



# The Naked Bulb as Inspiration

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The light bulb is an extraordinarily beautiful object. Its perfect form embraces a thousand reasons, all bound up with technological questions, ingenious combinations of mechanisms, materials, physical, chemical and mechanical knowledge, but the sum of all these factors does not match the force of the image, the emblem of invention, the very symbol of the meaning “idea.” —*Domus*, January 1999

*IN LIGHTING*, the bulb is integral to functionality; it is what makes the light. When cast as a lead element in design, the bulb becomes elevated beyond its more prosaic, utilitarian role. In recognizing the inherent beauty of the bulb, designers have often made it the aesthetic driver for the light form itself. Whether it is simply exposed (singularly or en masse) or enshrined as an icon, expressed as pure line or as a whimsical swarm of birds, or serves as a celebration or even a critique of the dangers of technology featuring a mass of exposed wires, the bulb can integrate and transcend both its technological function and its ideological implications and serve as the primary inspiration for design. The exploration of the bulb—not as technological marker of modernity but as a designer’s muse—reveals how this fundamental element has pushed both form and function to new levels, advancing the field of design.<sup>1</sup>

## Stripped Bare

The most common form of the light bulb is the familiar bulbous shape. As a manifestation of the idea of “capturing light in a bottle,” the simplicity of the bulb form holds a multiplicity of meanings, including innovation (idea), ingenuity (technology), and progress (modernity). The latter notion is captured, for example, in a poster for the Rural Electrification Administration as part of the New Deal campaigns of the 1930s (fig. 4.1), where the word *light* is encapsulated and made even clearer in the oversize bulb shape, which functions as a beacon of advancement, lighting homes and the way to the future.

With the growing interest in the machine and in industrial aesthetics as part of early modernist design philosophy, many designers played with scale and stripped components down to their most basic, functional elements. Jean Prouvé’s *Potence d’Eclairage (Swing Jib Lamp) No. 602* (1952; plate 41) is a prime example: with a more than eight-foot-long span, it was designed specifically for the Air France executive apartments in Brazzaville in the Congo. Prouvé reduced the task lamp to a single globe bulb projected out into the room at the end of a long metal pole; the effect is that a singular blob of light drops down to meet a specific user’s needs. Cantilevered off the wall, the orange rod easily pivots or swings as the user desires. Its utility belies the drama achieved by the combination of materials (steel, brass, wire, light bulb, and paint), color, and scale.<sup>2</sup>

Similar in concept and construction is Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni’s *Luminator Floor Lamp* (1955; plate 42). Instead of being projected off a wall, a lone bulb sits perched in singular glory atop a long iron tube. While the long metal tube and exposed bulb recall Prouvé’s lamp, here the directionality is not as obvious nor is the piece as potentially dangerous, as the elements are all contained vertically. In 1962 the Castiglioniis further pushed the industrial design aesthetic that hinges on a single,

PLATE 40.

Ingo Maurer, manufactured by Ingo Maurer GmbH, *Bulb Light*, designed 1966, metal, glass, and bulb

unshaded bulb with the *Toio Floor Lamp* (plate 43) for Flos. *Toio* features a car headlamp at the top of the lamp's metal tubing, with the wiring unsheathed; the result is that all of the lamp's elements are revealed, including the transformer and electrical cable. Beyond exposing the bulb, the lamp also displays and celebrates the actual components that make it functional, while the blaring light of the headlight spreads throughout the interior of a space, illuminating the ceiling and walls.

