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20 ODD QUESTIONS

Claudio Luti

The king of Kartell's furniture empire on mixing styles, escaping to sea and his many (plastic) thrones

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IN THE CLEAR | Claudio Luti FILIPPO BAMBERGHI

'I LOVE INFUSING plastic with irony and emotion," said Claudio Luti, 66, chairman and owner of Italian furniture company Kartell, which is known for witty pieces like the best-selling Louis Ghost Chair (2002), Philippe Starck's polycarbonate reinvention of a Louis XVI fauteuil. As pragmatic and chic as his products, Mr. Luti acquired Kartell in 1988 after a decade as managing director of Gianni Versace. Since then, the dapper Mr. Luti has cultivated some of the industry's biggest stars— Antonio Citterio, Vico Magistretti —turning Kartell into a global success, with more than 300 stores in 120 countries. It's an empire Taschen will chronicle in March, when it publishes the 400-page monograph "Kartell: The Culture of Plastics." Mr. Luti, who also oversees Milan's annual furniture fair, the Salone del Mobile, lives the life of a Milanese gentleman with gusto. Outside the office, he spends intensely leisurely weekends with his wife, Maria Castelli, relaxing in their art- and antique-filled home, skiing

in St. Moritz or enjoying decision-free days aboard their sailboat. The couple has two children, Lorenza, 34, who works as Kartell's marketing and retail director, and Federico, 32, Kartell's sales area manager. Here, Mr. Luti, a businessman whom fate turned into the high priest of plastics, talks about his love of décor diversity and his sweet gargantuan dogs.

One of my life's great surprises was falling in love with a material I'd never imagined working with. In university my thesis was on glass. My father was in glass production and I'd always thought I'd work in glass.

I stopped dressing fashionably as soon as I left fashion, and now I wear what my wife buys. I don't really need anything, but I do like to be elegant. To me, elegance is a disposition, a way of living, not just of dressing.

I'm fairly athletic, so as long as my body holds, I'll be skiing and sailing. Until recently, I played soccer. To keep motivated during tennis, I make a rule: Whoever loses pays for dinner.

I never believed in following trends, and I've never asked my designers to either. In the early '90s, everyone talked about minimalism. I never followed that. Piero Lissoni is fairly minimal but Antonio Citterio is very detail-oriented. I don't want to impose on their designs.



Clockwise from left: Bourgie lamp; the Louis Ghost Chair, designed by Philippe Starck; the Taschen take on Kartell

I really like mixing materials and periods. At home, I have a 19th-century wood dining table with Philippe Starck's Louis Ghost chairs. My desk is

from the 1700s and my desk chair is Starck's 2008 Mr. Impossible. In my garden, I combined my grandmother's iron chairs with green plastic Masters chairs, designed by Starck and Eugeni Quitllet.

My house has personality—a reflection of our lives, experiences and our memories. We have a typical Lombardian 1700s commode from my wife's grandma and some '30s sculptures by Arturo Martini that I bought at auction. In my dressing room, I have photos of my first regattas. In the morning, when I'm putting on my tie, they make me smile.

I'm not a major collector, but I do have paintings by Asger Jorn and Filippo De Pisis, and drawings by Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso and Massimo Campigli.

My office worktable is a kind of organized chaos, covered in papers. Though I have an Apple [computer] and an iPad, I still love paper, and working on it gives me time to think. In my office, I have a table full of things I need to look at: magazines, essays, design prototypes. I have a pre-Second World War black divan that I never use, and my favorite lamp, a black Bourgie, designed by Ferruccio Laviani.

When I work, I'm a Calvinist. I absolutely don't listen to music in the office, and I never read the paper there. Anyone working for me who reads the paper at work would be in trouble. We have a coffee bar in our offices, and I've never been there once. When you work, you work.

When I'm home, I don't want to think about work, so my home office is basically deserted. I want to think about my family, sports, my friends and my two Bernese Mountain Dogs, Leone and Viola. They're large and very sweet.

The hardest thing in my life was my father dying before I finished school. I found myself becoming an adult without the one person who really could have given me advice.

I don't like shopping and trying things on, but I do love looking at store windows, and I think Milan's "golden quadrilateral" is unmatched anywhere. From Bar Cova on Via Montenapoleone all along Via Spiga, Milan has the best jewelers, the most important clothes.

If I couldn't work at Kartell, I'd still work in luxury goods. I have friends who run the country's finest hotels, who make the best candies in Italy and the best cars. I really love that level of quality and knowing how to create beauty. I'm not interested in mass market.



One of Mr. Luti's Bernese Mountain Dogs KARTELL

I work very hard, but I also believe in relaxing. I spend August sailing the Mediterranean with my wife and friends on our boat, a Wally 77 Tuamata. It's about 10 years old, but was originally very advanced. It has no TV, so I'll read a dozen books. I wake up in the morning, and before I wash my face, I jump in the water. I never put on shoes. The biggest decision is who's going to make the spaghetti. It's marvelous.

Like a good Milanese, I leave the city almost every weekend. In winter, we see friends in St. Moritz. When it's warm out, we go to Portofino. During midseason, we go to our house in the woods. We used to ride horses, but now we are more interested in the mushrooms, the chestnuts and the fireplace.

I absolutely didn't know I wanted to work in design. I studied economics and business as a base to work as an entrepreneur. But I was lucky to end up

working with Gianni Versace, who was hyper-creative and constantly thinking about making things new. That influenced my thinking and made it easier for me to talk with architects and designers.



Sailing on his Wally 77 Tuamata WALLY

The best gift I ever got was a dark blue Porsche Carrera my wife gave me because I wasn't bold enough to buy one. When I was young, I didn't have the money. When I could afford it, it seemed inappropriate. It's a convertible and, with the silence and the wind, it feels like going on a sailboat. It's an instant vacation.



Porsche Carrera STEFAN WARTER/PORSCHE AG

No home is complete without affection. You can have all the Picassos in the world or walls made of gold, but without affection it's nothing.

—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman

