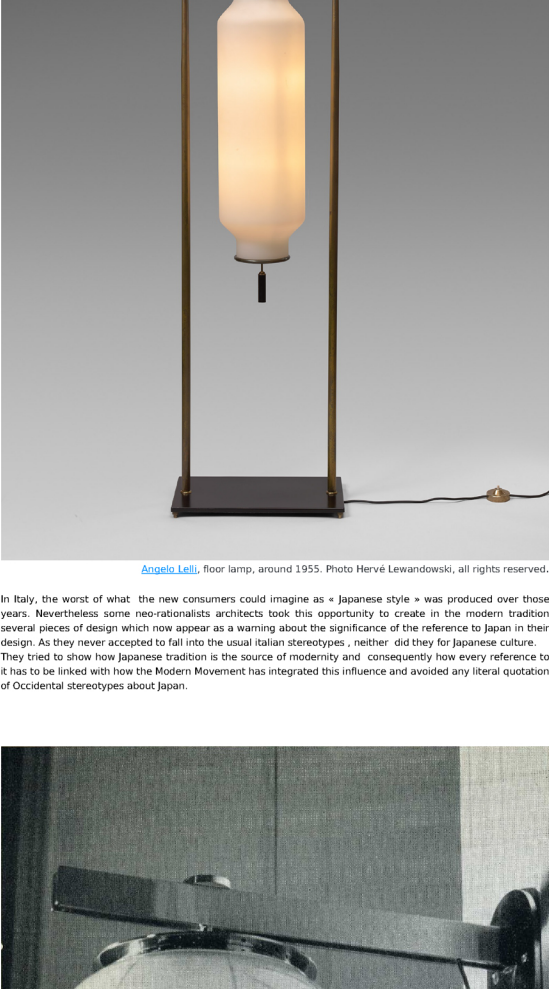


## Neo-rationalists Italian Architects, Japan and Modern Tradition (1950-1973)

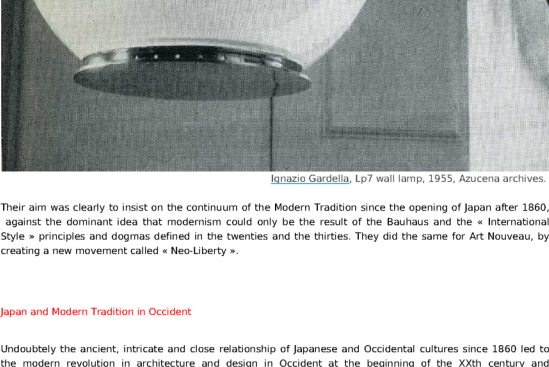
For better and for worse

Since the first wave of Japonism, after 1860 in Britain and then in the Occidental world, Japanese culture never had such a success as the one which can be identified from San Francisco to Helsinki in the 1950's and 1960's.



Angelo Lelli, floor lamp, 1955. Photo Hervé Lewandowski, all rights reserved.

In Italy, the worst of what the new consumers could imagine as « Japanese style » was produced over those years. Nevertheless some neo-rationalists architects took this opportunity to create in the modern tradition several pieces of design which now appear as a warning about the significance of the reference to Japan in their design. As they never accepted to fall into the usual Italian stereotypes, neither did they for Japanese culture. They tried to show how Japanese tradition is the source of modernity and consequently how every reference to it has to be linked with how the Modern Movement has integrated this influence and avoided any literal quotation of Occidental stereotypes about Japan.



Ignazio Gardella, Lp7 wall lamp, 1955. Azucena archives.

Their aim was clearly to insist on the continuum of the Modern Tradition since the opening of Japan after 1860, against the dominant idea that modernism could only be the result of the Bauhaus and the « International Style » principles and dogmas defined in the twenties and the thirties. They did the same for Art Nouveau, by creating a new movement called « Neo-Liberty ».

### Japan and Modern Tradition in Occident

Undoubtedly the ancient, intricate and close relationship of Japanese and Occidental cultures since 1860 led to the modern revolution in architecture and design in Occident at the beginning of the XXth century and integrating the principles of traditional Japanese architecture has been quite easy.



Claudio Salocchi, Centro bookcase, unique piece, tribute to Rietveld and Japan, 1960.

