

# Floating Rivas:

*The idea of Italy at sea*



BY BRUCE PETER

*Since the 1920s, Italy has become not only one of the world's leading ship-owning nations, but also a trend-setter in passenger ship design. Studio DeJorio, arguably, is working in a great tradition of Italian design and hospitality at sea.*



The new MSC MUSICA is a cruise ship following in the wake of legends. When we think of Italian liners of the recent past, we are imagining some of the most achingly hip, elegant and stylish ships ever to have gone to sea. We think of striking silhouettes, outlined against the sun and steaming at great speed through warm tropical seas; of promenades lined with steamer chairs; of lidos draped with tanned bodies in the latest cuts of bikinis, gazing out at the world through Prada shades and of the legendary Italian service-with-a-smile and a flourish of 'Prego!' as the pasta and wine are served. From the VULCANIA and CONTE DI SAVOIA, to the ANDREA DORIA, LEONARDO DA VINCI, RAFFAELLO and OCEANIC, Italian liners always have been amongst the most innovative at sea and Italy remains one of the world's great maritime nations, famed for its engineering and design brilliance as well as for its traditions of fine food and hospitality.

mass production and the exploitation of new materials in Italy's post-war building and industrial manufacturing boom. As editor of Domus magazine, Ponti argued that:

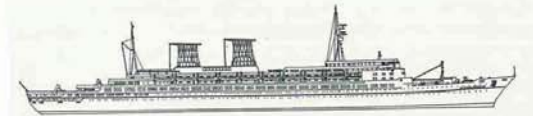
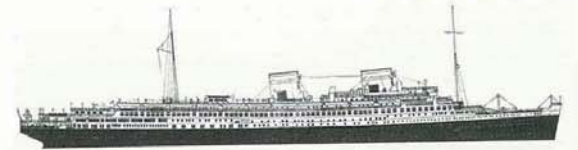
'Italian ships should be dedicated to Italy, that is, to the honour of Italy, in two ways. One is figurative, represented in the decorations, pictures and ornaments, and it is the restatement of the legendary Italy of art and history...The other way of honouring Italy is to make Italian ships superior to all the foreign ones, even if we conceive of a ship only as a 'functional means of transport' and not as propaganda.

Interiors of the 1950s-60s by Zoncada, Longoni and Ponti demonstrate the great elegance of post-war Italian shipboard design. In many ways, passenger ship interiors arguably have regressed since this period. (Author's collection)



Do you not want to achieve the maximum elegance and decisive unity?'

The answer was a resounding 'Si!' and so, in order to achieve these aims, Ponti - and several other leading architects designed cutting edge liner interiors - for example, Gustavo Pulitzer, Nino Zoncada and Matteo Longoni. All favoured shiny finishes, such as brushed aluminium, large abstract murals on bulkheads, polished rubber floors, plate glass partitions, and designer furniture upholstered in brightly coloured velours. These materials, and 'open plan' internal arrangements, more or less defined the typical Italian ship interior from the 1930s onwards. In 'prima classe', business tycoons, film stars, Latin American dictators and the high clergy of the Catholic Church mingled with flash new money 'wannabes', while, downstairs, in 'poltrone' (a term which always sounds like a Shakespearean term of abuse), migrant

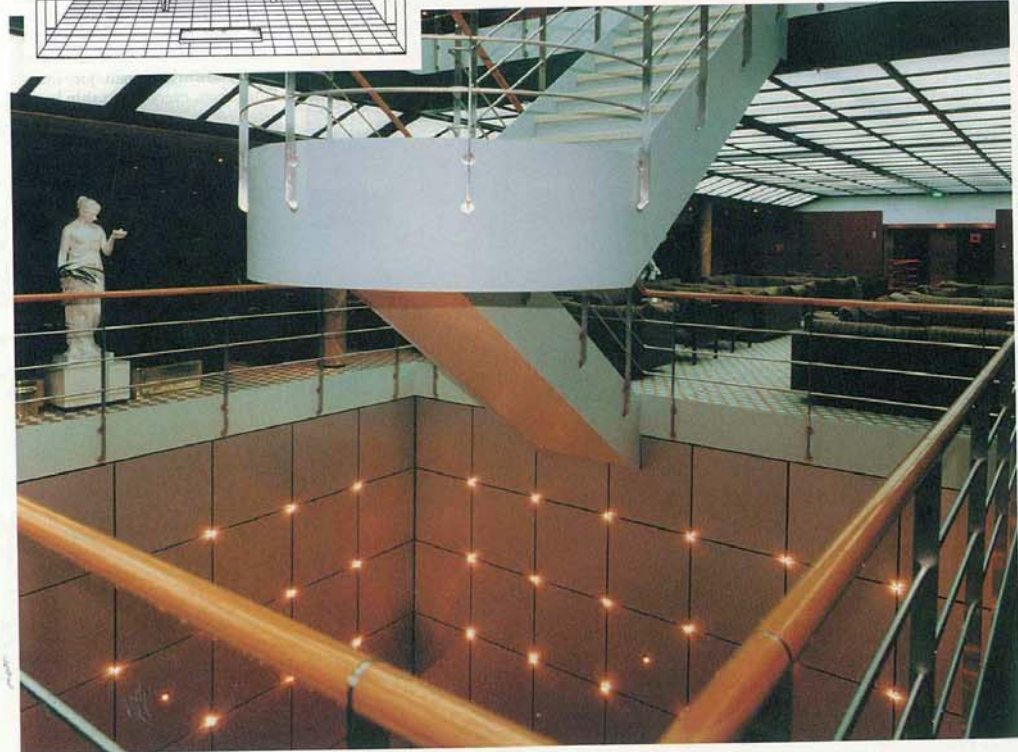
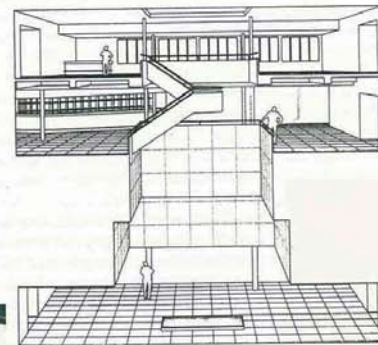


