



DAVIDE GROPPI The Poet of Light

The Piacenza-based lighting designer has just opened his first retrospective in his hometown, inside a former basilica turned gallery. We took the opportunity to look back with him over four decades of luminous storytelling.

The lamps of **Davide Groppi** (b. Piacenza, 1963) do not fight their way into the spotlight. On the contrary, they proceed by subtraction, stripping away the superfluous to focus on conveying a message in its purest form. **And yet, they claim space through their emotional and seductive power, activating a web of poetic references that range from the observation of the sky and natural phenomena to contemporary art.**

In *Nulla*, for instance - the lamp that earned him his first of three Compasso d'Oro awards in 2010 - the unembellishing is radical. By taking away more and more, all that remains is a small hole in the ceiling, where the light source is hidden, and a "Caravaggio-like" beam illuminates the subject.

Like his creations, Groppi himself has long stayed away from the spotlight. His first retrospective arrives nearly forty years after his beginnings in a tiny workshop in his hometown. *Un'ora di luce* ("An Hour of Light"), on view until 26 May at the singular **Volumnia** gallery run by **Enrica De Micheli**, set in a former basilica, traces his entire journey. Curated by **Marco Sammiceli**, the exhibition brings together products, prototypes, and more personal, experimental research.

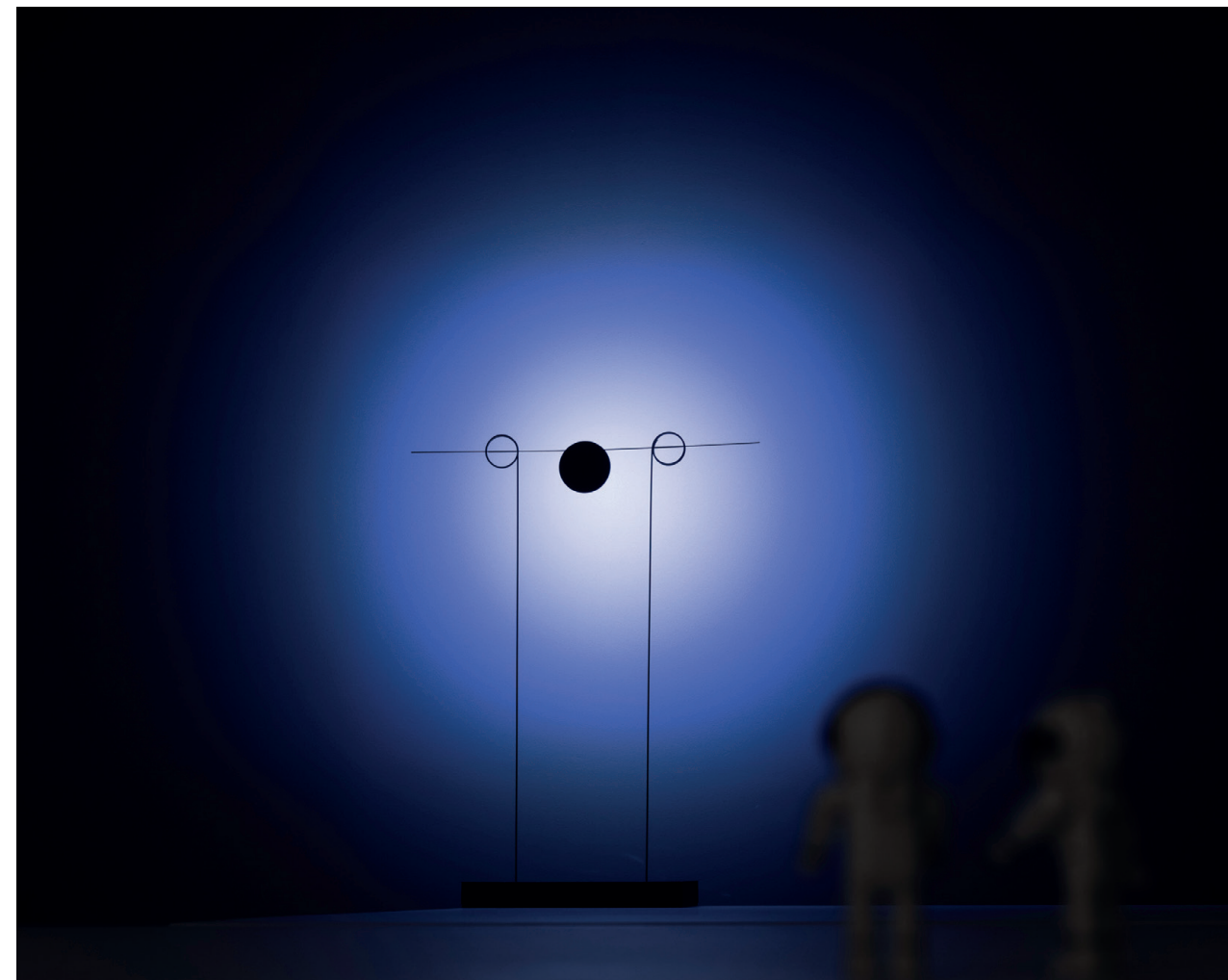
Let's start at the beginning. How did this exhibition come about?

I met Enrica at the very start of her work with the gallery, when I had the honour of lighting, with great delicacy, this extraordinary space. It's a late 16th-century church, enormous, larger than the cathedral, with five naves. It was deconsecrated during the Napoleonic invasions and later went through all sorts of transformations, becoming, for example, a barracks and a field hospital. Over the years, Enrica kept asking me to create a show about my work, but I never felt ready. I prefer to do things at the right moment, when I truly have something to say.

