

POETRY IN MOTION

Michael Anastassiades has elevated simplicity to an art form in his finely engineered luminaires. He reveals the inspiration behind his best-known pieces



WORDS: Nicky Trevett
PICTURES: Flos and Studio Michael Anastassiades



Nothing is ever new in design, declares Michael Anastassiades. And he's willing to challenge any designer daring to claim they are the first to do something. 'Every idea has existed in history. The only thing we can do is our own interpretation of an idea to make it unique.'

What Anastassiades can do with lines, spheres and other basic geometric shapes certainly comes close. His early training as a civil engineer shines through in the exquisite precision of his most memorable lighting designs. Pieces like the IC collection, his Mobile chandeliers and Tip of the Tongue are miracles of balance, poise and grace.

'I thought I ran away from engineering,' he says, 'but in reality, seeing my work, the reference is obvious. I guess the answer is you can never really erase any of your experiences in life. Somehow, everything you do affects the way you think and design, if not consciously then definitely subconsciously.'

Minimalism is an overused word, but it's hard to avoid when contemplating Anastassiades' often ridiculously simple designs. A ball on a stick. A rod. An arc. 'I look for simplicity and purity,' he says. 'I try to eliminate information and remove layers from the complexity of the visual language of an object. It's a distillation process, removing the layers so that what you retain is the bare minimum. That's how ideas become stronger.' What could be viewed as utilitarian and mundane becomes rich and complex in his hands – partly due to the finesse of the execution, partly to the quality of his materials. Typically his pieces are crafted from gleaming metals, such as brass or aluminium, teamed with mouth-blown opaline spheres.

'I like honest use of materials that communicate what they are rather than pretending to be something they're not,' he says. 'I don't like plastics treated with a metallic surface to look like metals. I use real metal to communicate that reflectivity.' Nor does he like to cheat time. 'I believe in the inherent qualities of materials – they age beautifully over the course of time. I don't use lacquers or protective layers, I like surfaces to change and patinate. It's an important element for me – the quality of timelessness, to develop a patina and become more beautiful with age.' ►

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Sometimes it's the exception that proves the rule. At first sight his Onyx lamp from 2007 seems out of sync; it has the signature simplicity of form – an elongated cup – but it draws on the natural beauty of stone. Anastassiades simply couldn't resist. 'The translucency of onyx lends itself for the function, provides an ambient glow,' he says. He likes the fact that each Onyx lamp is unique, 'because with stone you can never have two looking the same. It's the only piece I made in stone that is a light.'

Michael Anastassiades was born in Cyprus, but came to London to study. He abandoned his engineering studies when he discovered a fascinating alternative literally just around the corner. An industrial design course at the RCA. It changed everything. 'I have been exploring that path ever since – lighting specifically,' he says. 'It's probably not accidental. Lighting is a very poetic medium and I'd always been attracted by it.'

In 1994 he set up his own studio in London to express his ideas about culture and aesthetics in product, lighting and furniture design. He began working with architects, such as Bijoy Jain – the Indian architect behind Studio Mumbai – David Chipperfield and John Pawson. He also started to collaborate with manufacturers such as Lobbmeyr, Svenskt Tenn and – most famously – Flos. IC, String and Arrangements were all nurtured under Flos's welcoming umbrella.

In 2007 he guaranteed creative autonomy by starting his

own brand. Michael Anastassiades Limited produces signature furniture, jewellery, tabletop objects and – above all – lighting. Each product is handmade and manufactured in accordance with his original vision.

'I come up with a concept, an abstract idea that's sometimes not clearly defined but that interests me, so I decide to develop it,' he says. 'I may propose it to Flos, or I may keep it as my own brand. That's a decision taken at a later time. The most important thing for me is to develop the idea and then I assess who is the best party to do it.'

