

Since arriving in Minnesota from Milan last year, Mauro and his wife, Elisa, can't help but stand out.





THE
UNITED
STATES
OF
DESIGN

MEET THE
AUDACE GLOBAL
DESIGN GURU
WHO HAS INFUSED
HIS ELEGANTE
SENSIBILITY INTO
A ONCE-BLANDO
\$27 BILLION
AMERICAN
CONGLOMERATE.

BY CHUCK SALTER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BOWMAN

THE NINE PASSIONS OF 3M'S MAURO PORCINI

"Everything around
you, every product,
tells a story about you
to the world."

—MAURO PORCINI

1 Mauro loves his pink lion. One Saturday afternoon last spring, he and his wife, Elisa, front-runners for the title of Minnesota's most glamorous Italian transplants, stumbled onto an eclectic sale in a parking lot on the outskirts of St. Paul. As soon as he saw the white stone statue of a regal lion, Mauro didn't hesitate forking over a few hundred bucks. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. "I painted it fluo [as in fluorescent] pink myself," he says. And he put it in his front yard for all to see.

Mauro Porcini is the resident design guru at 3M, the materials-science conglomerate based in St. Paul. Throughout the company, he's simply known as Mauro—a renaissance man who's transcended

his last name. Although most of his Midwestern colleagues pronounce it *MORE-oh*, it actually rhymes with *WOW-whoa*, which is also the typical reaction to the flamingo-colored sculpture that now resides across the street from the Oak Ridge Country Club. The club had been lion-free for 90 years until Mauro moved from Milan in 2010 to Hopkins, a Minneapolis suburb dotted with low-pitch ranch homes like his. "The neighbors stop and take pictures," he says, smiling as he gazes at his yard one night in June. In his mind, Mauro says, the beast roars, "This house is owned by a designer, someone who likes to think in a different way!"

He delights in the shock, both in the color and the juxtaposition, of a sculpture associated with ornate European castles or Italian piazzas transplanted to a straitlaced American suburb. The piece works, he says, because "it's completely out of context."

Like Mauro himself. The stylish and unapologetically passionate 36-year-old designer oozes European panache from every pore of his intensely bronze skin, yet he works at one of the most low-key, unassuming companies in corporate America. 3M has been a quiet innovator by design. Although its 85 R&D labs around the world earn more than 500 patents a year and are responsible for an astounding 75,000 products on the market in such fields as medical devices and consumer electronics, the \$27 billion giant is still best known for creating ingenious but utilitarian items such as Post-it Notes, Scotch Tape, and Scotch-Brite Scrub Sponges. "One of the biggest problems we have

as a company is understatement," Mauro says. "We're trying to change that."

Mauro is about love—easily his favorite verb, as in "You have to love society and the people you design for"—not specs. He's here to trigger emotion, in customers, colleagues, and 3M partners. To be, as CEO George Buckley says, "an infectious agent" for design. No wonder Mauro's crazy about the statue. He's 3M's hot-pink lion.

2 Mauro loves the first product he designed for 3M. When he joined the company in 2002, it had plenty of industrial designers but no one like the then 26-year-old *prodigio* who had made his bones creating goods at Philips and with his own online design outfit. Antonio Pinna Berchet, 3M's head of corporate marketing in Milan, was eager to make its office wares stand out. The company was relying on functional excellence, but Italian consumers value aesthetics. "We wanted to create more impulse buying with more attractive products," Berchet says. His long-term goal was "more institutional. My thinking was design would be part of research and development."

After just a few months at 3M, Mauro showed the brass that he was bilingual in more than one sense: He can talk business as well as design. (Six Sigma has never sounded so sexy as when Mauro riffs about his love for process.) He convinced the projector team in Austin to let him compete for a redesign that was already under way. He tapped his Milan network and brought in Pininfarina, the Italian firm renowned for its work with Ferrari and Maserati. Mauro's group made the overhead projector striking, with the sleek, inviting lines of a luxury car. "Always our projectors have been very industrial and very standard," says Berchet. "This was absolutely new."

"You wanted to touch it," says Mauro.

What got the attention of pragmatists throughout 3M was the bottom line: Sales doubled. The S10 Multimedia Projector showed what design could do for business.

3 Mauro loves watches. He wears his passion and creativity on his sleeve. Literally. The crazier the watch the better. He has about 30 in current rotation. He'll wear the silver Philippe Starck with a hole in the middle to work, then change into the white Calvin Klein model with a tiny, almost invisible clock face for dinner.

