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

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Italy's most mechanical city¹

Upbringing and debut

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Bruno Munari was born in Milan on the morning of 24 October 1907 to Pia Cavicchioni and Enrico Munari, who had both recently immigrated to the large industrial city in Lombardy from the Veneto, a rural region in north-eastern Italy. His father was a waiter at the Caffè Gambrinus,² a popular venue among the political and artistic elite, located in the central Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, near the Duomo and the Teatro Alla Scala. His mother looked after him and helped the family make a living with her needlework skills. Munari's typical sense of humour can be seen in one of the many autobiographical profiles he wrote over the course of his life, in which he describes his proletarian background with graceful irony: 'All of a sudden, without warning from anyone, there I was, completely naked, in the middle of Milan, on the morning of 24 October 1907. My father had connections with some of the city's most noteworthy people, as he was a waiter at the Caffè Gambrinus. My mother put on airs, embroidering fans.'³

1. From the Futurist manifesto *L'arte meccanica* (Mechanical Art), 1922.

2. The Caffè Gambrius opened in 1882, in the wing of the Galleria that opens onto piazza Scala (in the spot of the former Caffè Gnocchi), and in 1914

changed its name to Caffè Grand'Italia (Paolo Colussi, *Cronologia di Milano dal 1881 al 1890*, <http://www.storiadimilano.it>, last accessed 9 April 2009).

3. Quoted in *Le persone che hanno fatto grande Milano*, 1983: 3.

The Munari family's arrival in Milan in the early years of the century and the arrival of their firstborn son, Bruno, took place within a rather particular political and, consequently, social context—above all with regard to the daily life of contemporary Italians. The so-called Giolittian era heralded the twentieth-century's first decade in a climate of moderate liberal reform that, despite its contradictions, marked a significant evolution in the country's productive and social relationships as Italy, in its own way, moved toward modernisation.⁴

The country was exiting a phase of complex, difficult transition. Unified as recently as 1861, which was relatively late compared to other European nations, Italy was still a young, poor nation, and remained behind its neighbours on an economic and political level; above all, it was still separated by major regional disparities. Beginning in the 1880s, despite the generally poor state of the economy and the serious agricultural crisis that had struck Europe, Italy had to transition from a primarily agricultural country to an at least partially industrial one.⁵ Lombardy in particular was assuming an increasingly industrial profile, and Milan reinforced its role as 'the kingdom's economic and moral capital'⁶—as proven by the 1881 Esposizione nazionale held in Milan, which was Italy's first national exhibition⁷—drawing a significant percentage of the masses emigrating from the countryside. Urban drift as a result of an increasing demand for industrial labour, as well as the rural exodus triggered by innovations in agricultural equipment

and practices,⁸ caused the city's population to double in just twenty years.⁹

On a political level, at the end of a long period of stasis in the parliamentary regime, and lacking any real alternatives to the historic Right and Left—with the former determined by the landholders' and banks' interests, and the latter determined by middle-class and industrial concerns—the strong fin-de-siècle social and political tensions, heightened by both the economic recession and the government's repressive politics, culminated in the assassination of King Umberto I at the hand of an anarchist in 1900.¹⁰ As colonial expansionism failed and the administration of Francesco Crispi brought the government ever closer to outright authoritarianism,¹¹ the following

4. For a more complete overview of the Giolittian era, see Procacci 1975²: 411–80; Carocci 1961 (in particular for political developments); Castronovo 1995: 107–97 (on the industrial boom); and the thorough summary in Aquarone 1988.

5. Thanks to a type of capitalist development similar to the Prussian model of economic transformation through government intervention (protectionist policies, a mixed credit system, and public works commissions), this first phase of industrialisation—still based primarily on familial entrepreneurship and small-scale production—mainly involved the steel, mechanical, electrical, and textile sectors, concentrated primarily in the so-called industrial triangle between Milan, Turin, and Genoa (Procacci 1975²: 331–2; Castronovo 1995: 160–5; Carocci 1961: 10–1).

6. Procacci 1975²: 363. With respect to the region's traditional sectors of production, Milan's new production centre was distinguished by strong growth in the steel and mechanical divisions, which were linked to the formation of economic infrastructure (transportation, electricity, and precision mechanics) and the agricultural revolution that was well underway

(thanks to innovative farming mechanics) (industrialisation 1997: 25–6).

7. Bigatti 1997: 25.

8. The wave of agricultural modernisation that swept across northern Italy in the latter half of the nineteenth century benefited from new machinery, chemical fertilisers, new crops and crop rotations. The modes of production also changed radically, shifting toward more capitalist management, not without government intervention (through land reclamation and the establishment of trade schools and centres for agricultural research). Cf. Castronovo 1995: 115–20.

9. 1901 census (compared to the 1880 census), in Castronovo 1995: 111.

10. Notably the insurrection of Sicily's Fasci dei lavoratori (a labour organisation movement, literally 'bundle of workers') in 1893–94, and the Bava Beccaris massacre in Milan in 1898 (cf. Procacci 1975²: 436–7, 445–6).

11. Francesco Crispi's rule was particularly reactionary on the interior front (1887–91 and 1993–95, periods in which Italy launched campaigns for its own 'place in the sun' in East Africa), as was the government of Luigi Pelloux (1898–1900). King Umberto I was assassinated

political period, lead by Giovanni Giolitti (1901–1914), began under signs of a more moderate reformism and a progressive modernisation of the nation's government, which allowed for two major steps forward in the country's civil and social evolution: on the one hand it encouraged industrialisation, and on the other hand, it opened politics up to the agricultural and industrial working class, organised in the socialist and catholic movements, which up until then had been marginal political forces largely excluded from the mainstream political-institutional system.¹² A series of structural reforms and investments,¹³ the expansion of electoral suffrage,¹⁴ as well as economic policies aimed at increasing the spending power of the lower classes, all took place in the context of increasingly rapid economic development in the agricultural and industrial/financial sectors, both of which were fostered by the state's protectionist politics.¹⁵ Yet despite the benefit of such protected conditions, Italy's economic expansion nevertheless had its downside, with difficult labour conditions for the working classes and high levels of emigration from the countryside to the city and abroad.¹⁶ Indeed, in spite of the reformist climate, the first decade of the twentieth century was a period of stark social contrasts, characterised by frequent strikes and trade disputes.¹⁷

Nevertheless, while Italy on the whole remained an agricultural, poor, and largely illiterate country, a consistent part of the population gradually saw its standards of living improve: both the lower middle class (consisting primarily of shopkeepers and

artisans) and the emerging middle class (public and private clerks, teachers), as

by an anarchist to avenge the protesters who had died during the violent repression of the May 1898 uprisings in Milan: the massacre was instigated by General Fiorenzo Bava Beccaris, upon whom the Savoy sovereign bestowed the highest honours.