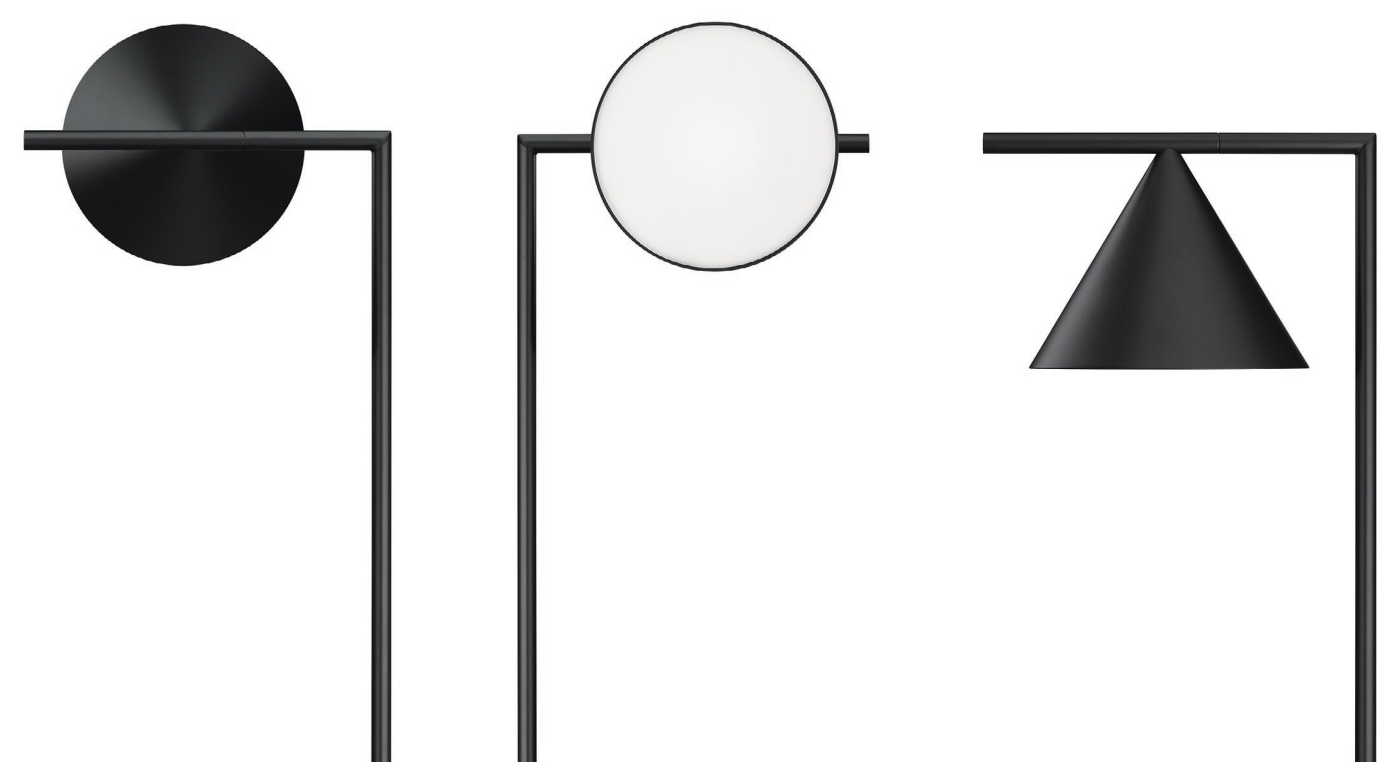
String was conceived when he saw electricity cables strung from pylon to pylon from the window of a train. He was struck by the way the perfectly parallel cables divided the landscape. Beautiful, poetic, and disciplined. He thought about how the idea could be translated to an interior space. And how a practical problem could be solved: placing light where you want it, regardless of the positioning of power points.

