The Talks

ACHILLE SALVAGNI: "THE WORK SHOULD BE LIVED"

SHORT PROFILE

Name: Achille Salvagni
DOB: 1970
Place of birth: Rome, Italy
Occupation: Designer, architect

Le Graal Cortina, the Achille Salvagni designed luxury hotel, opens in the Dolomites this December 2026. Achille, a new volume celebrating his creative work, is out now via Assouline.

BY EMMA ROBERTSON

Mr. Salvagni, is storytelling important to the work you do as a designer?

It's the essence! Without narrative, I don't exist. I cannot create a scenography or a staging without a narrative behind it. Even when I design a single piece of furniture, for example, my interpretation is always dedicated to a narrative. I never create for the sake of aesthetic. I could not be just a decorator.

Where did that instinct for storytelling come from?

Of course, being born in Rome was a major element that influenced my work. Being surrounded by historical buildings that were built layer after layer, never diluted by the passage of time... Each layer transfers its story to the next one, they all influence each other. That makes you feel part of a system that always takes care of the past and considers the future. I've always loved the history of craftsmanship, and I think that's reflected in my work.

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Indeed — you're working with seasoned stonemasons, nuns from a convent who make your textiles, bonze casters who once served the Vatican...

Yes, it's been my pleasure to meet a lot of amazing craftsmen in my life. Rome is really a cradle of craftsmanship, and the passion of these craftsmen is so inspiring for me. I can, and sometimes do, spend hours or even entire days with them analyzing a piece and understanding how we can achieve the result. I feel my story as a designer really started from meeting these giants, understanding their traditions, their ambition, their legacy passed down through generations. I think the human touch can also never be replaced, it's something a machine can never achieve, and that also adds to the storytelling I mentioned before. I need to have a story to create a canvas that embraces all the elements rather than just putting things together in a pleasant way.

Isn't that the meaning of design; the craft of something pleasant or beautiful?

Design is an aesthetical declination of a practical function. If you don't meet the practicality and you focus only on the artistic gesture, you're not doing design, you're doing art. I don't define myself an artist. I consider myself much more a designer, a woodworker, or a craftsman of architecture — not decorator or a painter or a sculptor. If you erase functionality, you demolish the essence of design. So for me, I try to remove the idea of decoration from my schematic attempt. My approach is more of a philological one. I simply try to release something that is a little brick which helps to make something bigger. I don't want to make a useless brick, an extra brick. We don't need this. We're full of bricks everywhere. We're surrounded by stones, bricks, and clay everywhere. If we add something, we want it to be something different than the others before you.

Kazuo Ishiguro says that he doesn't want to contribute numerically to literature: "What's the point in adding to this huge mountain of books unless there's something new or different?"

I'm competing with myself, trying to release something that adds a little layer of value, to make something that is better than the last thing. I'm always thinking I could have done better, I could have taken more attention, I could have improved.... I think I am like a chef. I never feel satisfied with what I release, honestly, and that puts me in a position that is always very critical. It's a lot to do with me and my own ego.

But even if aesthetic isn't your main goal, your work is still objectively beautiful, especially in its details.

I am obsessed with details! I prefer to whisper rather than to shout. I love when there is a detail on a piece that you discover gently and with. I love when a piece that doesn't ask for attention. Sometimes I discover little details in a piece of furniture that I didn't even know about when I created it. That's the real value that I think can make a piece timeless. For example, with the design and architecture work I did at the hotel Le Graal in Milano Cortina, I incorporated details from the Austro-Hungarian folklore that the area was influenced by back when it belonged to Austria. The wood detailing, the bas-reliefs, the plaster effects, they all belong to this countryside culture that we see in the area. I love all those references because there is a quiet energy about them, it really speaks to a revamped past, but without being nostalgic at all.

Another important detail in your work is a joyous or playful element; a green stripe at the bottom of a chair, or a bronze cast of monkeys across a cabinet.

Irony and joy and play, it's a big slice of my identity. I cannot be serious and I cannot be boring with my work because I would bore myself! I think having fun with my designs is part of the success of my game. I love the idea of breaking the rules in a very gentle way, because I don't want the work to be kept in a museum, behind some glass. The work should be lived! And I think we can accomplish that by not being too serious, breaking the rules, adding a human touch... It's much more pleasing that way.

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Your furniture, objects, and lighting are all more recent additions to your work, which previously focused on interior design and architecture. How has it been for you working on a smaller scale?

That's something that came to me since I was a very young student. I've always loved multitasking in different scales, and that's because I'm obsessed with details, but I also cannot get rid of the entire picture. My father was a builder, and when I was a kid, he would take me in his building sites where I would play with cement, iron, wood, clay, I would get into so many materials. But at the same time, I would come to visit certain sites where the building was finished, and that was a miracle to my eyes, going from these raw elements to then the entire picture. I guess that has naturally stuck with me.

Is there something you're able to accomplish or capture through objects that you can't do with interior design?

Well, an object is something that will last forever. A space, on the other hand, is ready to be modified by the person who steps inside. It's a canvas, it's almost alive because it changes when you are entering with your influences, your experiences, your life passing, you constantly change the mood of the space. And then you move house and that specific project disappears. In fact, most designed spaces of the past don't exist anymore. But we still have pieces of art and artifacts from thousands of years ago, that still represent the craftsmanship and the excellence of the approach to a single object. So that's to me a very big difference. And I'm thinking about that when I create a piece.

It must also be exciting for you to create spaces where everything, down to the cabinet handles, is designed by you.

Absolutely, and I feel privileged to be able to do this. It's wonderful that anytime I need any object or detail for a space, I can take a piece of paper that is completely blank and create my ideal table, my ideal chair, my ideal lamp, my ideal hinges, my ideal handle. It makes a substantial difference. I've really been inspired during my studies from designers like Gio Ponti and Alvar Aalto, who never considered a project an opportunity to gather someone else's work. It was always an experience to test their knowledge in each field and to accumulate layers of expertise in different areas. It's incredibly ambitious. And it's always in my mind to create my own alphabet to release my own little poems.