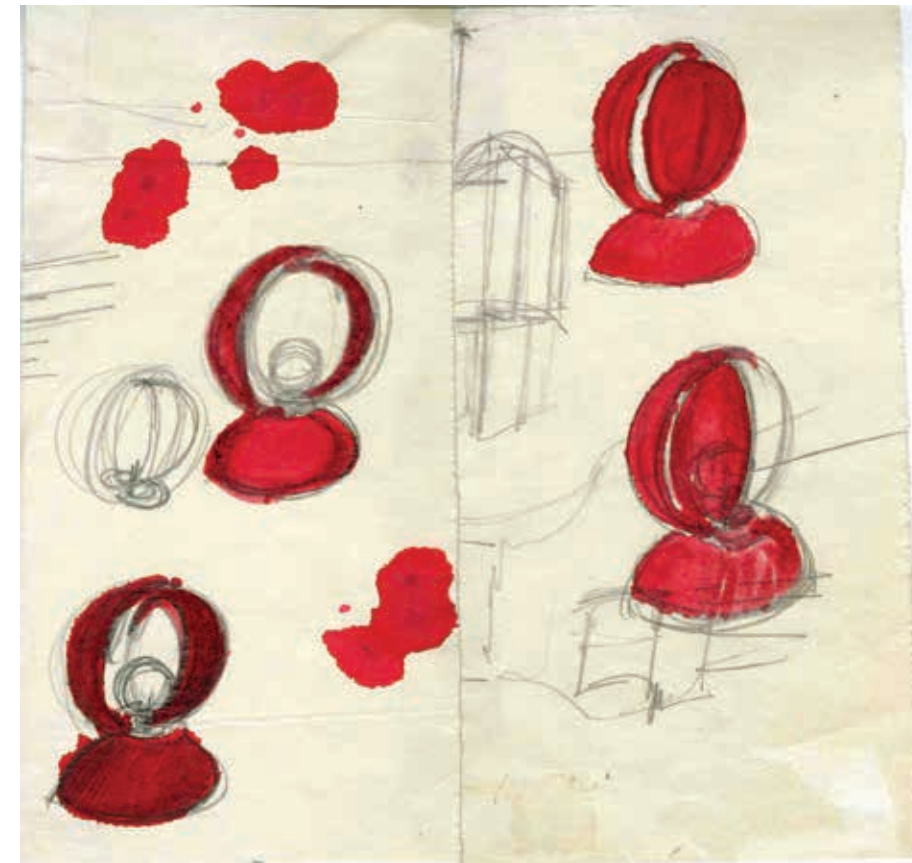
The act of illuminating a space may also imitate (and serve as a substitute for) the sun. Vico Magistretti acknowledges the connection between lighting and the sun in his *Eclisse Table Lamp* (1966; plate 44) for Artemide. Through the shape and sheer brightness of the bulb, Magistretti indicates that it is a manifestation of the sun whose glory can be witnessed in various stages. The design features three simple hemispheres: one functions as the base, another the shade, and the third is a rotating eyelid or sun shield. Originally, the three half spheres were formed from aluminum, a pliable metal, but later this design needed to be altered to incorporate a plastic section due to the overheating of the metal near the light/heat source. The user can manipulate a domed shield to block out the light emanating from the bulb, creating stages of an eclipse (or *eclisse* in Italian, which lends its name to the lamp). When fully closed, only a ring of light illuminates the edges of the shield's circle (fig. 4.2).

Conceiving the *Eclisse Table Lamp* as a bedside lamp—one to read by at night—Magistretti realized that if the bulb was masked or shielded, light could be focused and regulated, especially in the intimate setting of the bedroom. This simple solution solved the functional issue of misdirected light that could irritate others in the same room. Designed sculpturally using spheres, *Eclisse* reflects Magistretti's love of geometric forms and strong graphic outlines. Featured in the watershed exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972, *Eclisse* was one of the objects selected for its formal and technological innovations. The lamp also made an appearance in a 1967 *New York Times* article, "Lamp Designers Are Aglow over Naked Bulbs," in which the author described an important, reemerging trend: "Now the bare bulb is making a comeback in some circles, bringing with it spaghetti-like tangles of exposed wiring. As naked as the day it was born in 1879, the incandescent light bulb today hangs on wiggly wires from ceilings or is attached unshaded to wall, table or floor fixtures."<sup>3</sup> This enthusiasm, expressed nearly a century after the light bulb was invented, reflected a return to giving primacy to the bulb, reasserting its potential as a core feature in lighting design.