IC plays with the idea of balance. The table lights, wall lights, pendants and ceiling lights are based on one fundamental idea: a sphere perfectly poised on the edge

The infinitely adjustable Captain Flint for Flos: 'I wanted to design a light that had a dual purpose. An uplighter...that with a delicate rotation becomes a dim companion for reading'



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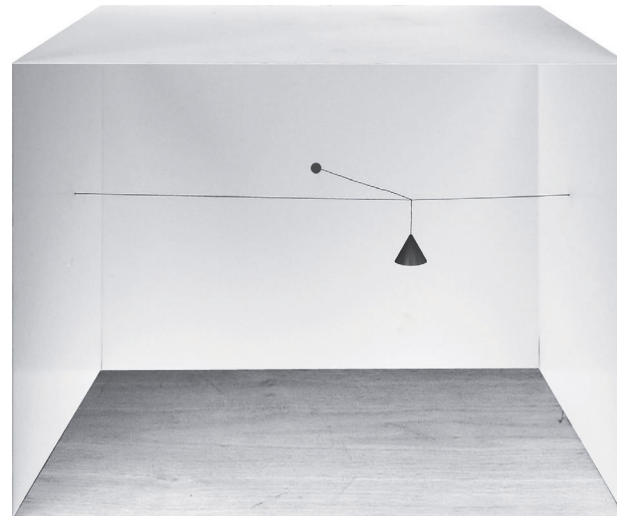


of a rod. The idea came from an online video clip of a contact juggler. Anastassiades wanted to capture the exact moment when the spinning spheres, balanced on the juggler's arms and fingers, appeared perfectly still. This idea of capturing the moment explains the inherent dynamism in much of his work. There is a sense of arrested motion, challenging the observer to consider what comes next. Tip of the Tongue, a ceiling and wall-mounted luminaire from his own collection, is one of his favourite examples. 'It creates that anxiety, that anticipation that the sphere is going to roll over and break, or fall on to another surface. Something that doesn't quite happen.'

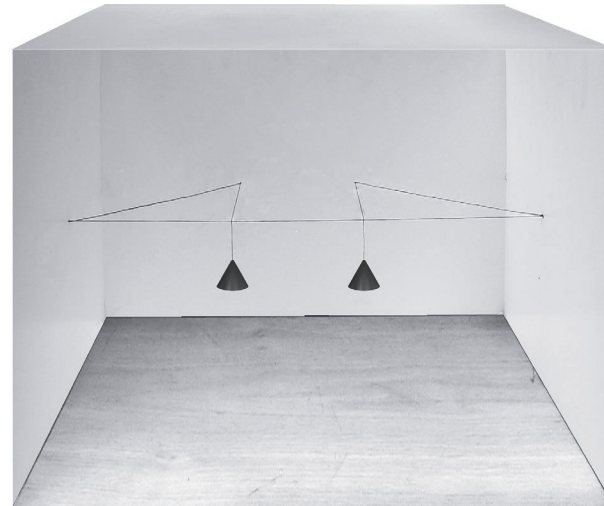
Evolution is another aspect of dynamism – an idea that keeps growing and changing. The designer's famous Mobile chandelier sequence came into being in 2008 as a study in parallel lines, and has become a game of curves. Over the years the designs have become more complex and playful, without losing their fundamental discipline – their sense of perfect equilibrium.

Anastassiades loves the idea of engagement with the user, and he regards String as an important first step towards this goal. 'It gives something for them to play around with. It's like drawing in three dimensions.' This idea is taken further in Arrangements, his latest design for Flos. It's composed of multiple chandeliers, allowing different elements to be mixed and matched. 'The idea is you can exchange one element at a later ►





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date and simply link all the elements together. It gives incredible freedom to the user.’