Profile drawings of Italy's pre- and post-war 'ships of state' - the REX and the MICHELANGELO. Both of these flagships had tragically short careers on the North Atlantic.

mothers changed babies nappies on the mosaic tops of Ponti-designed, Cassina-manufactured coffee tables, while their men-folk drank espressos and chain-smoked cigarettes.

While Italy itself was attempting successfully to project a progressive design image to the rest of the world, it was, however, Italian migrants in the USA which, arguably, did most to celebrate 'The Old Country' - but by means other than the ideals of Modernism. Indeed, Italian-Americans created the romanticised (and, frankly, kitsch) image of Italy seen in today's Las Vegas. There, Caesar's Palace and The Venetian hotel-casino resorts have come to represent one of two extremes of the idea of 'Italy' - and it is certainly the one particularly favoured by nearly all Americans. If Italian liners of the 1930s to 1960s pe-

The Piazza Navona on the COSTA CLASSICA is an outstanding contemporary interpretation of the great Italian tradition of Modernism afloat.



# PREGO

The 'Prego' alternative dining room on the *CRYSTAL SYMPHONY* is a comparatively restrained 'hotelier' vision of Italy by a Japanese cruise line, aiming at the American market.



riod encapsulated the Italy of high Modernist design and La Dolce Vita, then Las Vegas was the Italy of the Ordinary Joes Made Good – and, notwithstanding its obvious connotations of time and space, they loved it.

In the mid-1990s, a new generation of Italian passenger ships appeared. Costa Line commenced its new building programme firstly by converting two container ships into cruise ships (the *COSTA MARINA* and *COSTA ALLEGRA*), then by building four brand new ships (the *COSTA CLASSICA*, *COSTA ROMANTICA*, *COSTA VICTORIA* and a fourth unnamed vessel, which was delivered instead to NCL after its German builder went bankrupt). Both the naval and interior architectures were state-of-the-art and the work of famous Italian architects, such as the Genovese Pierluigi Cerri, Guido Canali from Parma and Studio De Jorio Design International, also from Genoa, was displayed. Little expense was spared and the finest materials, furnishings and art installations were specified with great expanses of mosaic and marble to give all of the ships a distinctly Neapolitan coolness.

The only problem was that genuinely contemporary Italian design of this kind did not square with Middle America's conceptions of what anything from Italy ought to look like. To them, the ships looked worryingly austere and nothing remotely like the Italy with which they were familiar from Las Vegas.

Thus, when Costa Line was absorbed into the mighty and ever-expanding Carnival empire in 1997, the new management decided that all future Costa new buildings should be entrusted instead to Carnival's own in-house architect, the ebullient Floridan Joe Farcus. Since then, every Costa ship has resembled a vision of Italy, imagined through American eyes; over-scaled plastic Corinthian capitals sprayed in gold, camp statuary, sticky-back plastic frescoes and photo-real pastiches of the Sistine Chapel and the Café Florian. Ships such as the *COSTA ATLANTICA* and *COSTA FORTUNA* could not be more different in atmosphere and style from Costa's earlier new constructions – but both European and American 'guests' apparently love them – there's no accounting for taste!

In such a context, it is remarkable that Costa Line has invested in a futuristic 'concept space', situated in the ground floor of its headquarters in Genoa. The 'C'-Dream Bar was the work of the architects and designers Marcello Albini and Emanuela Venturini, who describe it as follows: 'It's paradise found, a place that travels without being errat-

ic; it's full of color, but the shades of the lighting effects and stylish furnishing are enhanced by the elegance of gold and silver; it's subtle, youthful, magical. It's a score turned into music, a piece of writing turned into poetry: the design is imaginative, fresh, self-assured and uninhibited ....'

