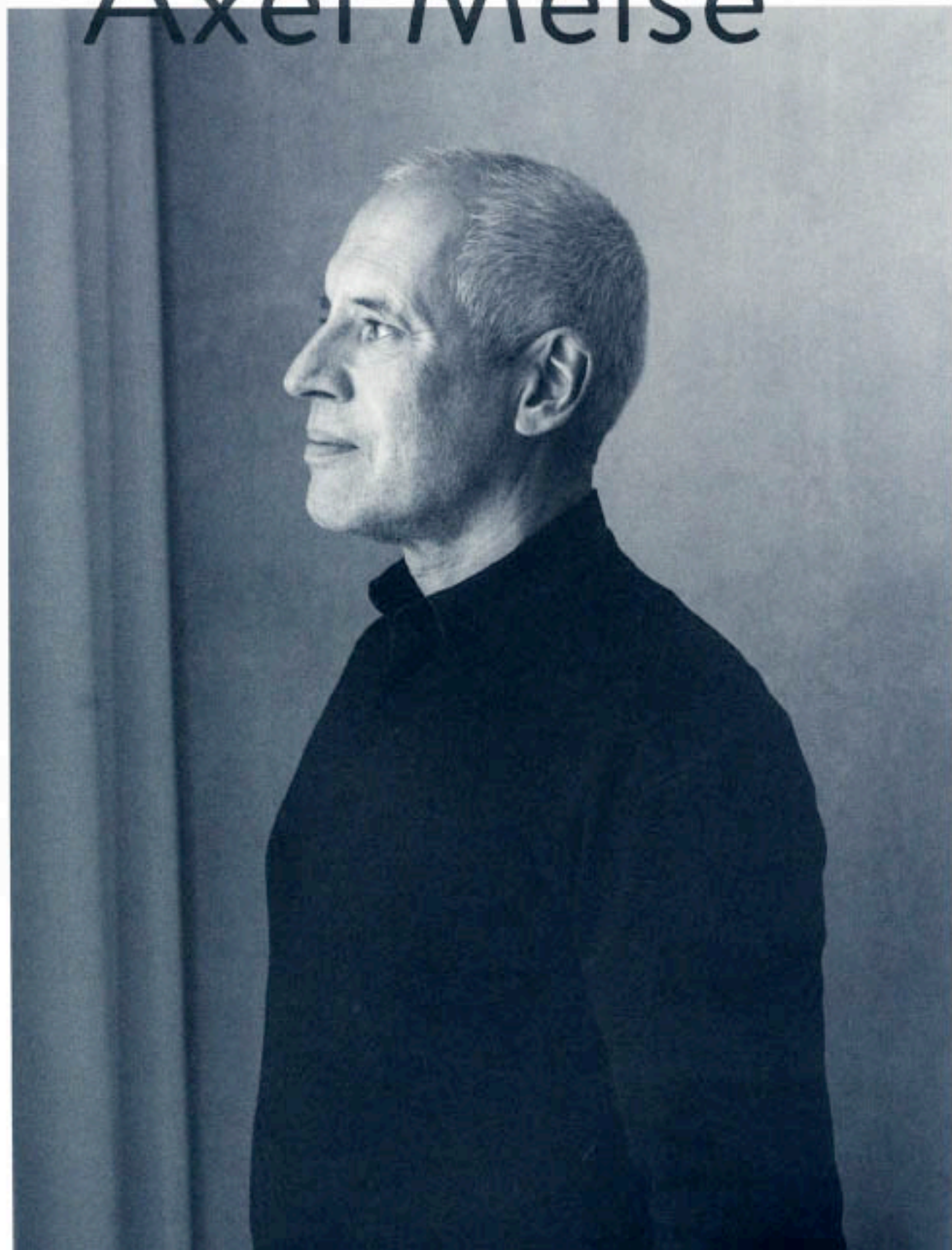




Occhio

ROMAN

Axel Meise









Occhio founder and designer Axel Meise on the fine art of customer-whispering, technological breakthroughs, holistic brands and the future of light.

Have you ever walked out of a hotel because of bad lighting?

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No; once you've booked in, you just grit your teeth and get on with it. But I certainly didn't stay there twice. Hotels, restaurants and shops live from the experience they offer, the quality of time spent there, the colours of the materials and the products. If you save on the lighting and on expert advice, you'll end up with no customers at all. That's pinching pennies in the wrong place. We always ensure we use the very best LEDs. That's the *Occhio* philosophy: no compromise. It's always been about realising a concept—the

idea of using light as a medium for holistic design in private spaces and large-scale projects alike.

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It's quite a popular slogan. What's your take on it?

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I see *holistic* as the opposite of the way it's normally done, where a few items are picked out of a hotchpotch of diverse products. Our aim is to create a streamlined concept, not just slap together a mishmash of different

materials, designs and light sources. Occhio supplies a lighting system in which the design, surfaces, light quality and control systems are streamlined and consistent throughout. The aim is to create the right lighting for every situation, but creating a consistent overall effect. That makes an enormous difference. Customers get that experience from a single Occhio lamp and then develop an appetite for more, enabling us to build up a loyal base of repeat customers. Like Apple.

