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

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Mainstream narratives for the history of 20th-century graphic design are still based on the modernist canon first established in Weimar Germany, and later defined in the postwar Swiss and North American contexts. More inclusive visions based on recent research, however, have shown that, despite its crucial role, the constructivist paradigm can no longer be considered the only expression of Modernism in graphic design.¹ Next to the well-known exceptions of Britain and France, for instance, different regional developments existed in ‘southern’ regions such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, even Argentina and Brazil.²

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 emergence of advertising, and the debate surrounding rationalist architecture. Taking shape in Milan during the interwar period, 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. The roots of modern Italian graphic design, which fully emerged after 1945, can be traced to this heterogeneous legacy.³

1. See Kinross 2004: 120–1; Branzi 2008: 11–3; cf. Burke 1998: ‘Twentieth-century Modernism is a post-mortem phenomenon, an inevitably selective historical construction, extrapolated from the statements made by its young gods of the 1920s’ (ibid.: 12).

2. Seminal texts on the history of graphic design are Twyman 1998 [1970], Meggs 1983, Hollis 1994, Jobling, Crowley 1996; works devoted to single countries and/or

periods include Ainsley 2000, Wlassikoff 2005, Hollis 2006, Vinti 2007, and *Typography Papers* no. 8 (2009); also worth mentioning is the ongoing research by Marina Emmanouil (on Greece) and Mary Ann Bolger (on Ireland) at London’s Royal College of Art.

3. Meggs maintains that 20th-century graphic design was a product of the ‘collision’ between Cubism and Futurist aesthetics (Meggs 1983: 274). Cf. Branzi 2008.

This research examines Bruno Munari's work as a graphic designer from the late 1920s to the mid-1940s, with the aim of understanding the emergence and characteristics of this modernist trend in Italian graphic design. 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 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.

The study also 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 production, and as such provides a substantial base for a full understanding of his *œuvre*, which is still affected by a fragmentary perception of the artist. In fact, the sheer variety and complexity of the activities in which he engaged over the years has made it difficult to pigeonhole his work, so that—despite the

growing number of publications and exhibition catalogues—the focus placed on him as either artist, industrial designer, writer or pedagogue has tended to overshadow all other aspects of his practice.

As a graphic designer, Munari's name is nowadays associated mostly with book series and children's books designed in the postwar period, while his work from the 1930s is hardly ever mentioned, let alone reproduced. This kind of disinformation is in part due to the prejudices surrounding Futurism, long associated with the 'misadventure' of Fascism; but it also hints at an intrinsic problem in Italy's graphic design historiography. Its close connection with the fine arts has seriously affected critical and historical thinking, where art criticism has imposed its own methodologies and language. This literary imprint has influenced much of the existing literature, which is marked by unnecessary verbal clutter and a *modus operandi* that favours subjective interpretation; moreover, in Munari's case, the content is predominantly anecdotal or romanticising. These flaws have not only deterred more factual investigations, but also hindered circulation outside of Italy, thus marginalizing the Italian graphic design scene on the international level.⁴

While Munari's evolution is dealt with chronologically, the analysis of his graphic works underlines key areas of visual interest, offering a cross reading that sheds light on their underlying poetics, themes, and formal attributes—although these tend to correspond to subsequent phases in the artist's career.

4. A revealing example of the miscommunication between art critics and graphic designers is the Munari interview by Quintavalle (in *Bruno Munari*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979: 15–22). At the opposite end, welcome exceptions to this

trend, which have proved valuable resources both in terms of information and insight into Munari's life and career, are the books by Tanchis 1987, and Meneguzzo 1993, a critical review by Menna 1966, as well as the interview by Branzi 1984.

The discussion takes its cue from the situation of Italian graphic design that had developed over the twenties, which on the one hand came to coincide with the consolidation of the Fascist regime and, on the other, with the introduction of theories regarding standardization and labour organization, which permeated industry and, by extension, related professional sectors such as advertising. With the progressive urban- and consumption-oriented evolution of Italian society, the professional field of commercial graphics—which had heretofore coincided with poster design—increasingly assumed a more complex conception of advertising modeled on American agencies.

Beginning with his formative years in the Veneto countryside, the first section brings Munari's Futurist militancy into perspective. Although the movement had lost part of its capacity for cultural agitation, Futurism was still an important force within the national artistic context. Once Futurism's first phase, focused on literature and painting, had been exhausted, after ww1 Marinetti brought together a new generation of artists; they worked in the artistic fields most closely tied to industry and commerce—applied arts and advertising in particular—bringing an innovative force back into the movement. This was an extremely creative period for Munari, who took an experimental approach from those Futurist roots that would become his distinguishing stylistic mark.

The thesis's central sections address Munari's vast output of the 1930s and early 1940s, a long period in which he tried

his hand at different media with a singular assimilative ability: illustration, book cover design, photomontage, advertising design, and installation. The work's examination is organized by type. Next to the central theme of Munari's transition toward a modern visual language, moulded on a fundamental rationality enlivened by an anarchic, humorous vein, the discussion focuses on two relevant aspects: the network of influences that acted upon his personality; and the intellectual class's accommodation toward the Fascist regime, which not even Munari—despite his substantially apolitical stance—voiced any dissent against.

Throughout the 1920s Italy's general backwardness and relative cultural isolation meant that the nation was substantially excluded from the spread of the Modernist aesthetic that had taken shape in Central Europe. Only in the early 1930s did the new Constructivist conceptions of New Typography spread to Italy, in close relation to the rise of Rationalist architecture and painterly abstraction. As for advertising design, determining influences came from various indirect sources rather than from contacts with champions of the European movements. These included reproductions in the trade press and the graphic layout of popular magazines, and were freely assimilated by a generation of self-taught practitioners. The presence of indefatigable figures who animated the theoretical debate in Milan—including the art critic Edoardo Persico and the typographer Guido Modiano, who were affiliated with the magazines *Casabella* and *Campo grafico*—was equally

important, as was that of Antonio Boggeri, who strived to update the Italian advertising scene by modelling it on foreign examples. An insight into aspects of Italian society under Fascist rule and developments in the graphic arts provides the framework within which to address the background theme of how 'modernity' was expressed in Italian graphic design of the 1930s: what were the characteristics and impact of the new theories based on the combination of typography and photography in Italy? What was retained of the complex aesthetic and social vision propelled by continental Modernism? What kind of relationship links this period to the mature Italian graphic design that emerged in the 1950s?

While the experiences of that period contain *in nuce* the central thread of Munari's multifaceted activity in the postwar years, the wartime period also marked another leap forward, toward a more controlled visual language and a conception of the trade that was more integrated with the system of production. When Munari assumed artistic direction of Mondadori's illustrated magazines he carved out a role that would carry him into the new cultural context of the 1950s. A chapter is specifically devoted to this aspect of his career, and serves to connect his earlier experiences with those of the postwar period.

Although the Futurist legacy is now recognized as one of the original components of 20th-century art and design history, the same period in Italian graphic design has not been sufficiently explored in all its implications as it relates to the broader European context. This research

on Bruno Munari's wide-ranging graphic design work during the interwar period allows us to follow in his trajectory the transition from a conception of the profession related to avant-garde art practice to a Modern conception of graphic design based on rational assumptions and idioms. Although these developments came to full fruition after 1945, they result from the convergence of differing local and European trends in the peculiar Milanese environment of the 1930s. To analyze the actual work of one its leading practitioners within the original context allows us to draw an overall picture of that period, thereby contributing to a historical assessment of Italian graphic design.