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# In the spotlight

Italian lighting manufacturer Artemide becomes a public company next October. **Virginio Briatore** visits its owner Ernesto Gismondi in Milan and shines a light on the reasons for its success

ARTEMIDE is an institution in the history of Italian design. Next October it will be listed as a public company on the stock market. As with many Italian companies, it is largely run by one character. In Italy, this figure is described as the person who "runs the ship". And in the case of Artemide, you are looking at a ship built, christened, launched and steered by Ernesto Gismondi, entrepreneur and designer, owner and driving force.

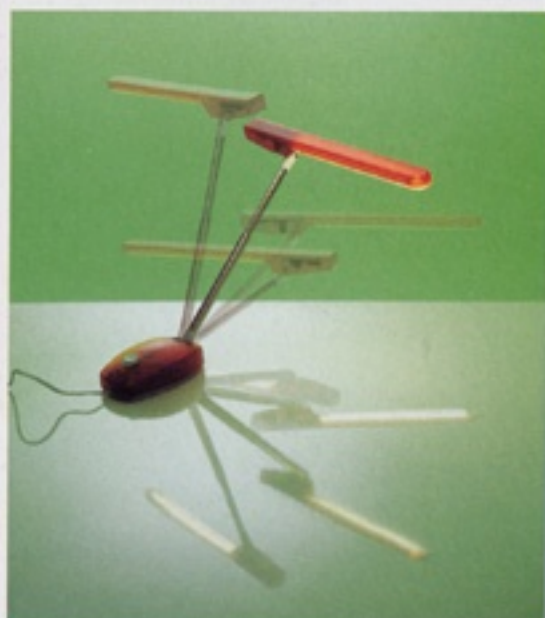
Founded by Gismondi and Milanese designer Sergio Mazza in 1959, Artemide is now an international group operating 16 companies, wholly owned, or in partnership with, 35 exclusive distributors around the world. The product lines offer solutions for all lighting needs, from the home to public buildings.

Gismondi, known to everybody as the "ingegnere" (a title which refers to his qualifications, but in the Italian language it also carries a meaning of respect), had just completed his studies with a dual degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the Milan Polytechnic (1957) and in Rocket Engineering from the University of Engineering of Rome (1959).

Artemide was created with the aim of producing lamps, and in 1960, Mazza had already designed the company's first table lamp, appropriately named Alfa. This model was in fact the first in an extraordinary series of designers and products: in the 1960s the catalogue expanded with Boalum, by Livio Castiglioni and Piero Frattini, a serpentine lamp 8m in length; Lesbo by Angelo Mangiarotti, in sculpted blown glass; the legendary Nesso mushroom, designed by Architetti Urbanisti Città Nuova; and, in 1967,







Clockwise from far left:  
Eclisse 2 table or wall lamp  
in white by Vico Magistretti  
for the Modern Classic line;  
Esperia Tavola table  
luminaire by Ernesto  
Gismondi for the  
Metamorfosi line; E.Light 6W  
table lamp in orange by  
Ernesto Gismondi; Ernesto  
Gismondi: the 'ingegnere'  
and co-founder of Artemide  
with the Pan Floor light by  
Ernesto Gismondi for the  
Architectural line

the Eclisse bedside lamp by Vico Magistretti, winner of the Compasso d'Oro, the most prestigious Italian design award.

These five models, together with another 13, all designed in the 1960s, were re-released as new editions in 1999, under the heading Modern Classic, attaining the status of cult objects. Other Artemide design history milestones featured in museum collections include the Aggregato model by Enzo Mari and Giancarlo Piretti, the totemic Callimaco floor lamp by Ettore Sottsass, and above all the best-selling "desk lamps": Tizio by Richard Sapper and Tolomeo by Michele De Lucchi and Giancarlo Piretti.

The Tolomeo lamp dates back to 1989. Appropriately enough, it was around then that Artemide embarked on a strategic transformation. From an Italian company which specialised in "home systems", it became a leading international player in the lighting sector, producing a full range of products, which were con-

ceived as "Human Light". This is, in effect, Artemide's ethos, to create an intelligent light, conceived for specific "life contexts" to be combined with different "light contexts".

Artemide's corporate headquarters are in Pregnana Milanese, nine miles from the centre of Milan. In the rather bleak landscape of the Italian flatland, devastated by industrial, commercial and residential construction, where unbridled speculation has run freely due to administrative incompetence and corruption, the Artemide quarters stands out for its unique setting. On one side is a long avenue of roses, while on the other, a meadow inhabited by a number of animals, including some beautiful donkeys. Apparently, the first of the herd was rescued from its cruel fate as a pack animal by the engineer himself. Gismondi purchased the beast while he was on one of his sailing jaunts to the Aeolian Islands near Sicily and brought it back to Milan.