12. Cf. Aquarone 1988: 37–60.

13. Among the reforms enacted under Giolitti over slightly more than a decade, one of the most important was the recovery of government finances, which were rebalanced by 1906. The primary investments went to infrastructure (nationalisation of the railways, the launch of major public works projects, reorganisation of the postal service, and municipalisation of various services), but other sectors also benefited, including education and social services (new laws on health care, women's and children's labour laws, and the first pension plans). Cf. Castronovo 1995: 171–2; Aquarone 1988: 190–206, 562–71; Croce 1963: 225, 230.

14. The 1912 law sanctioned a broadening of male suffrage, leading to universal suffrage for all male citizens, including illiterates, over thirty years of age who had done military service. Women were still excluded, and only gained the right to vote with the Republican Constitution of 1946.

15. The favourable economic situation continued up until World War I, with a median annual growth index of over 6 percent in the industrial sector (Procacci 1975²: 457; cf. Carocci 1961: 7), and brought about the first major growth concentrations. A few data provide a measure of how rapid Italian industrial expansion was: while in 1900 agriculture and industry constituted 51% and 20% of the gross domestic product, respectively, already by 1930 the value generated by industry far surpassed that of agriculture. While in the 1910s agriculture provided employment for 34% of the working-age

population nationwide—twice that of industry—the aforementioned industrial triangle was a noteworthy exception, employing 40% of the population in Lombardy and Liguria, and 31% in Piemonte (Procacci 1975²: 471; Aquarone 1988: 397). To compare this situation with other European nations, data on foreign commerce from 1890–1907 show an annual growth of 118% in Italy, with respect to England's 55% and Germany's 92% (Croce 1963: 228; see also Aquarone 1988: 289–301; Castronovo 1995: 160–5).

16. At the beginning of the century, Italians' wages were among the lowest in Europe, thanks also to extensive reliance on women and child labourers (Procacci 1975²: 459–60; Castronovo 1995: 173–4). Emigration has been a significant phenomenon throughout recent Italian history: it was a safety valve for social tensions and overpopulation (in 1901 the country had 32 million inhabitants, and 35 just ten years later; see Croce 1963: 229); it also played an undeniably important role in the economy, thanks to the money emigrants sent home from abroad. A first mass wave of emigration of the poorest rural classes into the cities was sparked by an agricultural crisis in the 1880s; in the 1900s, however, the migratory wave intensified, especially from southern Italy to North and South America (it reached a maximum of 725,000 emigrants in 1905, equal to 20‰). Cf. Castronovo 1995: 111–5; Aquarone 1988: 378–93.

17. Favoured by the government's more permissive stance, which was limited to maintaining public order, the number of strikes in Italy grew exponentially: from 642 recorded in the two-year period from 1899–1900 to 1852 in the following two years; the first general strike was declared in September 1904 (Castronovo 1995: 174; Croce 1963: 220, 227; Procacci 1975²: 463–5).

well as at least a part of the urban and agricultural working classes (who belonged to specialised categories such as artisans and skilled workers). At the dawn of the century, for example, the expenditure of the average Italian family showed a decrease in the amount of income spent on groceries, while spending on clothing, home furnishings, and the first consumer goods (such as bicycles and sewing machines) gradually increased.¹⁸ Consequently, the demand for education also increased, and, in step with the progress of public elementary instruction, newspaper readership and the nascent popular press also became more widespread. On a social level, and above all in the more developed regions of northern Italy, the Giolittian era was a particularly dynamic period, characterised by a prudent faith in the progress of the nation; on the whole, despite lingering shadows, the mere fact of people sensing this change was a positive enough force to stimulate social mobility.¹⁹

Badia Polesine (1913–1924)

Such was the general climate in which Bruno Munari's life began. Pia Cavicchioni and Enrico Munari were both from Badia Polesine²⁰ (or one of its bordering townships), a small town on the banks of the Adige River in the province of Rovigo, approximately 85 km south-west of Venice. Historically, the Polesine area, located along the lower reaches of the Po River, was a little-developed agricultural zone, hydrogeologically unstable due to frequent flooding of the Po and Adige rivers, with scarce

infrastructure²¹—all of which explains why it was the source of so much emigration. Pia and Enrico Munari had moved to Milan at the turn of the century, and were helped by some of Pia's relatives who were already living there. Despite their working-class living conditions, the family nevertheless belonged to a relatively privileged group; they could count on a minimum level of education (in a country where, at the end of the 1900s, approximately 40%

18. Socrate 1995: 363–5. The 'upper middle-class layout' in Italy was made up of various social groups: landowners, professionals (solicitors, doctors), entrepreneurs, bureaucrats (public administrators of every level)—corresponding to 5% of the overall population—in addition to the middle class and small business owners. A heterogeneous portion of the population greatly benefited from raises in pay and shorter working hours, including government workers, specialised and skilled labourers, and the farm hands of several areas of the Valle Padana (Po River Valley) in which agricultural co-operatives were widespread. Cf. Procacci 1975²: 468–71; Castronovo 1975: 185–7; Castronovo 1995: 174–5.