Creating emotion around a purchase is not an abstract concept for Mauro: This is how he shops for watches. At his team's holiday party in the Uptown district of Minneapolis last year, he fell

FROM MASKING TAPE TO MAURO

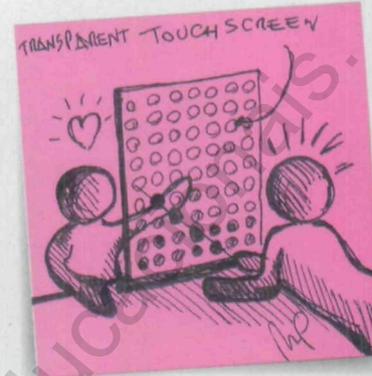
A SAMPLING OF 3M'S HITS, PAST AND PRESENT





POST-ITS FROM PORCINI

3M'S DESIGN CHIEF SKETCHES A FEW OF HIS FAVORITE THINGS.



hard for a colleague's iPod Nano watch, designed by Scott Wilson (see page 78). When Mauro realized there was an Apple store nearby, he led the group on a shopping excursion, where he bought two. "I can buy five [watches] in one week," he says with a laugh. "They grab my stomach."

He has plenty of love to go around. The man owns 65 pairs of shoes. "I married a monster," says Elisa.

4 Mauro loves the Little Tape Man. "Isn't he great?" he says, cradling an anthropomorphic tape dispenser in the palm of his hand. Dressed in a white Gucci jacket, black V-neck T-shirt, and black pants, Mauro stands in a 3M conference room surrounded by dozens of his team's creations. Safety goggles sporty enough to wear on Milan's fashionable boulevards. Ankle braces with a clever lace-up system. An air purifier that could be mistaken for a pricey vase. "But the Tape Man," Mauro says, "is my mascot."

In 2004, 3M executives in Europe asked him to focus on rejuvenating tape dispensers. The novelty of the 1961 invention of transparent Scotch Magic Tape had long since worn off. "The idea was a product that could almost be animated, living on your high-tech desk," Mauro says. "Like a companion." He brought in Stefano Giovannoni, the Milanese designer who had transmogrified Alessi's kitchen utensils into artful objects worthy of display. Giovannoni's Omino Scotch Tape Dispenser (*omino* is Italian for "little man") is a figure crawling on his stomach. The tape emerges from his head and attaches to his upraised foot. The charming dispenser appeared in design books and exhibits. It even found a home on the desk of Buckley, the CEO, who says, "It shows how design can differentiate a simple roll of tape." But it never crawled its way into stores. "People here were thinking, Oh, we love it, but is there a market big enough for this?" Mauro says. "The company was not ready for it."

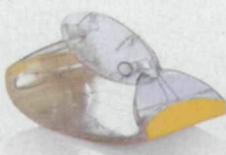
In the early years, despite the blessing of top management, who gave Mauro the mandate to build a design center in Milan, he often met resistance in the labs. He recalls this without a trace of bitterness. 3M is a 99-year-old bastion of proud left-brain thinkers whose highly rational and technology-driven approach has served it well. "My biggest roadblock was the lab directors who were in charge of creating new products," he says. "Here arrives this young guy from Italy, from the periphery of the 3M empire, and he's telling us how to do innovation?"

Mark Sorlien, a technical director and 30-year employee, whose plain blue button-down shirt and earnest demeanor evoke a high-school science teacher, was one of the skeptics. "At

Clockwise from top left: The new design center at 3M headquarters; imagining uses for a new touch-screen tech; 3M's Hoop Light; his Philippe Starck watch; his renovated home.



2006
Scotch Paper Cutter
(Good Design Award)



2007
Scotch Easy-Grip Packaging
Tape Dispenser
(Good Design Award)



2008
Scotch Fur Fighter
Pet Hair Remover
(Good Design Award)



2009
MPro 150 Pocket Projector
(ADI Design Index)



2010
Scotch Pop-Up Tape
Dispenser with precut strips
(Good Design Award)

2011
Flexible Light Mat and
Hoop Light debut at the
Milan Furniture Fair.

first we thought, What is this guy talking about?" he says, his eyes wide with bewilderment. "Mauro talked about 'what does that mop on the shelf say to the customer when she shops?' I'm thinking, It's a mop; how much water comes out?"

