

Graceful curves accent the modernistic black and silver telephone created by Brian Jablonski.

Designing a lifestyle in design

By Jill Hamilton
special writer

Brian Jablonski was having quite a week.

He had just moved from Dayton, Ohio, back to his parents' home in Birmingham. And he was busy packing for a year's stay in Milan, Italy. And the packing promised to be a challenge.

Jablonski is one of 30 students worldwide who have been awarded scholarships in industrial design to the prestigious Domus Academy in Milan. In seven days he'll be in Italy.

Oh, and another thing, Jablonski doesn't speak Italian.

"I've never been out of the States, so it's kind of exciting," said the soft-spoken Jablonski.

It's an honor to receive such an award, but it is nothing new to the 24-year-old Birmingham Groves graduate. He has received an honorable mention in a contest sponsored by International Design Magazine and third place in a contest called IDEA, sponsored by the Industrial Design Society of America. For Jablonski, the IDEA award "was just a national contest."

Jablonski entered the Domus competition as "a shot in the dark." He sent off the required slides of his work, letters of recommendation, transcripts and letter of intent, then promptly put the contest in the back of his mind.

A graduate of the Center for Creative Studies' College of Art and Design in Detroit, he was busy pursuing job opportunities in California, New York and Atlanta.

"TWO MONTHS later I received a letter from the Domus Academy," said Jablonski. "At first I was like, 'Yeah, right.' At the time, he didn't really know all that much about the school."

"The only things I knew were from a magazine that they put out. It's a big, office table magazine," Jablonski said. Soon, Jablonski's own designs may grace the pages of that magazine. His designs already are stunning. He is able to combine form and function with inventive results.

The Domus Academy was founded in 1983 as a graduate school and is the only such school offering programs leading to master's degree in industrial design, fashion and design management.

Jablonski will be at the academy for 10 months. Now through July, he'll spend one month in each of five design studios and take core classes covering such areas as design economics, industrial technologies and design culture and history.

The remainder of his stay will be spent working on a thesis or project that represents an in depth development of one of the projects completed during the design studios.

AMONG JABLONSKI'S current work is a Central Processing Unit (CPU) he designed for National Cash Register (NCR) in Dayton, Ohio. The CPU "is the brain part of the computer." It's usually very functional and, well, very boring, according to Jablonski.

For the CPU, Jablonski "wanted to make something different -- like a piece of sculpture." What he created was a sleek, curved design that adds a certain amount of grace to the normally bland piece of equipment.

"I'm happy with it," he said.

Jablonski said companies are looking to design their machinery with more "emotion." The success of such designs as the Ford Taurus showed manufacturers that customers do look for unusual design in their machinery.

But Jablonski's real love is designing furniture. His furniture has the same sort of simplicity and beauty as his more technical designs. His several designs for coffee tables are sleek and graceful with very simple lines. His fold-up table is artistic as well as quite functional.

The artist in Jablonski has been in evidence since he was a young boy.

"I was always 'the artist' in elementary school," he said.

While he was a student at Groves, he filled his schedule with technical classes like shop and drafting. It was not until his senior year in high school that he decided to pursue art as a career.

"I SUDDENLY decided that I wanted to go to art school, so I had to take an art class," Jablonski said. It was his first since grade school. "I just knew I wanted to make things."

After his stint at the Italian school, Jablonski plans to bring expertise back to his hometown.

"Sometime -- I don't know when -- I want my own design firm; I'd like to do furniture design," he said. "I'd like to end up back in Detroit."

"I think there's a market here for nicely designed furniture that doesn't have to be sold at an art gallery."

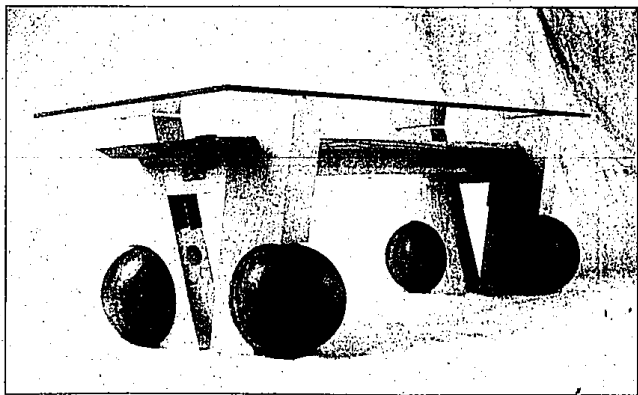
He has seen very average-looking office chairs selling for \$1,500 and "that's not uncommon," he said with a touch of disbelief.

Before his big plans can be realized, though, he plans to pick up as much knowledge as he can -- possibly by staying in Europe for a few years after graduation.

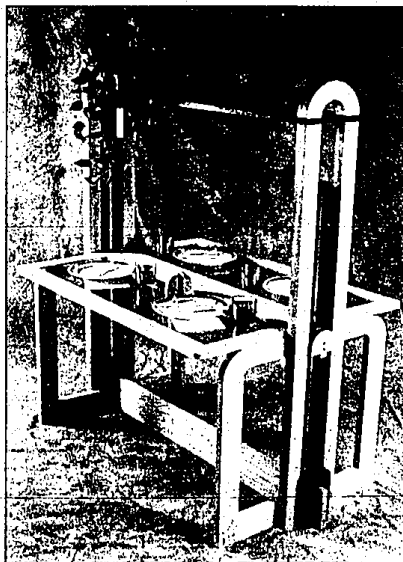
"I'm not looking to start my own business right away; there's always more you can learn from other people," he said.

Still, he ultimately does want a business of his own. He learned that when he found out the paltry fees that beginning industrial designers earn.

"If I'm going to scrape by like that, I may as well scrape by on my own," he said.



Large wooden balls and thick V-shaped legs are easily visible through the glass top of this coffee table, designed by Brian Jablonski.



Light and dark woods, contrast with the glass top and shell of Jablonski's dinner table.