19. In his observations collected in *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (A History of Italy, 1871–1915, first published in Italian in 1928), Benedetto Croce offers a frankly positive assessment of the Giolittian era: '[It was a time] of refreshment and peace, cheerfulness and prosperity. Such were for Italy the years in which the idea of a liberal régime was most fully realised' (American edition/translation, 1963: 214); and 'The activities of Parliament and of the Government during these ten years did not belie the hopes which had been aroused in 1901 (...)' (ibid.: 224). Cf. Procacci's opinion of Croce's historical viewpoint (Procacci 1975²: 470).

20. The family name partially confirms its origins in the north-eastern area of the country. The last name Munari, which is widespread and appears in

several variants throughout northern Italy, is found particularly in the Veneto region and lower Po Valley, and supposedly derives from hypocoristic forms or dialect-based modifications of the term *munaro* or *munero* (miller). Cavicchioni is a hypocoristic variant of a family name present in the areas around Ferrara and Rovigo (as well as the border region between Tuscany and Emilia Romagna), and is derived from nicknames associated with the archaic term *cavichio* (a peg or short, pointed pole). See <http://www.cognomiitaliani.org>, last accessed May 2009.

21. Although it originally referred to the 1880s, Procacci's description aptly captures the salient aspects of the landscape around Badia Polesine: '[It's] a landscape of embankments, of major drainage and land reclamation, of improvised villages—villages without even the usual, familiar presence of a church' (Procacci 1975²: 414). The provinces of the lower Po River Valley (Mantua, Ferrara, Ravenna, and the Polesine area) played a fundamental role in the history of the Italian labour movement, insofar as they were the birthplace and cradle that fostered the rapid growth of the socialist movement: 'The Po River Valley remained one of the hottest points of social conflict' (Castronovo 1995: 176). On the origins of socialism, rooted in farmers' protests throughout the countryside of the Po River Valley, see Procacci 1975²: 414–5, 434–9, and Castronovo 1995: 176–7.

of the population was still illiterate) and had professional experience as hotelkeepers, which guaranteed the family a modest degree of prosperity and put them in a position to invest in their children's education while looking for new opportunities for socio-economic advancement.

Although it is not known precisely why the Munari family decided to leave Milan and return to the Veneto countryside, aside from the probable family-related reasons, the chance to take up their own independent economic enterprise—like ownership and management of an inn—almost certainly was a deciding factor. In 1913, when Bruno was about 6 years old, the family left Milan to settle once again in Badia Polesine, where the Munari couple had acquired a mansion—originally a hunting residence of the Dukes of Este, from nearby Ferrara—which had already been transformed into an inn.²² Named Albergo Sant'Antonio, after the section of street the former Este residence overlooked, the inn lay on the town's main road, near the crossroads of the two routes that connected Polesine to Padua, Ferrara, Verona, and Rovigo,²³ thereby guaranteeing the town a fair amount of local economic relevance. Recent land reclamation and drainage had gradually transformed the human and economic geography of the entire area, leading to further development centred on the introduction of new crops and related manufacturing industries (mills and sugar refineries in particular). On the eve of World War I, Badia Polesine was a peaceful provincial town of over 10,000 inhabitants with a theatre, a hospital, and a trade

school.²⁴ Clearly the Munari family's return to Badia can be read in the positive light of the period in general, which must have led them to seize upon new opportunities to improve their standard of living in a region that, despite remaining primarily agricultural, now offered improved economic conditions.²⁵

My father adapted a large building that has been the residence of the Dukes of Este, and I lived the life of a hotelier there, helping him out a bit; but I didn't like it, because it's a life without leisure. If no one comes to fill in after your shift, you go to bed at two in the morning, after the last guest has come back, and you get up at five to go for groceries. My mother had invented a saying, she

22. The so-called Palazzo degli Estensi, whose construction is now attributed to the Venetian Gradonigo family, is a beautiful gothic building that dates back to circa 1430, during the first period of Venetian dominion in the area. The building is 'characterised on the lower levels by a portico with three different types of round arches, while the upper levels are distinguished by ogival windows and the sitting-room's mullioned window with three lights' (Barison, Occhi 2004). The transformation of this noble residence into a commercial building apparently occurred long ago: according to historic documents dating back to the arrival of Napoleonic troops in the area (1797), the inn already existed at the end of the eighteenth century (Paolo Aguzzoni, conversation with author, May 1, 2009).

23. On the other side of the iron bridge crossing the Adige River, the provincial route leads north toward Padua and south toward Ferrara. Another road leads along the riverbank: to the east, it runs upriver toward Verona; to the west, it runs down-river toward Rovigo.

24. The village takes its name from the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Mary at Vanadizza, originally founded in the tenth century, which by the thirteenth century already had a small town

built up around it. Over the centuries it passed from the hands of the Este family into Venetian rule, and after the Napoleonic invasion it was occupied—like much of northern Italy—by Austria, up until the Veneto region was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866. For additional historical and geographic background, see <http://www.comune.badiapolesine.ro.it/Informazioni/Storia.html>, last accessed April 2009; for the demographic data cited above, the source was ISTAT, the Italian National Statistics Institute, from http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Badia_Polesine, last accessed April 2009.

25. With respect to the period of 1887–1901, in which it is estimated that nearly one-third of the population left the Polesine area for the industrial triangle or for South America, the industrial-agricultural development of the region led to a temporary decrease in emigration in 1911 (a national census year). Despite the fact that in that same period there were nearly 1,400 active industries in the Province of Rovigo, with a significant growth in employment opportunities, in the nineteen-twenties agriculture still employed over two-thirds of the area's inhabitants (compared to 55% on the national level).

said you have to sleep in haste. I took after her, she was very agile, alert, and practical.²⁶

The Munari family ran the hotel and restaurant for about eighteen years, until the early forties, when they gave up the business because both children had chosen different paths. Their parents continued to live in Badia at least until the end of World War II, and for a brief period in 1943–44 Bruno's family took refuge at his parents' home after fleeing Milan.²⁷

Bruno was not an only child, but his brother Giordano was born ten years after him, in 1917. Giordano—who was trained as a mechanical designer, and later designed turbines for the Edison company²⁸—joined his brother in Milan around 1935. He likely stayed with Bruno and his wife Dilma Carnevali, whom he'd married in 1934, or perhaps with his sister-in-law's family: sure enough, in a curious coincidence, Giordano later married Dilma's sister.

