

ICONIC STYLE

THIS PAGE: *Gabriella Crespi in 1970.*
OPPOSITE PAGE: *the designer's Yang Yin desk at the 15th-century Palazzo Cenci in Rome, her first showroom.*

WOMAN of mystery

Gabriella Crespi's glamorous furniture and objects epitomised jet-set chic in the 1960s and '70s. Then, at the height of her career, the sophisticated Italian designer left it all behind.
By Jason Mowen



PHOTOGRAPHERS: OLIVIERO TOSCANI (PORTRAIT), ROBERT EMMETT BRIGHT

In contemplating the life and work of enigmatic Italian designer Gabriella Crespi, one cannot help but think, at least momentarily, of Greta Garbo. One of the most beguiling actresses ever to grace the silver screen, the Swedish-born Garbo possessed an inimitable style that won her an international, cult-like following throughout the 1920s and '30s. Then, seemingly overnight, she gave up her craft and all things Hollywood and disappeared into the confines of a New York apartment, leaving in her wake nothing but the echo of a line from 1932's *Grand Hotel*: "I want to be alone."

Like Garbo, Crespi was also dazzlingly beautiful and a brilliant artist, the reigning queen of the Italian decorative arts scene throughout the 1960s and '70s. Renowned for mainly one-off objects, furniture and lighting pieces in highly polished metals, plexiglass

and bamboo, Crespi created sculpturally formed designs that reflected the international, jet-set chic of her equally glamorous clientele — the Shah of Iran, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and Princess Grace of Monaco to name a few — and was a key figure in the decorative arts renaissance that took place in her native Italy, and beyond, at the time. Then, in the mid-1980s, at what must have been the zenith of her career, she abandoned Milan and the world of design to embark on a spiritual journey through India that would last almost two decades.

Many years later, Crespi would reflect: "I have always considered my independence in my work as well as in my life as one of my biggest achievements." Born into a cultivated and open-minded family in Milan in 1922, the young Gabriella was imbued with a love of French culture from an early age that would greatly inform »

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« her work as a designer. She graduated from the Brera Academy of Fine Arts and then studied architecture at the Polytechnic University of Milan, one of just a handful of women to do so at the time. In 1948 she married Giuseppe Maria Crespi, whose family, prominent textile industrialists, owned the national daily, *Corriere Della Sera*; they had two children, Gherardo and Elisabetta, but separated in the late 1950s. Crespi relocated to Rome and began her career, sketching and making wax prototypes of decorative objects that were then brought to life by skilled Italian artisans.

“At the beginning, it was certainly more difficult for a woman and I had to summon up all my courage to overcome the obstacles,” she said. “Fortunately today, passion and creativity are no longer hindered by the same limitations.”

In the early '60s she began what was to be an important two-decade collaboration with the House of Dior, which commissioned tableware, accessories and, later, furniture from the Italian designer. She opened her first showroom, at the 15th-century Palazzo Cenci in Rome in 1964, and a second, at Via Montenapoleone in Milan, in 1973. Elisabetta, who began working in the business in the early '70s, recalls her mother was constantly sketching: “She created every day, hundreds of ideas. She was like a fountain.”

Crespi's foray into furniture design began with the first Plurimi series in 1970, with subsequent Plurimi collections launched in 1976, 1980 and 1982. Iconic designs include the Magic Cube bar cabinet;

Z Table and Z Bar; Ellisse coffee table; and the Yang Yin desk. The Lotus Leaves side table and other pieces from the Rising Sun collection recall the straw marquetry used by Jean-Michel Frank in the '30s, while the Fungo Lamp references its Tiffany predecessors from the Art Nouveau period. Sleek and futuristic at times, organic and even whimsical at others, a Crespi design was always pure glamour in the truest sense of the word.

The designer, who passed away earlier this year, maintained only one vestige of her old life — an apartment in the centre of Milan — during the years of her self-imposed exile. A veritable cabinet of Crespi curiosities, it was here to which she returned in 2005, at age 83, almost as suddenly as she'd departed two decades prior. She was also to return to the world of design — a collection of shoes for Sergio Rossi and limited-edition jewellery based on designs from the '60s for Stella McCartney, not to mention new and reinterpreted furniture and objects — albeit more quietly and, in true Garbo fashion, as an elegant recluse. *VL*

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1. *Tre Pinguini* sculpture lamp in gilded bronze with Murano blown glass eggs (1970–74). 2. *Cubo Magico* brass coffee table/bar cabinet (1970). 3. *Fungo* bamboo-and-brass floor lamp (1973–75) and brass-and-plexiglass table lamp (1970). 4. *Airone* gilded bronze sculpture with Murano blown-glass egg (1973). 5. *Ellisse* Persian marble coffee table (1976).

