

Giampiero Bosoni

A Discreetly Technical Elegance

Tecno



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Techno



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The first edition of this volume was published on the occasion of the exhibition curated by the architect Pier Luigi Cerri, *L'eleganza discreta della tecnica* [A Discreetly Technical Elegance], Milan, Palazzo della Triennale, 12 April – 8 May 2011.

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Osvaldo Borsani, *P40*, 1956
Variable tilt armchair
p. 56

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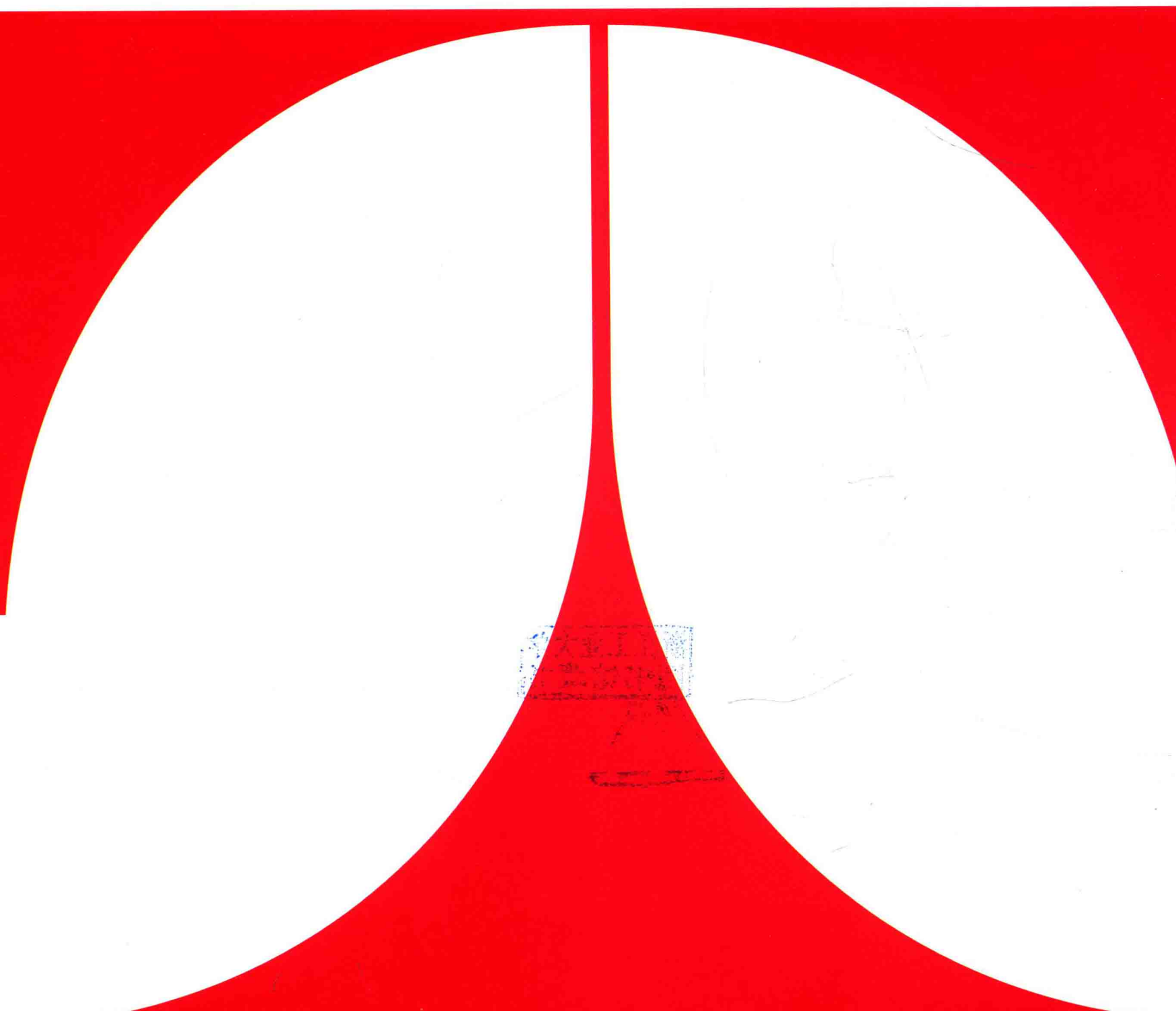
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and along with them all the
technicians, office workers,
executives, agents and distributors,
both current and past, who have
contributed to tracing out the
Tecno path.

