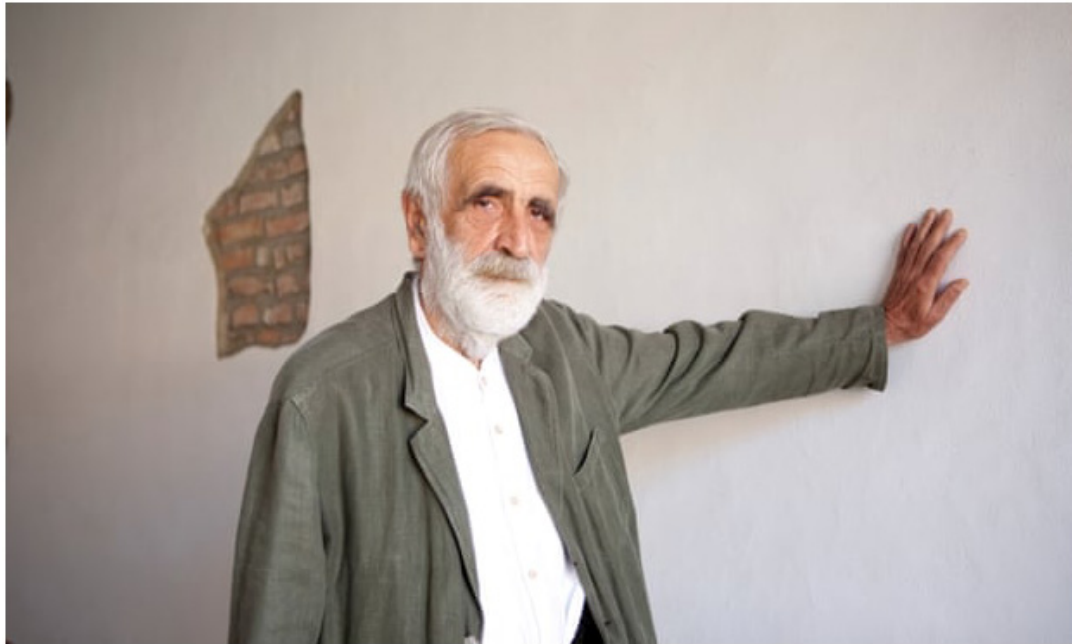


Enzo Mari obituary

Designer of everyday objects whose work was infused with radical politics



▲ Enzo Mari in 2010. He was dismissive of success, which, he said, only made him ask, 'Where did I go wrong?'
Photograph: Leonardo Cendamo/Getty Images

Politics infused everything that the designer Enzo Mari touched. Mari, who has died aged 88 of complications related to Covid-19, produced thousands of objects over a 60-year career, from pen holders and toys to chairs and vases. Each of those items drew inspiration from the [Arts and Crafts movement](#), in the simplicity of their form, and from his own uncompromising belief in communism.

His stackable Delfina chair, designed for the [Driade company](#) in 1974, consists of a simple steel frame and fabric. A tray for Danese, created in 1958, features a short length of industrial beam, slightly bent upwards at either end. His best known work, 16 Animals, consists of 16 figures, including an elephant, rhino, camel and snake, cut in one continuous stroke from a single piece of oak, which, once played with, provides the puzzle of reassembly. It became a hit in 1959 and is still sold by Danese today.

Mari was dismissive of such success. "When I design an object and people say: 'Oh, well done!', I unfailingly ask myself, Where did I go wrong? If everybody likes it, it means I have confirmed the existing reality and this is precisely what I don't want," he told *Domus* magazine in 1997.

The Guardian, November 2020

Tanya Leighton

Mari was dismissive of such success. “When I design an object and people say: ‘Oh, well done!’, I unfailingly ask myself, Where did I go wrong? If everybody likes it, it means I have confirmed the existing reality and this is precisely what I don’t want,” he told *Domus* magazine in 1997.

Mari’s egalitarian beliefs were evident in his *Autoprogettazione* project, through which the designer provided a step-by-step guide freely available to anyone to make their own products. In 1974 more than 5,000 people wrote to his studio in Milan requesting a manual. They were then able to build chairs, tables and other such furniture from scratch, using a few planks of plywood and a bag of nails.

While he strove to make his work affordable, he believed those making the products should be compensated well. Mass furniture, he told *Icon* magazine in 2009, was “cheap because of the blood of the people”. Nor was he keen on his peers producing high-end design, labelling most as “publicity whores”.



