

ceramics

M O N T H L Y



Cover: Paola Paronetto Collezioni

Studio Visit: Brad Schwieger

Tech: Kiln Furniture 101

Branded Craft

PAOLA PARONETTO

Collezioni

by D Wood

One of the classics of the Knoll furniture collection is Harry Bertoia's *Diamond Chair*. Made with flexible, welded-steel wire, the chair was not only a departure from wooden ones, but a representation of modernism and new technology when it appeared in 1952. Bertoia had immigrated to the US from Italy with his father and brother in 1930; he made his name with *Diamond Chair* 20 years later.

Bertoia was born in San Lorenzo d'Arzene, a few kilometers from Pordenone. To honor their famous son, the Galleria Harry Bertoia was created in the Palazzo Spalladi





by the Municipality of Pordenone. Pordenone is the birthplace of another designer/maker with a reputation that could stand alongside that of her esteemed countryman. Paola Paronetto, whose ceramics have appeared in *Elle Decor*, *Marie Claire Maison*, *Vogue Italia*, *Warehouse Home*, and *Grand Designs Australia*, plus countless European-language publications, was born in Pordenone. Unlike Arieto Bertoi, however, she chose to establish her studio on her native soil.

After Bertoi's brief foray into furniture, he turned to sculpture, making over 50 public works for American and international locations. Paronetto shares this proclivity. She says, "My ceramics are not made with a purpose, only for the shapes and colors to bring joy and inspiration to the beholder. They are more like sculptures, pieces of art, than 'useful' objects." A glimpse at her sculptures shows they can take forms as unexpected as a chair made of wire and air.

The Brand

While Paronetto is a hands-on designer/artist, she is also responsible for an enterprise. She has four production assistants in the studio, three administrative personnel, a warehouse staff person, and a cleaner. Mention of the latter two indicates their value in maintaining an environment that is orderly and efficient for concentration on making. One of her administrators has the specific task of ensuring that the enterprise's defined brand identity advances in line with Paronetto's ethics and vision. Her major market



1 *Ranuncoli (Buttercups)*, to 3 ft, 6 in, (1,1 m) in height; bowls to 15¾ in, (40 cm) in height, paper clay, 2021, *Photo: Studio Auber*. 2 View of Paronetto's workshop from the volume *Up Close*, 2022. *Photo: Clap Collective*. 3 Paola Paronetto in the workshop with her bottles, 2010. *Photo: Cristina Galliena Bohman*.



4 Bottles and bowl, to 27½ in. (70 cm) in height, paper clay, gold luster, printed decals, 2019, 5 Sufi lamps and Tripode, to 17¾ in. (45 cm) in height, paper clay, 2019. Photos: Studio Auber.

is the US, but she admits “there really isn’t a continent where we don’t have a retailer.” Boutiques, galleries, architects, and interior designers, as well as home décor e-tailers, are the brand’s focus.

A recent marketing device demonstrates that the brand stresses craft and design, attributes for which the Friuli region is known. Paronetto declares that *Up Close* (Graficart, 2022) was published “to give a voice to my collaborators and show where my work is made. I felt that I owed it to my customers and collaborators, with whom I have a very close and sincere relationship, to open the doors of my atelier for the first time—showing the place where the magic happens and where I work day in and day out with those at my side.”

Paronetto uses paper clay; an exacting process that she has developed to the degree that the material is the essence of her brand. Paper clay combines fiber pulp with clay slip to produce a lightweight, strong body that easily absorbs color. The usual aim is to minimize the presence of the fiber additive, to exploit the advantages of a seamless end product. By contrast, Paronetto celebrates the paper, for instance by using corrugated cardboard. She drenches the cardboard in a mixture of watery clay and pulp; before transferral to the kiln, the forms are about 20 to 30 percent paper. When the cardboard burns away in the firing, the characteristic ribs remain, as do the joins where one bit of cardboard meets the next. The extremely light and seemingly fragile corrugated forms include bottles, bowls, light fixtures, and wall pieces to which a palette of designer shades has been applied. Paronetto’s object photographs have backgrounds of wallpaper or interiors that demonstrate the accessories’ affinity for a contemporary space.