The core of a company is its history. This is true not only for the profound values that inspire it, but also for the practices and strategies of which it has been constituted and is still formed. The English word "core", which we Italians often use in the term "core business", expressing the company's strategic essence, originates in the Latin *cor, cordis*, which means heart. In this sense, today's Tecno is a company gazing deeply into its inner essence to relaunch itself from its core business. With the quality of its products and its innovative capacity to communicate, especially in the showroom, it is a company that has succeeded in given great meaning to the pillars of Italian design. Always abreast of the latest technological developments, it has maintained a harmonious equilibrium between executive quality and aesthetic refinement, bringing together in the forms of its products the style and fashion peculiar to Italian creativity and now the legacy of many houseware design companies. This has been its path not only in individual products, but also in its successes with major interior architecture projects, where Tecno has augmented its historical qualities with advanced organizational capabilities and where its signature quality and distinctive class have made it a point of reference for complex undertakings.

This process requires a desire to delve into Tecno's history, to become reacquainted with its guiding lights, starting with the founders Osvaldo and Fulgenzio Borsani, to re-assimi-

late the values that have guided its success, and to take an entirely novel look at an innovative path of growth.

The desire is there to put back into circulation all the energy that Tecno has generated throughout its prestigious history—in applying technology, in forming international teams to direct the major supply contracts—to witness the renewed but necessarily different growth of its potentialities.

We believe that the history of a brand is always the story of its people; in this sense, it is an emblematic affirmation of continuity that the founders' name is still a vital part of the enterprise through the active involvement of the youngest Borsani heir in this new adventure.

We must know who we are in order to forge our future, and it is thus essential that we seek our continuing identity in our history.

Giuliano Mosconi
President

Federico Borsani
Vice-President

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The uniting theme of the Tecno project



Superimposed images of the D70 sofa showing the different possible positions.

Sequence of images of the P35, P39 and P99 armchairs illustrating the formal and technological evolution sought by Osvaldo Borsani for this type of chair, 1953–1957.



“The Standard production system now makes it possible for manufactured products to faithfully reproduce in minute detail the model originally conceived and created by the artists and engineers. It also allows broad distribution so that everybody can enjoy products that not only fulfil a certain function, but also possess the requisites of technical perfection and durability while being aesthetically determined. Adhering to these criteria, Tecno presents its totally new line of elegant, rational furnishings that can be assembled and dismantled.”¹

These clearly elucidated concepts, which we find published in a sort of ideal manifesto on the opening pages of the 1953 Tecno product catalogue, highlight the distinctive qualities that have characterized Tecno throughout its history. We have attempted to recapitulate them in the expression “the discreet elegance of technique”, where technique is almost a synonym for engineering. However, together with that apparently conflicting but quite fascinating pair—elegance and technique—other key principals of the Tecno paradigm are also revealed in that first declaration of intent: the solid and intense relationship with the artistic quest; the impulse towards democratization of the industrial product; design as response to needs that are not strictly functional; furnishings that can be assembled and disassembled, modularity, reversibility, mobility and thus multifunctionality as matrices allowing technique to be incorporated into the process of the aesthetic and typological

development of the furnishing element for the modern home.

