

The Fables of Ambasz, who Launched Italian Design into the World

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*In 1972, fifty years ago, he curated the New York exhibition "The New Domestic Landscape," which introduced Italian furniture to the world. Today, the designer, a pioneer of green architecture, is the protagonist of a book curated by Fulvio Irace.
By Ludovica Stevan*

The reference to the fairy-tale world in the title of the volume published by Corraini Edizioni, "Emilio Ambasz. Green Architecture & Design Fables," is not surprising. After all, it was Emilio Ambasz, born in 1943, who promoted the literary genre of fairy tales to narrate his works.

"The invention of the fables that I have written in the last fifty years," he stated, "is the cornerstone of my working method. The subtext of a fable, after all, is a ritual, and it is precisely in support of rituals that most of my work develops."

We talk about this with Fulvio Irace, the curator of the volume.

How did the idea for this book come about?

"After a long private and professional friendship with Emilio Ambasz, three years ago, I decided that it was time to put in writing what has been and still is the story of the great pioneer of green architecture. And so, for three long years, I chased after the master, trying to collect all his writings." The effort was not in vain. "The result is the birth of an illustrated anthology that narrates his fundamental principles of architecture. In my opinion, the volume had to have the characteristics of a children's fable book; after all, this is one of the features that I have always appreciated in the narration of his projects, namely the ability to use that literary genre to describe his *modus operandi*. For this reason, I like to call him the 'Argentinian Aesop.' What better way to show it than iconographically? The idea came to me when looking at his first project-fables, already represented through illustrations starting from the seventies. My goal was to pick up that thread and create a book that, in every respect, looks like a book of fables."

The cover of the book (Corraini Edizioni, pp. 176, 25 euros)

How did you meet Emilio Ambasz?

"It was 1977. At the time, I was doing military service in Bologna. At the same time, I had the fortune of being chosen by the art critic Renato Barilli – who then directed the Museum of Modern Art in Bologna – to follow an exhibition dedicated to architectural drawing. I remember very well the day of the opening. Among the various faces, an elegant, distinguished gentleman appeared, dressed impeccably. It was Emilio Ambasz. From that first meeting, everything began."

What struck you the most about Emilio Ambasz?

"Without a doubt, his instinct in the field of industrial design. I was fascinated by his method, so innovative for those times as to seem astral. He was not like other designers; he didn't go to a manufacturer saying, 'I have a project, let's talk about it.' He developed it until he realized a prototype. Only at that point – with the model in hand – did he present himself to show the result."

Even though they date back several years, Ambasz's projects remain relevant. How do you comment on this capability?

"The timeliness of his projects is due to his ability to look ahead, somewhat like a prophet."

In fact, in a period when the problem of energy resources was not yet felt, he took it into account. One of the most significant projects is the Garden Pro Memoria, aimed at reminding future generations of the horrors of war. His practice of giving 'poetic form to the pragmatic' – as he defined it – is in this case also a precise civic commitment.

THE LAST WORD

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By Aurelio Magistà, September 28, 2020

This year also marks the anniversary of the New York exhibition "The New Domestic Landscape." Do you remember it?

"It was 1972 when Emilio Ambasz staged the exhibition at the MoMa in New York, the result of his passion for Italy. And so, he launched Italian design into the world, revealing the new generations of designers: Marco Zanuso, Joe Colombo, Mario Bellini, Gae Aulenti, Gaetano Pesce, Ettore Sottsass, and many others. The purpose was to demonstrate how our country was already at the forefront in furniture."