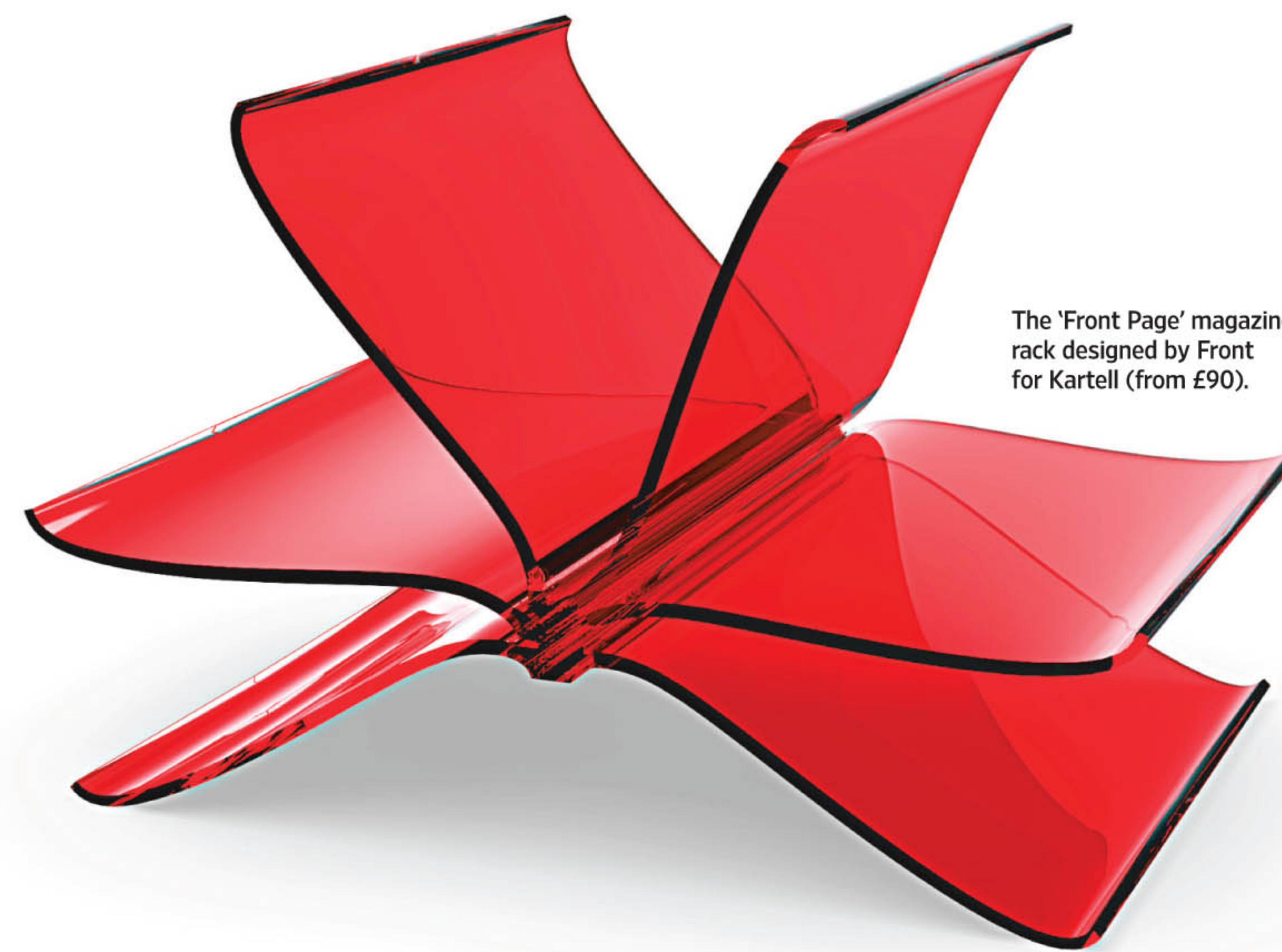




'5 O'Clock' chair designed by Nika Zupanc for Moooi (€491).



The Doshi Levien 'Paper Planes' chairs for Moroso, part of the Swarovski Elements at Work project (from €3,500).



The 'Front Page' magazine rack designed by Front for Kartell (from €90).



The 'Memory' chair by Tokujin Yoshioka.