Upbringing

Even if one does not take a literal read of the various memories Bruno Munari wove together as a plot feeding into his personal, ever-growing mythology (along with much of the 'sentimental' criticism that followed him and his work), the childhood he spent in the natural and social atmosphere of the Veneto countryside evidently had a determining influence on his sensibility and intelligence.²⁹

There wasn't one decisive moment, in my childhood or my later life, in which

I consciously realised my path would be that of an artist. There's always been a sort of 'fade-in, fade-out' between everyday small-town life (...) and my activity, an activity that would nowadays be called 'creative,' inspired by curiosity and the desire to do something out of the ordinary.³⁰

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This sentimental education left its mark, not least in his insatiable curiosity about natural phenomena, certainly rooted in his experiences of country life, which was still rather humble: typical children's games, stimuli found and discoveries made in the fluvial surroundings, paddle mills moored along the riverbanks, straw scarecrows, and the various characters and scenes of

26. Bruno Munari, quoted in Branzi 1984: 40.

27. Data confirmed by indirect evidence: 'From information gathered by those who knew Munari, the hotel was run by his parents from 1912–1913 (indeed, Bruno Munari arrived in Badia when he was 6–7 years old) until at least the 1930s. During the World War II his parents still lived in Badia Polesine' (Mara Barison, e-mail to author, April 30, 2009). After the war his parents also moved to Milan, where they were buried (Alberto Munari, e-mail to author, November 13, 2009).

28. For a brief period during the thirties, Giordano was employed as a designer of aircraft models for the Movo company, which was among Munari's clients (Alberto Munari, conversation with author, February 10, 2008).

29. The fact that over the years Munari steadily built a sort of public persona—carefully selecting facts, memories, episodes, and statements that effectively created a 'mythology'—is obvious to anyone who approaches him through his writings, testimonies, and works without other emotional influences or prejudices. See Meneguzzo: 'Too often the temptation to talk about Munari the way Munari talks about himself and his ideas has produced only apologetic books, inspired

sheerly by sympathy for the character (...)' (Meneguzzo 1993: 3). The circumstances of the childhood he so often spoke of later on seem far from having anything exceptional about them, nor did they play such an absolute, almost deterministic role in his personality; rather, Munari loved to make it sound as if they did, and his telling became an essential ingredient of the myth of his natural genius—insofar as it corresponded to his interest in games, childhood, and creativity.

30. Munari, interviewed by Alberto Munari (1986: 74).

31. Tanchis 1987: 10. Badia Polesine sits at the confluence of the Adige River and its smaller tributary, the so-called Adigetto (Little Adige), which bisects the town; the riverside village of San Nicolò (named after Saint Nicholas, also known as Pizzon, which was destroyed when the bridge was bombed in 1945), was inhabited by fishers and millers, who maintained floating mills. There was also a small shipyard for boat building, a riverside customs house, an inn, and the church of Saint Nicholas, patron of mariners (<http://www.comuneweb.it/BadiaPolesine>, and <http://www.castellonoratobadiapolesine.135.it>, both last consulted April 27, 2009). The presence of the Adige left a lasting mark on

rural life.³¹ The observation of nature not only inspired his capacity for reflection in rational, almost scientific terms—as well as the apparent verbal simplicity that characterised his prose—but it also served as a grounding orientation of his design methods, based as they were on a ‘structural imitation of nature.’³²

Another important legacy of his childhood came from one of his uncles, who was a violin maker and also the chef at the family hotel:

(...) this uncle who made violins, and was also a chef (...) lived in a house with his workshop on the ground floor, and his living spaces and a large terrace on the floor above (...)³³

(...) and I often stopped by his workshop to see how he treated the sheets of maple to form the curvatures on the sides of the violin (...) In the workshop I could take scraps of cut wood, set them in the vice, and work on them with uncle vice splendid gouges. I really liked working with his craftsman’s materials and tools, a lot more than helping my parents run the inn.³⁴

The manual dexterity that distinguishes such naïve bricolage of materials and techniques, which later became another characteristic of his working method, can be traced back to that artisan’s apprenticeship in his uncle’s workshop. But his habit of playing around with a broad range of natural forms and everyday objects also stemmed from the games conjured up from nothing that he enjoyed creating along the riverbanks or in the courtyard and attic of the family inn:

As a boy (and especially as a toddler) I never had toys like the ones every kid has today, but I made them up myself, and built them with whatever I found (...)

Ever since I was a boy I was an experimenter, even when I built my own toys, or built them for friends, using bamboo shoots or other simple materials (...)

In Badia, as a boy, I played in the immense attic above the inn. Some of my games, among others, included ‘parachuting’ the cats and tossing little strips of paper out of the window to observe how they moved through the air.³⁵

It is interesting to discover, in these recollections, the childhood—even ‘infantile’—source of many Munarian inventions, which were really just transposed into the more ‘adult’ context of art and design. His liking for play, understood in the cognitive sense as a tool for active discovery of the world, became an essential critiquing, designing, and teaching tool; it also fuelled his humorous and surreal veins, which made ample use of spoonerisms, semantic games, and word play. In this sense one could even read a transposition of childhood experiences into his work, which often enacts a connotative shift, changing a given action and thereby making it meaningful in a new way. For example, his 1969 performance in Como, ‘Far vedere l’aria’ (Air Made Visible), in which he let paper cut into different shapes fall from a tower, invariably comes to mind. As does the five-drop fountain created for Tokyo’s Isetan department store in 1965:

Munari—‘I’m fine in Milan, but I miss the river’ (Tanchis 1982: 50)—as was also clear in his short story ‘Le macchine della mia infanzia’ (The machines of my childhood) written in the twenties and reprinted in the appendix of *Arte come mestiere* (Munari 1966: 251–2).

