

# ART

# DIGEST

Cover: A collage of three important phases of Italian art — *Apologie du pas de Deux* (1951) by Severini, a futurist; upper right, *Madonna and Child* c. 1454, by Andrea Mantegna; and lower right, *The Anguish of Departure* by Giorgio De Chirico, formerly "meta-physical realist" and pre-surrealist.

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## Letters

### Congratulations

To the Editor:

I should like to express appreciation, on behalf of Mr. Fernand J. Martens and Mr. Peter A. De Maerel . . . who were both in accord that the (May 15) issue truly reflected the spirit of art in Belgium . . .

May I be permitted to extend my personal thanks . . . for your comments on the lovely Belgian City of Bruges? I believe that many travelers and art enthusiasts will find there, as you did, a most enchanting and magical medieval city.

. . . I should be most appreciative if you would convey to your staff my warmest congratulations.

Stanley G. Markusen  
Sabena Belgian Air Line  
New York, N. Y.

### Add New Hope

To the Editor:

I read with pleasure Constance Ward's "The Delaware Valley Tradition" in the June 1 ART DIGEST. . . .

But perhaps an addenda to Mrs. Ward's list of artists may be in order. The late C. F. Ramsey, Sr., for example, was painting in New Hope at the same time Redfield and Lathrop and Garber were. . . . She neglects to mention the sculpture of Jo Jenks . . . the paintings of Charles Ward and the painter Beveridge Moore. . . .

. . . it must be added that there are other galleries the Charles Fourth Gallery and the Delaware Bookshop, to name two, which have been showing local artists for many years.

Edmund Schiddell  
New Hope, Pa.

