Samos, model R
Italy's preeminence in the field of industrial design was widely recognized by 1972, the year of New York's Museum of Modern Art exhibition, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Enzo Mari, one of Milan's leading design practitioners and theoreticians, was represented in the show by objects he had designed, but, though he was invited along with several other young designers to create an environment especially for the exhibition, Mari declined, preferring instead to submit a statement. Mari is one of a group of socially conscious designers who are examining the role of their profession in a world beset by poverty, urban decay, and environmental pollution. Many have shifted their attention from the well-designed object to ways to improve man's environment. Others are skeptical about the notion that social change can be effected through design, and see their task as more directly political in nature. Mari believes that design can be instrumental in causing needed social change by facilitating communication between the social classes. His theoretical writings on the purposes of design and his research into the psychology of perception have been extensive and influential. The porcelain plates and vases of the Samos series displayed in MATRIX 43 represent only one aspect of Mari's many faceted activities. He has designed household objects of all kinds, from furniture to ashtrays, in wood, plastic, metal, and glass. One of the pioneers in the development of infinitely expandable modular systems, he has also created stimulating toys, playgrounds, and books for children. In all of his designs, Mari strives to make the meaning or function evident in the form an object takes.

When the Danese design firm asked him to design porcelainware, Mari approached the problem from the viewpoint of the ceramic factory workers. He watched as they worked with the clay and observed that "...because of the 'production and market needs' they were little by little being forced to reduce their quality to zero, even below zero...they have ended up performing...meaningless gestures, undemanding of anyone or anything..." (Stottsass, EttoRe, A Proposal for Handmade Porcelain, Milan, Italy: Danese '73). Mari decided to base his designs on hand-building, avoiding the use of the mold or pottery wheel. Initially, the clay is rolled out, then formed into turrets or cut into strips, circles, squares and other shapes. Finally, the parts are coiled, woven or layered in a manner which recalls both ancient coil pottery and basketry techniques as well as everyday pasta-making. Each piece is constructed by a single craftsman who is in control throughout, making judgments and adjustments each step of the way. Mari states that he is not advocating a return to artisanship but rather attempting to put the worker in true rapport with the material and the form. The method, though related to ancient craft and domestic traditions, paradoxically results in refined, elegant objects whose highly glazed white surfaces have a clean, modern look. The porcelains exemplify Mari's interest in serially. Each plate and vase offers an ingenious solution to the problem of building the final shape from its own basic component (circle, square, strip, etc.).

The simple and logical way in which the parts join and interrelate to form the gently curving whole is characteristic of Mari's philosophy of design. Though the pattern of each model is specifically defined, individual hand construction prevents precise duplication.

The area between art and design is less rigorously demarcated in Italy than it is in the United States. Mari, the philosopher-designer, is also a sculptor and a poet. In all of his varied activities, his main concern is with finding ways in which the artist can bring about a synthesis of thought and action.

Mari was born in Novara, Italy in 1932. He grew up in Milan and attended the Brera Academy of Fine Arts where he studied the psychology of vision. From 1963 to 1965 he taught at the Scuola Umanitaria, Milan and in 1970, at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome. In 1976 he was unanimously elected president of the Association for Industrial Design, a post which he held for three years. Mari lives and works in Milan.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

Samos, model B, 1973, porcelain, 8 cm x 27 cm (diam.).
Samos, model F, 1973, porcelain, 7 cm x 30 cm (diam.).
Samos, model G, 1973, white porcelain, 7 cm x 30 cm (diam.).
Samos, model M, 1973, white porcelain, 7 cm x 29 cm (diam.).
Samos, model N, 1973, white porcelain, 7 cm x 30 cm (diam.).
Samos, model P, 1973, white porcelain, 8 cm x 27 cm (diam.).
Samos, model R, 1973, porcelain, 7 cm x 30 cm (diam.).
Samos, model T, 1973, porcelain, 7 cm x 30 cm (diam.).
Samos, model U, 1973, porcelain, 17 cm x 13 cm (diam.).
Samos, model W, 1973, porcelain, 17 cm x 13 cm (diam.).

All works lent by Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc., New York - San Francisco.
Selected one-person exhibitions:
Galleria Danese, Milan, Italy, Forty Iron Vases '59;
Galleria Milano, Milan, Italy '72, '73, '74, '77 (cats.
pub.); Italian Cultural Institute, Tokyo, Japan '80.

Selected group exhibitions:
La Biennale di Venezia, Italy '64, '76, '78 (cats.
pub.); VI Biennale di San Marino, Italy '67; Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, Contenir, Regader, Jouer '70
(cat. pub.); Bologna, Italy, Tra Rivolta e Rivoluzione
'72 (cat. pub.); Museo Foldi-Pezzoli, Milan, Italy,
Milano '70, '72 (cat. pub.); The Museum of Modern Art,
NY, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape '72 (cat. pub.,
includes statement by Mari).

Selected bibliography about Mari (see also catalogues
listed under exhibitions):
Vergine, Lea. "Milan: Art Without Heroes," Art and
Artists, vol. 4, no. 1 (April '69).

S., S. "Bravo Danese," Industrial Design #17 (Oct.
'70).

Accami, G. M. "Munari, Castellano, Mari," Opus
International, no. 16 (March '70).

(Dec. '73).

S., S. "Crafted with Design," Industrial Design #21
(Sept. '74).

Sottsass, Ettore. Enzo Mari: A Proposal for Handmade Porce-
lain (Milan, Italy: Danese '73).

Pedro, Renato. Enzo Mari Designer (Bari: Dedalo libri
'80, in Italian).

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