32. Meneguzzo 1993: 8.

33. Branzi 1984: 40.

34. Munari, interviewed by Alberto Munari (1986: 74); cf. Branzi 1984: 40.

35. Munari in Alberto Munari 1986: 74; Branzi

1984: 40; and Rossi 1962: 9, respectively. A more recent text in which Munari reflects on the many games and activities of his childhood is particularly illuminating: ‘Un gattino vero miagolante’ (A true cat whining)—originally published in the catalogue *Giochi e grafica* (Cremona: Comune di Soncino/Ass.ne Prov.le Cremona/Ass.ne Culturale Soncino, 1990), now reprinted in *C’era due volte IV*; 8 (September 1997): 38ff.

And then in the courtyard I had a faucet that dripped. Obviously the washer was shot, so it no longer turned off properly. But the sound of those drips was quite interesting, because it was neither monotone nor monotonous. I don't know why, but listening closely you could hear that the interval between one drip and the next wasn't the same, and even the sound of each drip was different. One day I tried putting an empty bucket under the shower: *toc toc toc toc toc toc*; then a crumpled-up newspaper, *cha cha cha cha cha*; then an upside-down skillet, *ten ten ten ten ten ten ten*; then I let the drips fall into an empty jam jar, *tic tic tic tec tec tec toc toc tuc tuc boc buc tum*. A few of my friends and I tried singing some made-up songs following the rhythm of the drips. One song went 'pic pac pac pic patapic patapac pitopec pataluc,' and then you'd repeat the riff with individual variations.³⁶

The advancement of primary public education and the fact that it was free—as it was entirely underwritten by the government—made it possible for Bruno to attend elementary school in Badia (beginning in second grade), and he also benefited from important reforms to the national scholastic system.³⁷ Early on, primary school provided several branches of study (after the basic four-year foundation program) to those who wished to pursue middle-school education upon passing their exams; and those who decided to finish their schooling, after two more supplementary courses, could be done by the age of twelve: this two-track system tended to severely limit social mobility, as it discouraged pupils from the lower and working classes from continuing on to secondary education.³⁸ In light of the path Munari took—later on he went to an *istituto tecnico superiore* (technical high school) for about a year—one can infer that he or his family had

opted to continue his studies; he took the entrance exam for middle school,³⁹ although there are no records that he went to school beyond the obligatory age of twelve, and despite the fact that Badia had an applied arts institute, where he could have learned the rudimentary basics of drawing and design.⁴⁰ It should be pointed out that secondary education, which was still based on an eighteenth-century model (known as the Casati Law, passed in 1859), created a clear distinction between 'humanistic' and 'technical' courses of study, with the latter geared more toward professional preparation—which also carried obvious social repercussions.⁴¹ It is therefore no surprise that secondary education, especially in the liberal arts and sciences (in the national system of *licei*, senior high schools that naturally led to university) were still the privilege of the more

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36. Munari 1990a ['Un gattino vero miagolante'].

37. For the most comprehensive overview of the Italian school system under Giolitti, see Aquarone 1988: 522–62. The serious shortcomings of primary education at the beginning of the century were, if not fully resolved, at least dealt with through successive reforms—known as the Nasi (1903) and Orlando laws (1904). New regulations raised the compulsory age of attendance to twelve, stipulated the establishment of evening schools, and called for better working conditions for teachers. It also led to increased government funding, to the point where the State fully underwrote all public elementary instruction (which had hitherto been the responsibility of individual municipalities), as sanctioned by the Dane-Credaro law of 1911 (cf. Croce 1963: 226).

38. Moreover, while the agricultural and industrial development of northern Italy encouraged working-class families to invest in their children's education, it also created a demand for unskilled labourers—which were drawn from local

primary schools, as shown by the slow growth of enrolment between 1901 and 1907 (Aquarone 1988: 552).

39. In an interview about his first school experiences, Munari admitted: 'No, I didn't really want to study. And I remember that in elementary school I was punished once, because I illustrated the subject. Drawing like that was quite forbidden at the time' (quoted in Barberis 1978).

40. The Dante Mazzari School of Applied Arts, founded in 1882.

41. This basic distinction was, effectively, a double-track access to higher education, with clear class connotations (Aquarone 1988: 546). On the one hand, the tuition—which was rather costly for high schools, but relatively inexpensive for trade schools—was a discriminating factor that determined students' chosen field of study; on the other, the different levels of government support—direct in the case of secondary schools, while leaving trade schools to rely upon the resources of local authorities, municipalities, and private donors—emphasised attendants' limitations and geographical differences.

well-to-do classes, since the subsistence of less well-to-do families often depended on the contribution of working-age children, and in any case the scarcity of such families' resources rarely put them in a position to pay the hefty school taxes; the best-case scenario for students from working-class families who opted to continue their studies was to enrol in the technical institutes—as Munari did.

My relationship to my parents was a fairly traditional one (...) My family had a hotel, they were always incredibly busy and had very little time for me (...) [When I was nineteen] I came to Milan, because I wanted to be an artist. Naturally, my parents were against it, they'd have liked me to follow in their line of work (...) What I don't like about running an inn is its sheer repeatability, it's damaging, you do things only to then undo them: there was no way to take part in it in a creative way.⁴²

Milan

Even if Munari's parents had wanted their son, who was already helping out in the hotel as an all-purpose factotum, to continue the business they had launched, they could not really oppose to their firstborn's aspirations⁴³ (they took a similar stance with their second son, Giordano, when he, too, moved to Milan). As a rowdy adolescent who could not stand the prospect of continuing a job he viewed as thankless, and consumed by a 'wholly provincial desire to go out and discover the world,'⁴⁴ Munari was able to pursue his studies thanks to one of his uncles. The husband of his mother's sister was an engineer, and had briefly lived in Badia before moving to

Milan with his family. Considered the most well-to-do member of the family, Bruno's uncle Ugo had offered to help his nephew; the chance to do so came in 1924, when Ugo was hired to oversee the construction of a plant in Naples, and took Bruno along. Munari was seventeen at the time, and attended a technical school while in Naples—although he did not complete his studies, most likely because of the family's return to Milan less than a year later.⁴⁵