In many of the images, the vessels are grouped—like a potato chip or a peanut, you can’t have just one! In the course of advancing her technique, Paronetto noticed that “the results were flattering and the shapes were coming to life more and more, aggregating into families in a dense dialog of shapes and colors, like real ‘individuals’ with different characteristics and personalities.” The hand-making process and the kiln’s effects make for families whose members have idiosyncrasies while having the same genes. The family members can be a single hue or a mix of complementaries, contributing to a still-life arrangement that is either pleasant or striking.

Finding the Brand

Paronetto grew up in a household—and a country—imbued in design and handcraft traditions. Her maternal grandfather was a sculptor, although her access to him was only via his work residing in the family home. Her father was an architect, and she describes her mother as “a seamstress of great taste and creativity. With her I never missed an opportunity to sew clothes for dolls and make something of my own out of fabric.” In addition to his fascination with buildings, her father instilled an interest in nature in his four offspring. “He liked to tell us the story of every tree, plant, and flower,” she explains. “My parents moved eleven times, and each time my father recreated a cozy home for us and all the animals in the area, even making an aquatic oasis for them.”

As a child, Paronetto liked to draw—her father treated her to paper and paints since he knew this was her favorite hobby. There were no structured art classes at school. After high school, Paronetto did odd jobs—seasonal work in the country and at the

seaside, sewing clothes, working in her father's architectural office. She had begun experimenting with ceramics when, at the age of 18, she heard that Nello Minelli from Gubbio (an Italian Renaissance center for majolica lusterware) would be teaching ceramics and throwing in Pordenone. She says, "This began my passion for working with clay. My first [potter's] lathe (wheel) course was paid for by my grandmother, and then I went on to one course after another. I even harvested grapes to help me buy my first kiln!"

Her second teacher was Giuseppe Temperoni, who permitted Paronetto to shadow him in his workshop. Temperoni was strict and a perfectionist, but he exposed her to time-honored techniques and forms—lathe, columbine (coiling), slab, casting, and sculpture—in materials ranging from earthenware and refractory (fire) clay to porcelain. Surface treatments and firing included multiple glazes, engobes, raku, Etruscan Bucchero, and Villanovan. Temperoni was from Deruta (also known for its lusterware), so Paronetto explains that it was inevitable that "we experimented with lusters and third firings, flux, and crystalline-glaze firings. Getting to know him was really important for me. I learned to look for beauty in the lines of vases, aesthetic lightness, attention to details that make the difference in precise and sinuous forms." In about 1988, Temperoni's generosity of spirit assisted Paronetto's establishment of her first workshop, including advice on necessary equipment. To cover the costs of this venture, she conducted evening classes.

At the same time as advancing her own practice, Paronetto became aware of Pietro Elia Maddalena's La Meridiana International School of Ceramics in Tuscany. In addition to valuing Maddalena's humility, friendliness, and humanity, she took workshops with Takeshi Yasuda, Mo Jupp, Walter Keeler, and John Colbeck. The most lasting impact came from Giovanni Cimatti, from whom she learned terra sigillata and raku dolce (removing objects from the kiln when temperature has dropped to 1067°F (575°C) and sprinkling them with sawdust). Panels made with those techniques had immediate retail success.

Paronetto says, "Thanks to Cimatti's teachings during the various workshops, new collections were born. With him, my imagination and creativity were always sparked, he was a great inspiration and always stimulated me to create something new through my own experience." She created the series of *Congo* vases, covered with engobes and terra sigillata, and began to participate in exhibitions, markets, and fairs. Cimatti suggested that she teach courses in her workshop, which she found stimulating and confidence-building.

With the onset of the year 2008, Paronetto felt intuitively that she wanted new challenges that, once perfected, could be shown internationally, especially in Paris. She began exploring paper clay with Cimatti and realized that this could be a method and style with which to go forward. Paper clay is elastic and less restrictive than other clay bodies, even though it poses problems—warping, breakage—when taken to the outer limits of its capabilities. Despite the commitment necessary to solve paper clay's drawbacks, she realized that she needed to "remove myself from the static, rigid shapes that I saw in ceramic making. I wanted something that was dynamic, light, and poetic without being restricted by the practicality of the object." The decision to concentrate on paper clay has resulted in the unique Paola Paronetto brand.