▲ Enzo Mari's wall calendar for Danese, which can be used in perpetuity.
Photograph: Milan Triennale

“He refused to play the game of galleries, of the commercialisation of his designs into fetishes,” said Hans Ulrich Obrist, who has curated a retrospective of Mari’s work currently showing at the *Milan Triennale*. At a talk given at the Serpentine Gallery in 2006, Mari turned to the architect *Rem Koolhaas*, who was also present, and described him as a “pornographic window dresser”.

Enzo was born in Cerano, in the Italian province of Novara, the son of Luigi Mari, who survived on alms before eventually opening a small shop providing barbering and shoe repairs, and his wife, Carolina (nee Stagnoli), who laboured in the rice fields. When Enzo was two, the family moved to Milan, where he attended a Jesuit middle school, followed by the Liceo Parini secondary school. During the summer holidays the city would send the poorer children on a state-funded summer camp, where sand castle-building competitions gave the boy his first taste of design.

In 1947 Luigi became ill, and this left the family destitute. Enzo quit school, taking on odd jobs to help his mother. He delivered cabbages, dragging the sacks across town by hand; he worked as a bricklayer, and sold soap. The experience not only fed his politics but also how he approached design. “I would carefully observe the way the simple people I ran into behaved,” he said, storing away memories of how people used and handled everyday objects.

“I would apply for any sort of artisanal work that would come up. Making a sign for a wine-seller, for example, or supports for a shop-window. I couldn’t let on that I still had no method. Each time I would attempt to figure out, understand, what was essential. This search for what is essential is still today my first thought when designing.”

Aged 19, having saved a little money, Mari attempted to enrol at university, though without a high-school diploma. The only place to accept him was the Accademia di Belle Arti in Brera, where he drifted between painting, sculpture and, eventually, stage design courses. Nonetheless he continued to paint, fascinated by the interior architecture of the classical works of art he had seen on a trip walking through Tuscany. The resulting works were exhibited at Centro San Fedele, Milan, in 1952.

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

In 1956 he designed a mobile library for the Bompiani publishing house, which took books to small towns around [Italy](#), and in 1958 he met Bruno Danese, then establishing his eponymous design brand. It was a small set-up, but it appealed. Mari produced a wall calendar for Danese, which, the days and months laid out on sliding lengths of wood, could be used in perpetuity.

More designs followed, often utilising a single piece of material shaped to form anything from letter openers to salad servers. Mari produced a series of screenprints, each featuring childlike renditions of common objects or animals. “When culture and incomes are adequate, original works are purchased, which are more or less quality works. But most people do not earn enough or are not learned enough,” he said of this turn to art. The print series culminated in a book, *The Apple and the Butterfly* (1969), written with his wife Iela, and a follow-up, *The Chicken and the Egg*, in 1970. It was, the authors said, a way of drawing the viewer’s attention to shapes, given the distraction of television.



▲ Enzo Mari in 1974. The designer had an uncompromising belief in communism. Photograph: Adriano Alecchi/Zuma Press/PA Images

From 1963 to 1967 he taught at the Scuola Umanitaria in his home city, the first of several teaching appointments, in Carrara, Florence, Berlin and Vienna. He would tell his students that on graduation their aim must be “deconditioning people from the god of merchandise”. Working with companies such as Alessi, for whom he created melamine salt and pepper pots; and Zani and Zani, creating stainless steel olive oil pots, he received the Compasso d’Oro award four times, the first in 1967.

His radical politics were not quelled by success. At the 1976 Venice Biennale he showed 44 abstract marble sculptures on plinths, which, pieced together, formed a hammer and sickle. The following year Mari designed a two-metre monument in the form of a mallet, dedicated to [Roberto Franceschi](#), a student fatally shot by police during student protests in 1973. It was installed without permission at a crossroads near Bocconi University in Milan, and finally given official status by the city in 2013. For a 1989 solo exhibition, Mari refused to show his own work at all, presenting instead his collection of scythes.

Mari produced more than 2,000 designs, including collaborations with architects and, in 1982, the restoration of the Piazza del Duomo, Milan, providing street furniture for the poor and recently immigrated, who, he said, would come from the outskirts of Milan to the centre to find work and community. He had solo exhibitions at the University of Parma in 1983 and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Turin, in 2008.

Enzo’s second wife, the art critic Lea Vergine (nee Buoncristiano), whom he married in 1978, died the day after he did, also of complications related to Covid-19. He is survived by their daughter, Meta, and by a daughter, Agostina, and a son, Michele, from his marriage to Iela (nee Gabriela Ferrario), which ended in divorce.

- Enzo Mari, designer, born 27 April 1932; died 19 October 2020

Oliver Basciano

Sun 1 Nov 2020 17.20 GMT