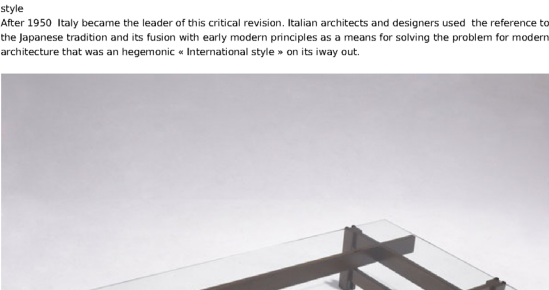
The challenge of modern architecture has been to respond to the needs of modern civilisation and the modern way of life by building with fluidity, modularity, standardization, sincerity in the use of materials, simplicity, emptiness, transparency and above all functionality which were for centuries in the DNA of traditional Japanese architecture : four hundred years before this method was adopted in Occident, Katsura had already been built. A quick inventory of modern architects inspired by Japan reveals the importance of the confluence between the traditional Japanese way of life and modern solutions for modern living in Occident. From Charles Rennie Macintosh to Charlotte Perriand, from Adolf Loos, Gerrit Rietveld, Walter Gropius, Mies Van Der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Robert Mallet-Stevens to Richard Neutra and so on, Japan is everywhere in the international Modern Movement.

Unfortunately the Modern Movement turned into what is usually called « International Style » : a kind of new global academism forgetting the lessons of Secession, Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau, even forgetting some lessons of the Bauhaus and one of its most important mission which was to keep modernity alive.

Nevertheless integration of Japanese way of building skills into modern architecture had its own history dependant on the history of the penetration of modernity in each country; in Italy, the limits of the « International Style » could not escape the observers and practicians as they had already formulated their first warning in the thirties.

### The Modern Tradition Concept and the reference to Japan in Postwar Italian Design

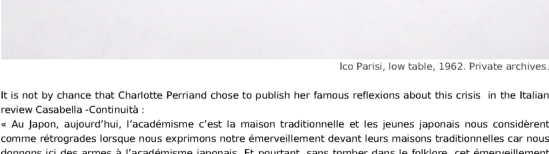
This evolution which started an important critical work, especially by Italian neo-rationalists caused the split of the CIAM in 1959 and revealed the crisis of an « International Style » no longer pertinent.



Ico Parisi, pair of lounge chairs, Cassina, 1956. Photo Hervé Lewandowski, all rights reserved.

Therefore, modern architects and designers had to go back to the nature of modernity : a method and not a style.

After 1950 Italy became the leader of this critical revision. Italian architects and designers used the reference to the Japanese tradition and its fusion with early modern principles as a means for solving the problem for modern architecture that was an hegemonic « International style » on its way out.

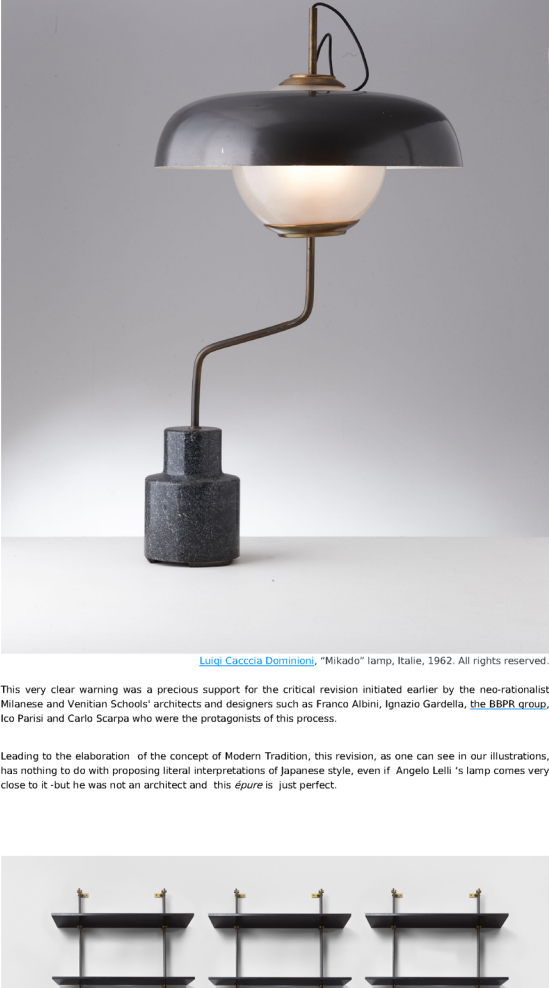


Ico Parisi, low table, 1962. Private archives.