The sale of 'il Salone'

Furniture fair in Milan touts prêt-à-porter concept

By Helen Kirwan-Taylor

THIS WEEK MARKS the 49th year of the Milan Furniture Fair, affectionately known as "il Salone." It's considered the single biggest and most important design event in the world, but there used to be a catch. You could ogle the merchandise as much as you liked but chances were the gorgeous thing you had your heart set on was just a prototype, and thus it was never going to be made. If you did find something you liked and that was assured to go into production, you had to wait at least three months.

But this year, for the first time, entrepreneurial manufacturers are copying the fashion model. There are prêt-à-porter (you can buy it there and then on the rack, so to speak), and couture options (the piece is

made individually for you and there are only limited quantities available). What it means is that "il Salone" is becoming an event like Art Miami/Basel, where you go to actually shop for the home.

Leading the prêt-à-porter trend is Renato Preti, a former private-equity executive whose love of design led him first to invest in companies like B&B Italia and then to set up on his own. He opened Skitsch, a cutting edge design store on the Via Monte Di Pietà 11 in Milan, during the fair last year. Another followed in London last month on Brompton Road.

He was on hand in the packed Milanese store during the fair, presenting his new collection, which can not only be ordered there and then, but will be delivered within days to your home. Stock is the magic word in furniture. "It's our philosophy: be consumer friendly, sell directly to the client," he says. "The others present prototypes to the wholesalers. It might go into production at prices you never know. We believe in a multichannel approach based on the luxury model. We will also put all the prices on the product!"

Skitsch is launching 26 new products this year, including the "Cinderella Broke a Leg" bed by Marcel Wanders (with glass

legs, €3,900), the "Aka" chair made by Jean-Marie Massaud (€348) and the "Shogun Sofa" with changeable covers by Luca Nichotti (from €1,980).

Another savvy entrepreneur with fashion connections—his marriage to Stella McCartney being one of them—is Alasdair Willis. Not only is he launching his own-brand collection called "Estd" this year, but it is ready to be ordered on Yoox.com. Having been criticized earlier in his career for producing unaffordable design/art, Mr. Willis has now emerged as a strong player who can rival some of Italy's best. Estd's 10-piece collection includes "Dip" (a bowl, €80-€130), "Soft Grid" (a blanket, €325) and "Butt," a stackable stool based on a tractor seat (€125). "It's great to launch with something that is available there and then," says Mr. Willis.

Another Englishman getting noticed for his canny commercial instinct is Tom Dixon. Long respected as a designer, he is now also challenging the Salone's status as a trade-only fair by selling directly on site. His show this year is called "Industry." "This is global industry selling 350,000 products, yet you couldn't buy a thing," he

says. So this year he fast-tracked the production, amassed stock and showed it can be done. Some products are versions of past success like the "Jack" light (€355) and the "Off Cut" bench (€395). This year he trumped everyone by selling a digitally created, quickly produced, flat-packed "Etch" light for €100 to take home.

The most exclusive party of the week was thrown at Rinascente, the famous Italian department store, to highlight British-made goods (the show was called "100% British Design"). Not only did Prince Andrew, Duke of York, pitch up for the opening party, but everything was for sale. SCP, the British design company that has always championed home-grown talent, had managed to get everything made and delivered on time, including the "Ulrik" stool by Alex Hellum (€676) and the "Sum" shelves by star designer Peter Marigold (€590).

The British commercial flair seems to have caught on with manufacturers from other countries, including Austria's Swarovski, which this year is launching several products as part of the Swarovski Elements Work Project. The company is using their famous crystals, which, they assured me, "have been all signed and dusted and even priced up." This means that what you see (such as the "Eye" collection of vases and candleholders at €125-€800 and the "Soft Crystal" series) is good to go. This makes a refreshing change from the enormous chandeliers the company shows in Mi-

lan, which tend to be unaffordable and often end up in hotels in Dubai or Moscow.

Still, it's the Italians who dominate the fair. Kartell, one of the most successful design companies world-wide, always sells products you can count on having in your living room within a few months. The company experiments wildly (this year for example they launched the "Audrey" chair by Lissoni, breaking ground by working with metal), but always comes up with something that stops the crowds. My favorite products this year were the "Front Page," (€90) a bright red magazine rack designed by the super-hot Swedish outfit Front and the "Invisible" chair by Tokujin Yoshioka.