In 1926, at the age of nineteen and with no further schooling behind him, Munari decided to move to Milan: 'I wanted to be a painter, and went to Milan.'⁴⁶ Between his stay in Naples and his arrival in Milan, Munari probably went back to Badia, where he could take the time to make a decision about his future and perhaps scrape together some money before his move, as well as lend his parents a hand running the hotel. As his son Alberto noted, one oft-overlooked aspect of that period was the relative poverty he experienced upon arriving in Milan, with practically no money and no work prospects.⁴⁷

I stayed with my mother's sister, aunt Amelia, who had married an engineer. They helped me a great deal (and I had a very cute cousin). My uncle taught me technical

42. Bruno Munari, quoted in Catalano 1994: 152.

43. Alberto Munari, conversation with author, February 10, 2008.

44. Tanchis 1987: 10. Cf. *Le persone che hanno fatto grande Milano*, 1983: 4–6: 'He liked painting, drawing, inventing games, and making machines that had no useful purpose. That's why he got bored of that Veneto town, and even got angry—because when a man can't do what he enjoys, it's only natural that he's unhappy, angry, and his blood grows bitter. So he took the train and came to Milan (...) and has never felt angry since (...).'

45. The information is cited in Naylor 1990, and was originally from an

English-language profile of Munari from 1964, further confirmed by Alberto Munari (conversation with author, February 10, 2008). Nevertheless, neither the school's name nor its specialisation are noted. Generally speaking, most technical training of the time lasted four years, and included physics/mathematics, surveying, agronomy, commercial accounting, and industrial courses (Aquirone 1988: 546n).

46. Di Corato 2008: 209n.

47. Alberto Munari, conversation with author, February 10, 2008.

48. Bruno Munari, quoted in Catalano 1994: 152. See also Giuseppe Tarozzi's summary of an interview with Munari:

and geometric draughtsmanship, as well as how to draw building plans and sections, all of which was useful to me later on.⁴⁸

Most sources say Munari had settled in Milan by 1927, which is also the date of his first participation in the group shows mounted by the Milanese Futurists. Nevertheless, considering that Munari permanently settled in Milan only around 1930, it seems likely that, at least in an initial phase of the transition, he was still periodically going from Milan to Badia—a situation that was likely facilitated by the blurred boundaries between his work life and family life.⁴⁹ In Milan, while waiting to find some kind of work, he was actually taken in once again by his uncle the engineer, who saw his aptitude for drawing and design and ended up taking him in to work as a technical draughtsman. Munari must have already felt a familiarity with design, which he had pursued on his own as an adolescent back in Badia: proud as he was of his autodidactic background, he later tended to minimise the importance of the technical instruction he had received in high school. In any case, ample historiographic criticism has highlighted the poor quality of most teaching at Italian technical schools of the day;⁵⁰ nevertheless, in light of his uncle's decision, it is difficult not to see a connection to his formative instruction, however rudimentary, at the institute in Naples. Be that as it may, that first professional experience brought him into contact with the engineering world and undoubtedly constituted a technical apprenticeship that was important for

his growth, initiating him in the technical aspects of design that would later become such an essential part of his creative approach.

I have no particular memories of my arrival in Milan. I was from a small town and, obviously, the scale was different. Milan felt like a very big, boundless city. Nevertheless, at least back then, Milan didn't seem like a metropolis. It was just big.⁵¹

Munari's technical apprenticeship with his uncle ended after a couple of years, in 1928, when Ugo left for America: from then on Munari, who was already a full-fledged member of the Milanese Futurist group, began to support himself by working in advertising. Like other artists of his generation, and following the ideological premises of Futurism, which spoke of an art launched without prejudice into daily life, Munari felt no separation between the art seen in galleries and that of advertising,

'He had seventy lire in his pocket and nothing much at all in the way of prospects. In Badia Polesine, where he'd started out, he helped his father and mother run a hotel. He was turning nineteen and really didn't that line of work. He liked painting, drawing, inventing games (...) That's why he got bored of that Veneto town, and even got angry (...). So he took the train and came to Milan. An uncle engineer took him in until he could find him another place. Then, because the boy was good at drawing, he asked him to help draw some of the designs he'd made' (*Le persone che hanno fatto grande Milano*, 1983: 4–6). Guido Vergani's account matches rather closely: '(...) He said he'd become a Milanese in 1926, when he came to town with only 70 lire in his pocket and a sole calling—that of no longer being a factotum in the little hotel his folks kept up amid the poverty of Badia Polesine' (Vergani in Finessi 2005: 160). Both Tarozzi and Vergani attribute

the date of Munari's arrival in Milan (1926) to Munari himself.

49. Information deduced from an English-language biographical sketch, certainly written by Munari himself (evident not only from the English that is clearly moulded on Italian, but also from the type of information given, carefully selected to focus on both his childhood and his artistic experiences), provided by the Dutch publisher Steendrukkerij de Jong in 1964 for the launch of his illegible red and white book for the Kwadrat-Bladen series: '1930, leaves his parents in Badia Polesine and settles in Milan.' A copy of the book is now in the Domus Archives, Milan (Munari, file 22).

50. 'But I only studied a bit of engineering, which was utterly useless! I'm just curious, I'm an experimenter,' Bruno Munari, cited in Manera 1986: 153. On the Italian school system, see Aquarone 1988: 547.

