Known for her singular furniture, Gabriella Crespi has resurfaced after decades in isolation to reclaim her mantle as one of the world's finest designers.

A RECLUSE RETURNS

BY DEREK BLASBERG
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THE ITALIAN DESIGNER Gabriella Crespi moved into her Milan apartment, a penthouse in the center of town with an overgrown terrace that obscures the busy metropolis below, in the early 1970s. At the time, she was a glamorous and celebrated member of international society who created interiors for friends and clients like the shah of Iran, the princess of Monaco and the king of Saudi Arabia. She used this apartment as a set in promotional materials for her modern furniture and *objets* that mixed polished metals with natural materials like bamboo and wood. These campaigns display such remarkable creations as 1975's Lotus Leaves, a side table with oscillating bamboo shelves, and 1976's sleek, polished-brass coffee table, Ellisse, which sells for more than $150,000 today.

Four and a half decades later, she's still in the same apartment and those signature furnishings are exactly where they've always been. It is Crespi who has

VISUAL LEGACY
Clockwise from left: Vintage magazines featuring Crespi's designs; the living room of Crespi's Milan apartment, with such works as her iconic Ellisse coffee table topped with the sculpture *My Soul*, the Lotus Leaf bamboo side table and sculptures from the Lune series; another sculpture from the Lune series; the Fungo lamp; a photograph of Crespi in the 1970s.

GOLDEN TOUCH
Above: Crespi's collection of signature hats. Right: A selection of 1970s jewelry designed by Crespi in copper plated with 24-karat gold, featuring fossils and amethysts.


JAZZ

changed. Absent is the extroverted, chatty designer, whom her 61-year-old daughter, Elisabetta, describes as having been "volcanic in every sense of the word." In her place is a quiet 93-year-old woman with a consternating glare and reserved poise. Says Elisabetta, "She changed identities: from jet set to spiritual."

"She's like the Greta Garbo of Milan," the artist Francesco Vezzoli says when he and I meet on the buzzing street outside her apartment. Vezzoli, a popular Milan figure, arranged a rare visit with the reclusive designer. Crespi receives us wearing what has become her uniform: layers of flowing, white linen that resemble Eastern religious robes. Her face, still captivating with pale, translucent skin and sky-high cheekbones, is hidden under a cream-colored felt hat and behind oversize sunglasses, both of which stay on while Elisabetta serves fresh cranberry juice in brass goblets that her mother designed in the '70s. When Crespi speaks, which isn't often, it's in hushed tones, using a minimum of words to express her point.

The Garbo comparison is apt. After spending the 1960s and '70s in the center of her generation's social swirl, the designer abruptly abandoned her craft and retreated entirely from the limelight. It was 1986 when she met the late Shri Muniraji, an Indian spiritual advisor who would become her guru, and followed him high into the Himalaya Mountains. She sold her inventory and gave away what remained, spending almost the entirety of the next 20 years in near silence on a spiritual quest. She kept in touch with her children—Elisabetta and a son, Gherardo—but practically everyone wishing to discuss her previous life as a much-admired Italian designer was told she was unavailable and she wanted to stay that way.

That is, until recently, when she suddenly re-emerged from a self-imposed exile. As she approached 90, she decided to pick up her design career where she had left off. She called the original artisans (or, in some cases, their children) to say she was making a comeback. In April, as part of Salone del Mobile design week in Milan, the Rita Fancsaly gallery showed four new versions of some of her most famous designs—the Dama and Ellisse tables, the Z desk and the Yang Yin bar, in limited editions of nine (this time in bronze)—as well as her first collaboration with another creator, a special version of her Puzzle table with Italian glass artist Franco Deboni.

THE DESIGN WORLD that Crespi is re-entering—and her place within it—is much different than the one she left. For one, she is no longer a lone female in what was a male-dominated industry. After graduating from the Liceo Artistico at the Accademi di Belle Arti di Brera, she began studying architecture at the Polytechnic University of Milan in 1944. "At that time, I needed all my courage to start," Crespi says of finishing school and starting her career. "But challenges never discouraged me. My desire to go on was stronger than my fear of failing."