The article also highlighted other designers who were inspired by the bulb and noted, for example, the cleverness of Gino Sarfatti, who used a weighted leather bag filled with lead shot to create a base for his *600/P Table Light* (1966; plate 45). Sarfatti's lamp, like Magistretti's, plays with the user's desire to shift the angle and directionality of the exposed bulb's light; however, here the manipulation is achieved not with a reflector but by easily redistributing the beanbag-like bottom. Covered by a notched-out half shield, the bulb's nakedness depends on how one orients the bag base, making the lamp at times playful, at times stark and brutish. Also mentioned in the *Times* article was Ingo Maurer's *Bulb Light* (1966; see plate 40), which blurs the boundaries between purpose and aesthetics. There is no shyness or slow reveal in Maurer's *Bulb Light*, where he transparently encases an "original" Edison-style bulb



4.1.  
Lester Beall, *Light: Rural Electrification Administration*, 1937, silkscreen. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the designer, 220.1937



4.2.  
Vico Magistretti, *Eclisse Table Lamp* design drawing, c. 1966. Courtesy Archivio Studio Magistretti-Fondazione Vico Magistretti

4.3.  
*GE Edison Mazda Lamps Fixture*, c. 1925, tin, enamel, lithograph on plastic, and bulbs. The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach. Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian-Florida International University (Miami, Florida)

in a larger crystal bulb that acts as an amplifier of form and suggests the placement of specimens under bell jars. The scale also challenges the way a user typically interacts with a traditional bulb shape. Whether the quality of light or usage is affected by the form is not a primary concern. Maurer explores the idea that the bulb can essentially capture light in a bottle, a notion that is at the heart of the alchemy of lighting.

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's *Noce Table/Floor/Wall Light* (1972; plate 46) also transparently encapsulates the bulb (or two in this case), but it encourages directional interplay. The two bulbs are ensconced in a watertight, die-cast aluminum base. The pressed-glass top, with its patterned surface, functions as a diffuser. An external knob rotates the interior plate to which the bulbs are affixed, making it possible to change the level of diffusion depending on the patterning of the surface and angle of rotation. The total design resembles its namesake, *noce*, "nut" in Italian.

Martine Bedin displays bulbs with a sense of whimsy in her *Super Lamp* (c. 1978; plate 47) for the Italian design collective Memphis. While at Memphis, Bedin specialized in lighting and graphic design, and her training in both disciplines is evident in this work. Resembling a streamlined toy car, the rounded base is crowned with a row of similarly shaped bulbs with socket collars of different colors, signaling a shift to more overtly whimsical references in design while also reminiscent of an earlier advertising display for GE Edison Mazda bulbs (fig. 4.3). The flattened planes of the semicircular base design, enameled a muted dark blue, make the collars and bulbs stand out as the passenger-drivers on this multilight/car. Based on drawings Bedin



