

# WILLY RIZZO



MALLETT

*Paul Smith*





Mallett and Paul Smith are embarking on a unique experiment. This October we are mounting a joint selling exhibition in Mallett's shop in New York and the following month in Paul Smith's shop in London.

Nearly a year ago Nicholas Chandor and I were having a discussion about who in the world of design and period furniture we really admired but who was also not as famous as they should be. Nicholas Chandor is the Head of Interiors of the clothing empire Paul Smith. I am a director of the London and New York antique dealers Mallett. We both immediately thought of Willy Rizzo whose career is discussed in full on the following pages. Willy Rizzo is well known to the 20th century dealing fraternity but outside that world he has been woefully neglected. He is a superb portrait photographer working for many years for *Paris Match* and a designer whose imagination and severe neo-classical style defines the Italian style between 1965 and 1980. The range and quality of his work is truly outstanding and has and will stand the test of time. His legacy is a body of work which is both pleasing to the eye and stimulating to the intellect.

We have been able to source many items that have never been on the market before as they have come from the Rizzo's themselves. There are two experimental designs from the 1970's that were never produced commercially. The furniture is accompanied by a selection of some of Willy Rizzo's finest portraits. We are delighted to say that Willy has designed exclusively for the exhibition a frame for his photographs, something he has never done before. Both these frames and the images are being produced in a limited edition of eight.

We are very excited by the forthcoming exhibitions which will be accompanied by this catalogue which will publish some of Willy Rizzo's furniture work for the first time.

Thomas Woodham-Smith

Left: Willy in St. Tropez in  
1969 with *Casa Vogue*



Willy Rizzo is best known as a photographer and his career began during the golden age of photojournalism. Having first worked for the Black Star Agency in America during the post-war 1940's he began an illustrious twenty year career with *Paris Match* in late 1948 that would see him photograph some of the greatest names of the age. Married as he then was to actress Elsa Martinelli, Rizzo had unparalleled access to the stars and his constellation of sitters would include such greats as Brigitte Bardot, Sofia Loren, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Jane Fonda, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso. His assignments would take him to the Nuremberg trials and the French Indochina war. Hergé even based the character of Paris-Flash photographer Walter Rizotto in *The Castafiore Emerald* on his real-life *Paris Match* counterpart. His photographic work is well known and well documented, but less so his design. In the late 60's Rizzo put down his camera and focused instead on furniture design, a field in which, though he had no experience, he would go on to enjoy considerable success.

As Rizzo describes, it all began in a Salon de Coiffure in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome in late 1966, and unfolded in the space of about an hour. While his wife was having her hair done they discussed moving to Italy, as their respective careers demanded them being there so often. He liked the area the salon was in so asked the Coiffure if he knew of a local real estate agent. His response was "sure, there's one around the corner, but you'll need a miracle to find an apartment around here." Undeterred he saw the agent, whose response was as predicted; no apartments. He did however have a second floor shirt-maker's shop in the Piazza Mignanelli just in front of the Spanish Embassy that looked on to the Piazza di Spagna, but it was a run down one room commercial space with no facilities and was practically uninhabitable. He signed a six month lease on the spot and returned triumphant to the salon, all in about 45 minutes. There still remained the question of redecoration, and not wanting the usual antique, Scandinavian or psychedelic looks, he decided, before the hour was up, to start from scratch, a decision that would lead Rizzo to become one of the most sought after modernist designers of the era.



With the help of the Coiffure, Rizzo found a small group of local artisans and set about transforming the shirt maker's into an apartment: "Once the essentials were finished we started on the decoration. I wanted the walls to be brown and gold so we painted them brown and while the paint was still wet I blew handfuls of gold powder against them. It sounds crazy but it worked and after that the guys knew exactly what I was looking for. The kitchen was silver, all the floors and ceilings black and we built all the furniture from scratch; a stereo cabinet, sofa, coffee table, consoles, everything. It was a lot of fun making the 'Salon de Rizzo' in Rome, and the result was very chic." Rizzo had never intended to become a furniture designer, but as his friends saw what he had done in his own apartment they wanted him to do the same in theirs, and he had some impressive friends. Enconced as he was within the glamorous worlds of film and fashion, Rizzo was very much a part of the high society scene from which he would receive the majority of his commissions.

Hergé even based the character of Paris-Flash photographer Walter Rizotto in *The Castafiore Emerald*

One of his first would be for Ghigi Cassini, the American Hearst newspaper columnist and socialite who first coined the term "Jet Set" to describe the socialites and lifestyle that Fellini immortalized in *La Dolce Vita*. Cassini wanted a modern apartment in a traditional setting and having found rooms in the nearby Palazzo Torlonia, set about persuading Rizzo to design furniture sophisticated enough not to conflict with the palace's neo-classical interiors. The commission was a great success and would be followed by others from a whole swathe of Italian high society, all of them worthy of the jet set title. Notorious playboys such as Rodolfo Parisi, Gigi Rizzi and Franco Rapetti were amongst his earliest clients, as were the movie directors Vincente Minelli and Otto Priminger. Salvador Dali commissioned a number of pieces as did Brigitte Bardot for the interior of La Madrague in St. Tropez. He furnished aristocratic apartments in the Palazzo Borghese and the Palazzo Ruspoli. Rizzo's style defined the era. He was uniquely placed as a designer for the *Dolce Vita*, being a part of the world he was designing for. He was the consummate jet set playboy and his client list testifies to how close his furniture was to the mark.





