

Presentation for the Inauguration of the exhibition “50 Years of Arnolfo di Cambio” at the Museum of Glass in Colle Val d’Elsa, 2nd December 2023. François Burkhardt:

My first encounter with Arnolfo di Cambio came in the early seventies while researching the pioneers of Italian design for the exhibition “Design as a Postulate: Italy’s Example” at the International Design Center IDZ in Berlin in 1973. Vittorio Gregotti, overseeing the segment on design history from the fifties to the seventies, introduced me to a second-generation Italian design pioneer, Joe Colombo. Digging deeper, I stumbled upon a piece by Colombo—a glass called “Smoke,” crafted in 1963. In my search for the glass manufacturer, I was astonished to learn that the company that tasked Joe Colombo with designing a collection of glasses in its inaugural year of 1963 was not situated in Brianza or Biella, but in Colle Val d’Elsa. Each year, the company decided to invite a different designer to contribute to its collection. In chronological order, they had already collaborated with Marco Zanuso, Cini Boeri, Sergio Asti, Ettore Sottsass, and Achille Castiglioni—all esteemed pioneers of Italian design excellence at the time.

I was surprised to discover that Sottsass and Castiglioni were absent from the company’s catalogues during those years. The reason became clear to me in 1998, during a presentation of the “Clearline” collection by Flos in Milan. It was there that Achille Castiglioni, after many years, crossed paths with Gilberto Bagnasacco again and reminded him of their contact in the early sixties. Castiglioni mentioned that his glass, which was once considered too simple, had entered production with Alessi. Such forward-thinking must have guided by someone well-versed in the latest developments in Milanese design. This enlightened entrepreneur was Gilberto Bagnasacco, who, along with his father Bruno, founded Arnolfo di Cambio. A Milanese who relocated to Tuscany, Bagnasacco’s vision helped the company stand out not only for its design quality but also for its product innovation. For instance, Joe Colombo, a smoker and whisky drinker, invented a glass with a base that allowed one to hold both a drink and a cigarette simultaneously. This unique feature of the Smoke glass has never been replicated before or since, highlighting its originality. The decision to begin producing design objects with Joe Colombo underscores the collection manager’s recognition of him as the most innovative European designer of the 1960s, a fact confirmed by the history of the field. Ten years later, Cini Boeri designed the Cibi glass, which gained fame for its appearance in a scene from the 1981 film “Blade Runner.” During those years, the company garnered features, articles, covers, and mentions in numerous Italian and international magazines, bringing attention to Colle Val d’Elsa as the city of crystal in Italy.

Few companies, like Kartell, founded in Milan around the same time, thrive solely on producing contemporary design objects. In Italy, we were at the beginning of the “good design” movement, which, despite all efforts, would never exceed 15% of the total market production of objects. To sustain its 200 employees, Arnolfo di Cambio had to expand its catalogue to meet the demand for traditional forms, even though innovation in this area was challenging. Over time, the company sought to balance traditional objects with contemporary design, gradually prioritizing the former. This duality reached its peak in Arnolfo di Cambio’s 2004 catalogue. The Clearline collection, a contemporary show of “good design,” boasts 105 objects, making up roughly 30% of the entire catalogue. With approximately 450 products in total, this necessitates a substantial number of moulds, warehouse space, expensive catalogues, specialized packaging, and escalating costs in management, distribution, advertising, and marketing. This will signal the conclusion of

the opportunity to diversify the range of glasses, carafes, trays, cups, bowls, vases, and home accessories in markets that are becoming increasingly saturated with products. Even with products mostly similar, made both manually and with automated technologies, consolidating all types of glasses then in production solely in Colle Val d'Elsa already occupied a significant share of the European market. In the meantime, Gabriele Bagnasacco recognizes the impending danger and restructures his organization and production. He directly assumes the presidency of Arnolfo di Cambio and separates production, appointing the then brilliant young glassblower Vasco Conti, who will become factory manager. Bagnasacco retains control over product concepts, marketing, distribution, and sales, allowing Conti to make his own production while keeping him as a partner in the Arnolfo di Cambio brand. Gabriele Bagnasacco is now owner of the Compagnia Italiana del Cristallo S.r.l. which has licensed the Arnolfo di Cambio brand for as long as he can remember, still predominantly owned by the Bagnasacco family.

In 1992, I was commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce of Siena to undertake one of the most significant design research operations in Italy. This project was noteworthy for its methodological approach and the complexity of its initiative, which encompassed everything from revitalizing the role of craftsmanship in product design to developing marketing strategies and establishing a training consultancy service. Titled "Mestieri d'Autore, Craftsmanship, Industry and Territory, the Crystal of Colle Val d'Elsa," the project was brought to fruition in 1993 with the participation of eight invited designers. It was primarily dedicated to supporting small artisans, aiming to discover new ways to revitalize craftsmanship through design. This involved bringing artisans closer to design and designers closer to the realities of artisanal production. The initiative resulted in the creation of about thirty prototypes, which were intended to be put into production. This process was coordinated by a consortium of 15 small artisanal businesses, supported by medium and large local companies and the Municipality of Colle Val d'Elsa. The president was the master glass cutter Ardino Bacci, and I served as the art director. The catalogue featured four evolving collections: selected objects from Colle's artisanal production, products from 20th-century masters, key figures in Italian design, and contemporary design, initially totalling 59 items. Unfortunately, the project ultimately fell through, but it had the potential to succeed with adjustments, perseverance, and time, as evidenced by the prototypes, some of which are now part of the permanent collection at the Crystal Museum. My involvement in this project brought me into contact with Gabriele Bagnasacco.