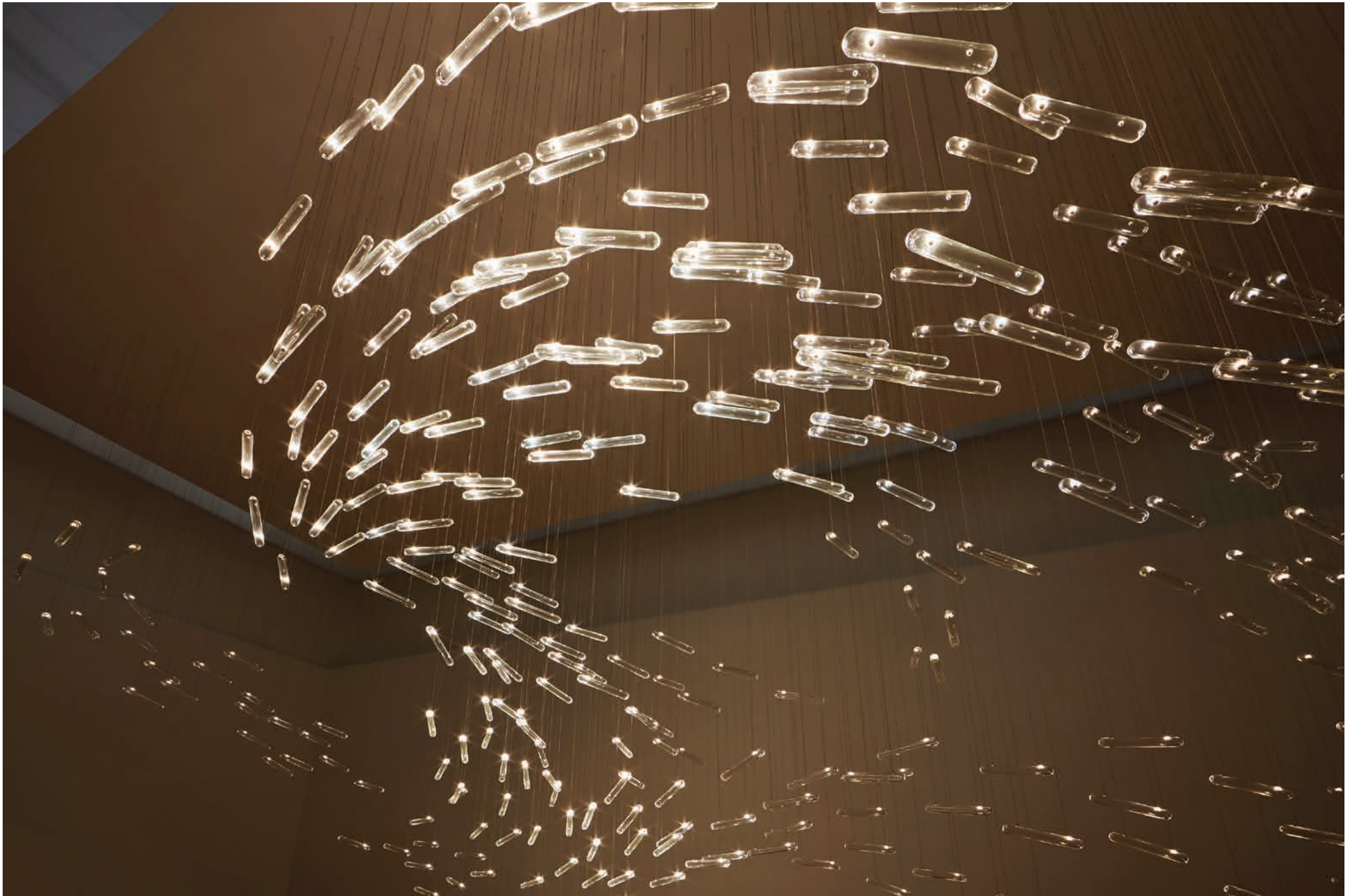


PLATE 56.  
Drift, *Flight*,  
designed 2009,  
hand-blown glass,  
wire, electronics,  
anodized aluminum,  
and LEDs



PLATE 15.  
Isao Hosoe, manufactured by Valenti, *Hebi Lamp*, designed 1970,  
plastic, aluminum, enamel, and bulb



PLATE 16.  
Ettore Sottsass, manufactured by Memphis Milano, *Tahiti Table Light*,  
designed 1981, made c. 1981-88, metal, enamel, laminate, and bulb



PLATE 48. (ABOVE)  
Harri Koskinen, manufactured by Design House Stockholm,  
*Block Floor/Table Lamps*, 1996, glass and bulb



PLATE 49. (OPPOSITE)  
Rody Graumans, for Droog Design, manufactured by DMD,  
*85 Lamps*, designed 1993, made 1997, wire and 15-watt bulbs