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That emphasis on technology, user convenience and design quality certainly does have a certain Apple ring to it.

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I hear that comparison a lot, and there is actually a lot of common ground between us. We feel we only partly belong to the lighting industry. I like to take brands like Apple for guidance and check out what they're doing—but only so that I can do it all quite differently in our own industry.

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Could you explain what you mean by that? Making light into a cultural good and a luxury product?

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Light has always been a cultural good, right from the Stone Age, when people would cluster around a fire that gave heat and light. It's always been a cultural good in the form of artificial light, too—candles and gaslight. Then electric light came along, and some time or other the first LEDs appeared, and then

energy-saving lightbulbs. And that was the moment when Ingo Maurer, for one, announced that he feared for the culture of light. Once people have experienced quality light, they no longer want to give it up. We adopted LEDs relatively late because we always sought to supply the very best quality that was the closest to halogen. In fact, there was a risk involved in the move from halogen and incandescent to LED, and many people suffered because of it.

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Occhio seems in many respects to be a thoroughly German phenomenon, consistently updating and advancing the system-based design from the 1960s.

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But that's the way the Swiss do it too! And the Danes. It's such a sensible idea. An ecosystem doesn't fall within a specific nationality, as our name shows; we deliberately decided not to use a German name for the product or the brand.

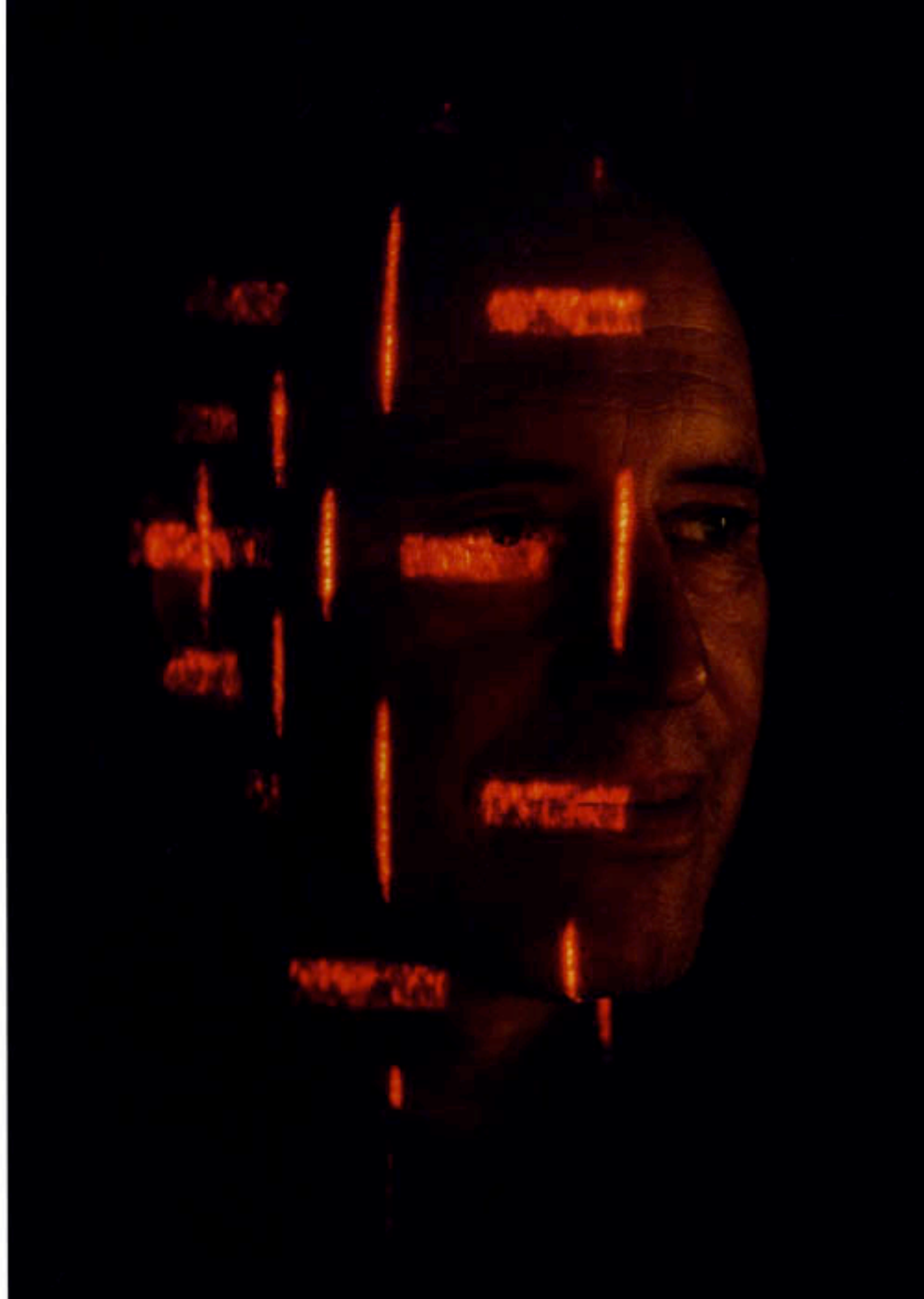
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Why not?