Another challenge in Crespi's early career was to gain the respect of her peers. In 1948, she married Giuseppe Maria Crespi, a member of a well-known Italian family that owned textile factories and the national daily, *Corriere della Serra*. With her beauty, stylish flair and this new last name, she was suddenly in the top tier of the Milanese upper class. The creative community at the time was reluctant to accept such a glamorous member. Explains Vezzoli: "She was a woman, she was an aristocrat, she was wealthy, which for many in the left wing was intellectually detrimental. But today, in this post-ideological moment, all the things that would have worked against her are no longer valid. People look at the work, and they want to buy it because it's so special."

Her creations also stand out because, in today's world of easily digestible interior trends, Crespi's singular designs are deeply personal. "My work started as a labor of love with great attention to details and hand finishings. I never wanted to mass-produce anything," she says, relying on her daughter to help translate and formulate her thoughts. Each piece began as a hand-sketched drawing, which she then sent to local craftsmen to be realized. "The relationships with my artisans were so close that sometimes a phone call was enough to create a prototype," she says. "I still work the same way today."

Crespi's designs captured the glitz and the glamour of a generation. "A marriage of disco flair with Hollywood elegance" is how they're described by Ambra Medda, Christie's global creative director for 20th- and 21st-century design and contributor to a monograph of Crespi's work. "She is the purest expression of the moment she lived in—she was taking commissions from some of the world's most magnetic people with houses around the globe." Crespi presented her collections everywhere from Dallas and New York to Tehran and Rio de Janeiro. "My best friends were my favorite clients."

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—GABRIELLA CRESPI

Elisabetta, who began working with her mother as a teenager in 1970, says she was extremely prolific. "She created every day, hundreds of ideas. She was like a fountain." Crespi was constantly sketching—indeed, photographs from this period show her with a notepad in hand—and she was fiercely individual and professionally driven. (She and Giuseppe divorced in the early 1960s.) Elisabetta remembers her wanting to be known as an "independent island." Her mother once became infuriated when she learned at an opening in Rome that another designer had copied one of her designs. "[The fashion designer] Valentino was there and told her this happened to him all the time, and that she should be happy because fakes were the biggest compliment. But she was not happy. Not at all!"

"I have always considered my independence in my work as well as in my life as one of my biggest achievements," Crespi says today.

Crespi's best-known pieces are remarkable not only for their sleek, modern design, but also for their functionality, like the Plurimi furniture series, which she first introduced in 1968 and produced through the 1970s. Forms could be opened and rearranged; some, like the Yang Yin mobile bars, featured internal shelves and storage spaces for bottles. In 1974, she had a hit with the Rising Sun collection, which featured furniture and housewares in starburst patterns of bamboo. This collection expanded to include many types of home décor, such as platters, bassinets, and screens. (In April, an original Rising Sun ice bucket was on sale at 1stdibs.com for $3,200.)

CRESPI CANNOT PINPOINT the precise moment she decided to shutter operations and head for the Himalayas. She was always consumed with the spiritual: In 1945, after World War II, she spent several months living in isolation in the Hebrides, and she points to the celestial inspirations behind her early designs of jewelry and objects in the 1950s. But she says that meeting Muniraji in the mid-1980s was the most important factor of her seemingly abrupt decision. "At a certain moment, she decided that she had completed her cycle, she had finished that phase as a designer. She knew she was going to be gone for a long time," Elisabetta remembers.

"Meditation and karma yoga were my main activities during my 20 years in India," Crespi says. But even in her spiritual enclave, she could not escape the legend of her previous life: "One of my [assigned] roles was to decorate the temple in the Himalayas, and it is probably true that my past experience was still strongly alive."

For nearly two decades, she was content in the mountains and didn't long for any of the luxuries that her career afforded her. "I loved my new life so much that I didn't miss anything from my old one," she says.

While she was silent in the mountains, the design world was abuzz about the lost works of Gabriella Crespi. Modern-design collectors became interested in the early 2000s. New York–based dealer Suzanne Demisch was one of the first to bring Crespi's pieces back to New York. "This is a time when people were just rediscovering the 1970s. Everything was kind of up for grabs, and no one knew what it meant at the time." Demisch says it was obvious how haphazard Crespi's departure must have been. "She gave everything away, and no one cared about it," she says. Demisch discovered a whole chunk of Crespi's archive, including sketches and designs for unexecuted pieces, in a Milan antiques shop. She rented a truck to drive around the South of France and picked up major pieces at outdoor flea markets. "I found a mirror in some shop in South Beach, Miami, and they had no idea what it was. I was so excited," Demisch says, still in disbelief.

