



Beautiful ascetic: Gabriella Crespi's apartment in the Palazzo Cenci in Rome, which she sold in 1987 to follow her guru; Crespi, right, with her Plexiglas obelisks in 1970.



Top Brass

DESPITE THE SHEEN OF HER GLAMOROUS LIFE, THE DESIGNER **GABRIELLA CRESPI** NEEDED MORE. ELAINE MAYERS SALKALN TRACKS HER DOWN.

Any of us today, especially those of us who have attained a certain age without withering under the weight of it all, have lived multiple lives — either in tandem or in sequence. We have hyphenated identities that often reveal a colorful collage of karmic convergences.

So it is with Gabriella Crespi, who at 82 can look back on having been a designer, artist, manufacturer, marketing genius, glamorous socialite and, since 1987, ardent follower of Shri Muniraji, an Indian guru with whom she studies for months at a stretch high in the Himalayas, seeking Satya (truth), unity and a feeling of infinity.

"I take a taxi from Delhi nine hours to Annapurna in the north of India," she says. (She used to take the train when she was more agile.)

Her guru, a disciple of Babaji, himself said to be an incarnation of Krishna, is the "Yogi-Christ of Modern India." And, in a sense, Crespi is experiencing a kind of rebirth, too. There is a renewed interest in her furniture and accessory designs — about 1,500 all told, including lamps, silverware and jewelry, in a huge range of materials, from metal, wood, marble and bamboo to seeds, shells and gemstones. Produced mainly in the 1960's and 70's, her creations graced some of the most elegant



Base instinct: Crespi's Gold Drops goblet.

homes in the world. Elizabeth Arden "fell in love with my designs, and wanted everything in the collection," Crespi said recently. Thomas Hoving, Princess Grace, Günther Sachs and the Shah of Iran were other aficionados.

Today, her furniture and decorative objects are beginning to bring high prices, as the design world turns its focus from midcentury French to Italian. Suzanne Demisch, a New York dealer in 20th-century furniture who has sold a number of Crespi's pieces, considers her work "much more innovative than what other Italians were doing at the time." It is also more difficult to find, according to Liz O'Brien, another New York dealer, because "people still treasure it." O'Brien recently sold an elliptical brass coffee table for \$15,000.

The Tavolo 2000 table features retractable leaves and was envisioned by Crespi as furniture of the future. Originally designed as rectangular forms made of stainless steel, the tables were eventually reworked as ovals made of brass, a material the Italians were crazy for in the 60's. Similarly, a square end table called the Magic Cube later evolved into a brass cylinder. In a taller form, it opened into a bar.

The multifunctionality of her furniture is a Crespi trademark. She made coffee tables that rose to dining height, bookcases that became room dividers, seating that converted into beds. In her Yang Yin collection (1979), a cylindrical desk opened like a clamshell to reveal storage. There was also a Yang Yin bar and a free-standing wardrobe, like a steamer trunk, with hangers on one side and drawers on the other. They were made of contrasting materials — one side was ebony, for example, and the other brass.

While the furniture looks like sculpture, it moves with the precision of a fine watch, and her mechanisms are patented. This is due, no doubt, to her architectural studies at the Politecnico Institute in Milan. "I was in love with Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright when I

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELAINE MAYERS BALKALN



That 70's showplace: Crespi's mechanically expanding brass tables are flanked by her Quick Change seating.

was young," she said. But it was also familial. Born in Milan in 1922, she was raised in Tuscany near Florence, where she first developed her love of nature. Her father was a mechanical engineer, and her mother taught her "to be generous with others," a trait that has been most apparent in her spiritual wanderings. By 1945, she was already on a spiritual path, having spent many months at the end of the war in isolation in the Hebrides, off the coast of Scotland. "The desire for silence and infinity had already been born inside me," she said. She met her husband, Giuseppe Maria Crespi, at a tennis club in Milan. After their marriage in 1948, she lived with his family, one of the richest in Italy. The Crespis built a huge textile empire and owned the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. Two children, "the object of my life," followed. Though the couple later divorced, they are still friends, having recently spent Christmas Eve together in her seven-room penthouse in Milan, which looks as fresh and modern today as it did when I photographed it back in 1979 for an article on her.

Crespi's apartment is a tribute to her design acumen: her elliptical brass coffee table is surrounded by her Quick Change seating, which turns into a bed; her bamboo dining table, with its bravura sunburst pattern, has the cachet of intricate inlay and is complemented by a sensuous brass credenza with curved ends. On the terrace there are several groupings of her bamboo furniture with matching planters, and her brass lamps are in every room. Their half-dome shades (either in Plexiglas or bamboo) hark back to Tiffany and Art Nouveau — no doubt attributable to the antimodernism then in the air, though Crespi would dispute this.

"I was inspired only by the universe," she says.

Crespi did not have a factory, or even a separate studio. She would make detailed drawings at home and bring them to various artisans around Milan, where, in those days, a designer could dream up a sensational piece and quickly have a prototype made, sometimes overnight, by a fine

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SUZANNE DEMISCH



Eastern influence: still based in Milan, Crespi (shown in 1991) spends several months a year at a Himalayan ashram.

woodworker or metalsmith. For instance, to make her tableware and necklaces — called Gold Drops — she would sculpture models in wax, and others would make the molds; her birds and animals, including her giant ostrich, with a real ostrich egg for its belly, were begun in clay and then silver-plated. At the height of her success, Crespi maintained a showroom and warehouse in Milan and a showroom and glamorous apartment in the historic Palazzo Cenci in Rome (where her pieces looked right at home set against Umbrian frescoes). In New York, she sold to the trade through Casa Bella and for a time at Neiman Marcus. And then, in 1987, she abruptly stopped. "I rid myself of everything," she said. "The showrooms, the warehouse, the Rome apartment, the house in Sardinia. Everything." Even her designer clothes and furs gave way to the ascetic wraps of Hindu holy men.

Her choice of color is interesting, however. Instead of saffron, she says, "I like to wear purple." But she bends to tradition and wears the red dot in the center of her forehead.

When Crespi happened upon a photo of Babaji, it was instant recognition. She felt she had known him in a previous life. She still lives in her Milan apartment part of the year, but her life there is more spartan — her diet is vegetarian, and she has become more frugal. "But rich inside," she adds.

She can add "author" to her list of credits. The memoir of her spiritual journey, called "Search for Infinity — Himalaya," details her struggle to reach the unity as described in Kundalini yoga, the final goal of merging male and female energy.

And has she found infinity? "Oh, yes," Crespi sighs joyfully. "But it is never-ending." ■

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