Above: Robert Mitchum (left) at the opening of Willy Rizzo's Los Angeles shop in 1975

Facing page: Italian actress Virna Lisi photographed by Willy for the front cover of *Queen* in 1962

By 1968, demand for Rizzo's work was such that he set up his own company. He established a factory just outside Rome at Tivoli which at its height employed as many as 150 workers, and would of course include the original team from the Piazza di Spagna. Throughout the following ten years he designed and produced more than thirty pieces of furniture, from steel banded travertine dining tables to bronze table lamps, all of which were hand made. He opened a Willy Rizzo store on the rue Fauborg Saint-Honoré and further boutiques across France and Europe, as well as points of sale in New York, Miami and LA. His work was illustrated in countless magazines and appeared on the cover of *Maison et Jardin* at least fifteen times. However in 1978 he gave it all up to return to his first love, photography. "I'd never intended to become a businessman and ultimately it began to bore me. I missed my bohemian life as a photographer so I sold the factory."

During those ten years, Rizzo developed a style that is easily recognizable today. An admirer of the sophistication of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier as well as the understated luxury of Ruhlmann, his work brought the best aspects of these together. Typically his pieces combine clean, simple lines with bold geometric forms that are lightened by a delicate handling of materials, most notably his innovative inlaying of chrome with brass. Having come to furniture design somewhat accidentally, Rizzo's lack of formal training placed him on the outside of Italy's strong indigenous design traditions, a fact that made his style so unique at the time. While there is an obvious debt in Rizzo's work to the existing modernist emphasis on functionality and simplified forms, the fascination with methods of mass production and modern materials is something he deliberately avoided. During the late 50's the leading Italian designers such as Gio Ponti shifted their focus towards industrial design and the generation followed suit. While many of Rizzo's contemporaries, particularly Magistretti and Colombo made great strides using modern plastics, Rizzo remained faithful to a doctrine of traditional materials and craftsmanship, his work being more a response to the contemporary cultural environment than current design trends.

As Rizzo explains, the style was at first defined by the clients and the type of interiors they wanted to furnish. "It was never about recreating classic styles in modern furniture, that wasn't the point. It was about creating something new for a traditional setting." While his clients wanted a modern look, brightly coloured plastics were simply not suited to the neo-classical interiors of Europe's grandiose palaces and villas, hence Rizzo's reliance on noble materials such as brass, steel and stone. His hand crafted designs had enough strength and substance to successfully integrate into such interiors, but it was more than just a question of materials; it was also a matter of space. "The starting point for all of my earlier designs was the space for which the piece was intended. Whether for my own apartment or Ghighi's or whoever, it was the needs of the actual space that defined the final result. That's why Architects often make the best furniture designers; they have a better awareness and understanding of interior space." Comfort and convenience also played a significant part in Rizzo's designs. His modular sofas were an essay in luxury, covered in coloured pig skin suede and equipped with control panels in the arms to adjust everything from the lighting to the volume on the stereo. The doors in his apartments could be opened and closed at the sound of a clap and there were cocktail cabinets concealed in his coffee tables. This really was design for a leisured lifestyle and Rizzo, who was at the time Art Director for Playboy Italia, knew his market well. The success of his approach is evident today in the longevity and versatility of his designs. It has been said that the key to Rizzo's photographs is their simplicity. In his own words: "Photographs without fussy details survive better than the others." The same is surely true of his furniture; it works as well in contemporary interiors as it ever did, and this is due in part to their simple, classic nature. When describing his design process, Rizzo likens the experience to men's fashion: "If you made furniture like women's dresses it would look awful. For a Couturier it's far easier to design something new for a woman; there's so much more room to experiment and take artistic liberties. It's much more difficult when designing for a man. You can't do overly elaborate things; there is a line that must be respected and only a limited amount of space for experimentation."

Clockwise from top left:  
Some of the font covers Willy photographed include, French actress Nicole Maurey, 1944; Elsa Martinelli, 1961; Sophia Loren, posing shortly before her departure for Hollywood in late 1958; Gina Lollabrigida, aged 33, photographed in Moscow in 1961

Of course there is also the question of originality. Rizzo “made it a point of honor never to copy or collaborate” and as such developed a style that was both distinctive and influential. Jansen acquired and produced a number of his designs, and he had an undeniable effect on Cardin’s work. The abundance of furniture to be found in dealers inventories either attributed to or in the manner of Willy Rizzo further attests to the distinct character of his style. As interest in design from the period increases so too does the fascination with Rizzo’s work. His furniture is now widely exhibited, most recently in a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. A collection of his photographs was published in the book *Mes Stars* in 2003, and an exhibition of his work in Indochina is soon to be held at the Niepce museum in Chalon-sur-Saone. Having returned to furniture design for a period in the late 80’s he does so now again, this time in collaboration with Paul Smith and Mallett. For all his achievements, Rizzo remains as laid back as ever, the epitome of dolce vita style.

Left: an example of Willy Rizzo advertising. All advertising was devised and overseen by Willy himself. Editors were always keen to use his material as it was fun and innovative.

*This article was written by Nick Kilner following an interview with Willy Rizzo in Paris in April 2007.*