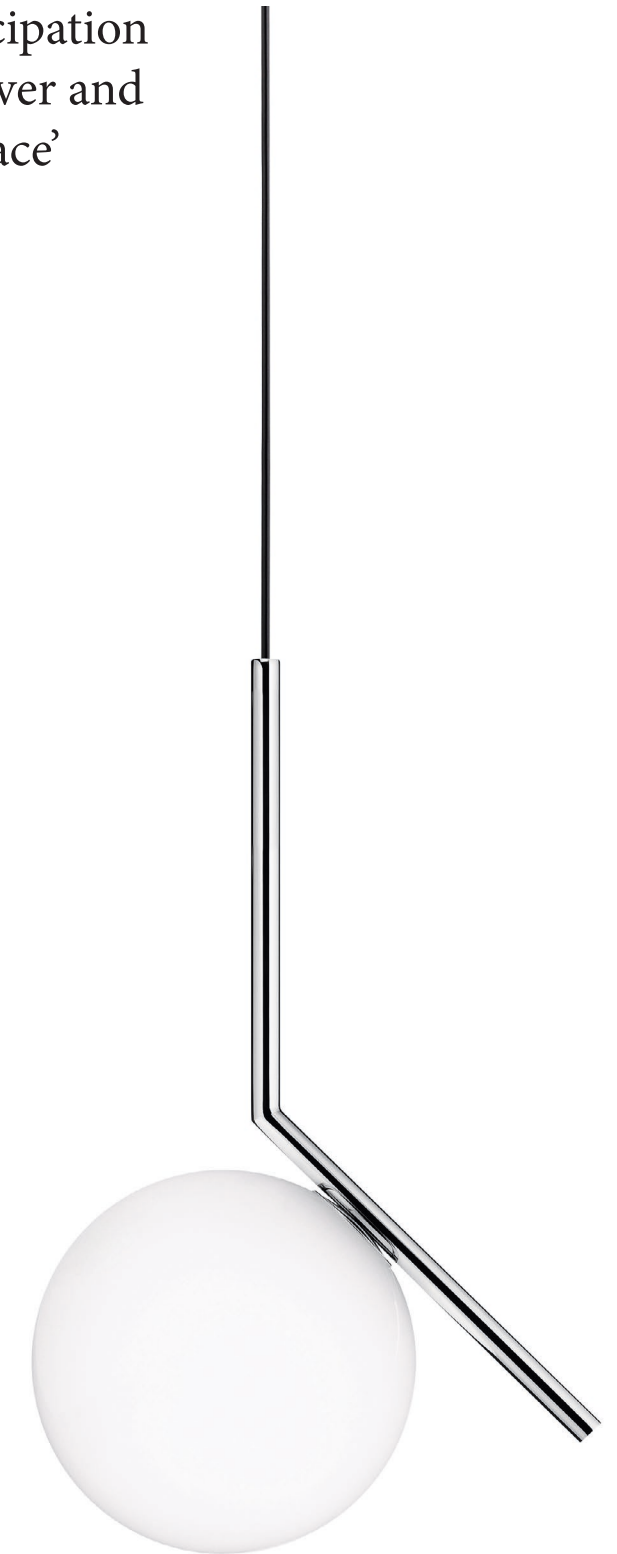
If, as Anastassiades believes, there is no such thing as something new, then everything that exists is open to reinterpretation. It seems fitting that the humble fluorescent tube, once a staple of every office but now out-of-step with the times, has found new life in some of his favourite creations.

The 2006 Tube chandelier was the first light fixture he designed for his own house. ‘I needed something very specific that I couldn’t find in the market,’ he says, ‘therefore I made something of my own. It was just a simple exercise, how to suspend three tubes at a time in a minimal way. But it also references things in history, like the use of fluorescent tubes – with a unique approach.’

The slim, pared-back forms of One Well-Known Sequence, a series of floor lamps and pendants, also pay homage to the fluorescent tube. It is also quite possibly the only luminaire designed to double as a ruler. ‘It was developed when we decided to move to Camden,’ says Anastassiades. ‘I found a car mechanic’s garage, a beautiful space created many years back and never changed. It was perfectly functional for a garage. I wanted to measure and document the space before I inhabited and changed it.’

Another designer would get out a tape measure. Anastassiades created a custom luminaire. That references the history of lighting. ‘I created these fixtures as a sequence,’ he explains (hence the name). ‘The different tubes all had a specific dimension – fractions or multiples of a metre.’

So no. Maybe Anastassiades has gifted the world with nothing new. But his precise, poetic treatment of simple forms and elegant materials add to the beauty of interior spaces all over the world. And that will surely do. □



Previous pages and left: String for Flos: ‘It’s like drawing in three dimensions’
 Right: pendant version of IC series for Flos, playing with the idea of balance
 Overleaf: from the Mobile chandelier series under the Studio Michael
 Anastassiades brand (left) and a permutation of Arrangements for Flos (right)

