

## **The Drama of Light**

by Victor Margolin

In the history of lighting design, the great lamps that have been created by the likes of Victor Horta, Gerrit Rietveld, Guy Carwardine, Marianne Brandt, Gino Sarfatti, Isamu Noguchi, Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Richard Sapper, and Ingo Maurer, are well known. We see them on display in museums throughout the world and many have become classics in the marketplace, even after thirty or forty years. Consider, for example, Noguchi's huge round rice paper lamp, which combine a traditional material and a modern form, or Sapper's Tizio lamp with its elegant linear form.

But let us also reflect on the difference between a single lamp and a lighting system. Little attention has paid to the latter because the result of a system is an atmosphere of light. There is no single iconic object on which to focus aesthetic judgment. It is the system that produces the effect.

Targetti Sankey has put a great deal of emphasis on the design of lighting systems, beginning with its hi-tech Structura system in the 1970s with its elegant triangular modules that could be combined into overhead networks to support a range of lights from spots that shoot highly focused beams into a room to colored neon strips that run the full length of a large public space. Paolo Targetti, who runs the company, has been the man behind much of Targetti's innovation. With the Structura system alone, which has been used to light everything from fashion shows to old master paintings in a civic museum, Targetti offers various kinds of lights that can be attached to the modular strips to create many different effects.

Targetti's systems, of which there are quite a number, are especially designed to illuminate public areas although they can be used in the home as well. Their potential is particularly evident in larger spaces where they can create a drama by producing intensities that vary from one part of the room to another. This is a very different approach to lighting public space from the drab rows of fluorescent lights that one finds in the typical office or in many restaurants and shops. Although, one must acknowledge that in the past ten years or so, architects and interior designers have paid more attention to lighting public spaces and have achieved some impressive results, there is still a long way to go. The possibility of light to create high drama in large spaces may cause some designers to use it cautiously. But Targetti Sankey has pushed the envelope in the development of lighting systems for public spaces in order to make more dramatic and thus more stimulating environments possible.

The Stellaria system, designed by Paolo Targetti, consists of modular metal strips that can form grids suspended from a ceiling with spotlights of any color at each contact point. The grid of light produces a textured illumination that creates greater drama than a more diffuse glow. The modularity of the system also allows the combination of different kinds of bulbs from small spots to

larger suspended ones. Targetti has invented a range of alternatives from decorative glass spotlights in white or blue to more flexible professional spotlights sheathed in translucent coverings.

The Structurella system, which Paolo Targetti also has a strong hand in designing, continues the triangular modules of the earlier Structura design but is geared to supporting larger clip-on spots or even projectors of colored light. The system has different connecting pieces that allow it to twist around a ceiling in serpentine fashion. The aim of both the Stellaria and Structurella systems is to turn public spaces into theatrical ones. Paolo Targetti has thought a lot about museums, for example, attempting to balance the potential of lighting to enhance the drama of the objects with the need for controlling the light to conserve the objects. For Targetti, the lighting designer is a mediator between the technical requirements of a given space and the symbolic value of light itself. The latter is a somewhat mystical concept but such value is readily evident when a church, monument, or other historic site is dramatically lit in order to bring out its essential qualities. For such purposes Targetti has designed a special series, Lights of Florence, which has resulted from a lifetime of living amidst historic sites in and around Florence and contemplating the potential of lighting to enhance their drama and dignity.

Targetti has sought to guide his company along a fine line between history and modernity. The forms of its products are clearly modern, consisting of clean lines and unadorned surfaces. But Targetti is highly conscious of how materials communicate cultural value; hence Targetti Sankey does not focus only on metal and glass. Their Stoneage collection makes brilliant use of fossil stone to establish a link between the present and the enduring forms of classical Greece and Rome. Wall sconces of smooth and rough stone become signs of the past amid the most contemporary furnishings. But, conversely, for the modern office the Arianne collection, consisting of sleek metallic forms that suggest flying saucers, contains the necessary work light in pleasing contemporary sculptural forms. Most recently Targetti received the prestigious Compasso d'Oro Award for his lighting project entitled Mondial F1. This award, which has a history dating back to the 1950s, has traditionally signified excellence in Italian products.

In the report that Samuel Bing, the Art Nouveau impresario, published in France after his visit to America in the 1890s, he took particular note of how American designers had understood the implications of electricity's discovery for the future of lighting. "Instead of limiting the new method of lighting to the illusory use of traditional fixtures," he wrote, "the Americans immediately did away with all the old systems that had been created for other kinds of light." The same might be said of Targetti Sankey one hundred years later.

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