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Bruno Munari and the invention of modern graphic design in Italy, 1928 - 1945

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Bruno Munari and the invention
of modern graphic design
in Italy, 1928–1945

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Bruno Munari en de oorsprong van de moderne grafische vormgeving in Italië, 1928–1945

Ondanks de moeilijke omstandigheden onder het fascistische regime, ontdekte Italië zijn eigen vorm van Modernisme in het prille begin van de jaren dertig. Het was het resultaat van een veelzijdige wisselwerking tussen een aantal factoren: de opkomst van de reclame, de druk en vitaliteit van het Futurisme en het debat rond de rationalistische architectuur. Deze studie onderzoekt het werk, tussen het eind van de jaren twintig en het midden van de jaren veertig (eind van de tweede wereldoorlog), van Bruno Munari als grafisch ontwerper, met de bedoeling om de oorsprong van die modernistische beweging in Italië en zijn eigenheden, beter te begrijpen. Deze eigen ontwerpcultuur die zich aanvankelijk in Milaan ontwikkelde bracht op een eclectische manier twee verschillende, modernistische bewegingen samen. Aan de ene kant de plaatselijke tradities, vertegenwoordigd door de Futuristische avant-garde, en een Europese traditie die aansloot bij het Constructivisme. Munari (1907–1998) werkte gelijktijdig als kunstschilder en als reclameontwerper. Aanvankelijk deelde hij de brede culturele belangstelling van de Futuristen, maar niet zonder een zekere openheid voor andere bewegingen zoals het Dadaïsme en het Surrealisme, om uiteindelijk aan te sluiten bij de Abstracten. Hij was een exponent van het nieuwe reclamevak en zijn werk getuigt dan ook van de evolutie van het vakgebied, met een grote verscheidenheid aan referenties, ambities en begrenzingen. Door zich te beperken tot

de stijlontwikkeling van Munari poogt deze studie de wisselwerking te onderzoeken tussen de Futuristische visuele vormtaal en de ideeën ontleend aan architectuur, fotografie, abstracte schilderkunst en de functionele typografie uit Noord Europa. Deze studie plaatst de ontwerper in zijn tijd en omgeving door zowel aandacht te schenken aan het bredere culturele kader als aan het eigenlijke werk.

De studie onderzoekt en beoordeelt ook de basis van Munari's reputatie tegen de achtergrond van een grote hoeveelheid bronnenmateriaal. Het is de eerste uitgebreide en gedetailleerde presentatie en studie van Munari's grafische productie en is zodoende een belangrijke basis voor een beter en vollediger begrip van zijn werk. Terwijl de evolutie van Munari's werk chronologisch is behandeld, onderstreept de analyse van het grafische werk de gebieden die van visueel belang zijn. Op die manier geeft de studie een afwisselende kijk op de onderliggende poëtische, thematische en formele kenmerken. De grote verscheidenheid in Munari's werk geeft niet alleen meer inzicht in de manier waarop modernistische ideeën werden ontvangen en opgenomen in het Milaan van de jaren dertig, maar ook in de manier waarop het vakgebied evolueerde van een beweging die aanvankelijk bij de avant-garde kunst hoorde tot het moderne begrip van grafisch ontwerp gebaseerd op rationele veronderstellingen en idiomen. Het is dan ook geen toeval dat Munari één van de leidende figuren is geworden van het Italiaans grafisch ontwerpen dat na 1945 tot ontplooiing kwam en waarvan de oorsprong alleen kan worden gevonden in de verscheidenheid van die culturele erfenis.

Bruno Munari and the Invention of Modern Graphic Design in Italy, 1928–1945

Despite the difficult political conditions under the Fascist regime, Italy saw its own modernist wave hit the commercial arts in the 1930s, resulting from a complex interplay of factors as diverse as the weight of Futurism, the rise of advertising, and the debate surrounding Rationalist architecture. This research examines Bruno Munari's work as a graphic designer from the late 1920s to mid-1940s, with the aim of understanding the emergence and characteristics of the modernist trend in Italian graphic design. Taking shape in Milan, this original 'design culture' eclectically brought together two quite different strains of Modernity: a local tradition represented by the Futurist avant-garde, and a European tradition associated with Constructivism. Munari (1907–1998) worked simultaneously as painter and as advertising designer: he debuted with the Futurists, whose broader cultural reach he shared, while also remaining open to other currents—such as Dadaism and Surrealism—and ultimately aligned himself with a more Abstractionist stance. Insofar as he was an exponent of the new advertising profession, his design work also reflects its evolution, mixed references, aspirations, and limits. Concentrating on Munari's stylistic development, the study seeks to explore the interaction between the Futurist visual vocabulary and conceptions coming from architecture, photography, abstract painting, and functionalist typography trickling in

from central and northern Europe. Hence, the discussion positions the designer in his time and place, concentrating as much on the artefacts as on the broader cultural framework.

Secondly, the study attempts to assess Munari's reputation against a body of exemplary work, based on firsthand documentation. It is the first extensive, detailed record of Munari's graphic design output, and as such provides a substantial base for a full understanding of his *œuvre*. While Munari's evolution is dealt with chronologically, the analysis of his graphic works highlights key areas of visual interest, offering a cross reading that sheds light on their underlying poetics, themes, and formal attributes. In its trajectory, Munari's wide-ranging graphic design work shows how modernist ideas were received and assimilated in the Milanese environment of the 1930s, as well as the shift in conceptions of the graphic design profession—from one related to avant-garde art practice to a Modern one, based on rational idioms. The roots of modern Italian graphic design, which fully emerged after 1945, can be traced to this heterogeneous legacy—and it is no coincidence that Munari became one of the fields' leading exponents.

Acknowledgements

This research draws primarily on printed reproductions of Munari's work as well as a number of original artefacts from the interwar years, which are available in public libraries and in private collections. Pictorial and bibliographical research was carried out during holiday periods spent in Italy between 2005 and 2010, and in particular during a study leave from the Université du Québec à Montréal in the course of the academic year 2007–08, for which I am most grateful.

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CLAC Galleria del Design e dell'Arredamento, Cantù
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 Fondazione ADI Associazione Disegno Industriale, Milan
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*In memoria di Marco Vettorazzo,
 partito 'in direzione ostinata e contraria'
 (1970-2006).*

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