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‘Amiata is just the start’

In a first for Victoria and Albert, the luxury bath manufacturer has called on external designers to produce its new collection. Francesca Seden caught up with Sandro Meneghello and Marco Paoletti to hear more about Amiata, which was launched at this year’s Salone del Mobile in Milan

“We have the appetite for working with designers now,” enthuses Victoria & Albert’s marketing director, Jonathan Carter, on the company’s collaboration with Italian designers Sandro Meneghello and Marco Paoletti. The three men first met at Salone Del Mobile in Milan two years ago, where the seeds for the partnership were sewn, and the range was successfully launched at this year’s show.

“We’ve worked with a number of technical consultants, in the past,” Carter explains. “They weren’t necessarily bathroom experts with the history and heritage of design knowledge.”

Understanding the limitations and possibilities of the material required a steep learning curve, but Carter is confident that the products will be well received in the market. “We know it will be successful,” he insists. “There’s that body of knowledge and we’re ready to do some other things as well. We’re not sure what they will be, but we’re really looking forward to continuing our working relationship. I expect we will be working with some other people. This has been a very good start.”

Meneghello and Paoletti started their design studio in 2005 and have collaborated with several Italian and international manufacturers, including Antonio Lupi and Glass. Their Amiata collection is formed from V&A’s Quarrycast material and is based on the shape of the Amiata mountain range.

Below: Amiata bath formed from Quarrycast



Above: Sandro Meneghello (left) and Marco Paoletti (right)

Q&A

Q: How did the collaboration come about?

Sandro Meneghello: We first met in Milan in 2012 and had the opportunity to see and touch the Quarrycast material. So we decided that we’d like to design something for Victoria and Albert. We had another important meeting the following year at ISH, and that’s when the collaboration was decided. But our goal from that first meeting was to produce something to show at Salone del Mobile 2014.

Q: What are the benefits of using the designers?

Jonathan Carter: Sandro and Marco formed a very close relationship with the technical and production side and we were very happy about this, and being able to have them speak to the technical director in our manufacturing plant in South Africa. They were on a steep learning curve, but we’re delighted to see the products they’ve designed.

Q: What inspired the Amiata collection?

SM: Amiata is an extinct volcano and the Quarrycast material is also made from volcanic-rich limestone, so that provides a link between us, the company and the material.

Q: What’s your impression of KBB design in the UK?

SM: It’s very different from Italy. Italian design is closer to European design but with the UK, there is a clear step, and it’s more comparable to the US. It’s more traditional, and this market is completely different from Europe – more classical, more comfortable, and with a lot of wood. The washbasin with the pedestal is very important for the UK market. In Europe, it’s mostly wall-hung sanitaryware, whereas here it’s all about close-coupled WCs and floor stands. The bathtub is very important here, but in Italy less so.

Marco Paoletti: In Italy, no one has a bathtub, we prefer showers.

Q: And what is good design in your opinion?

SM: I would say that good design is the perfect solution to a problem.

MP: Something that’s easy, useful and nice to look at, for sure something that you can use.

Q: Will you collaborate with other manufacturers?

SM: We have collaborated with a number of sanitaryware companies in Italy and created bathroom furniture for an Italian brand. We’ve also designed taps, so we’ve done a lot of things in the bathroom area. About 70% of the work we do is for the bathroom. We know this market very well, especially in Italy.

MP: Our first connection as designers was in the bathroom industry, and this is partly because it’s not so easy, when you first start out as a designer, to get into furniture design.

SM: The bathroom is really a complete room, but you have lots of different materials to work with. There is ceramic, brass, steel, glass and stone and all require different technologies to produce the finished piece.

MP: If you’re creating say a table, it will consist of the top and the legs and no more, whereas with a tap, it’s a very different and complicated mould. With V&A, we are using another kind of material and, again, another kind of mould. It’s very interesting from a design point of view.

Q: Does having a vast range of materials give you more freedom as designers?

SM: Yes and the possibility to use a mould for a chair is very good. There are limits and you can’t do whatever you want, but in terms of shape it gives you a lot of freedom.

MP: But also you have to know the audience and the connection with the company and its history. I’m not an artist, I’m working with the company to produce something commercial.

Q: How do you balance creativity with commerciality?

SM: The market puts some limits on creativity, as does production. There is the cost to be considered, as well as other factors. You have to draw your shape, and that shape is a solution to that particular problem. It has to meet some kind of need and there is no design without it.

MP: We didn’t just arrive at Victoria and Albert and say ‘okay, this is for you’, because I don’t know them, I don’t know the market and we want to have some limits. It has to be a partnership.

Q: What is next for you and V&A?

MP: I think it depends on the success of the Amiata range. When we met the company two years ago, we saw the opportunity and potential.

SM: The launch at Salone Del Mobile this year is very important and we are already speaking about new projects for 2014 and beyond.

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