What does the title *An Hour of Light* mean?

It comes from an idea by Marco Sammiceli and has various meanings. The first, the simplest, is an invitation to the visitor to give me an hour of their time so I can show them my work. Then, we wanted to bring together in a single phrase two inexpressible dimensions—space and time—both central to the exhibition. Finally, there's a third reading tied to the moment we're all living through, and the anxiety it causes me as a human being. I like to think I can offer visitors an hour of wonder and serenity, leaving the world and its conflicts outside. The entire installation revolves around lightness and a sense of the cosmos; there's the sky, there are celestial bodies...

And satellites like *Moon*, the "paper moon" that is one of your most evocative and well-known lamps.



Yes, exactly. A large *Moon* welcomes visitors at the beginning of the exhibition. For the rest, we created volumes and 'inhabited walls,' to borrow Louis Kahn's expression, imagining a kind of small village where people can wander freely and almost lose themselves.

Let's retrace these forty years of exploring light. It all began here in Piacenza in the mid-1980s.

In 1985, at twenty-two, I opened a tiny 25-square-metre workshop. The world of light fascinated me. I had been a very curious child, and I was lucky to grow up with parents, especially my father, who taught me to build things while paying attention even to the hidden parts. With great effort, I managed to keep going into the 1990s.

And then?

I realised that if I stayed there waiting, not much would happen. So I printed my first catalogue, with just three lamps, and started traveling along the Via Emilia, from Piacenza to Rimini, in a beat-up Dyane 6, visiting furniture and lighting shops to present my products. That's how I found my first clients, and also friends, people I still show my new designs to in advance.

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What was the turning point?

The arrival of the first truly usable LEDs, around 2007/2008. At first they intimidated me, they looked like little insects, and I was sorry to leave behind the romantic dimension of the light bulb. But then my mind opened up. I understood that they would allow me to express things I hadn't been able to before, giving me both a competitive and creative advantage. That's when *Nulla* was born, perhaps the first lamp on the market to grasp the one-dimensional nature of LEDs. It's the project I feel most attached to: a special lens and a tiny hole in the ceiling create a beautiful, Caravaggio-like light.

On the left: Davide Groppi, courtesy of the designer

On top: Davide Groppi. *Un'ora di luce*, 2026, Volumnia, Piacenza Ph. Fausto Mazza



**DAVIDE GROPPI'S
THREE ADI
COMPASSO
D'ORO AWARDS**



→ **Nulla, 2014**

The light source, a powerful LED amplified by a lens, is concealed to leave the stage entirely to the illuminated subject. The light seems to emerge from a hole in the ceiling.

→ **Sampei, 2014**

As suggested by its playful reference to the character from the Japanese anime of the same name, this flexible, telescopic floor lamp is inspired by a fishing rod. In fact, it is a *ready-made* product that repurposes an existing object for a new function.

→ **Anima, 2024**

The art of Fausto Melotti and his "thin sculptures" has long been a source of inspiration for Groppi. In *Anima*, a slender stem culminating in an open metal circle, his connection is especially evident.



Are there designers or artists, besides Maurer, who have inspired you?

Certainly **Dieter Rams**, for his ability to be both elegant and highly technical. Then there are artists, Caravaggio influenced me enormously, but above all modern and contemporary art: Americans like **Donald Judd**, **Sol LeWitt**, and **James Turrell**, as well as **Fausto Melotti**, **Ettore Spalletti**, and **Alberto Burri**. These are inspirations I don't explicitly reference in the exhibition, but they're always there in my mind.

At Volumnia we also see experimental works not intended for industrial production. How much space does this kind of free, market-independent research have in your daily life?

A great deal, almost all of it, in fact. I work from morning to evening searching for new inspiration. Next to my office I've set up a darkroom where I can experiment in total darkness, as well as a large workshop. I also have an archive where I keep papers, diffusers, plastics—anything that can be used to shape light.

Have you ever wanted to design something other than a lamp?



I'm fascinated by very simple things—a table, for instance, or a chair. As a good Emilian, I think they're enough on their own to make a home

I've been asked, but I've always refused. It would feel like betraying myself and my work. Even when I was young, I understood that what I had in mind was too radical to delegate to a company, I had to try to do it myself. Besides, I don't know if I could do anything else: I'm a singer-songwriter, and this is my music.

If you had to, what kind of object would you choose?

I'm fascinated by very simple things—a table, for instance, or a chair. As a good Emilian, I think they're enough on their own to make a home.

■ **Giulia Marani**

Is that the lamp you would save if you had to retreat to a desert island?

Yes, because for me it marked the beginning of a new life. I realised I had to listen only to my own sensibility and do so in the most authentic way possible. I also like it because it represents, in a sense, the negation of my work; the total absence of design. Together with *Infinito* and *Pablo*, it forms the three vowels of my alphabet, corresponding to the three ways light manifests: direct, indirect, and diffused. The latter akin to Raphael, soft and without shadows.

Beyond technical innovation, were there other decisive moments in your career?

Firstly, there was a perfect moment when I encountered the work of **Ingo Maurer**, which I came across in a magazine. Then one day I went to Munich, found his address in the phone book, and showed up at his door hoping to meet him. By pure chance, he was there and he was incredibly kind. Then there was **Maddalena De Padova**, who in 2004 displayed forty identical *Baloo* lamps in her shop on Corso Venezia. But in general, I'm like a sponge. I absorb something from everyone I meet.

On top: Davide Groppi.
Un'ora di luce, 2026,
Volumnia, Piacenza
Ph. Fausto Mazza