51. *Le persone che hanno fatto grande Milano*, 1983: 6.

which was certainly a pioneering viewpoint in Milan at the close of the 1920s. This decision—which Munari repeatedly returned to over the years, making it an integral part of his reading of his own career—was dictated by a need for economic independence that would keep him from paying any heed to art-market logic, as well as his uninhibited, avant-garde vision of aesthetic activity, understood as unconfined creativity, which guaranteed him maximal freedom to practice whatever kind of visual research he wished—from painting to photography, poster design, mobile sculptures, trade-fair exhibitions, ceramics, theatrical sets, furniture design, and commercial graphics:

I did it so as not to feel bound to any dealer (...) [I chose graphic design] with the same enthusiasm I did everything else with, because I don't believe there are any first-class or second-class actions in life: I approach everything with curiosity.⁵²

Studio Mauzan-Morzenti

Early on, in 1928, Munari worked as a sketch artist in the Mauzan-Morzenti studio, an ad agency and poster publisher founded in 1924 by the French *affichiste* Achille Mauzan and the printer Federico Morzenti.⁵³ Doing the reverse of what Leonetto Cappiello had (leaving Italy for Paris to work for the publisher Vercasson), Mauzan had left Lyon for Italy (moving to Turin, then Rome, and finally Milan) prior to World War I, and made a name for himself illustrating postcards and posters during the golden age of silent film. Mauzan later worked primarily in advertising: first at

the Officine Grafiche Ricordi, then at the Maga agency (founded by Giuseppe Magnoli), and in 1924 he teamed up with his friend Federico Morzenti to create the Mauzan-Morzenti agency, with offices on via Castel Modrone in Milan.⁵⁴ The studio was a noteworthy success, as the staggering number of posters they made for countless clients in those years attests (particularly in such highly competitive sectors as food advertising), thanks not only to Mauzan's prolific output, but also through their contracts with other painters: among the young artists who worked with them were Gino Boccasile, Matteo Bianchi, Sant'Ambrogio, and Sepo.⁵⁵ Even after Mauzan left for Argentina at the end of 1926, the Mauzan-Morzenti studio remained active for many years (at least through the late

52. Bruno Munari, quoted in Catalano 1994: 151. Cf. also Tanchis 1987: 11: 'He was ever-faithful to his principle of always having a job (as advertising designer, art director, illustrator), so as to remain economically independent from the fickle art market.'

53. This information appears first in Pesavento, Palieri 1953, and was reprinted in the 1995 Bolaffi catalogue. Mirande Carnévalé-Mauzan, daughter of the French *affichiste*, does not recall her father ever mentioning Munari (letter to author, October 29, 2007), but that is not so surprising, given that Munari's collaboration with the Morzenti studio (1928) began after Mauzan left for South America (1926-1927). Achille (Luciano) Mauzan (1883-1952), was a French painter, illustrator, and art deco poster artist. His best-known poster was done for a loan program through the Credito Italiano (1917), which uses the device of a soldier pointing his finger at the viewer, first stylised in a poster designed by Alfred Leete featuring Lord Kitchener (1914). At the end of 1926 Mauzan left Italy for Argentina, where he remained until 1932 (his success as a commercial artist contributed greatly to the

emergent Argentine graphic tradition), before finally returning to France, where his work gained little recognition. There are very few critical studies of his work, even in French: aside from the catalogue published by Alain Weill in 1983 (with an article on his Italian period by Luigi Menegazzi, curator of the Salce Collection in Treviso), see the catalogue raisonné edited and published by his daughter, Mirande Carnévalé-Mauzan, in 2001, of which there is also an abridged English-language edition focussing on his posters.

54. The illustration used as the logo on letterhead—portraying a Joker shouting into the ear of a Pierrot—is representative of Mauzan's later, more congenial caricaturistic style (reproduced in Carnévalé-Mauzan 2001: 23, 69). Mauzan was well known in Milan, even amongst the general public: in 1921 he co-organised an exhibition with Cappiello at the Castello Sforzesco, in which he exhibited ceramics and book illustrations made for the First International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Monza (1923) and the following Monza Biennial (1925).

55. Carnévalé-Mauzan 2001: 24.

1930s), and they made the most of each opportunity for long-distance collaboration between Buenos Aires and Milan.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Munari's time at the studio—a period in which he began to sign his work with the Futurist pseudonym *BUM*, or simply *Bruno*—was not to last more than a few months, and by the end of that same year he began collaborating with artist brothers Carlo and Vittorio Cossio on animated advertisement shorts.

Animation

From the first attempts at film advertising—carried out in the 1920s with slide film and stop-motion animations—this medium had rapidly spread through Italy, apace with the rapid success of synchronised sound.⁵⁷ Animated films, which had also begun in Milan—and were pioneered by the artists working for the children's weekly *Corriere dei piccoli* (the first Italian comic-strip magazine, established in 1908 as a supplement to the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper)—had long been the artistic bastion of 'enthusiastic neophytes'⁵⁸ due to national film producers' reluctance to invest in a product so different from the successful genres of silent film, based on divas or D'Annunzian historical dramas. Even when the success of *cartoons* by Walt Disney, Max Fleischer, and Pat Sullivan revived public interest in the genre, Italian production in the field remained fairly small, given the ongoing lack of both industrial capital and technical know-how, and was primarily limited to adverts and publicity shorts produced with creative

obstinacy and passion in small studios, often on custom-made equipment.⁵⁹ In fact, it was only thanks to the initiative and resources of the advertising field that an artistic and technical animation tradition was established in Milan between the two world wars; only after World War II was it to finally receive the broad public and recognition it deserved, thanks in part to the arrival of television.⁶⁰

In 1928 two significant careers in animated advertising began: Nino Pagot debuted with Oscar and Guido Maestro; and the Cossio brothers began to work with Milan's Italiana di Pubblicità Cinematografica (IPC, film advertising company) under the direction of Marcello Maestro and Bruno Ditz. Munari introduced Carlo Cossio, who began as a comic-strip artist,⁶¹

56. See, for example, the 'Scampoli a metà prezzo' poster (Scraps at half price, 1938), reproduced in Carnévalé–Mauzan 2001: 182. In particular, with regard to the studio's relationship with Munari, see two posters (now extant only in reproductions of mock-ups in *L'Ufficio Moderno*, November 1932: 661–4) created by Ricas and Munari for 'Casa America, el hogar de la musica'—a shop in Buenos Aires that Mauzan designed four posters for between 1929–30 (reproduced in Weill 1983: 64–5 and Carnévalé–Mauzan 2001: 14–5)—which provide clear evidence of Ricas and Munari's collaboration (they had become associates in 1930) with the studio Mauzan–Morzenti.