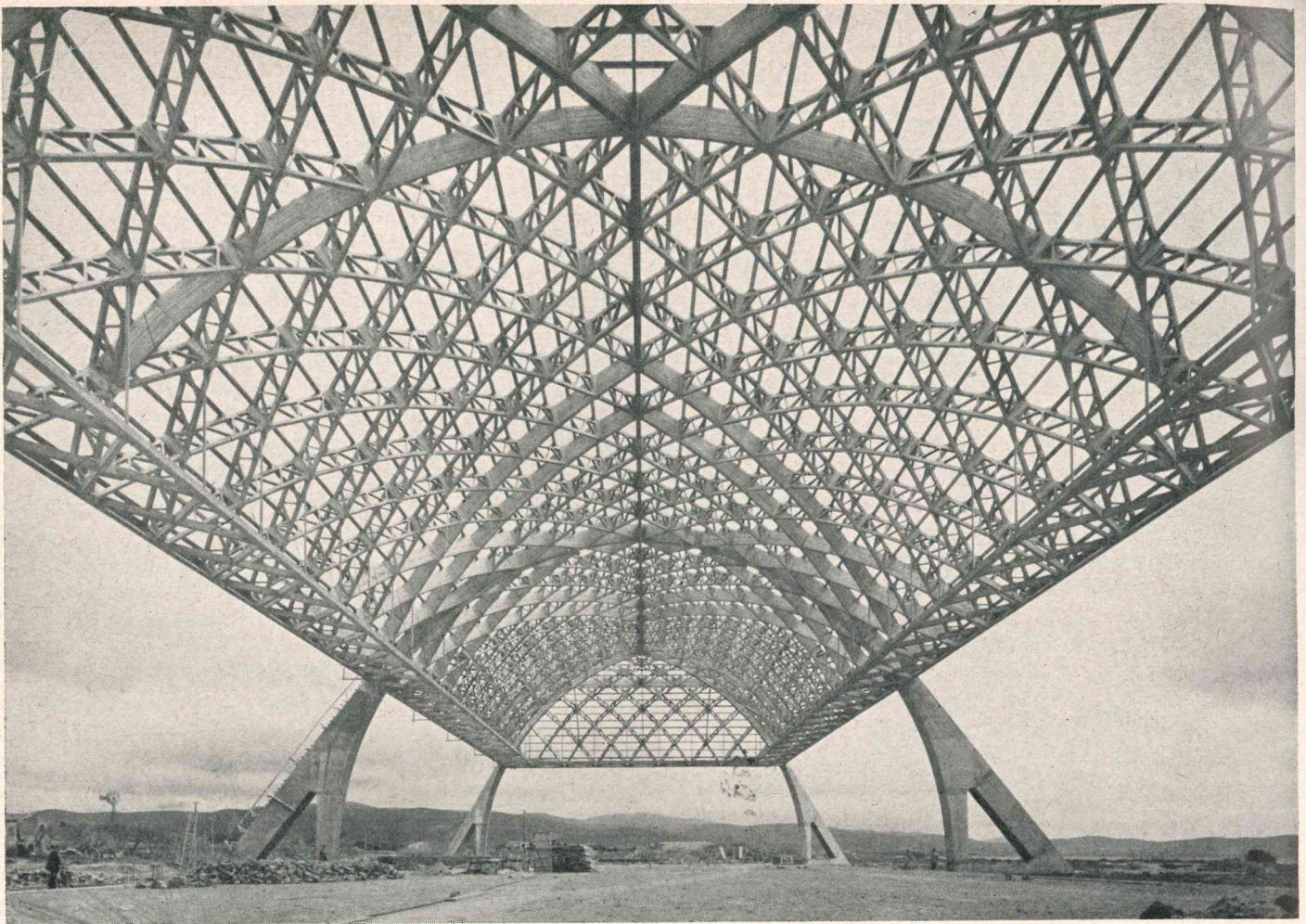
### Contributors

Alfred Frankenstein is the new music editor for ART DIGEST; he is the music editor for the San Francisco Chronicle . . . Ada Louise Huxtable has contributed several articles to ART DIGEST. Recently she returned from Italy where she was on a research assignment in design . . . Piero Dorazio is an artist-critic who lives in Rome. This spring he showed a group of his sculptures (called cartographies) in New York . . . Parker Tyler, now living in Italy, is a frequent contributor to art magazines. In the February 15th issue of ART DIGEST he wrote "Film Sense and Painting Sense" . . . H. H. Arnason is director of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and has written before for ART DIGEST . . . Edwin Ziegfeld is head of the fine and industrial arts department, Teachers College, Columbia University.

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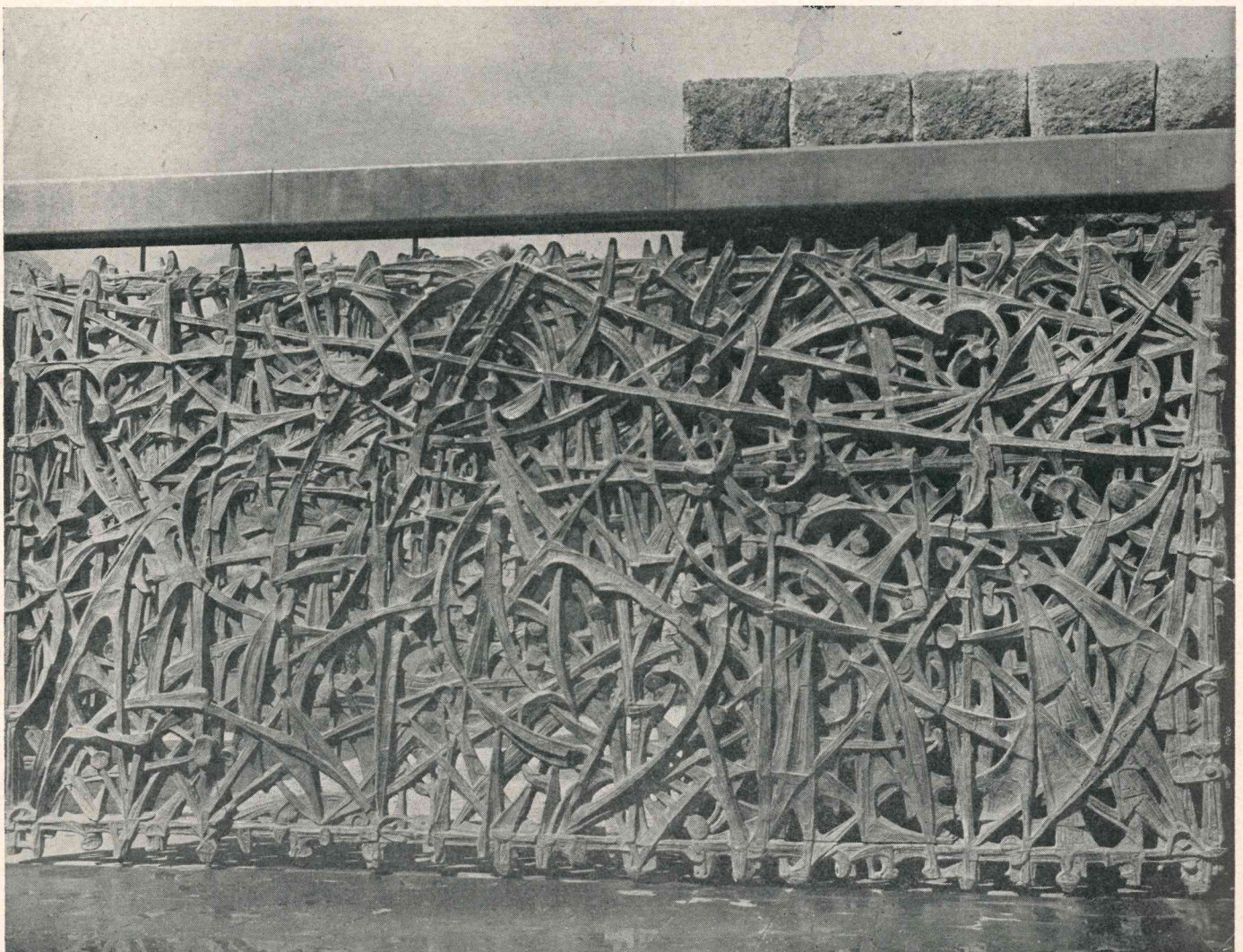
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Airplane Hangar: Rome. Architect: Pier Luigi Nervi

