. Alessi objects are used for status display within retail, museum and domestic sites. We may interpret this as a progression from old Alessi to new Alessi, although, as I have suggested, this dual conception of the company is questionable.

L'oggetto dell'equilibrio is an attempt to liberate Alessi from its reputation as producer of the iconic goods of the 1980s, and concomitantly to free up perceptions of the company's new products. Nevertheless, although Alessi has expended much energy in becoming a postmodern ideal, a careful analysis of the objects contradicts such a strategy. Meanings and associations invested in the products by their designers prior to purchase pre-empt the slipping signifiers suggested by post-structuralism.

Although, arguably, postmodernism was pre-eminent in the cultural climate of the 1980s, and Alessi is perceived to typify both postmodern and 1980s design, we should not neglect the long-standing modernist strain in the Alessi catalogue. Clearly Alessi's shift from canonical modernism to post-structuralist polysemy has been successful only in visual terms. A desire to control, and to provide ready-made meaning has negated 'writerly' meaning for Alessi objects.²⁹ Roland Barthes's concept of the reader (or consumer, for our purposes) playing

an active role in the production of meaning for an artefact is here quashed by the older idea of the designer as creator.

Alessi's aims thus appear to be unattainable and contradictory, even within the postmodernist theoretical context in which the company sets itself. Associative meanings, properly, result from interaction between user and object, and only the mirage of these meanings may be consciously designed in advance. Alessi has tried to evade critiques of postmodernism which posit it as a shallow cultural veneer for capitalist commodity fetishism by conspicuously publicising its attempt to inject an element of empathy into design. However, just as the bricolage patchwork of references that constitutes postmodernism incorporates even its detractors, so the free play of meaning is self-sustaining, and cannot be anticipated by manufacturers. Alessi products have undergone several identity overhauls, from utilitarian household goods, through *objets d'art*³⁰ to the move into plastics, like a couturier's diffusion line attempting to balance design values and commercial constraints. Nevertheless, such are the caprices of the cultural logic of late capitalism that the process of design at Alessi produces popular pieces which achieve interest and sales in the media and the market.

¹ Philippe Starck (born 1949) is a French celebrity designer who has worked internationally, including extensive collaborations with Alessi on such projects as the 'Hot Bertaa' kettle, 'Juicy Salif' lemon squeezer and 'Max le Chinois' colander. He has designed a diverse range of products from a motorcycle and a toothbrush to architecture. His most recent work has been as an interior designer for hotels such as Ian Schrager's Delano in Miami. Four Starck-designed Schrager hotels are due to open in London in the autumn of 1997.

² Michael Graves (born 1934) has achieved critical and professional success as an architect. He studied at Princeton University before executing public architectural commissions exemplified by the postmodern Portland Public Service building. Graves first worked with Alessi on the 'Tea and Coffee Piazza', a commission resulting from his architectural achievements.

³ Named in opposition to Louis Sullivan's motto, later taken up by the modern movement, 'form follows function', Alessi's phrase indicates the company's concept of emotional values embodied in designed objects, and also recalls the structure of this traditionally Italian family company.

⁴ Consolidated by the exhibition *It's Plastic* at London's Design Museum (October 1994 - April 1995), this trend has grown with the popularity of Authentics' translucent household objects, and developments in recycled plastic for the home. The enthusiasm for plastics accords with the current 1960s revival in both fashion and furnishings.

⁵ I use this term as a convenient encapsulation of the reception of certain canonical pieces of 20th-century design, (which might be exemplified by the renewed enthusiasm in the 1990s for the work of Charles and Ray Eames). 'High design' may be said to incorporate also the self-consciousness of certain designers aiming to achieve a place in the canon of design by prioritising high-profile aesthetics over utility and the visual understatement which allows an object to blend into its surroundings. High Design may be contrasted with 'anonymous' design to describe concisely the different aims and reception of products respectively elite and everyday.

⁶ A term used by Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', reproduced in *Image Music Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath, Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1977.

⁷ Extract from Alberto Alessi's Factory Journal, reproduced in 'Tea and Coffee Piazza 1983', *Alessi: The Design Factory* Meret Gabra-Liddell (ed.), London: Academy Editions, 1994, p.39. Michele Alessi is Alberto's brother, and co-chairman of the company. Alberto views the brothers' roles in the company as maternal and paternal. Alberto is in charge of communications, nurturing the design projects, and so is maternal. Michele leads the financial aspects in a hard and stern manner, viewed as masculine. This characterisation is based on Michele Alessi's comments in interview with the author at the Royal College of Art, October 1995.

⁸ Since the mid 1950s Richard Sapper has worked in Italy as an industrial designer for companies such as Brionvega, Artemide and IBM. He trained at the University of Munich and in the studio of Gio Ponti and worked in partnership with Marco Zanuso.

⁹ The role of New York's Museum of Modern Art as an arbiter of taste for both consumers and manufacturers has been particularly fully discussed. See Jonathan Woodham, 'The Post-War Consumer: Design Propaganda and Awareness, 1945-1965' in *From Spitfire to Microchip: Studies in the History of Design from 1945*, London: The Design Council, undated.

¹⁰ Letter from Max Protech, dealer, to Ronald Lightbourn of the Tate Gallery, London, in the V&A Registered Papers. This letter was clearly passed to the V&A by the Tate, which curates painting and sculpture.

