



The man who designed a chair for a golf club which became one of the world's best sellers in many a domestic setting

TEXT BY LAVINIA THOMAS · PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES MORTIMER

RECALLING his early schooldays in Milan, Vico Magistretti is inclined to echo Max Beerbohm's mildly jaundiced view that his pleasure at *having been* to Charterhouse markedly exceeded his pleasure *being* there. For Magistretti and his fellow-pupils, the academic Milanese treadmill was inexorable, by day and by year. He tots up that he suffered eight years Latin and three years Greek, apart, of course, from maths and the rest. These early studies were followed by five years architectural training in the Milan Polytechnic.

Yet now, looking back, Magistretti thinks the merciless curriculum is still paying him dividends. His interests are wider

and deeper, he thinks, than those enjoyed by most young people today. Indeed, he thinks that life is that much tougher for young people today. They finish their years of over-specialized studies and then find too few jobs awaiting them, whether they live in New York or London. They become bitter. They are highly skilled in only one discipline; the practice of that discipline is too frequently denied them. And thanks to that specialization, they find they are unable to break into other interests which have vastly different, highly developed, specialized disciplines of their own.

Magistretti makes his observations with a wry, detached sardonic

humour. He is plainly a man at ease with himself, aware of his achievement, keen for fresh challenges, coolly confident that he could meet them. A man of middle height, black-haired, olive-skinned, fine-boned, the deep lines in his cheeks, clearly from humour and not neuroses.

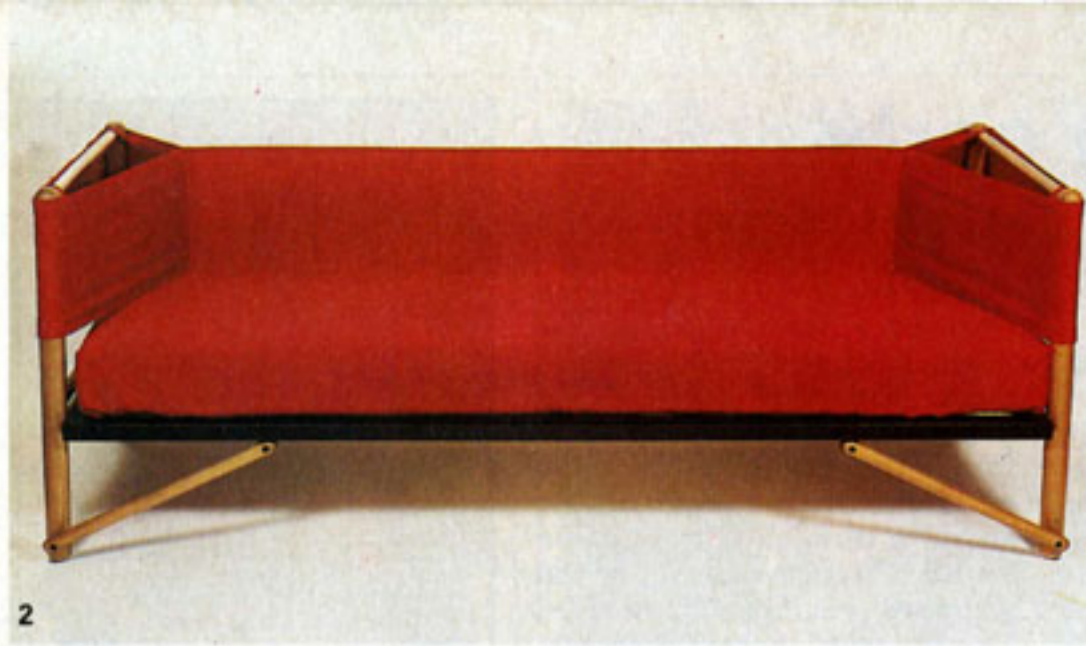
He talks readily and easily in English, pausing for emphasis rather than the quest for a word. This ease of expression in a foreign language is a reflection of his *mouvementé* life. He spends almost as much time in Britain and the United States as he does in Italy. Indeed, in addition to his home in Milan, he keeps a flat in Dulwich to cope with his British commitments

both at the Royal College of Art, where he teaches, and with the London office of Cassina, the Italian furniture manufacturers.