Mirko: *Bronze War Monument Gate, Rome*



# Post War Italy: Architecture and Design

by *Ada Louise Huxtable*

In Italy, new and old live in an effective harmony of contrast. Italy has bloomed and declined many times; there is in her the inherent and continuous power of renewal and change. In her cities, the building forms of a timeless progression of cultures stand side by side. The richness and variety of these structures, their strength and vitality, their intimations of history and human life, create the magnificent, romantic complexity that is the Italian architectural scene.

The contemporary Italian architect has a strong sense of history and a realization of the inevitability of architectural change. He is primarily concerned with the present and the future, and the development of a contemporary expression as valid for its own day as that of any of the monuments that surround him. With so many traditions, it is hard to be traditional. With so many contradictory sets of successful rules, it is often easier to follow none. He is, therefore, an individualist and an experimentalist. He indulges his natural inclinations toward a personal expression and a wide design vocabulary sympathetic to himself, which he handles with an unusual sense of style. His convictions are born of sincerity and a surprisingly sure taste; his ingenuity, his flair for the humorous "gioco" (play) give his solutions unpredictable twists and infinite scope. Italian architects today form a group whose post-war work is marked by exceptional vitality and variety.

This post-war work has attracted considerable attention. It has been called, in some error of understanding, but in recognition of its special stylistic qualities and wealth of production, a "renaissance." Actually, it is no renaissance. Contemporary architecture came late to Italy and has a history of continuous development there; only now has it reached its highpoint of activity and philosophy, 20 years behind the rest of Europe. Its present characteristics have been determined by two factors: the course of development of architecture and design in the last 20 years, and the specific contributions of the Italian heritage and temperament. The quality and character of this work has focused world attention on Italy as a creative force today.

The visitor's first impression, particularly if he comes by train to Rome, is of the striking contrast between past and present. He emerges into a new railroad station, as elegant as a drawing room. He passes through a glass-walled ticket office, covered with a curving, cantilevered ceiling. S-shaped concrete beams paralleled by strips of skylighting appear to lead the traveler, with dramatic effectiveness, beyond the glass facade of the station, directly into the heart of Rome. Just outside of the glass station wall, spotlighted with all of the art of the theatre, is the antique Roman wall, Agger Serviano. For the Anglo-Saxon mind, still tinged with Victorian gentility, for the American Calvinist conscious, the sensuous pleasure of such visual dramatics is almost too great. But once accepted, the strangely beautiful, disconcerting juxtaposition of color, light, period and style provides endless gratification. And against the brilliant confusion of the

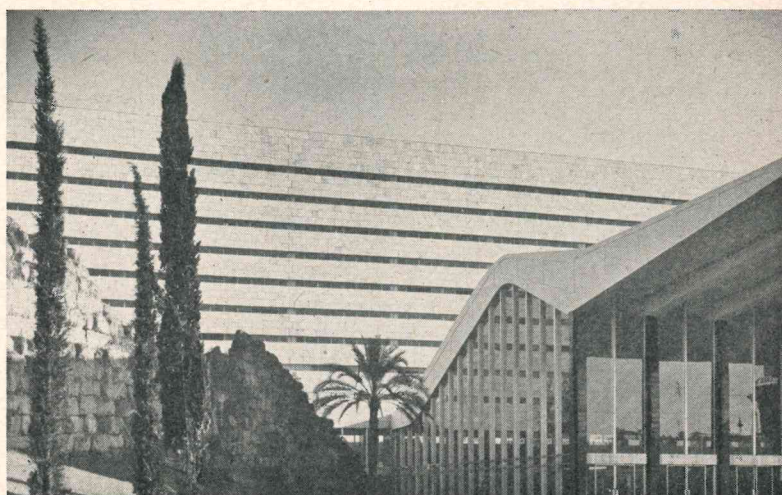
scene one begins to see certain consistent characteristics of the new work. Specifically, one becomes aware of two important Italian contributions to contemporary architecture: one structural, the other decorative. It is these two elements—the imaginative development of engineering forms and the indulgence of the decorative sense—that account for both the effectiveness and the excesses of post-war Italian design.