It is not by chance that Charlotte Perriand chose to publish her famous reflexions about this crisis in the Italian review Casabella-Continuità :

« Au Japon, aujourd'hui, l'académisme c'est la maison traditionnelle et les jeunes japonais nous considèrent comme rétrogrades lorsque nous exprimons notre émerveillement devant leurs maisons traditionnelles. Car nous donnons ici des armes à l'académisme japonais. Et pourtant, sans tomber dans le folklorisme, cet émerveillement est justifié, car cette maison possède toutes les qualités et l'esprit de nos tendances modernes. »

In Charlotte Perriand, « Crise de geste au Japon », Casabella-Continuità, n° 210, Milan, 1956.



Luigi Caccia Dominioni, "Mikado" lamp, Italie, 1962. All rights reserved.

This very clear warning was a precious support for the critical revision initiated earlier by the neo-rationalist Milanese and Venetian Schools' architects and designers such as Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, the BBPR group, Ico Parisi and Carlo Scarpa who were the protagonists of this process.

Leading to the elaboration of the concept of Modern Tradition, this revision, as one can see in our illustrations, has nothing to do with proposing literal interpretations of Japanese style, even if Angelo Lelli's lamp comes very close to it-but he was not an architect and this *épure* is just perfect.

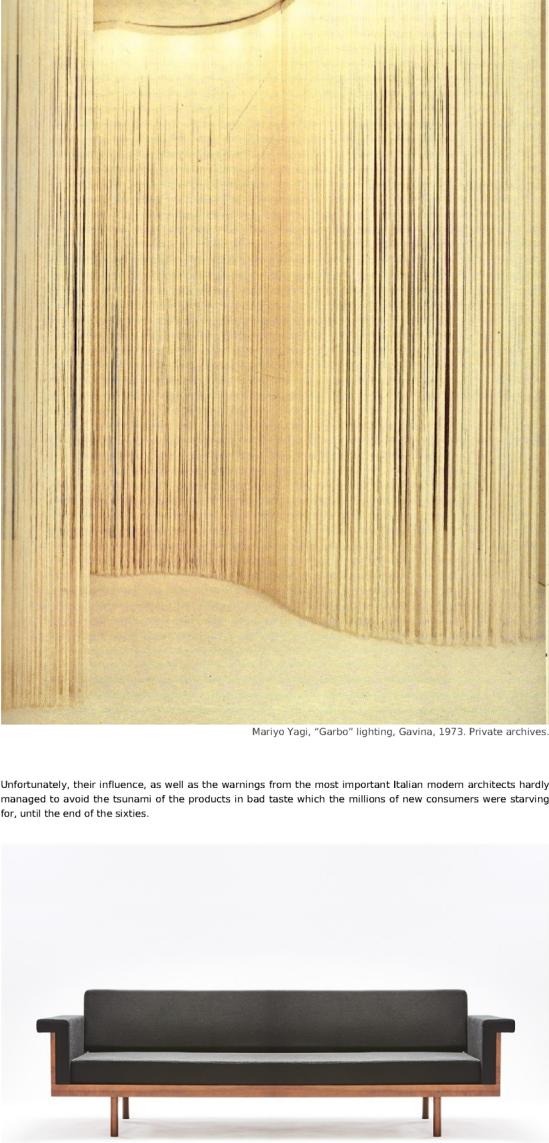


Ignazio Gardella, bookcase, 1957-1965. Photo Hervé Lewandowski, all rights reserved.

Their designs were examples of what the reference to Japanese tradition in modern design had to be in those times, and as Charlotte Perriand did in words, they were a significant warning from the Italian pioneers of the Modern Movement towards the industry of design drowned under the « fashionable » desire of the new consumers for decoration in « Japanese style ».

Their first models designed in the fifties delivered a message clearly addressed to the design industry by offering a remedy to banality and bad taste. This helped to make Italian design more creative and dynamic : until the triumph of the label « Made in Italy » in the 70's and the Pop Revolution.

The involvement of young Japanese architects in this process is documented by the archives of the « Selettiva » of Carlo. This international competition organized in the fifties by the Brianza wood design furniture industry, close to Milan, has often rewarded their work : a very refreshing input as well as a powerful reminder of the skills coming from traditional vernacular Japanese methods and their pertinence for industrial mass production.



Maruyo Yagi, "Garbo" lighting, Gavina, 1973. Private archives.

Unfortunately, their influence, as well as the warnings from the most important Italian modern architects hardly managed to avoid the tsunami of the products in bad taste which the millions of new consumers were starving for, until the end of the sixties.



Kazuhide Takahama, canapé "Naeko", Gavina, 1957. Courtesy Galerie Yves

Gastou.

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