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6 *Safa*, to 23½ in. (60 cm) in height, paper clay, 2021, 7 *Bosco and Tripode*, to 35½ in. (90 cm) in height, paper clay, 2019, 6, 7 Photos: Studio Auber. 8 *Favo Vases*, to 25½ in. (65 cm) in height, wheel- and hand-modeled refractory clay, terra sigillata, reserve technique, 2002. Photo: Max Tassotto.

Crafting the Brand

Despite Paronetto's outlets being showrooms rather than galleries, her output is definitely one-of-a-kind, handmade craft. No two pieces are the same. In the home-décor market, where a vast majority of accessories are mass-produced and therefore have little meaning for their owners, Paronetto's ceramics are individual and signed. Her *Cartocci* series, probably the most widely known of her portfolio, includes bottles and pitchers, bowl shapes with and without a foot, cactus vases, and circular trays. Their names are inspired by nature—*anemone*, *tulip*, *toucan*, *volcano*—as are the colors, a startling range including moss green, burgundy, pink, lilac, and chocolate.

Following a first firing to 2012°F (1100°C), satin glazes and vitrified engobes are poured on the inside of the vessels. When pieces are suitably dry and drops and smudges removed, color is applied to the outer surface with a brush. A second firing in the range of 1688°F (920°C) to 1760°F (960°C) takes place. If pure gold or platinum are part of the design, vessels go through a third firing, to 1328°F (720°C), to affix the metallic luster. Paronetto buys base colors of the engobes and glazes, which are modified to suit her aesthetics.

The presence of nature is seen literally in the *Pistilli* (named for a flower's pistil) and *Bosco* (woods) series. The *Pistilli* vessels replicate their namesakes by means of tiers of diminishing circumference; the *Bosco* vases have protruding branches whose trunks are ridged like tree bark. What is remarkable about these and other objects that have components is their connections: for instance, how do the branches connect to the trunk and stay there?

Looking back, Paronetto describes her actions, "I experimented a lot to create families of bottles and large, soft, and moving shapes. Since I wanted to participate in important design fairs related to furniture, I had to make an effort to make them quite repeatable and recognizable, even though they were all unique pieces. I wanted clients to make their selection without too much difficulty and be able to re-order those pieces again." Some seem to defy gravity, as in the *Safa* group, wherein a tall cylindrical vessel has a waist, a portion of lesser diameter than what is above and below. The *Signorina* vases consist of tubular supports for a flat-bottomed open container, the whole resembling a woman's skirt and stumpy legs. These are heretical shapes that are eccentric and literally edgy. Their novelty would appeal





9 From left to right: Anemone, bottles, print bottle, anemone, anemone lamps, tulipano, to 31½ in. (80 cm) in height, paper clay, 2014. **10** *Composition*, to 29½ in. (75 cm) in height, paper clay, 2015. **11** *Group*, to 27½ in. (70 cm) in height, paper clay, 2017. **12** *Bottles and bowls*, to 35½ in. (90 cm) in height, paper clay, 2009. *Photos: Studio Auber.*

to fashion-conscious interior decorators who are up-to-date with the latest trends.

All of the aforementioned objects are primarily non-functional, although the vases can hold water and be used for flower arrangements. They are decorated solely with color so that the ribs and valleys of the absent paper, along with the play of light across the surface, predominate. In 2020, Paronetto introduced the placement of decal images of nature in muted tones of sepia or burgundy onto white paper-clay bodies. Entitled *Ego*, these vases could also

be personalized with an image of the customer's choosing. One can imagine these being commissioned for a special occasion or corporate gift-giving. Such new product lines are typical of Paronetto's attitude toward her business. "We are expanding to infuse the spirit of paper-clay ceramics into other materials," she explains. "I am very excited about this and feel that it is a new chapter in my career. To be able to use the skills I have honed in ceramics to express myself using other mediums has been more than interesting to say the least."

Paola Paronetto—Creazioni Ceramiche

Paronetto has set aside the wheel for the time being for practical reasons, "It would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out various techniques with different clays and firings in the same workshop. I now concentrate on what inspires me most because I want to do it to the best of my ability." Similarly, while she enjoyed teaching, she no longer has space in her studio or time away from making to devote to instructing others, except her assistants.

Paola Paronetto is a credit to the many creative Italian designers and craftspeople who precede and stand beside her. In the words of Harry Bertoina, "The urge for good design is the same as the urge to go on living. The assumption is that somewhere, hidden, is a better way of doing things." Long may this continue to hold true.

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