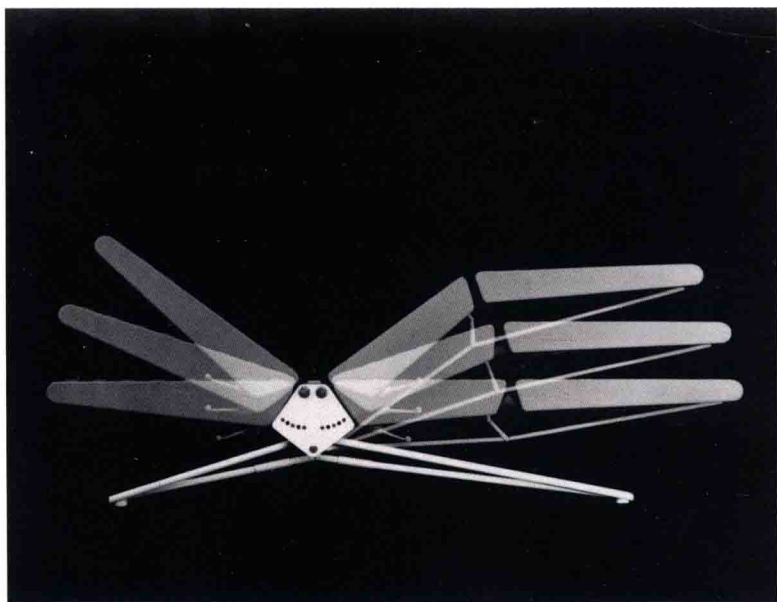
For a new homescape

“The novelty lies in the concept of furniture and the home embodied by Tecno. They are not seen as two abstract and separate parts,” we read in a Tecno catalogue from the early sixties, “but as two living things that are only perfect and complete when they come into direct contact with one another. By creating an elementary unit that can be multiplied ad infinitum, Tecno invented the modular furnishing component for a home that is alive and richly imbued with the personality of its inhabitants.”²

In effect, it all began with the idea of the home—or better, with the idea of dwelling spaces as a fundamental element in one’s quality of life. The rich and intense Tecno story reaches back to the early twenties and the Atelier di Varedo, later Arredamenti Borsani Varedo (ABV), founded by Gaetano Borsani³, father of the twins Fulgenzio and Osvaldo, who would found Tecno. It is the story of a workshop that bore witness every day to the fulfilment of that vital idea of the culture of dwelling spaces. For Osvaldo Borsani, a designer who entered his father’s workshop when he was still wet behind the ears and wearing knickers, this continuous exercise in designing interiors and their furnishings brought him to conceive of the space and things in the home as a pivot point—moving from the inside outwards and vice ver-



The P40, L77 and P32 models photographed "in movement" with strobe-effect stop-action photography. These dynamic representations of the piece of furniture are one of the more explicit expressions of the original qualities of Borsani's designs for Tecno.



sa—of many aspects, both specific and broad, of a rational, modern project. In particular, his experience with the creation of the *Casa minima*,⁴ which he designed together with A. Cairoli and G. B. Varisco for the 5th Triennale in 1933, represents an initial and powerful statement of this orientation.⁵ His vision, which does not appear avant-garde in style (although not lacking in certain typical elements of modern furniture such as tubular metal frame members), is innovative in the way in which he subtly proposes non-coordinated furnishings, each with its own fully realized and distinct qualities, that can be mixed and combined rather freely: each piece of furniture becomes autonomous in its design, self-defining, while at the same time endowed with a strong capacity for interrelation.

The individual furnishing element as a complete object

We may be aided in introducing this topic by the keen observations of the noted architectural historian, Joseph Rykwert, in a brief almost unknown text, where he pays homage to the "philosophy" of Tecno led by the Borsani twins: "I am writing this introduction seated in a Tecno armchair that I bought when my back began giving me problems. We can't call the chair an antique, but I have had it for a number of years. But my computer sits on a relic: a desk, perhaps one-of-a-kind, designed by Gordon Russel or one of his pupils. I presume Osval-

do Borsani would not be offended by the juxtaposition. After all, he has always declared himself the enemy of the completely designed salon as a paradigm for a furniture designer or craftsman. And even though he has assumed the responsibility of designing very large work spaces, we have to thank him first and foremost for his attention to the single furnishing element as an object that is complete in itself."⁶ This note opens for us a realm that begs to be explored and reconstructed. It prompts us to undertake a rereading of the foundations of Italian furniture design: the close and special relationship that has existed in Italy between interior architecture and the design of furniture and furnishing complements and which has led to a total rethinking of the homescape. Among the progenitors of this Italian approach to furniture design and interior architecture, we find the names of Luigi Caccia Dominioni and Ignazio Gardella, but in terms of contributions to theory, the preeminent figure is Franco Albini. And like Caccia Dominioni and Gardella, he too was particularly admired by Osvaldo Borsani. In gaining some perspective on Borsani's career in design, the definition ascribed by Ponti to the interiors of the Albini house in 1940 sounds more pertinent than ever: "precision fantasies."⁷ And we may say the same for the words more generally applied by Tafuri to the work of these creative minds, characterized as "the cruel elegance of avant-garde Italian design prior to the War."⁸