

# STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

The millennia-long evolution of the sofa may have finally achieved the optimum blend of looks and comfort

By *JESSICA DOYLE* Photographs by *MATTEO IMBRIANI*

The perfect sofa ticks a number of boxes. As the main player in the living room, it has to have enough personality to set the tone lookwise, and, given its size, it has to anchor the space. It should have enough substance not to need replumping every time someone gets up. And then, as one of the biggest furniture investments you'll make, it must be crafted with staying power in mind.

Perhaps most importantly, it's also got to feel right: gone are the days of the cutting-edge couch that looks edgy but makes you feel as though you're perched on a window ledge. Today's sofas prove that the right one can look smart, tailored and put-together, yet still offer the squishiness that invites you to lounge on it all day long.

*'A sofa should have a timeless aesthetic so it becomes a classic to pass on to future generations'*

The Belgian architect and designer Vincent Van Duysen does not seem, at first glance, a person to value the concept of squish. Dressed in black jeans, black cashmere crewneck and black jacket, he is the walking embodiment of his exacting approach to design, and the spare, pared-back aesthetic of his work. And yet his latest sofa for the Italian furniture brand Molteni&C is far from chilly and austere. Instead, it's a luxurious blend of enveloping curves, statement colour and deep comfort.

The sofa, a new, modular iteration of Molteni's Augusto design, was revealed at the Salone del Mobile furniture fair in Milan in April this year, where the big story when it came to upholstery was plumpness: big-hitting brands such as Flexform, Poltrona Frau, B&B Italia and Cassina all showed puffed-up armchairs and sofas that cocoon.

The new Augusto, which started life last year as a compact, linear piece, has been stretched, curved, reshaped and given a shot of glamour in order to create a supersized semicircular version.





Van Duysen, 62, who started his career in Milan with the Italian designer Aldo Cibic and launched his own practice 35 years ago, joined Molteni&C as creative director in 2016. Since then he has applied an architectural rigour to his collections; as he puts it, ‘constantly striving for the essence’ of each design.

Yet rather than being preoccupied with form and style, his approach takes in warmth, soul and texture, and is entirely focused on the happiness of those who will experience his furniture. ‘My work is human-centric,’ he says. ‘The art of living is at the core of my practice and philosophy.’

The sofa, above all pieces of furniture, characterises that art, its key function being relaxation. It has its origins in ancient Egypt, when it took the form of a bench piled with carpets for the comfort of pharaohs, and the word is derived from the Arabic *suffah*.

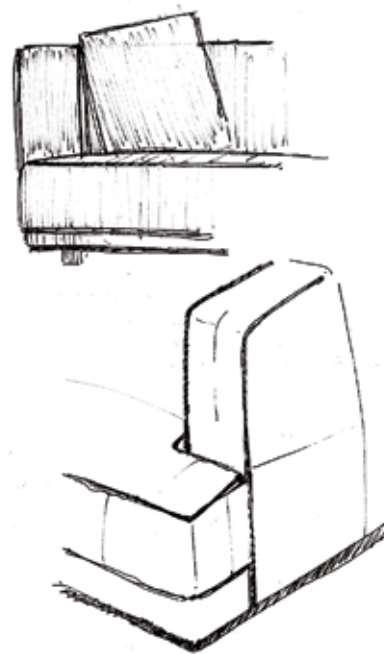
Sofas didn’t make it to Europe until the 17th century, when they were similarly bench-like, and reserved only for the most elevated of homes – one of the earliest surviving sofas in England is at the V&A Museum and dates from 1690, with a narrow seat, tall back, minimal padding and ornate upholstery: elegant, but not inviting.

The furniture-maker Thomas Chippendale developed the sofa during the 18th century, creating designs that were more accessible and affordable, and at the same time the *canapé* came into being in France, a couch-like piece with ornately carved wooden legs and an upholstered back.

It wasn’t until the Victorian era, when furniture could be made by machine rather than by hand, that sofas came into their own in British homes; but ever since they have continued to symbolise domestic comfort.

The curved sofa, that ultimate expression of glamorous lounging, is au courant today, but has its roots in the mid-20th century, when Jean Royère’s iconic Polar Bear, a padded crescent shape, revolutionised the sofa scene.

Van Duysen, of course, is not concerned with notions of fashion: ‘A sofa should have a timeless aesthetic so it



becomes a classic to pass on to future generations,’ he says. ‘It should make a statement without being too prominent.’ Rather than creating a sofa that delivers an impact purely through its looks, his aim was to create a piece of furniture that could ‘foster connection’ between people; for him, the curvilinear Augusto is not simply an aesthetic conceit, but is intended to allow people to sit face to face with one another, with the aim of making the chat better.

He believes that his new design is a move on from his previous work for Molteni, in the year that the brand marks its 90th anniversary. ‘It is especially with this version of Augusto that I felt like there was a departure from the classic sofas,’ he says; and indeed, in its new, languorous form, the Augusto strikes a fresh note.

It is, he says, ‘an exploration of contrasts: where past meets present, and technical innovation meets the expert craftsmanship of Molteni’. It also explores further contrasts: for example, between softness and structure; a super-comfortable sitting experience and a sharp silhouette. He started with the concept of ‘total comfort’, and meticulously explored the different ways a body might relax into the base, back and armrests of the sofa.

This translated into deep, upholstered seats underpinned by a metal structure, with a painted aluminium base resting on aluminium feet; the combination allowing a balance between the inviting squashiness of a truly great sofa, and the sophistication for which Molteni is known.

In terms of composition, these days, what goes into a sofa is as important as what can be seen on the outside, particularly for a designer whose focus on

Vincent Van Duysen with the new modular Augusto sofa, reconfigured with softer padding and rounded format. Price on request (molteni.it)



wellbeing extends to the planet as a whole, and for a brand keen to expand on its eco credentials.

So that means polyurethane padding in the cushions; but unlike the planet-polluting polyurethane of old, the type used here is composed of a material called Polimex, which is derived from renewable and recyclable materials, and is quick to produce. That helps to lower its environmental impact, as does the fact that it is up to 70 per cent lighter than standard padding.

The sofa can be customised to within an inch of clients’ preferences. They can choose to mix in a chaise longue or an island unit and, of course, it can be upholstered in any one of more than 800 variously coloured Molteni fabrics, curated by the Milanese fashion designer Marta Ferri. There’s even a vegetable-tanned bio leather made from olive residue.

The evolution of the Augusto is, says Van Duysen, ‘a blend of timelessness with contemporary flair’, much like his journey with Molteni. ‘My blueprint for the brand’s future is to be faithful to the legacy of the past 90 years and then develop it, constantly improving and refining the collection.’

The refreshed Augusto is a symbol of that vision: a sofa that ticks all the boxes with architectural restraint and all-out glamour. ●