**VB:** In terms of the company and its strategy, what are the most important past episodes?

**EG:** The day we started on 11 January 1960, and then 1971, when Sergio Mazza gave up his share in the firm. For 30 years our policy has been based on the conquest of markets, on the organisation of an export network composed of companies we own, under the name Artemide. We now have 12 such companies in 12 different countries, and each of them has made an effort to fit into the local context. We have increased the number of our design contacts, in an attempt to be international in terms of names, but Italian in terms of style – a clear, but delicate notion, almost a marriage between the designer and the company, which has been possible because of my direct involvement as a filter.

We have gradually expanded our range of products, getting involved in lighting for the workplace, and then for architecture and the city. It's at this point that we learnt a lesson that is better expressed in Milanese dialect: "Offelè fa il tò mesté". Translated in English this means that everyone should do what they are best at. Nobody can do everything. Even if you have the technical means to achieve success in a parallel sector, you also need another mentality.

**VB:** Is this when you began to acquire specialised companies?

**EG:** Yes, to continue growing in a more exciting way, in 1995 we bought the French company Megalit, which specialises in lighting for the office. This was a very good choice, thanks to the quality of fabrication, design, and the openness of the personnel. The following year we acquired the German firm DZ Licht, renowned for its expertise in the field of outdoor lighting. After all, what did we know about materials that can withstand acid rain? Actually, what we have done is to acquire the know-how of other companies and cultures. Today, thanks to this very "German", precise, obstinate factory, along with our gentler touch and passion for our work, we are creating a range of innovative products designed by Michele De Lucchi, Norman Foster, Italo Rota, Umberto Riva and the German designer Klaus Begasse.

**VB:** So could we say that today Artemide is a trio of companies, each with its own expertise: residential, workplace, the urban environment?

**EG:** The real situation is more complex, but that just about sums it up. We also have other production facilities in Hungary, the Czech Republic, the US, but obviously we have opted for a rationalisation. Today there are three main factories designed for manufacturing, equipped with numerical control technologies to guarantee quality, which operate under our guidance. We control the entire process. Artemide is the mother company and makes the decisions regarding strategy, design and image. We have a further sub-division of responsibilities ►





Top left: Tizio Titanium table lamp by Richard Sapper;  
Above: Boalum 8m serpentine lamp by Livio Castiglioni and Piero Frattini for Modern Classic line;  
Left: Tolomeo Video table lamps by Michele De Lucchi and Giancarlo Piretti

inside the company: the architect Carlotta De Bevilacqua is responsible for concepts, overall vision and communication, while I handle products and research and development. I feel very confident in this area today, because we now have three specialised divisions.

**VB:** Is your objective to bring design culture into situations where, until now, the parameters have been purely technical in nature?

**EG:** Yes. We've asked ourselves what we could do in that sort of market. In our main sector, that of lighting for the home, it is the user who buys the product, while in the other sectors there is a professional expert responsible for making choices. At this point we need to make an effort to persuade these decision-makers, to propose a better balance between the typical parameters of efficiency, durability, quality and price with the fifth, less tangible but decisive value element: design. It's a clear trend and we can see that the other companies, like Zumtobel, are doing the same thing.

**VB:** Which product is the biggest source of income to Artemide?

**EG:** The Tolomeo system is our leading product in an overall consolidated balance, for 2000, of \$68m.

**VB:** Why have you decided to go public and be listed on the stock market? Is this a signal of a possible shareholder reorganisation?

**EG:** That's out of the question. I've been the owner of Artemide from the beginning, and that's not going to change. In October, we'll be listed on the stock market because we want to grow, to make investments, to maintain and

expand our computerised production systems and develop the new sales network. Our objective goes beyond the sale of products toward the sale of services. We want to create specific lighting projects equipped with software, or with presence detectors. Lighting that can change in keeping with circumstances, offering variable atmosphere for individual or collective users, adapting to variable contexts. To do this we are focusing on a network of exclusive outlets; at the moment we already have 22 Artemide shops in the main international areas, including two in London.

Recently we organised the outlet in Paris, which is an interesting model. An old "hotel particulier" with products for the home on the first floor, the technical lighting fixtures on the second, while the third level is for training courses, and the top floor contains the design studios.

So the new adventure of Artemide has begun. Its key concept of "thinking about light in terms of human needs rather than those of the space", lives through its designs. Surprisingly, it's the consumers who have suggested to Artemide how to broaden the use of popular lamps such as Tizio and Tolomeo. Conceived initially as simple desk lamps, they have increasingly been used in restaurants, bars and hotels. So consumers have the last word, but so does the engineer: "The most beautiful light I've ever experienced is the light I make by draping my underwear over the horrid lamps I always find on the bedside tables in hotels," says Gismondi. ■

English translation by Steve Piccolo

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