



MARTINO GAMPER

What makes a furniture designer? Martino Gamper has been a chef, a carpenter, a hitch-hiker. From the mass-produced to the individual crafted object, *Deyan Sudjic* profiles the multifaceted creator

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Gamper on Post Mundus Chair (2012, Gebrueder Thonet Vienna).



Workshop tools.



Studio knives, recipes, Off-Cut Vase detail and vintage banana (eaten now).

Defining Martino Gamper is not easy. Having attended four very different art schools in several different countries, he studied in departments that ranged from sculpture and ceramics to design, and used three languages, before finally deciding what he wanted to be. He is in the gallery world, but also designs for mass production, and is interested in what he calls “making as a means of thinking”.

Gamper was born in the German-speaking Italian province of South Tyrol, in the small city of Meran – Italians call it Merano – in 1971. Now he lives in London, but spends several weeks of every year in New Zealand, where his wife, the artist Francis Upritchard, is from; and he has a residency at Maja Hoffmann’s foundation in Arles.

Gamper considered the life of a maker in his teens. He enrolled at a craft school when he was just 14. An apprenticeship came next. If you take a quick look behind the ragged façade of the building where he has his studio, in a still-ungentrified corner of Hackney, you would be forgiven for assuming that Gamper turned out to be a carpenter. There are neat rows of chisels and saws arranged on the walls, and carefully ordered work benches on which pieces of wooden furniture wait to be completed. But there is more to his work than skill – enough, in fact, to render the debate around craft and design, and art and design, redundant.

Taking up almost as much space in the studio as his carpentry tools and the chair production

line is a long table flanked by the kitchen that takes up much of Gamper’s energy. It’s not that he is a chef, but food is a fundamental for him. “Early on, with no clients or commissions, I had to find an alibi to get started on a project, and that alibi was food.” “Cooking is similar to design,” he says. “In order to design a table you need food, and food without a table does not work. I create food events in order to design tables; it is an excuse.” On the day I am there, the studio is working on a meal to celebrate Christmas, but Gamper uses food much in the way the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija does, to explore the ways in which we interact with each other.

He completed his apprenticeship at 19, then went travelling. After a summer in Switzerland

financed by selling bags made out of old inner bike tubes, he tentatively began to think about becoming an artist. He secured a place at the Art Academy in Florence in 1990, but left almost immediately – repelled by the endless reproductions of Michelangelo’s statue of David and the shortcomings of the Italian educational system, where students copied each other’s essays and professors failed to show up. He moved to Vienna – where he talked Michelangelo Pistoletto into giving him a place on the sculpture course at the Academy of Fine Arts. Pistoletto, one of the founders of Italy’s *arte povera* movement, was interested enough in the objects that Gamper made. Gamper was also spending a lot of his time at the University of Applied Arts,

on the other side of the city. It was the school where Josef Hoffmann had once taught, which was rooted in design, rather than art. Pistoletto suggested that he made up his mind between the two, and he chose design. Gamper gravitated to what was nominally the ceramics masterclass, led by Matteo Thun, once an assistant to Ettore Sottsass and a member of the Memphis group. Despite learning very little about ceramics, Gamper impressed Thun enough to get hired to work in his studio in Milan. Thun not only paid him – unusual in the intern-exploitative climate of the time – but also covered his fares to and from Vienna in order to allow him to continue with his studies. The experience of working in a well-organised commercially orient-

tated design practice was something that Gamper found useful, even if it did not leave him wanting to design in Thun’s post-Memphis postmodern manner, or even to run a large studio. The early 1990s were not Milan’s best years: “The masters were dying out, the place looked grey, and postmodernism did not appeal,” Gamper says. While Thun was spending most of his time in Italy, a group of his more enterprising students in Vienna, Gamper among them, hijacked their absent professor’s office and turned it into their private workspace. When Thun finally departed, Enzo Mari took his place.

For Gamper, studying with Mari was as important an experience as meeting Pistoletto. Both have an interest in humble, found materi-





Chair parts bundle.



Recycling bin and Arnold Circus Stool storage.



Very sharp circular saw blade.



Bella Vista Chair, reclaimed teak, pasta flour on floor.

als; Mari's blueprints for self-made open-source furniture designs have continued to fascinate designers. Even more interesting was Gamper's time spent in London at the Royal College of Art as an Erasmus student. It was there that he encountered a tutor who disabused him of the notion that his precocious technical ability with a band saw would be enough to get him through: "I am not interested in your practical skills, I am interested in your thinking about the idea." This was an approach that stayed with him. And he returned to the RCA, once Ron Arad had established the design-product course.

Arad used to say that his job at the RCA was to make his students unemployable. Partly, he was suggesting that his course would give

graduates the independence to set up on their own. But he was also conscious of the realities of a world in which the traditional idea of big industrial clients looking to hire designers to work on specific briefs no longer applied. His students had to be able to make their own way. If they couldn't work on an industrial scale, then they had to make the most of what they could find, just as Arad himself had once made his Rover chairs with car seats salvaged from a scrap yard.

