

UPWARDLY MOBILE

THE WORLD'S FOREMOST VENUE FOR LUXURY FURNISHINGS AND ACCESSORIES—SALONE DEL MOBILE—CAPTURES THE INHERENT COOL OF THE ITALIAN CITY THAT IT CALLS HOME.

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It is, as it turns out, nearly impossible to order an icy glass of water in Milan—room-temperature *naturale* being completely de rigueur; instead, the cosmopolitan Italian city concerns itself with a different kind of cool. Here, for one week each spring, its fashionable citizens (think plenty of black, linen, leather and painstakingly rolled-up jeans and cigarette pants) join an international conglomerate of visiting design aficionados, trading in their impossibly stylish heels and wingtips for sensible footwear all in the name of design as Salone del Mobile rolls into town. The floors of Salone, the world's largest furnishings fair, which inhabits the sprawling halls of the Milano Congressi convention center designed by Mario Bellini, are meant to be thoroughly explored, pavement pounded—each corner of its nearly 600,000 square feet filled with furniture and accessories from the world's preeminent creative minds.

And while the talent hails from all over Europe and beyond, there's a distinctly Italian flavor to the proceedings: a flair for the dramatic and a gravitas provided by the beautifully preserved centuries-old buildings that host the design events within the city, both in the showrooms of established Italian brands and in a bevy of what we affectionately referred to as "palazzo pop-ups" during our visit. Kohler's showing of its new line of fixtures in collaboration with the French designer Jean-Louis Deniot, for example, takes place at the tony Palazzo Durini di Monza, a 17th-century mansion designed by the Baroque architect Francesco Maria Richini—a juxtaposition of modern chrome and porcelain against ancient stone and Renaissance art.

In Bottega Veneta's dedicated home boutique, too, the venerable fashion house-turned-luxury furniture brand pairs the sleek lines of its übermodern living, dining, office and bedroom



Among Salone del Mobile's many new introductions were (clockwise from top) Natuzzi's Dorian line, Flou's Softwing bed—an update on the company's famous Nathalie—and Poltrona Frau's Neri&Hu-designed mirror.



offerings with 18th-century frescoes by artists like Carlo Innocenzo Carlone and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. The result is startling but also, somehow, entirely inevitable thanks to the attention to detail that is paramount in Italian design. And it's everywhere.

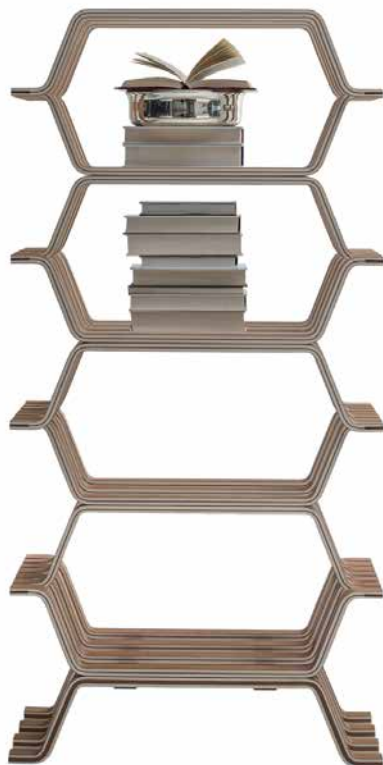
For celebrated kitchen brands like Varenna by Poliform and Boffi, each cabinet front and drawer is a work of art—every element carefully veneered, laser-cut and dovetailed together like so many puzzle pieces. At Flou, a variety of new introductions are a pitch-perfect complement to the brand's longtime bestsellers, like the Nathalie—arguably the industry's first upholstered bed, designed by Vico Magistretti in 1978, which still looks utterly timeless with its tireless slipcovered reinventions. Longtime power players B&B Italia and Flexform, too, stay nimble by introducing covetable new pieces—like the Do-Maru armchair by Doshi Levien and a brand-new line of seating by Daniel Libeskind, respectively—to a roster of old favorites.

On once-barren concrete plots in the middle of the convention center, each brand transforms its booth into a mini home away from home—each one different and dazzling but many embracing a rich, Italian minimalism as a common theme along with another unifier, this one a bit more material (literally): While structured Italian footwear is more or less on hiatus for the week, leather pervades everything else. It's in the thick straps of the striking, buckled light pendants and impressive Neri&Hu-designed mirror and valet stand at Poltrona Frau; it's used in a hundred different ways on the supple cushions of Natuzzi and Molteni&C's many beautiful sofas and chairs; it's inset into the ultimate desk for movers and shakers at Promemoria; and it's woven and stitched with remarkable precision across a variety of Hermès home offerings.

For all its eye candy and endless inspiration, the true beauty of Salone is in the escape it provides: Here, there are a multitude of worlds rapidly constructed, but with great care, that you can imagine yourself in, with thousands of new products with which to redesign the perfect room in your mind, and not a single person to pass judgment. They're design lovers, after all, and they're likely doing the exact same thing, and we're happy to toast to that—the water may be warm, but the Prosecco is ice cold.



A study in contrasts at Bottega Veneta (above), a pop of playful color on a Flexform chair (right), and the new MHC2 bookshelf from Molteni&C (below) honor the juxtaposition of old and new.



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY BOTTEGA VENETA; COURTESY FLEXFORM; COURTESY MOLteni&C.