

At London Exhibition, Celebrating a Visual Master

By Alice Rawsthorn

Sept. 16, 2012

LONDON — How do you say “What do you expect?” “Do you have a cigarette?” and “Call me” without speaking? Easy. All you have to do, at least if you are Italian, is stretch your fingertips upwards and clasp them together for the first, extend your index and middle finger as if holding a cigarette for the second, and rotate an index finger while pointing it at your ear for the third.

Those gestures and many more are described in the “Supplement to the Italian Dictionary” published in 1963 by Bruno Munari. Deciphering his compatriots’ hand signals was one of many challenges that Munari set himself in a 70-year career as a designer, artist, art director, filmmaker, architect, visual theorist and newspaper columnist, who also found the time to publish some 70 books as well as to invent one of the earliest portable slide projectors.



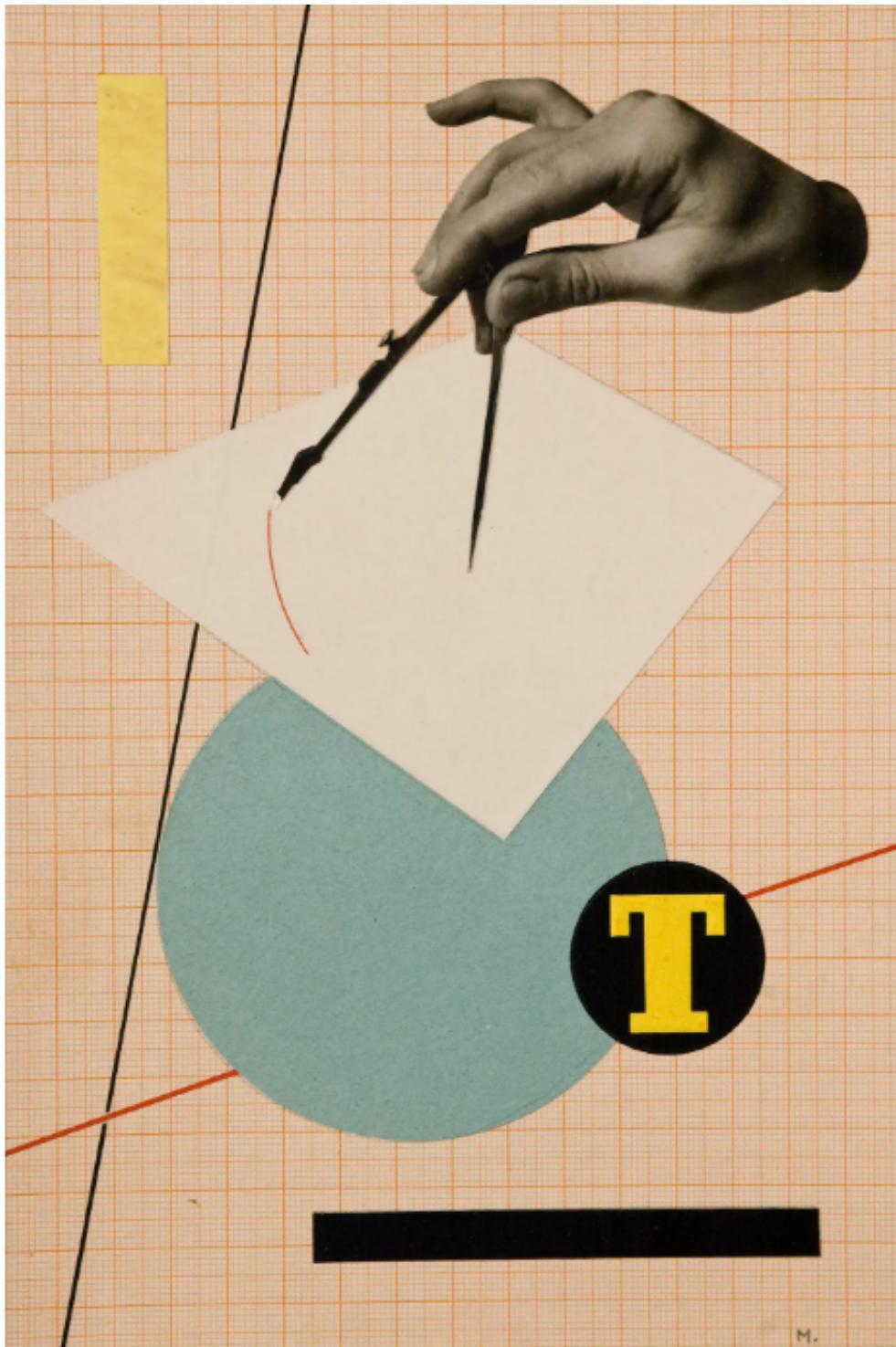
Bruno Munari in his Milan studio in 1949. Massimo & Sonia Cirulli Archive, via Estorick Collection