¹¹ Promotional slogan used in Julius Bryant, *Victoria and Albert Museum Guide*, London: Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986, back cover.

- ¹² 'The Secret Life of the Home', a display of household goods at the Science Museum, London, designed by Tim Dunkin and related to a BBC TV series, *The Secret Life of Machines*.
- ¹³ Brighton Museum is one example of a local museum finding display solutions to underfunding. Curator Stella Beddoe had little space or money to devote to late 20th-century design. She obtained Alessi objects at a discounted price from the design store Caz Systems in Brighton. Beddoe used examples from Alessi's range in a case exploring the design work of architects which also included pieces by Bauhaus luminary Walter Gropius. Stella Beddoe in interview with the author, Brighton Museum, February 1996.
- ¹⁴ Here I paraphrase the comments of Alberto Alessi, in interview with the author, Alessi factory at Crusinallo, March 1996.
- ¹⁵ Claire Brass in interview with the author, Milan, March 1996.
- ¹⁶ According to Alberto Alessi's Factory Journal in *Alessi: The Design Factory*, Meret Gabra-Liddell (ed.), London: Academy Editions, 1994, p.51.
- ¹⁷ Spazio Mepra kitchen objects, designed by Maurizio Duranti, stocked by Liberty, Regent Street, London, Winter 1995.
- ¹⁸ Anna Griffiths, 'Agenti Segreti in Buona Causa', *Design World*, no.24, 1992, pp.56-9.
- ¹⁹ Compare for example, *Twergi: Un nuovo episodio dell'avventura*, Alessi catalogue no.6, Crusinallo: Piazza Battista 1865 S.r.l., 1994, p.6, with 'Italian Design Update', *Design World*, no.20, 1991, p.26. There has been no critically objective book-length study of Alessi, although there is a brief treatment of the company in Peter Dormer, *The Meanings of Modern Design: Towards the Twenty-First Century*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.
- ²⁰ Winnicott has described how children realise their identity using the mother's breast which becomes to be seen as a separate object, and suggested that we continue to use objects in the development of our sensorial education and in forming our self-identity. See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Press, 1971.
- ²¹ Alberto Alessi and Laura Polinoro, 'Family Follows Fiction', in Meret Gabra-Liddell (ed.), *Alessi: The Design Factory*, London: Academy Editions, 1994, p.131.
- ²² Caroline Elphick, Owner-Manager of Caz Systems design store, Brighton, in interview with the author, October 1995. See also 'Classic Alessi cuts tags to add Mass Appeal', *HFD - The Weekly Home Furnishings Newspaper*, vol.67, no.10, March 8 1993, p.39.
- ²³ There are several Alessi brands. Alessi is the main line, with Officina Alessi denoting the more expensive, hand-finished pieces, usually with a heightened design pedigree. Other offshoots include Tendentse for the ceramic pieces, and Twergi for objects in wood.
- ²⁴ 'Mary Biscuit' biscuit barrel of plastic and thermoplastic rubber available in blue, green or orange, designed in 1995. Stefano Giovannoni is one of the 'younger generation' of designers working with Alessi. Following architectural training in Florence, he has worked in partnership with Guido Venturini under the name of King-Kong simultaneously designing products and architecture. Today, Giovannoni works for Alessi on an individual basis.
- ²⁵ 'Egidio, the little man has lost something' is one of several matching products designed by Di Rosa for Alessi in 1994 including another bottle-top 'Carlo, a little ghost on top of a bottle', the napkin rings 'Luca, a little monster eating a napkin' and the jars 'Gianni, a little man holding on tight'. These products are sold in several pastel shades. Mattia Di Rosa is another of the younger Italian architects working with Alessi on the 'Family Follows Fiction' range of plastic goods. Laura Polinoro suggested in interview with the author that the move into plastics was a way of accommodating the work of younger designers, Centro Studi Alessi, Milan, March 1996. See also Nally Bellati, *New Italian Design*, New York: Rizzoli, 1990, for a discussion of contemporary Italian design in

terms of generations.

- ²⁶ This characterisation of design consumption in the 1980s and 1990s is partly informed by Stephen Bayley, in interview with the author, Redwood and Bayley, London, October 1995.
- ²⁷ Pasini, 'The Quest for Balance', *L'oggetto dell'equilibrio*, Milan: Electa/Alessi, 1996, pp.8-9.
- ²⁸ Bruno Pasini, 'The Quest for Balance', *L'oggetto dell'equilibrio*, Milan: Electa/Alessi, 1996, pp.6-7.
- ²⁹ In French scriptible (or writerly) 'text' is multivalent, and places the reader in the position of author, actively creating meanings. Lisible (or readerly) meaning in a 'work' is dictated by an author to feed the passive reader with closed meaning. See Roland Barthes S/Z of 1970, and his essays 'From work to text' ('De l'oeuvre au texte', *Revue d'Esthétique* 3, 1971, reprinted in *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), and 'The Death of the Author' reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, David Lodge (ed.), London: Longman, 1988.
- ³⁰ The 'Alessi D'après' range is pertinent here, and also to the earlier discussion of design as Art. 'Alessi D'après' is a series of four objects signed and numbered in an unlimited edition. The Officina Alessi annual catalogues quote Gilo Dorfles thus: 'The coming of the multiple, namely an art work designed by the artist just for its realisation in many identical copies, was a logical consequence of our time.'

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