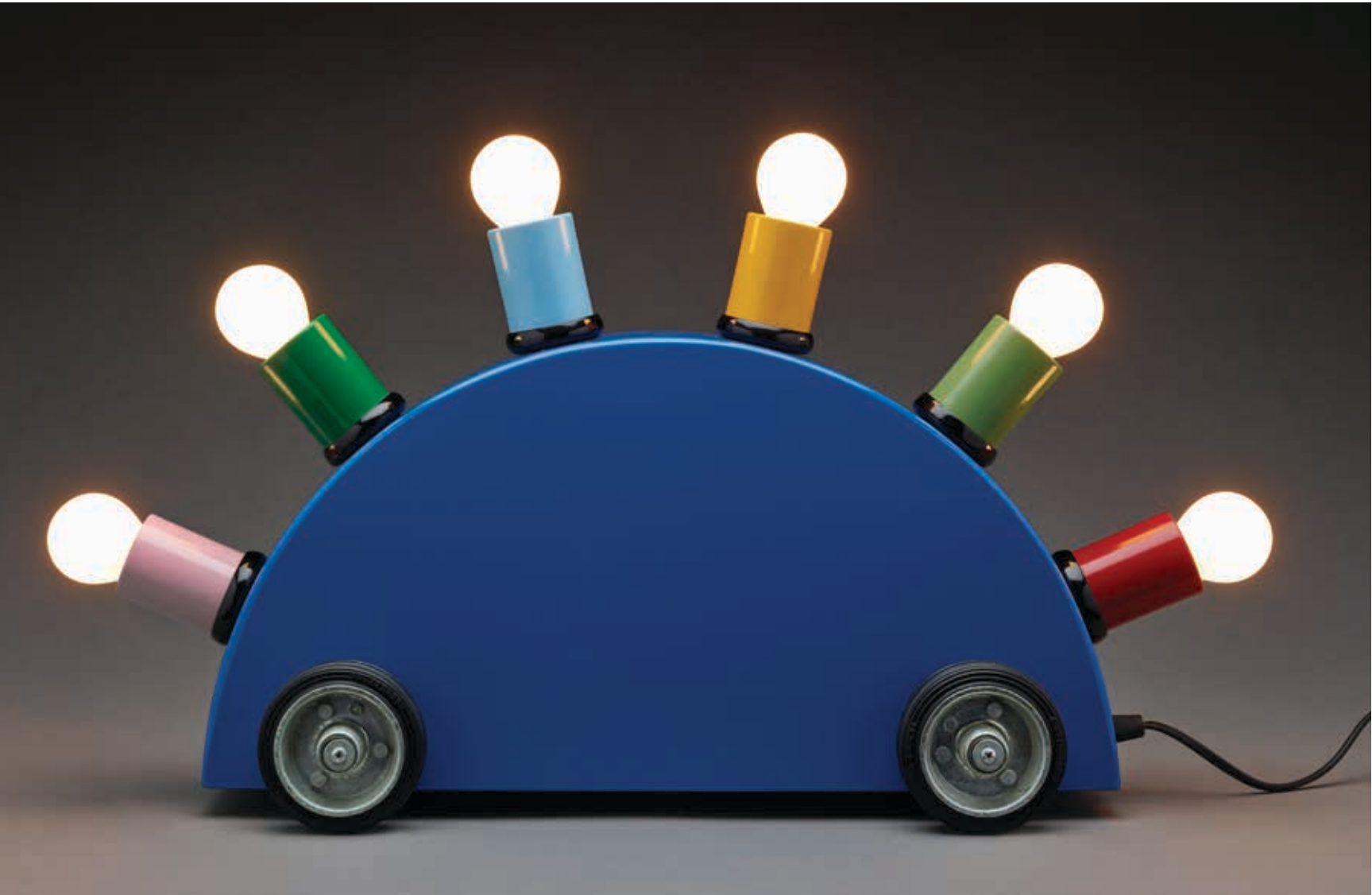


PLATE 47.  
Martine Bedin, manufactured by Memphis Milano, *Super Lamp*,  
designed c. 1978, made c. 1981–88, fiberglass, enamel, steel, rubber,  
and 40-watt incandescent bulbs