Sofa designers B&B Italia have never teased the customer. It takes millions of euros to get the technology together to produce the sort of products they make, and it shows. The biggest attraction this year was the graceful, soft and feminine sofa called "Bend" (£4,400) by Patricia Urquiola.

Alessi, makers of quirky household items, had a rather ingenious clock by the famous Spaniard Marti Guixé, which you can write on yourself. They had prices (€76) ready to go and even stockists on hand.

But though offering prêt-à-porter products has its attraction, "il Salone" is also still about vanguard new design products that take time to produce. Always worth waiting for is Edra, which this year launched the "Campana" light by the Campana Brothers,

assembled randomly out of around 180 variously shaped pieces of laser-cut glossy anodized aluminium at an undisclosed price. (See article on page W8.)

Getting the blend between the commercial and the artistic right is always a struggle and one in which Moroso, now arguably the trendiest firm in design, succeeds. Feminine, adventurous and always eye catching, its designs have never failed in recent years to please. This year, it was Tokujin Yoshioka's "Memory," a moldable aluminum chair that constantly changes its shape, that got the most applause.

This year furniture maker Cassina caught everyone's eye with the "Canapo" rocking chair (€3,395), an old design by Franco Albini brought back to life.

Meanwhile, Dutch designer Marcel Wanders should not be underestimated. Moooi, the company he founded and which is now 50%-owned by B&B Italia, knows its prices and always delivers when it says it will. The punchiest piece was Mr. Wanders's "Monster" chair, with a funny face. But the real star is Slovenian designer Nika Zupanc, whose flowery "5 O'Clock" chair will, I suspect, become ubiquitous (€491).

I predict il Salone will turn into a selling show that dazzles homeowners as much as it always has wholesalers. One thing is for sure: The days of waiting 18 weeks for a chair are over.

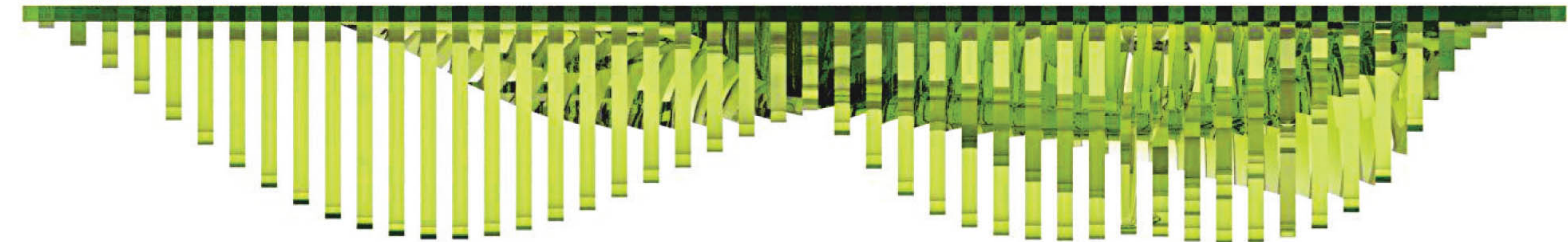
Helen Kirwan-Taylor is a writer based in London.



Cassina's 'Canapo' rocking chair by Franco Albini (€3,950).

Clockwise from top left: Moooi; Swarovski; Cappellini

SAWAYA MORONI



By far the most adventurous couture-design company currently in Milan is Sawaya Moroni, a smallish outfit with a store on Milan's via Manzoni.

This independent company (Paolo Moroni handles business, William Sawaya designs), which specializes in handcrafted complex pieces of design by big names such as Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, Ron Arad and Michael Graves, has always taken chances. When they launched the fluid "Glacier Sofa" by Zaha Hadid in 2000, they assumed no one would buy it.

It was so "extreme," says Mr. Moroni, "but in the end it was one of our most successful products."

The Milanese know their store well, as on top of producing quirky, colorful and playful design, they also sell serious silver products for occasions such as wedding anniversaries.

This year they are celebrating their 25th anniversary and showing bold new pieces including the "Torg" armchair and table by Daniel Libeskind, and "Tunnels," a limited-edition wooden bench designed by Jakob + MacFarlane (who also designed Georges restaurant on top of the Centre Pompidou). They also sell more affordable design such as the fun "XXX" stools by Mario Cananzi and "Nylon" chaise longue in bright purple by Mr. Sawaya. www.sawayamoroni.com

— Helen Kirwan Taylor

Tunnels, Bench designed by Jakob + MacFarlane. 24,000 euros.