According to Demisch, early in Crespi's design career, "She was considered more décor than

design." This was no doubt discouraging to Crespi, but time has proved that her vision was one of the most influential of her era. "It takes time to weed out the good and the bad, and it takes scholarship to understand what it means. Her work has relevance. It has a point of view," Demisch says.

"People with a specific, sophisticated taste always understood it," says Liz O'Brien, another New York dealer. "For me, she really epitomizes the kind of cosmopolitan chic of the 1970s." As more clients asked for Crespi pieces, O'Brien became intrigued with her legend. "I wanted to see her so badly and meet her, but she was gone."

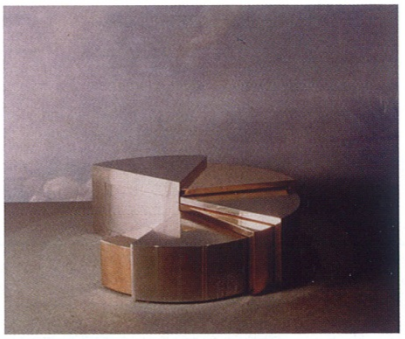
Crespi eventually made her way back to Italy. While visiting her family in Milan in 2006, she fell and broke her femur. Elisabetta acknowledges that her mother would not have stayed if she hadn't been injured, and Crespi is philosophical about her unexpected homecoming. "It is possible that my accident happened when a new 'cycle' was to begin. Something I have learned from my spiritual path in India is to stay in the present, whatever life brings you."

The fashion industry has long embraced Crespi's aesthetic. "She was boho chic before boho chic existed," says Italian *Vogue*'s editor, Franca Sozzani, who owns one of Crespi's coveted Z desks. Sergio Rossi dedicated a collection of shoes to her designs, Fendi started installing Crespi furniture in its flagships and Stella McCartney, who had been a collector of her work, sold her jewelry at her boutiques. "I was immediately drawn to the warmth and the femininity," she says. In 2008, McCartney adds, "I totally sought her out, wrote her a letter and asked if we could meet for tea. We met at a hotel in Milan, and I learned about her life, her warmth and all that she has been able to achieve as a woman in design. Our relationship really built off from that, and we stayed in touch and still write each other notes. She is an incredible woman with such strength, and yet there is a sense of fragility. It's a special combination." The sunglasses Crespi wears every day now are gifts from McCartney.

Nearly three decades after she paused her career, Crespi has again littered her apartment with sketches and furniture prototypes. "I'm restarting from where I left off," she says, clarifying that she isn't merely recycling old ideas but rather continuing them. "Bronze will be the new *fil rouge*. Most of my sculptures were made of bronze, but never my furniture. It's one of my favorite materials, so precious and very difficult with which to work to realize these size works." Continues Elisabetta, "This dimension in bronze is almost impossible. It's no problem in brass or steel, but for bronze it was a lot of work, and this is something that we are very proud of."

Crespi's daughter spends much of her time in the Milan apartment now, both as collaborator and companion. Crespi meditates twice a day, and her words are as carefully meted out as ever. "[She is] very quiet. Muniraji answered every question through silence. From him, she learned a new way to communicate," Elisabetta says.

So, speaking of this long-awaited return, Crespi chooses to quote another designer, the late François-Xavier Lalanne: "The art of living is the supreme art." •



FINE VINTAGE
Clockwise from above: Crespi pictured with her 1970s rhinoceros figurine; the Sit & Sip table from 1980, from the Plurimi collection; Crespi's iconic 1974 Z desk, much in demand by collectors.

WILD WORLD
Clockwise from left: Crespi's 1973 Puzzle table; the Tre Pinguini lamp; the Tavolo 2000, Crespi's 1970 coffee table, topped with obelisks.

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–STELLA McCARTNEY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF GABRIELLA CRESPI (4); COURTESY OF ARCHIVIO GABRIELLA CRESPI; FRANCESCA MORGI