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After the Apocalypse

The Sasso floorlamp by Luigi Caccia Dominioni
A new lamp for a new world (1947)

The Sasso lamp is poetry

Many pieces of design are poetry. But only few of them can give such an aesthetic emotion with so little means. Modern minimalism makes the challenge even bigger, even if in poetry, architecture or art, less is often more.
Usually one does not need more than a word + poetical + nice stereotypes to use the word « poetry» and pieces which really deserve to be seen as true poetry are desperately rare.
The Sasso lamp is one of the rare pieces of design which, combinating the idea, the subject, the making, invention, allusions and references which have led to this object gave to it a very special poetical strength.
Because or despite Caccia's intention to use a srictly functionnalist method matching with the modesty due to the destination of the lamp, a monastery near Bergamo, this minimalist lighting leaves no one indifferent, and its success since we have rediscovered and exhibited it at the beginning of the millenium is still increasing..
So rare that it has been forgotten for decades, the Sasso Lamp is a true masterpiece which deserved to be shown to the new generations and its message has taken a peculiar pertinence in our time of serious concerns about our planet's future.

Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Sasso floorlamp, 1947. Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés.

Doing a lot with quite nothing, again and again…

It was not the first time that Caccia made a lot with quite nothing.
His first experiment in this spirit was quite a « ready made » : a telescopic support from a camera customized with a Singer sewing machine light and a round cast iron dumbbell became in his hands a floor lamp unfortunately lost but documented in 1947. The 1962 well known Toio lamp by the Castiglioni brothers for Flos is by descent an example of this type of home made design.
The project of modern reconstruction of the family house has been the second experiment of this type. This time no fun allowed : the XVIth century palace of the Earls Caccia Dominioni on the Sant'Ambrogio Place in the historical heart of Milan was no more than a calcinated pile of rubble after the 1943 american bombing raids.
Unlikely house where he spent all his youth was after the war completely destroyed as a lot of historical buildings in Milan.
If it was a tragedy for all Italians, it was an opportunity for Caccia and the Milanese aristocracy to define a new architectural identity and give to the *alta borghesia* a good reason to follow his way. The new Palazzo Caccia Dominioni became for the Milanese elite the model of new modernity. Caccia gave a new face to the Milanese enlightened and humanist bourgeoisie horrified by the fascist barbarity, yearning for a fresh start as well as they felt reponsible for the return to civilization. Everything was to be changed and the challenge was to create a new world starting with the revision of the relationship of mankind and God's Creation.

Palazzo Caccia Dominioni, 1947-1949, public archives

The third day…

At this very moment, some monks near Bergamo commissioned Caccia some lightings for the annual funds rising exhibition of their charity missions. Italy was in 1947 completely involved in the Reconstruction process with a lot to do and very poor means. The monks of Bergamo did not have much money to spend but a lot to rise. The lightings had to be cheap, made in order to have their documents and their exhibition hall correctly illuminated and as few as possible. By chance the convent was built on the Brembo River. A quick walk on the river's edge gave to Caccia the base of his lighting : a big river stone. Undoubtedly, this wet stone reminded him the rubbles of his Palazzo and restarting everything from the result of millions years of natural erosion lit his inspiration.

If the french poet Francis Ponge had had to give a description of the Caccia project he would certainly have written something in this manner :

Consequently, the pebble will be looked at with the greatest care: it will be washed, it will be polished and – to do justice to its beautiful ferruginous layers, alternating with paler and glassier sedimentations such as alabaster – it will be varnished. Then, its most protruding side will be pierced while praying that such loving care will not have made the stone so proud that it will only yield by bursting into pieces(*). Once the delicate operation is successfully performed, the stone, now tamed and tractable, will be rewarded by receiving a long, hollow stem, of copper or steel, previously punctured into three tiny holes, one at the bottom and two at the top, so that the electric wire can be threaded through it. This stem, which resembles a miniature periscope, will rise to a dozen degrees at most may now receive at its summit the award that the patient rock deserves. Two brass devices, ingeniously articulated, each of them equipped with a lock screw, are fitted on the tube in order to grasp with their gleaming claws two gorgeous burnish aluminum truncated cone-shaped hats, moderately movable, the lucid blackness of which, obtained through the electrolytic transmutation of anodized copper, the stone. At last, and in order to endlessly perform the glorious mystery of electric illumination, the architect puts the final touch to his work by placing on each deflector the button switch that will achieve the miracle.

The monks could not have found a better solution. The floorlamp with its double use for lighting, its discreet high technology light disposal and its modesty should have surely been approved by the old masters of functionalism as well.
The singularity of the stone makes of each example a unicum as well as the model itself which has never been imitated successfully as a type. Caccia designed for Azucena a small table version which unfortunately, because of its scale, does not reach the strong significance of the nearly two meters high original design.

Sasso floorlamp, Azucena archives.

Taking from earth and water the first tool of humanity, a stone the kind of which the first men used to make fire, Caccia renewed the inaugural gesture that led to civilization.
In doing so, he also payed tribute to God's Creation with sincere faith and confidence in human resilience.

(*) "There are some rebellious varieties of marble that are very difficult to work with: the skilled men call them proud marbles, because they resist the tools too much, and will only yield to them by bursting."
Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle des Minéraux*, tome III, page 78, Paris 1818.

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