Munari, who died in 1998, may not be as well known as his contemporaries, like Achille Castiglioni in design, or Lucio Fontana in art, but he exerted a profound influence over visual culture during his lifetime, and continues to do so today. Both as a writer and practitioner, he embodied the 20th-century dream of imbuing everyday life with the most compelling qualities of art. “There should be no such thing as art divorced from life, with beautiful things to look at and hideous things to use,” he wrote in his 1966 book “Design as Art.” “If what we use every day is made with art, and not thrown together by chance or caprice, then we shall have nothing to hide.”

His beliefs were rooted in his early experience as a member of the Italian Futurist movement, which he joined as a 19-year-old in 1926. His relationship with Futurism is the theme of “Bruno Munari: My Futurist Past,” an exhibition opening Wednesday at the Estorick Collection in London. The show traces its influence on his work until 1950, when he forsook Futurism to become a co-founder of the abstractionist Concrete Art Movement in postwar Italy.

Born in 1907 in Milan — where his father worked as a waiter at Gambrinus, a cafe on Piazza della Scala, where wealthy Milanese opera buffs downed tamarind sodas after performances at La Scala — Munari spent his childhood in the Veneto region of northern Italy after his parents opened a hotel there. He discovered Futurism by chance as a teenager when he overheard some of the hotel guests discussing it. Futurism celebrated speed, technology and other aspects of modern life in every creative discipline, and Munari found it so enthralling that he moved to Milan.

An uncle found him a job as a graphic designer, but Munari fell in with the Futurists after meeting a member of the movement in a bookstore, and soon started to exhibit with them using the pseudonym “Bum.” In 1930, he and a friend, Riccardo Ricas, co-founded a graphic design studio, R+M, working mostly for magazines including *Natura* and *La Lettura*. From then on, Munari divided his time between commercial design projects, which ranged from advertisements for Shell and Campari, to a wartime role as art director of *Il Tempo*, the Italian equivalent of *Life* magazine, and artistic experiments.



“T,” for a 1935 advertisement in Campo Grafico magazine.
Massimo & Sonia Cirulli Archive, via Estorick Collection

One of his obsessions was the Futurist love of machinery, which Munari traced back to his childhood, when he and his friends would hike several miles to marvel at the wheel of a gigantic wooden water mill. He devised a series of what he called “Useless Machines,” or mobile sculptures that created beguiling patterns of light and shadow.

Munari was equally intrigued by the visual possibilities of artificial light. Writing in the catalog for the Estorick Collection show, Munari's son Alberto remembers how his father showed years of family photographs on the slide projector he had built, then used transparent candy wrappers and coils of onion skin to produce strangely shaped images on the screen. Working with such inexpensive materials was typical of Munari, who liked to claim (not entirely accurately) that his name meant "making something out of nothing" in Japanese and constructed sculptures, collages and architectural installations from cardboard, paper tissues, wire mesh and fishing line.

Another recurring theme in his work was its playfulness, which reflected the importance Munari attached to art's ability to enable adults to express a childlike sense of fun. After Alberto's birth, he applied the same principle to designing children's books and toys, then observed how his son responded to them. Munari's witty, beautifully illustrated books of the alphabet and fantastical contraptions like his "Useless Machines" are still popular with children today.

He continued to exhibit with the Futurists up until the Second World War, but became increasingly critical of that movement and more interested in others, notably Constructivism, which appealed to his vision of art as a socially and politically empowering medium. This strand of his work became increasingly important to Munari after the war, when he devoted many of his projects to putting Constructivist principles into practice by ending the distinction, or "divorce," between art and life.



“Aeroplanes and Archers,” 1932. Massimo & Sonia Cirulli Archive, via Estorick Collection

Munari did so by designing objects, images and books, which were produced in large quantities for the general public, yet matched the beauty, conceptual rigor and technical ingenuity of compelling artworks. Much of his work in industrial design was for the Milanese manufacturer Danese, for which he developed dozens of products, including 1964’s exquisitely shaped Falkland light.

Ever the cultural democrat, Munari aired his thoughts on art and design in a column for the Milanese daily newspaper *Il Giorno*. He published a collection of those columns and other texts in “*Design as Art*” in which he discoursed on cutlery, furniture, frying pans, slippers, colors and shapes. Munari summed up his vision in the final sentence of the book’s introductory essay: “When the objects we use every day and the surroundings we live in have become in themselves a work of art, then we shall be able to say that we have achieved a balanced life.”