



## Gabriella Crespi

The cult furniture designer  
recounts her early inspirations

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Gabriella Crespi's bewitching designs seem to radiate an almost talismanic power. The elite owners of her sleek, puzzle-box creations – often manufactured as one-of-a-kind pieces for the likes of Princess Grace, Elizabeth Arden and the Shah of Iran – treasured them in private homes and seldom sold them on. Their rarity on the auction circuit has rendered Crespi's name less recognisable than her unique vision merits – although prices rocket when a pyramid lamp or rotating coffee table does go under the hammer.

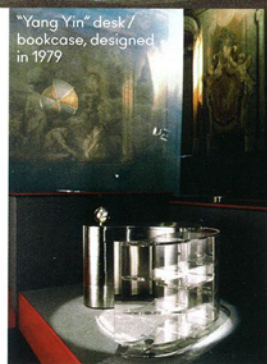
The designer, artist and socialite – her style a glamorous mix of Bond girl and Jackie O – was born in Milan in 1922, but grew up in the mellow twilights of Tuscany, kindling a love of nature that would be inextricably woven into the DNA of her designs. Crespi cut her teeth studying architecture at the prestigious Politecnico Istituto, “when I was obsessed with Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier” the now 90-year-old remembers from her Milan penthouse. In her 20s, she met Giuseppe Maria Crespi at an exclusive tennis club and soon after married into one of the richest and most powerful families in Italy; in the 19th century,

the Crespis built a thriving textile empire and later owned the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. Gabriella moved into the opulent 16th century residence Palazzo Cenci in Rome and her first creative sparks resulted in The Small Lune collection, sculptures evoking the phases of the moon: “Everything I did was always inspired by the universe,” she explains simply. The majority of her works – almost 1,500 in all – were created during the 60s and 70s for the international jet set. She conjured elegant magic-tricks of furniture, both eminently practical in their clever use of space, and deliciously extravagant. Crespi's trademark was the playful multi-functionality of her designs: coffee tables telescope into dining tables, quick-change seats swivel into beds and drawers in brass and stainless steel fold like intricate origami. The Yang Yin desk – a nod to Crespi's lifelong interest in Eastern spirituality – opens like a shell to reveal a secret interior of shelves and drawers, highly polished steel complimenting its counterpart in transparent Plexiglas.

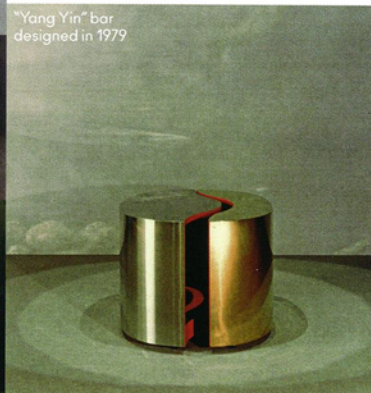
Crespi brought her architect's training to the clockwork-precise construction of moveable



"Yang Yin" table  
designed in 1979



"Yang Yin" desk /  
bookcase, designed  
in 1979



"Yang Yin" bar  
designed in 1979

components and interlocking joints - many of her innovative mechanisms were patented. Her sketches were taken to the finest craftsmen in Italy, working in brass, bamboo, Plexiglas, ebony, sportscar-red lacquer and polished steel. The interplay of light around her creations caused them to shape-shift and become liquid under candlelight: "She married disco flair to old Hollywood elegance," says Ambra Adda, the young co-founder of Miami Design. "Her inspiration came from classic craft traditions and Eastern philosophies, even as she lived a highly urbane life."

In 1973, Crespi opened the doors to her showroom and store in Milan, on the chic Via Montenapoleone (where the Louis Vuitton boutique now resides). Surreal window-displays courtesy of artist Paul Paganini advertised the bold designs inside its colonnaded entrance hall, a seductive mix of luxurious sophistication and bohemian avant-garde. As well as furniture - including a brass and leather folding seat designed to recall the jaws of an Amazonian alligator - her love of nature emerged in animal sculptures: regal, life-size bronze deer, or

a giant ostrich in whose belly a real ostrich egg was set like a precious jewel.

The tension between Crespi's high-society lifestyle and earthy love of nature fuelled her extraordinary vision. At the height of her success however, her spiritual wanderings (which had already taken her to the isolated Hebrides before the war) became the stronger of the two forces; she retired from the glitterati in favour of a simpler existence. In 1985, "I rid myself of everything," she told the New York Times. "The showrooms, the warehouse, the Rome apartment, the house in Sardinia. Everything." Journeying to India, Crespi spent almost two decades high in the Himalayas, clad in simple purple robes, studying under her guru, Sri Muniraji. Today, she continues to practice meditation daily, while enjoying a resurgent interest in her work (a retrospective in Milan opened last year) which attests to its profound influence: "It has an idiosyncratic richness, audacity and presence," explains Adda. "When you walk into a room containing a Crespi design, you can't ignore it."

Words Hannah Lack

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