In the summer of 1995, Gabriele Bagnasacco, then president of Arnolfo di Cambio, reached out to me to kickstart a design object production program. This initiative stemmed from a lesson he had gleaned from his father, Gilberto, who had achieved success in the 1960s with designs by Joe Colombo, Marco Zanuso, Cini Boeri, and Sergio Asti, many of which remain in production today. Bagnasacco proposed the creation of a line of contemporary design products, drawing inspiration from the pioneering designs of the 1960s. Aware that the market dynamics had shifted since then, I understood the importance of aligning our proposals with Gilberto Bagnasacco's market-focused strategy, particularly within the Italian market. Three decades later, I capitalized on the market's globalization-driven expansion, allowing me to collaborate with international designers for the project. Alongside Gabriele, we conceived the

“Clearline” product line, which revolved around integrating crystal production with innovative designs, boasting a contemporary aesthetic suitable for small to medium-sized series, given the high production costs. It targeted a discerning audience well-versed in cultural trends and styles, appreciating the craftsmanship’s finesse. This niche production underscored the product’s cultural quality, positioning it for sustained success in the markets. So, I extended invitations to Colle for Oscar Tusquets from Spain, Toshiyuki Kita from Japan, Roger Tallon from France, Alfredo Häberli from Switzerland, Konstantin Grcic from Germany, Ikka Suppanen from Finland, and Karim Rashid from the United States. They were joined by Italian masters Ettore Sottsass, Enzo Mari, Michele De Lucchi and Alberto Meda. Additionally, we provided emerging designers like Duccio Santini, Andy Ruggero, Marcello Mantengoli and Maurizio Duranti with the opportunity to contribute to the refined collection of masters. From this collaboration emerged original products showcasing typological invention, such as Tusquets’ hors d’oeuvre container or Häberli’s tray with integrated cups. Sottsass introduced glasses with thickened stems and bases to emphasize the balance between the object’s height and weight through the crystal’s density. Mari’s series of glasses featured different geometric bases, all unified by the cylindrical shape of the chalice’s upper part. Mari insisted that a glass must be unique to be justified, emphasizing the designer’s duty to avoid redundancy—a lesson still pertinent in design today, one that Gabriele later embraced by streamlining the catalogue’s offerings.

In 2014, Arnolfo di Cambio’s art direction was entrusted to the young French designer Claire Le Sage, who had completed her studies at ENSADE in Paris a decade earlier. Le Sage had already collaborated with one of France’s most prestigious crystal companies, the Cristalleries Saint-Louis located in the Vosges region. With this appointment, Gabriele may have aimed to leverage the techniques and distinctive taste of French tradition, which differed somewhat from the Italian style. Le Sage shifted the company’s focus from a collection solely cantered on crystal to a broader concept of tabletop art. To achieve this, she introduced porcelain and a new decorative style to Arnolfo di Cambio, which she replicated across various products, making them more appealing to consumers in major markets and adapting to diverse lifestyles. With this appointment, Gabriele may be seeking to leverage the techniques and taste of French tradition, which often carries a more pronounced individuality compared to the Italian style. Le Sage will pivot the company’s strategy from solely focusing on crystal to embracing a broader vision of tabletop art. To achieve this, she will introduce porcelain and a fresh decorative style to Arnolfo di Cambio, which will be echoed across a variety of products, aiming to better resonate with consumers in major markets and adapting to diverse lifestyles. The addition of porcelain to Arnolfo di Cambio’s collection aims to establish connections with representation for other brands, a strategy currently underway with Lagerfeld, Cavalli, or Dior. By expanding the product range to include various materials for tabletop art—not just ceramics or porcelain but also metals—Gabriele Bagnasacco is pursuing a diversity-oriented policy. This move is aimed at breaking away from a market overly restricted and fiercely competitive in a single material, instead opening up to more promising markets. A broad understanding of practices across different fields enables better responses to demand, facilitating both production and practical use while fostering market innovation through increased combination possibilities.

Recently, I had an intriguing experience in Volterra. I was commissioned by the Cassa di Risparmio di Volterra to explore fresh ideas to support the alabaster industry, which was facing a severe crisis. The outcome of our deliberations, led by my team, didn't focus on producing new objects or targeting specific markets. Instead, our aim was to enhance the quality of the alabaster material itself. Alabaster, inherently fragile and prone to liquid absorption, is unsuitable for tabletop art and cannot withstand dishwashing. Our goal was to broaden its functionality by making it more durable, impervious to liquids, even more translucent, and capable of being safely coloured. Today, there are chemical treatment techniques available that enable such enhancements, with industries active in this sector, even in Tuscany. I understand well that this experience cannot be directly applied to crystal. Perhaps, for glass and crystal alike, we need to move away from the notion of solely relying on product and design innovation and explore alternative parameters for sustainability. In conclusion, in my view, there are three key factors contributing to the survival of craftsmanship.

In Italy, artisans remain integral to the industrial production process, and it's nearly impossible to imagine production without their active involvement.

The notion of a close identity link between manual skill and the final product persists as a meaningful model for me. This bond, forming an inseparable triad, imbues the product with both utility and beauty—qualities often overlooked in industrialized processes with their compartmentalized production methods. This unity also fosters moral strength, binding the artisan to their craft and creation. Consequently, artisans take pride in their work, contrasting with many industrial workers who view their tasks as mere obligations devoid of any personal connection to the end product.

Despite the sensory detachment of the digital era, craftsmanship upholds specific values crucial for societal cohesion. Sensory development, particularly tactile perception, remains essential for genuine social interaction, as it directly engages with materials rather than their digital simulations. While embracing the need for modernization, craftsmanship preserves these values within its profession.

These are the reasons why I chose to collaborate with the Arnolfo di Cambio company for several years, and I wish them a prosperous future and enduring success.