Partly because Italy's basic building material is concrete, partly because inexpensive labor and lack of standardization make the individualized solution practical, Italian architects and engineers are constantly devising new systems and variations on systems of reinforced concrete construction, which lead to completely new architectural forms. There is a tendency to think of building as enclosed space to be contained within a great variety of shapes for functional uses and for visual and psychological effects. Whatever the problem—a boat station, a covered market, a monument—the challenge to invent new structural-sculptural forms, to widen the horizons of traditional building, is met with energy and imagination. The results, as in the warehouses, factories and exposition halls of Pier Luigi Nervi are of equal importance to the science of engineering and to the art of architecture.

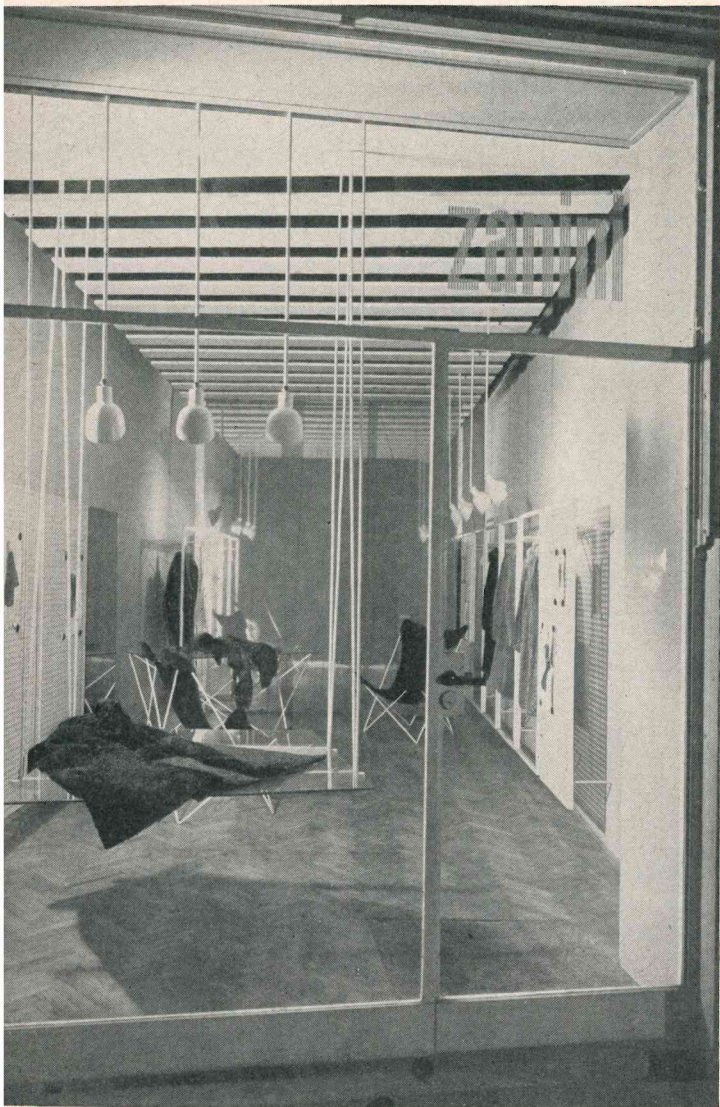
The second Italian preoccupation is with the enrichment of architecture in terms of texture and pattern, a revival of surface interest, a taste for more complex arrangements of color and form. Apartment houses, for example, by Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, Vito Latis and others in Milan, use their structural frames and balcony systems as calculated exterior patterns; they are skilfully controlled exercises in order and intricacy. There is, in the work of many architects, much use of decorative materials, mosaic, tile, ceramic, marble and glass, traditionally associated with Italy's building arts, to give their characteristic embellishment to today's architecture and interiors. There is considerable experimentation with color: for variety, in housing developments outside Rome; for psychological effect, in Milan; and for a combination of the two, in the new Olivetti workers' housing at Ivrea.

It is not strange that the Italians should be among the first to expand successfully the decorative vocabulary of modern architecture. Color, imagery and decorative materials are part of the Italian architectural tradition. Plane surfaces are native to Italy, in the simple, white-walled or tinted cubes of Mediterranean building, but tradition has always embellished the smooth facade with color or painted struc-

Rome Railway Terminal



\* This article is based on an exhibition, "The Modern Movement in Italy: Architecture and Design," prepared by the author for the International Program of the Department of Circulating Exhibitions, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition will be at the museum from August 17 to September 6.