Although never commercialized, the Little Tape Man, along with other early designs, ultimately succeeded. "They helped to shake the system," Mauro says of the rejections. "They showed the direction we needed to go." The failures helped pave the way for a crop of playful items, including a high-heel tape dispenser, Elisa's favorite, and an apple Post-it dispenser used by Buckley. "It's a dispenser, for goodness sakes," he says, "but there's no reason why it shouldn't be beautiful."

These creative designs have sold well. As Joe Harlan, executive vice president of 3M's \$3.8 billion consumer and office business that bankrolls most of Mauro's work, says, "Once you start adding value, resistance goes away."

5 Mauro loves his house. From the lawn ornaments to its interior, Mauro's home embodies his design sensibility. "You walk in and your jaw drops," says Robyn Waters, the former Target design chief and a recent dinner guest. Mauro tore down the kitchen, living room, and den walls, transforming a predictable ranch-style floor plan into an open, modern, and whimsical space. Everywhere you look, he has added seemingly incongruous elements that meld together: a Frank Gehry cardboard chair; a Madonna and Child painting by his father, an architect; a spotted goat pelt (from Elisa's days as a designer at Gucci); a delicate glassblown bird on a shelf tilted at a precarious angle. The coup de grâce, though, may be the master bathroom, with a two-seater Jacuzzi that fills from a spout in the ceiling. He turns on the water, marveling at the long, thin column of liquid. "Don't you just love that?" he says.

Twice a week or so, Mauro and his wife have guests over for dinner, just as they did in Milan—3Mers, local designers, or out-of-town friends passing through. One night in June, he opens the door, having changed from his office attire into a definitely NSFW open-collared white shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest. Before you know it, you're sipping prosecco with Grand Marnier and pureed pear and noshing on Elisa's exquisite appetizer spread of bruschetta caprese, Pizza Margherita, and Italian chicken salad. For dinner: wild mushroom agnolotti with a porcini (of course) cream sauce, topped with Parmigiano-Reggiano. "I starve when Elisa is not in town," Mauro says, breaking out the Barolo he brought from Milan in his suitcase.

This fall, he will throw open the doors to 3M's new design center in St. Paul. Much like his home, it is meant to entice. "People will see this intriguing space and want to visit," he says. A couple of years ago, in an effort to further integrate design at 3M, Mauro proposed building the company's design hub at headquarters—and moving from Milan to the U.S. to run it. "In Milan, you breathe design," he says. "I'm trying to bring some of that here."

As he walked through the unfinished space last summer, wearing pink pants, pink socks, and a black custom-tailored Italian jacket, Mauro could already see the center humming with designers. A river of fuchsia winding along the carpet from the entrance will usher people into offices that will look dramatically different from the muted colors and tall cubicles that pervade the 3M campus. "The project rooms will have grass," he says matter-of-factly. Artificial grass. Lawn furniture. And the floor by the kitchen area will be white tiles. Mauro loves white (see his iPhone, his watch, the bleached wood floors in his house). He has sent the tiles back four times already because they weren't right. That sort of perfectionism would normally cause ripples, but he has enough goodwill banked to get away with it.

And his influence is growing. He's the head of global strategic design in the consumer and office unit, but his work extends to other divisions. Buckley says 3M is spending five times

more on design than five years ago. And Mauro's 50-member group is becoming more global, adding designers in China and Japan. Brazil is next.

6 Mauro loves 3M's new touch-screen technology. He didn't design it, but he's helping to promote it. 3M has 46 core technologies—adhesives to abrasives, films to finishes—which it uses to seed products across various industries. A lot of the materials go inside other companies' offerings. (In fact, the average cell phone can contain a dozen 3M components: materials that brighten the screen, seal against water, help bond metal and plastic parts, and provide shock absorption.) "For a designer, 3M is like a candy store," Mauro says.

But much of this technology is invisible to the eye, which begs the question, Where does design fit in? "We're helping our customers envision the innovation," Mauro says. For 3M's ultrathin, flexible, and transparent touch-screen technology, which can respond to multiple simultaneous touches, his team and the R&D lab imagined several potential applications. A curved video-game player. A touch-screen bracelet. A washing machine with touch-screen controls on the glass door. The designers then produced a video that 3M shares with consumer-electronics manufacturers as part of what Lee Fain, the project's design manager, calls "design provocation."