Actually, more than anything else, it resembles a film set designed by Michelangelo Antonioni. A grand, white space with complex coloured lighting effects, it contains only a few pieces of very theatrical designer furniture and lighting, with a glass bar, staffed by a couple of highly coiffed and glacially frigid hostesses. It is impossibly, improbably, painfully stylish but quite magnificently pretentious. Does it, perhaps, represent a violent allergic reaction to Joe Farcus's shipboard design on behalf of Costa's Italian management? Who knows? But it is certainly remarkable – and in an aesthetic never likely to be found onboard a cruise ship, it seems, passengers respond best to rich, gold-plated Baroque, bedecked in flambeaux and tied with garlands of bananas.

Until recently, the last flag-bearers of modern Italian design at sea were Italian short-sea ferries, belonging to Grimaldi Lines and Tirrenia. The involvement of Mediterranean Shipping Company in the cruise business, however, has brought Italian shipboard design back into cruising. All of these firms (and others besides) employ the highly-experienced firm of Studio De Jorio Design International to design their ships. Since the 1970s, this company has worked on numerous passenger ship projects, giving every one a particular identity.

Headed by architect Giuseppe De Jorio, the Studio specializes in both land-based and shipboard work. From the time of his first involvement in passenger ship interior design, when he assisted in drawing up



The *COSTA CLASSICA* berthed in azure tropical seas, next to the *RADISSON DIAMOND*.

interiors for the 1961-delivered *GUGLIELMO MARCONI*, De Jorio's approach has involved the use of high quality materials, such as Carrara marble in conjunction with plate glass, aluminium, various laminates, along with fire-resistant veneers, floor coverings and soft furnishings. With vivid colors and a carefully made selection of vibrant art pieces, De Jorio shipboard interiors reflect modern Italian architecture and industrial design at its best, without being either too stark and 'hi-tech', or too avant-garde or 'trendy'. While the underlying design values for *MSC MUSICA* are located in an evolving tradition, its interpretation and rendering have kept pace with the times, giving the latest De Jorio Design International ships a similar appeal as his earlier works showed in their own times.

A vertiginous view down into the depths of the *MSC MUSICA*'s commodious atrium.



The Restaurant *Il Giardino* on the *MSC MUSICA* aims to evoke an Italian piazza afloat and is, in some ways, closer in spirit to the *CRYSTAL SYMPHONY*'s decor than to the approach used on *COSTA CLASSICA*.



Italy, as imagined in Las Vegas: the indoor 'Grand Canal' of the Venetian Hotel and Resort and one of the hallways at Caesar's Palace. Below, the Italy of Las Vegas is seen in its cruise ship incarnation aboard the Costa Atlantica, designed by Joe Farcus. A copy of a Renaissance altarpiece graces the chapel, while the Cafe Florian is a photo-real reproduction of the original, created by Aalborg Reklamefoto using digital cameras and Adobe Photoshop.



Courtesy: Akva Yards



Courtesy: Akva Yards

Whether one is aboard a new Tirrenia ferry – or one of MSC's impressive cruise ships – one can immediately recognize the De Jorio Design International 'look' in the same way that past Italian masters of shipboard architecture also left their distinctive signatures on each project. Gio Ponti, for example, loved three-dimensional floating ceilings, asymmetrical furniture layouts and walls of mirror; Nino Zoncada used pegboard panels with cove lighting for ceilings, plate glass bulkheads and velour chairs of his own design while Longoni loved jagged shapes, Lucite lights and rich rosewood veneers. Studio De Jorio Design International, however, favours grand 'feature' staircases and sweeping forms to define and to divide spaces. Just as in a Renaissance piazza on *terra firma*, seeing and being seen is all-important. Brass is used for balustrades, to create a hard, glinting contrast to the opulent and richly-toned soft furnishings. While this formula is fairly generic across the entire cruise and hospitality industry, the details of De Jorio Design International's designs are distinctly Italian – and many of the fixtures and fittings are locally-sourced.

Unlike many another cruise line, MSC actively promotes the modern Italian design to be enjoyed onboard its ships as a special selling feature and a positive reason to choose that company's ships, rather than any other.



By the end of 2006, **Bruce Peter** had been aboard 62 passenger ships, all over the world since January. When shipboard, our intrepid reporter dutifully samples all of the facilities, as demonstrated here. Bruce's highlights of the year included sailing up Alaska's Inside Passage on the American ferry Columbia, a 20-hour cruise from Hong Kong on the Star Pisces and a transatlantic crossing on the Queen Mary 2. From squalid engine rooms on Albanian ferries, to topless shows on Asian casino ships, Bruce reckons he's seen nearly everything that floats – but his first love is for the elegant ships of the 1950s and 60s. 'Launched' only in 1974, he may just have been born in the wrong era, however. When not sailing on ships, Bruce lectures in design at the Glasgow School of Art. [B.Peter@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:B.Peter@gsa.ac.uk)