



DESIGN HERO

WILLY RIZZO

The Italian maverick who excelled at glamour, combining a career as a celebrity photographer with furniture design

When Willy Rizzo (1928-2013) wasn't photographing stars such as Brigitte Bardot, Audrey Hepburn and Jack Nicholson, he was designing the kind of furniture they liked to live with. Party-ready, revolving lacquer coffee tables with built-in niches for cocktail kit; glass and exotic-wood desks more suited to the writing of racy memoirs than to humdrum office tasks; curved sofas upholstered in conversation-starting materials (wild boar skin and peccary hide) that were perfect for playboy pads. Salvador Dalí owned several of his pieces, as did Bardot, who used them to furnish her Saint-Tropez retreat, La Madrague.

Rizzo's neat dovetailing of two very different careers not only made him unique, but also lent his life and work a level of glamour that few designers attain. Born in Naples, he loved photography from a young age, snapping classmates at his Paris school with a box camera given to him by his mother. By 1944, still a teenager, he was doing war reportage in Tunisia, shooting burned-out tanks in atmospheric twilight. Then the world of cinema reeled him in. In 1949, he was hired by the newly launched *Paris Match* magazine, heralding the start of a long collaboration during which he photographed Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe and Pablo Picasso.

Rizzo moved to Rome in 1968, and it was here, almost by accident, that he became a furniture designer. The only property he could find to rent in the area he liked was an abandoned second-floor commercial unit. Working with local artisans, he transformed it into a jewel-box apartment with a silver kitchen and furniture in

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the kind of 'noble' materials for which he would become known: fine woods, stainless steel, marble and leather. Naturally, all his famous friends wanted the look for themselves, so Rizzo set up his own studio. His 'hero' designs included the 'TRG' lacquered circular coffee table (1969), created for a round room in a friend's apartment, and the 'TP-Elliptique' dining table (1969), made entirely of exotic marble with brass trim, which is now exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art. As the 1970s unfolded, the pieces were followed by gleaming metal lamps, bookcases and games tables.

Though his design work happened spontaneously, Rizzo took it very seriously. Of his signature coffee tables, he said: 'They are not designed to be "gadget" furniture. They are definitive and indestructible pieces made to last the test of time.' One of his final projects, in 2011, was an update of the hi-fi furniture he'd helped pioneer in the 1960s: the 'Galileo' stereo, a space-age form with iPad dock and Bose speakers.

Rizzo returned to photography in the late 1970s, saying he missed his bohemian lifestyle, but he still found time for design. In 2009, he opened Studio Willy Rizzo in Paris with his wife Dominique and their children Willy Jr, Camilla and Gloria. He died in 2013, but the family still produces his work, so the pinnacle of jet-set chic is yours for the taking. willyrizzo.com



Rizzo's apartment in Paris, featuring his 'Sofa Super C', 'TRG' coffee table, rotating 'Mini-Clubs' chairs and brass 'Floor Lamp'



Left 'TP Unopiedi' dining table, approx £7,693; and right 'Round Love Lamp', approx £6,839, both Willy Rizzo



'TP-Elliptique' table, approx £15,385; 'SQ-L' chairs, approx £1,282 each; and 'SQ-L-BR' armchair, approx £1,496, all Willy Rizzo (willyrizzo.com)