Designers, Mauro says, are good storytellers. At 3M, they're charged with telling the story of a product not only to consumers but, increasingly, to the companies it supplies as well. "In consumer elec-

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Mauro dresses up at 3M as if it were a Milanese runway. His wardrobe, he says, conveys "creativity and business savvy."



tronics, you use design or you die," he says. "In a company like this, it's less obvious that design is needed, but it is."

1 Mauro loves his *Breakfast at Tiffany's* poster. The iconic image of Audrey Hepburn in a sleeveless black dress, long black gloves, and strands of pearls hangs on the wall overlooking his desk. Pure elegance, perhaps Mauro's second-favorite word. "Whenever I interview someone, I ask, What's your definition of elegance?" he says.

Mauro defines elegance as consisting of simplicity and balance—"like jazz," he says—concepts he expounds on continually within 3M. "He's started a sort of design school inside 3M," says Berchet. "He's teaching others the right approach."

Sorlien, the once-skeptical 3M technical director

"WHENEVER I INTERVIEW SOMEONE, I ASK, WHAT'S YOUR DEFINITION OF ELEGANCE?" SAYS MAURO.



and mechanical engineer, is now "a conspirator," Mauro says. Sorlien worked with the design team on a new filtered-water pitcher that takes up minimal space in the refrigerator yet has a nifty fast-flow filter, based on preexisting 3M technology. "I'm an Iowa guy," Sorlien says as a shorthand explanation for how he's not a designer. But he's undeniably proud of how, well, elegant the pitcher is. "If you'd have given me 10 years, I'd never have come up with this," he says, admiring the superslim profile—and the fact that it holds more water than the previous rounder version. "What Mauro and his designers helped us with is form plus function."

8 Mauro loves the Hoop Light. A couple of years ago, he was part of a three-day brainstorm looking at 3M's lighting technology in hopes of creating a business that could target a higher-end market of architects and interior designers. The Hoop Light that emerged from the new business is unlike anything previously created by 3M. At 9 feet in diameter, the fixture looks like the base of a chandelier minus the fancy lights. Inside the slender band are LEDs and reflective films and filters that spread the light out, creating an even glow. The piece can also change colors, altering the mood of a room. Suspended from thin cables, it floats like a halo.

The Hoop Light, along with a slew of other chic creations, is getting the company noticed in design circles as never before. Last spring, 3M participated in the Milan Furniture Fair, the largest furniture trade show in the world, a coming-out party that Mauro had anticipated for years. Working with local designers, his team put together a showcase that married 3M engineering and its emerging design focus. A flexible adhesive mat dotted with lights can be attached to walls or sculpted into a curving wall of light. The Sunlight Delivery System collects natural light from the roof and distributes it to windowless areas of a building through a sort of plumbing network. The exhibit offered a captivating experience in lieu of a straightforward sales pitch. "We didn't go into much detail about the technology," says Matthieu Aquino, the design manager in Milan who spent a year preparing for the fair. "It was very different for 3M."

The new business, architectural markets, has one of Mauro's designers on board. He's involved in shaping products, marketing, and the business plan from the start. Another first at 3M—and the kind of integration that Mauro had envisioned early on and is eager to replicate.

9 Mauro loves his bobblehead. It's a suave little doll, a mini-Mauro in a brown leather jacket, matching brown shoes, and a black shirt. Mauro displays it on his desk because it was a gift from a 3M leadership event last February. Each of the managers got one. To Mauro, the figure is another sign that he's become part of the leadership team and that 3M's blue-button-down brigade accepts him. "Mauro's making it okay to talk about and be passionate about love, soul, and the customer experience, not just about technicalities and business plans," says Waters, the ex-Target exec, "although he can talk about those too."

In the consumer and business unit, says Harlan, design is the key to differentiating 3M's products, its packaging, and even its store displays in an increasingly crowded market: "The strategy is to get design throughout the organization, and Mauro's the guy."

For all the outward differences between Mauro and 3M (his dark gray Porsche pops in the sea of sedans in the parking lot), he focuses on the similarities. "They're design thinkers," he says of his colleagues. "We're just waking up something that was already here."

The designer's goal, as he explained to graduates at the University of Minnesota's College of Design last spring, is not customer satisfaction. That's a terribly low bar. You're just meeting someone's needs. If you're a designer who loves your customers, "you surprise," he said. "You enter the sacred field of the magic, of the extraordinary, of the memorable."

For Mauro, that's *amore*. ©

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