

CULTURE IN FOCUS

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WILLIAM CORBETT

May 15 - June 15

Running Hot & Cold

By Eileen Kennedy

It's 6:15 in the morning. You disentangle yourself from your tousled sheets and stumble toward the bathroom in a dream...

And step into...Antonio Bullo, Luigi Molinis, Marco Zanuso. No, it's not a clandestine meeting of the Three Tenors. These are the Italian designers whose work greets you as you lean down over your milk white ceramic basin with tempered Mediterranean aquamarine crystal counter and high sheen chrome faucets, shaped like sleek art deco sculpture, and reach for your pedestrian toothbrush from a sumptuous wall-mounted aquamarine glass tumbler. Each curve, color and texture represent *la bella figura* that Italians seem to have been born with. You genuflect and thank Hera that by the 1960s there was such a dearth of work for Italy's postwar designers that they moved into the industrial sector, forever changing our functional design landscape into a little bit of heaven.

The works of these designers and more can be seen on "exhibit" at Isola (Italian for "Islands") Gallery, so called because co-owners and sisters Julie and Lisa Nemrow are in the business of importing and selling primarily bath and kitchen products/environments that embody what the Bauhaus aspired to — an aesthetic that synthesizes art with the functional needs of life. The installations rival many Newbury Street galleries; this month's exhibit is state-of-the-art bathroom design.

With works created by design luminaries like Marco Zanuso, whose pieces are in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, and Antonio Bullo and Andres Jost, this year's Design Plus award recipients at the ISH Fair in Frankfurt, the uninitiated enters this space unprepared for what is possible to experience in the room most Americans probably spend the least amount of time in.

How about a translucent plastic faucet lever (referred to as a "mixer") in blue, azure, yellow or gray? "The Italians have done so much with plastic," Lisa points out. I can't help smiling with pride — from my own Italian ancestry — and move slowly around the gallery, inhaling the ethereally pale walls, the scented color-coordinated soaps, taking in the hand-blown Murano glass accessories crafted by Venetian artisans (although machine produced, almost all the work is hand finished,) rounded, lacquered crystal shelves and tops that reflect the light on the Mediterranean Sea, Carrara stone, works whose essential sculptural form reminds us these Italian designers come from a tradition that antedates Michelangelo.

BIS BIS is the self-congratulatory name of the Nemrows' import company. Fittingly, it's the exclamation ("Encore! Encore!") traditionally spoken, more often shouted, in Italian theatres, concert halls, and opera houses after a really good show. This gallery deserves a visit, even if one isn't as enamored of contemporary Italian spa design as this writer, even if just for the *tour de force* marketing strategy of the products: the conscious, and so-clever, representation of art as life with photographs of the gallery's own products framed above the actual objects.

Moving away from downtown and across design traditions are the homegrown rewards of the award-winning workshop of Eric Swanson, traditional New England woodworker, at his 59 Amory Street location in Jamaica Plain. There you enter the world of high-end custom-designed cabinetry and furniture that has been a tradition in Boston since the early Colonial period.

And yet "custom design" is a term that is historically relative. For example, a visit to the kitchen, actually kitchens, of the 18th-century Loring-Greenough House, also in Jamaica Plain, reveals how much the customs of a pre-industrialized economy shaped "design." Where form followed function very closely — but usually not with aesthetic principles uppermost in mind — a certain clumsiness became real elegance. In many older New England homes, for instance, a summer kitchen was "added on" to the main kitchen to separate the rest of the house from the acrid-smelling, heat-producing activities, like making lye soap, or candles or preserves for home use.

That's not the case in Swanson's studio. Standing before one of Swanson's latest works-in-progress, a massive unfinished white oak sideboard (representative of 350-400 hours of work,) I felt what can be unique, even poetic, in the custom crafting of wood. It hums — when every single piece of wood is matched for its grain, like a book that opens up, and all the joinings are seamless —

there's a harmony that's created that you can actually feel. Such harmony, Swanson points out, can't be experienced in "stock cabinetry or semi-custom." If the Italian adage about one of the important ingredients of good cooking is love is true, then surely one of the important ingredients of custom-made work is the loving attention to its detailed process. Although Swanson uses power tools, his is one of the few woodworking enterprises that makes and grinds all its knives by hand!

Late afternoon sun poured a honey light into the studio as Swanson shared some of his thoughts on the design process. "It's a miracle of transformation...from a need to an idea that fills the need to the rough materials to the shape of something that solves the problem elegantly." He's not exaggerating. Swanson scored an unprecedented double win in the CWB Design Portfolio Award this year, including "Kitchen/Bath Cabinetry."

Echoing the longing of William Morris (of the Arts and Crafts Movement) that all craftsmen have the attitude of an artist, Swanson feels his work is "sculpture with a purpose."

Who did you apprentice with as a young woodworker," I asked.
"Italians."

I smiled. **am**



One of Eric Swanson's wood creations.

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