Gamper's graduation project was an exploration of corners. "I was living in a corner of a loft at the time, and my project was about the corner as a spatial entity between architecture and furniture. I made a corner light inspired by Fla-

vin." Afterwards, Gamper made a living scavenging from skips in order to improvise ready-made objects: 'Designing without designing', he called it. He was selling lights made from footballs. The Umbro football was the only one that had the right degree of transparency, and he had a stall at the V&A selling pieces he made on the spot for 25 pounds each. From out of this exercise came the 100 chairs in 100 days project, which turned a spontaneous exercise into a conscious performance: He put together fragments of broken and abandoned chairs to create altogether new chairs. A polypropylene seat, teamed with a bentwood back, a pressed metal shell and an upside-down back. Each individual chair is ingenious, and is more than a piece of

sculpture, but is based on an understanding of what is involved in manufacturing and designing a chair: "I learned a lot by taking chairs apart." Keeping up the pace was demanding, but the project immediately attracted attention, and has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world.

Commissions started to come Gamper's way: some for conventional pieces of mass-produced furniture, others for interiors. There was work from the fashion world: windows for Miuccia Prada, displays for Anya Hindmarch and interiors for Peter Pilotto, a friend with a similar Austrian-Italian background. The Serpentine asked him to curate an exhibition, which he based on the seemingly unpromising idea of

the shelf, but filled it with pieces that made you consider the humblest but most ubiquitous of objects in a new way. Most recently, he designed the AlpiNN, a restaurant for a chef in the South Tyrol who has a commitment to rooting his food in the specifics of the place. "He doesn't use olive oil, because you can't find it in the mountains, so I wanted to design the place using only things that you could see in the area: wood from the valley, lamps using parchment from sheep that graze nearby." Like all of Gamper's work, his design avoids the obvious. He has no predictable signatures. Instead, his material grows out of the material from which it is made, and from quietly observing how we use space-sand objects.

Britain is no longer quite the place that it was at the end of the 1990s, when a special set of circumstances that included open borders and low rents made London a specially fertile place for designers. On the rain-soaked day of Britain's 2019 general election, Gamper wore a badge to proclaim his hope that Britain would choose a government that made it possible to stay in the European Union. He had taken the citizenship test that would qualify him as British but did not yet have the right to vote. London has become a place in which it is possible for a designer who can work anywhere, as he can, to be successful. What is not so clear is how attractive it would be now to a young and unknown Gamper.

According to Martino Gamper, “There is no perfect design and there is no über-design. Objects talk to us personally. Some might be more functional than others, and the emotional attachment is very individual.” Around 10 years ago, the London-based, Italian-born furniture designer started working on this project, and built a new chair every day for 100 days. He put together parts of different chairs that he found dumped on the streets or rescued from disuse at friends’ homes,

his approach focusing on creating each chair as a unique object made from the materials available at the time. A blend of found stylistic and structural elements, he generated perverse, poetic and humorous hybrids: “What happens to the status and potential of a plastic garden chair when it is upholstered with luxurious yellow suede?” The project was exhibited in London in 2007, at the Milan Triennale in 2009, and at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, in 2010.

100 Chairs collection courtesy of Nilufar Gallery, Milan
Photography Abäke and Martino Gamper





Anna Arca



Gio Ponti furniture courtesy of Nilufar Gallery, Milan

Situated at the heart of Shoreditch in east London, Arnold Circus is part of the Boundary Estate, the city's first council housing project. The estate, built from the rubble of old slums, was inaugurated in 1896 and consists of 19 blocks of five-storey tenements displayed around a central garden, within which can be found a celebrated eight-sided bandstand.

The Arnold Circus Stool was designed by Martino Gamper as part of the estate's regen-

eration project in 2006. This polyvalent and multifaceted piece of furniture is a rotation moulded polyethylene plastic stool, and can be used in several ways other than for indoor sitting, like storage or garden furniture. It is also the official seating for the estate's many community events and volunteering initiatives, such as circus picnics, brass band concerts, carrom tournaments and of course music and film screenings.

Armed with the tools of his trade, Martino Gamper broke, cut and modified furniture created by Italian architect and industrial designer Gio Ponti for the Hotel Parco dei Principi, in Sorrento. This was not an act of destruction in itself, but rather "an action", to reinvent, rethink and repossess the object, and create a "new destiny" for it.

Deconstruction, much more than mere standard practice, is the path towards knowledge for

Gamper. Engaging with a structure is an intimate and physical process that explores the emotional dynamics and boundaries between the object and its maker. This kind of engagement provokes a reaction in Gamper, which is then translated as an immediate action on the object, a "creative process in action", which can be defined as 'action design'.

With his transformative powers, and the ability to improvise and reappropriate, Gamper

seeks to extend the life of a classic piece of design beyond its museum-like existence. The outcome is always unknown, the process is spontaneous and freewheeling, and the result is a variety of objects, each with its own attitude – some functional, some pathetic and some even beautiful.