Although Magistretti enjoyed (or suffered) so wide-ranging an education in the humanities, few men of our time have become such specialists in one of the most demanding of all technologies: the design of modern furniture for mass-production.

Yet, despite his international success and renown as a furniture designer, Magistretti still regards architecture as his first love, but counters that confession by his conviction that furniture designing offers a far more immediate and effective means of communicating with far more people. And that he regards as a factor of paramount importance in a designer's life. The other side of the coin is that furniture designing also gives him the chance to work completely alone. Although he usually has one or two architectural students in his office, he works essentially as a solitary.

That he owes much to his architectural training he readily admits. Primarily, he says, because he was



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taught to think in terms of Design and not Style. Equally, his training taught him to design furniture in the simplest possible way. He sees this in personal terms. He likes to think that he would be able, at a pinch, to build any object he designs, despite the fact that he rates his talents as a craftsman as zero. Curious this, he adds, for until quite recently he was proud of a single-figure golf handicap. A man whose hands aren't necessarily completely versatile.

Magistretti's most widely-known designing achievement is, of course, the chair seen in the picture above, alongside his recent design for the sofa in which he reclines. This chair, known in the trade as Model 892, is normally seen as here, with its red timber frame and raffia seat form. In the manner of all writers, musicians, artists and architects who hit the jackpot with an early yet wildly successful novel, sonata, painting or building, the 892 causes too many people to try to persuade him to look back rather than forward. Cassina make no such demands. He likes working with

Some Magistretti designs, including 'Broomstick'

1 Painted beech wood and rush armchair, 892, by Cassina, about £142, from Environment, Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2, with 'Maralunga' two-seat sofa, also available upholstered in leather, by Cassina, from £706, at Coexistence, Floral Street, WC2.
 2 'Cap' sofa-bed, about £420. 3 'Regina D'Africa' armchair, about £172. 4 'Regina D'Africa' stool, about £80.00.
 5 'Atollo' spray-painted metal table lamp, 79 cm high, by

O'Luce, about £182, from Oscar Woollens, Finchley Road, NW3. 6 'Kilim' round table, 72 cm high, about £152. 7 'Bath' bookstand, 133 cm high, about £104, with 'Tenorio' hat and coat stand, about £30.00. All the above, except Nos. 1 and 5, are from the 'Broomstick' collection, made in beech wood, by Alias, and available from Domus, Brompton Road, London SW3, and General Trading Company, Sloane Street, London SW1, (Photographs: Dudley Mountney.)

them, he says, because they leave him to his own devices—as they do with all their designers.

He has no intention of looking back. Indeed, he isn't all that concerned with timber, which, he says, is amongst the most inflexible of all materials at a designer's disposal. Why use a material that won't bend?

The 892 is a clear example of his delight in, and talent for, designing furniture with a particular interior in mind. If a prospective client comes to him because he is unable to find the right furniture for an interior, then Magistretti's interest is readily aroused. Thus the design for the 892 derived directly from his close links with a sporting club in Milan. The director of the club decided that he needed new and suitable chairs in the recreation

room, the preserve of members' children awaiting the conclusion of parental pleasures. Durable appropriate furniture was needed. Hence Magistretti's red and rugged model, well-suited to watching table-tennis and a colourful partner for the brightly-coloured toys and equipment of the room. The international success of model 892 agreeably surprised the designer.

One thing leads to another. As a result of his association with the sporting club, Magistretti took up golf. As a result of his quick success in this exacting sport, despite his late start, he has been commissioned to design a set of golf clubs for a sports equipment company in the United States.

More recently, he has designed his 'Broomstick' collection, which is based on nine items: chairs,

stools, tables, stands and sofas, all in different colours, of course. He says—tongue in cheek?—that he wanted a range that was transportable between his Milan and Dulwich homes and that, to that end, he designed a range which could be put in the boot of any car. The collection exemplifies his preference for designing in numbers rather than singles.

After completing his golf club designs he hopes to return to his first love: architecture. He has designed buildings for Olivetti, housing, commercial units and showrooms for Cassina, and a biology building for Milan University. Here again, he left the interior designers as much freedom as possible. After all, he says blandly, who knows what the building will be used for in fifty years time ●