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Because we see ourselves as an international brand and because the idea also works at international level. The name Occhio naturally reveals a strain of Italophilia, but it can't be localised or pin the design down to a specific region. *German engineering* would be a good fit as a label. It's about high-end products in a high-end ecosystem.

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And that means...

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I don't want to make things that other people make, or do what they do. We aim to create products and spaces that inspire our customers: not only in our own flagship stores, but also with shop-in-shops at our retail partners. That means being familiar with the matter right down to the tiniest detail. The product is only the core, the seed; it's all about designing the entire chain of brand experience from end to end, and that really means going right up to the customers, being in direct contact with them, listening to them, understanding them. In the end, we seek to offer our customers what they really want for themselves, but may not even have known they wanted. That needs consistency, right down to the imagery we use. One weak link, and it's all over. Well, perhaps not all over, but the whole brand experience is weakened.

Are there still big differences between your vision and the products that are now available to look at and buy?

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M

My vision has various different dimensions. The goal is a culture of light that we create and offer to our customers. What we see now is certainly the vision I had five years ago, or maybe even longer: an extremely precise and comprehensive portfolio, a holistic system offering the right light for every situation. A complete solution. But technology moves on, we have ideas, and innovation is our middle name.

So it's not only about design...

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Design is only the manifestation of innovation that develops successively. It might be interesting to introduce decorative elements while we manage our existing portfolio and add new products, like the Mito series with its touchless control. It opens up scope for surprises.

You said before that you only partly see yourself as a lighting manufacturer. Are you more like a technology company that's expanding its software operations?

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M

Light is always about control. How can I adjust it to my moods, my needs and desires? With electronics alone, of course. I'm proud that we've come through the chip crisis so well. The innovations coming along now are more concerned with control, but they also involve lighting technology or the possibilities offered by motorisation.

Occhio has shown impressive growth in recent years.

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Standing still is going backwards. Throughout the entire history of the company, ever since

1999, we've only dipped into the red briefly. We've expanded almost fourfold over the past five years. That's an incredible pace.

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Growth on that scale usually comes with a price tag...

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I'm really proud that we've grown so much but still stayed highly profitable. That growth isn't only down to Mito; classic designs like Sento are also kicking up a gear.

There have also been a few changes in-house. Benno Zerlin is now co-CEO, overseeing day-to-day business...

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Yes, the big switch has just taken place. I'm now free of the daily routine and handed management over to Benno. Now I'm chair of the advisory board and I love it. I'm still the director of design and innovation, strategy and brand. We've broken the EUR 100 million sales barrier and are the European market leader. Now we have to unlock the vast potential of international markets. It's now all the more important for everyone to focus on their core skills. I've done the management up to now, but my core skills lie elsewhere...

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In design?

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Yes, and in innovation, brand and strategy.

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The hardest part of design is...

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...only doing what's most useful for the brand and the portfolio and, of course, what delivers added value for the users. But not all the designs have to come from me. We have a strong design team. My main job is to provide a flow of constructive input and to keep saying no until it's perfect.

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Is there a set of specific criteria?

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No, we only draw up a rough set of specifications, which evolves constantly. Our approach is holistic, thinking consistently and living and breathing our own values, truly implementing them. The hardest task is actually ensuring our employees clearly understand our values and are familiar with them down to the smallest detail.

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Have you ever received love letters to *the most beautiful light*?

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Yes, I have, actually. It's ultimately about giving our users what makes them happy and

genuinely enhances their quality of life, and that's exactly what we do. Our first product saw us making something utterly new and disruptive and saying: we're putting an end to chaos and creating order, consistency and convenience. Today we call it *a new culture of light*.

ees and partners, who share our values and inspire our customers wherever they are in the world.

Axel Meise, thank you.

Doesn't success generate its own risks, particularly when exclusive designs are involved? What if customers start to say: oh, Occhio is everywhere, let's look for something else?

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All I can say there is: have fun looking. There's nothing around in the same league. Of course we have a certain presence, but then so do many good things. I see that as a motivation, not a risk. If you love driving you'll probably give anything to drive a Porsche some day, even though the roads are full of them.

So where will Occhio go from here?

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There's still so much to do. Take internationalisation, for example, which is still a huge subject for me. The UK is our next market in Europe. In Italy we've already sent out a clear signal with our new store in Milan; we're now the European market leader, and our next goal is for Occhio to conquer the world. We've already made a start, at least in key markets like China, and there's still plenty of potential in the USA. That will definitely be the next phase of our business. But it only works if we have the right people, the right employ-

