

Culture

The face behind 1,000 plates

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Piero Fornasetti made witty self-expression a signature style

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

She is masked on one. Tearful on another. Winking on a third. Sleeping on a fourth. She is also shown with a moustache, sticking out her tongue, sporting a false nose, and with her face variously smashed into fragments, turned into stone, stuck inside a TV set, sprouting butterfly wings and garlanded with leaves.

Those are just a few of the 350 interpretations of the face of the same woman wearing the same expression on ceramic plates created by the 20th-century Italian designer Piero Fornasetti. He named her "Lina Cavalieri" after the famously beautiful early 1900s Italian soprano even though the face was not based on the real Lina's but on one he had found on an old wood engraving.

The "Theme and Variations" series, as those plates were called, was only a tiny part of Fornasetti's work in ceramics. Having started out as an artist, decorator and printmaker, he didn't tackle ceramics until the age of 33 when he made a set of 30 plates for a 1947 exhibition organized in Milan by his friend and fellow designer Gio Ponti. When manufacturer after manufacturer rejected his designs, Fornasetti decided to make

Piero Fornasetti, right, started out as an artist, decorator and printmaker, and began working with illustrations on ceramics in 1947. Right and center right, milk cups with saucers and lids, and the tray, three fishes.



IMAGES FROM ARCHIVES FORNASETTI



them himself.

He tackled the project with characteristic vigor. After researching the industry by visiting factories, studios and archives, he bought the necessary equipment to install in his Milan studio and hired specialists in ceramic production, printing and decoration. By the early 1960s, when he opened a showroom on Via Montenapoleone in Milan, Fornasetti had designed thousands of ceramic pieces in his signature style of intricate, playful, surreal, often melancholic illustrations, and he continued to create more until his death in 1988.

Hundreds of examples of his ceramics are shown together with Fornasetti's equally prolific work in interiors, furniture, glass, crystal, silks, clothing, stage sets, print making, painting, po-

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Left, plate 150 from Piero Fornasetti's "Theme and Variations" series, modeled loosely on Lina Cavalieri, the early 1900s Italian soprano. Above, the Moro chair and, below left, the sun chair. The illustrations for his pieces were distinctively his own.



The designer's focus was on playful illustrations, not creating new forms.

etry and drawing in "Fornasetti: The Complete Universe," a whopper of a book edited by his son, Barnaba. By "whopper," I don't just mean a big book, but a very big one, which is so heavy that I can't hold it open for longer than a few seconds. (Note to Rizzoli, the publisher: That's too heavy. Why not print it in two reader-friendlier volumes?)

Aching wrists apart, it's a fascinating book. Fornasetti was one of the gilded generation of Italian designers who established their country as the global design center of the mid-20th century. Like his peers, he reinterpreted traditional elements of Italian culture in his objects: his particular obsessions being Piranesi's etchings, Palladio's architecture and Pirandello's plays.

What made Fornasetti unusual was his focus on using distinctive illustrations rather than creating new forms and typologies as other designers were doing, among them the Castiglioni

brothers, Carlo Mollino and Joe Colombo. By repeatedly producing the same objects in the same shapes and sizes, he turned them into blank canvases for his illustrations.

As the book shows, this formula was spectacularly efficient at enabling him to produce countless versions of the same objects, and to treat design as a form of self-expression — "my personal biography," as he called it. It also made him an oddball in mid-20th-century design, which was dominated by Modernist purists, who were deeply suspicious of anything "decorative" or "self-expressive." Ponti shared Fornasetti's love of theatricality and historic symbolism, but many of their contemporaries dismissed him as a whimsical eccentric.

Fornasetti had begun by studying painting and sculpture in his native Milan, only to be chucked out of art school. After working as a cabin boy on a ship bound for Africa, he returned to Milan

and enrolled at another art school. He then worked in the studio built for him in his parents' house, and made prints and engravings for Lucio Fontana, Giorgio de Chirico and other artists. In 1939, his own work was featured in *Domus*, the art and design magazine edited by Ponti.

During World War II, he fled to Switzerland to avoid military service, then returned to his family home, where he lived and worked for the rest of his life. (Barnaba Fornasetti is now based there.) Ponti commissioned him to design friezes and furniture for the in-

teriors of his architectural projects, and Fornasetti began to produce hundreds of flamboyantly printed silk scarves, his "graphic sonnets."

By the late 1940s, Fornasetti had not only defined his signature style of witty figurative illustrations, but his chosen way of working, researching each new project with as much vigor as he had applied when approaching ceramics.

Technically he could be ingenious. When Fornasetti decided to design trays, he identified how to press a sheet of metal in a wooden mould and frame each one with fine iron wire. He then produced some 430 designs, ranging from astrological symbols and hot air balloons to sea creatures, Venetian street scenes and La Scala opera house. Like Ponti and Mollino, he forged a close rapport with the artisans who made his products. Many of them were devoted to him, so much so that the furniture maker Giancarlo Parodi worked unpaid when Fornasetti had financial problems in the 1970s.

That was his nadir. Fornasetti's ornate style seemed even more frivolous to the radical Anti-Design Movement of the 1970s than it had to the Modernists in the 1950s and '60s. But by the end of that decade, he had been "rediscovered" by the Post-Modernists, who admired his flamboyance and love of ornament. By 1983, his work had become so fashionable that Sotheby's sold one of his pieces for \$15,000, then a record for the work of a living designer.

Fornasetti has since been celebrated for the same idiosyncrasies that the Modernists despised, but never more so than now. You can see traces of his surreal graphics in the work of contemporary designers such as Studio Job and Scholten & Baijings, but his true legacy is his love of self-expression, which is now regarded as essential by young designers everywhere.