Milan Fur Shop. Architect Franco Albini

tural decoration. It has added brilliant, patterned tiles in Campania, decorative brick ventilators in Tuscany, developed a three-dimensional complexity of geometric forms in the south. The contrast of colored marbles, tiled roofs, and slatted and colored blinds universally enriches the basic building forms. The contemporary Italian designer's acceptance of a complex vocabulary of sensuous effects is undoubtedly conditioned by the architectural heritage that surrounds him.

This great variety of forms and the particular richness of color and texture that characterize post-war Italian architecture are both stimulating and disturbing. The most provocative quality is in the frequent use of structural elements in an apparently anti-structural way: the reinforced concrete frame that is deliberately exploited for its decorative pattern, a tremendous ceiling span seemingly supported by nothing but glass, strange, organically shaped concrete shells that shock the traditional sense of structure. It was much in this manner that Michelangelo flouted the accepted functions of columns, pilasters and other Renaissance architectural elements to stress their decorative potentialities. It is this ability to experiment beyond the previous uses of an established vocabulary that distinguishes much of the post-war Italian work. It seems strange, for example, for a symbolic, non-functional structure, such as a war memorial in Milan, by the firm of Belgioioso, Peressutti and Rogers, to be designed in terms of the rigid geometry commonly associated with functional architecture of the early 20th century, and for a utilitarian building, like the chair lift station at the 1951 Milan Triennale, by Renzo Zavarella,

to be solved by a fantastic concrete shell, closer to sculpture than to the rectilinear forms of established building techniques. And yet the basic logic is that the utilitarian building is experimenting with contemporary engineering forms and their possibilities for space enclosure, while the monument uses the geometric vocabulary abstractly, in a kind of linear poetry, the function of which is emotional and esthetic.

The architect in Italy today is not architect alone, but interior and industrial designer as well. He has always shown a special flair for the art of display; his handling of exhibitions and shops has set new international standards. Franco Albini, Angelo Bianchetti, Paolo Chessa, Ignazio Gardella, Bruno Munari, and the firm of Belgioioso, Peressutti and Rogers are a few of those who have done much of the research and experimentation that translate the influences of avant-garde painting and sculpture into terms of the practical arts of design. A love for structural intricacy, a flair for elegance, for nuances of refinement, appear in the best of Italy's industrial products and home furnishings. The Italian designer is particularly fond of the use of elaborate systems of metal supports planned as mathematical patterns of subtle, linear tensions. There is a preoccupation with the decorative appearance of these structural elements, which are treated almost independently, contrasted with sculptural forms in wood, metal or marble. This juxtaposition of the staccato straight line with the flowing curved line, of the geometric shape with the free form, is a specific characteristic of Italian design. The successful use of the two seemingly antagonistic expressions creates a feeling of balanced tensions that explains much of the visual vitality of the Italian product. The degree to which this combination is held in restraint, the amount of its conscious refinement, is largely responsible for the success or failure of the individual example. Indulging in experimental license far beyond the pretense of reasonable function, the Italian artist produces designs of significant originality, as in the free form arcs and ribbons of fluorescent lighting installations by the sculptor Lucio Fontana. The lack of mass production encourages this, for when the furnishings of an interior are made to specifications and accessories are created by the artist-craftsman, ingenuity can be given full play. In the design of interiors, as in the building of cities, new and old complement each other, not with a sense of surprised discovery that the two do really look well together after all, but because the old has always been there, and the beautiful does not go out of style.

The Italian artist and architect does not hesitate to turn his hand to industrial design, often with superior results. The Olivetti typewriters and office machines, designed by Marcello Nizzoli, the automobile bodies of Pinin-Farina, the amazingly diverse production of architect-editor Gio Ponti, all attest to this versatility.

Undeniably the defeat of Fascism and the end of World War II made the present Italian production possible. Not only did it end the restrictions of the Fascist state, it also deposed the politically-sponsored academic group that represented the real dictatorship in Italian design. In 1945, there was a need for new building and for reconstruction, for export products in industry and the crafts. There were shortages of materials, money, living space and lack of standardization, that called for a special inventiveness.

Italy's limited industrialization has forced the use of a variety of new solutions, many of which will, in turn, contribute anew to the art of the machine. The dynamic and experimental quality of Italy's present work is the result of almost a decade of extraordinary creative activity, during which Italian architecture and design have emerged as a major contribution to contemporary art.