



living

The big break for all three came in 1991 with the Alessi competition, open only to women, for kitchen and tableware called Memory Containers – a good title in the New Age kitchen. Though Louise Gibb's dragon-shaped soup tureen defeated the manufacturers and never progressed from prototype, the trio made it as finalists. "It was the turning point after eight years' slog," says Clare. "And being true to your designs," adds Louise, who says she learnt precision by painting on silk. "It's best to be trained as a painter because then you can do anything. You're not boxed in." She made crazy hats from cardboard and polystyrene for the launch party of Alessi's FFF (Family Follows Fiction), a range by young Italian designers of useful things that look as though they might have been tossed out of the nursery. All in moulded pastel plastic, there's a bottle opener like a teething ring, cruet sets like the Clangers, a Squirrel Nutkin nutcracker and a cactus fruit bowl, quite a shocker for the hard-edged, stainless steel-with-style industrial company that made post-modernist architects household names. Remember the Alessi kettle that sings (so popular that Michael Graves bought a branding iron to initial his design) or looks like a Viking helmet (Philippe Starck) or silhouettes cityscapes (Aldo Rossi), and the trigger-happy kettle that blows the whistle when it gets up steam (Richard Sapper)? No-nonsense Clare Brass explains that this new collection is an ambitious move into a cheaper market with lower-age-group appeal. Alberto Alessi, who brought the family business of making pasta pots and steamers into the twenty-first century with all of these special projects, says, "Family Follows Fiction is the end of a story of the designer Eighties. We're following in the footsteps of those who worked in applied arts."

It's good news for graduates leaving art college with a car-boot-sale collection of bits and pieces, and no job. Art-school graduates are fast becoming one of Britain's best exports. ■

Above, from top: Joanna Lyle's flower vase, arm-lily sofa, on sale at Planet Earth (tel: 071-379 3285), and sketches for Neptune's Throne, launched at Abitare Living Fair in Verona, October 14-18

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Fun follows function

From gadgets to chairs, design gets playful. In Milan, three British girls are on the cutting edge of New Age design. By Nonie Niesewand

The New Age Arts and Crafts movement is dawning. Not with William Morris strawberry fields of wallpapers and clunky sideboards in repro but with colourful, painterly patterns on everything useful. Swatch watches started the craze. Now, as factories worldwide tool up to replicate brushstrokes and even David Hockney goes wall-to-wall on acrylic carpets from Vorwerk, an artist's studio in Milan becomes a powerhouse for industrial design. The owner, Louise Gibb, above, graduated in Fine Arts from Coventry Lanchester Poly in 1985 and headed for Italy. Today, her crocodile-toothed dogs, more *Jurassic Park* than Disney, are just walking out of her studio and on to watchstraps, sunglasses and textiles. The two British designers photographed with her, Clare Brass and Joanna Lyle, also graduated in 1985, having studied furniture design at Middlesex Poly. Their story reads like a blockbuster novel: Inter Rail to Italy in the mid Eighties, doorstep a few famous studios before setting up own-name studios, then live off royalties from industrial design.

Clare Brass found her first job in Milan in the fashionable studio of Andrea Branzi, who told her, "I don't like your work but I'm desperate for help – I'll take you on for six weeks." She stayed for two-and-a-half years before designing a bestselling matchbox with flint striker for Twerg (an offshoot of Alessi) that unexpectedly sells at the rate of 50,000 a year. The formidable design studio of King & Miranda was the launchpad for Joanna Lyle, whose glass, anemone-like chandelier of lights and playful aphoblers break out of the industrial mould. Hermes covered her jester's cap of a chair in its celebrated silk scarves.

Girls on top: three British designers in Milan. In Louise Gibb's studio, 1, they are, from left, Clare Brass, Louise Gibb (with her dog, Frieda, among the papier-mâché clones) and Joanna Lyle. 2, Joanna Lyle's tentacled glass light. 3, the stainless-steel Chimu bowl for Alessi which launched Lyle's career and, 4, her jester's cap of a chair covered in Hermes scarves, on sale at Galleria Colombari in Milan. Clare Brass, 5, with her blond-wood chair, and, 6, the gadget that sells over 50,000 a year for Twerg – a firelighter that balances the match on top of the stack, ready to strike on the black sulphur pad