57. For example, the first cinematic advertising company in Italy was Publi-Cine, founded in the twenties by the journalist Felice Minetti, which covered approximately half of the more than 1,200 cinemas nationwide (Ceserani 1997: 128). The first talkie film, *The Jazz Singer*, was produced by Warner Bros. in 1927, and one year later Walt Disney released the first feature-length Mickey Mouse animation with sound (*Steamboat Willie*). As for Italy, the first film

with synchronised sound was produced in 1930 (Gennaro Righelli's *La canzone dell'amore*).

58. Gianeri 1960: 188.

59. Both Gianeri (1960: 186–91) and Alberti (1957: 136–7) note that Italy, generally speaking, lacked a receptive audience: the American tradition of slapstick comedy—whose language was based on physical gags, and was widely used in cartoons—was alien to Italian culture, whose silent cinematic comedies favoured vaudeville and farce. See also Zanotto, Zangrando 1973: 21, 25; and Bucalossi 1966: 34–7.

60. Simply consider the creations (for film and later for television) of Nino and Toni Pagot, Gino and Roberto Gavioli, Osvaldo Cavandoli, Paul Campani, and Bruno Bozzetto, to mention only a few. For an overview of the most famous television commercials produced in Italy from the late fifties onward, see Croce 2008 (with enclosed DVD).

61. The first strip drawn by Carlo Cossio, with dialogue and texts by Mario Nerbini—*Le avventure aviatriche di un balillino*—debuted in 1928 as a supplement to the weekly comic *Il 420*, published by Giuseppe Nerbini. Of great historical significance, in 1932

as well as his brother Vittorio to Milan's animation scene, where they met other artists, including Giuseppe Perego and Ferdinando Corbella.⁶² Munari collaborated with the Cossio brothers on a few brief advertising inserts with animated puppets,⁶³ wherein he was finally able to test out his inventiveness to resolve the formidable technical difficulties inherent to such a pioneering medium: 'Blessed be laziness! (...) mainspring of progress: they invented the compass and home plumbing so they'd no longer have to draw circles by hand and run with a bucket to the spring,' as Munari later said of his experiences there.⁶⁴ These were brief adverts animated in an artisanal manner, using figures cut from cardboard, fixed in place with pins, and filmed in a single cut:

We gave them articulated limbs by putting little pieces of copper at the leg and arm joints, at the waistline, and at the bottom of the neck to hold the pieces together. Laid horizontally on the flat set, under a vertically mounted film camera, the characters were then moved by hand and photographed one shot at a time, one movement after another. Naturally their movements were limited to whatever could be shown with the cut-out profile, with jumps and similar actions—that is, without any perspectival depth. In order to obtain the effect of depth, we sometimes drew the character on the set; the character was then drawn again, with the necessary movements for each action and each shot, including the set.⁶⁵

For other shorts completed in 1929 the Cossio brothers experimented with a new technique that consisted of drawing the puppets in white on black paper, and again shot one frame at a time; the following year, alongside Munari, they discovered the

cel technique—named for the transparent celluloid sheets each successive drawing was made on.⁶⁶

As he worked alongside the Cossio brothers, in the early thirties Munari also regularly worked for the IPC: between 1930 and 1935 he single-handedly completed 'a considerable number of advertising shorts (...) using a lead cable wire (...) [while] the sets were made of the most varied material, from cotton balls to glass and corrugated cardboard'—on these he was the sole creator, designer, and photographer.⁶⁷ Although no known copies of these shorts exist today, from their summary description it is easy to detect their formal analogies with the archetypal 'mechanical' figures Munari produced during this period, as well as their connection to contemporary investigations on the possible artistic

Nerbini became the first Italian publisher of *Topolino* (*Mickey Mouse*); two years later he launched a new weekly comic, *L'Avventuroso*, heralding the heyday of adventure comics (Telloli 2000).

62. In 1930, Carlo Cossio (1907–1964) founded Dibicoss, which later became Doricoss DB, both studios specialised in modern advertising art. In 1931, after a few ups and downs, Cossio moved to Paris to deepen his knowledge of cinema, and returned to Milan at the end of 1933, when he became the technical director of Milionfilm, an agency specialised in feature-length animations. In 1934 he left the world of animation to work in comics, and drew strips for various papers, until in 1938 he became successful with the character Dick Fulmine (Dick Lightning), whose adventures appeared in the pages of *L'Audace*. Other characters created at the tip of his pencil included the boxer Furio Almirante—which was then carried forward by his brother Vittorio (1911–1984)—Tanks pugno d'acciaio, Kansas Kid, and Buffalo Bill (Telloli 2000). Cf. Zanotto, Zangrando 1973: 25–9.

63. Zanotto, Zangrando (1973: 132) list in the appendix for 1928: shorts created and produced by Carlo Cossio, in collaboration with Munari, with photographs (in black and white) by Aldo Torelli.

64. Bruno Munari, quoted in Zanotto, Zangrando 1973: 27–8. The argument for minimum effort as the motivation for human progress appeared in *Design e comunicazione visiva* (Munari 1968: 68ff.); the close resemblance of Munari's example in both cases would seem to indicate that the quote dates back to the late 1960s.

65. Vittorio Cossio, quoted in Zanotto, Zangrando 1973: 25–6. Cf. Tanchis 1987: 28.

66. Bendazzi 1988: 59 mentions Munari alongside the Cossio brothers. Cf. also Gianeri 1960: 192. The cel, patented by the American artist Earl Hurd in 1914, allowed animators to draw the background separately, and then animate the characters by painting on transparent sheets of celluloid acetate, with each cel corresponding to a single frame of the sequence.

67. Zanotto, Zangrando 1973: 27–8, 132.

uses of industrial ('polymaterial') materials—which reveals the early influence of Futurist aesthetics on the young designer, as well as highlighting the ongoing osmosis between formal lines of research in both art and advertising design.