



FRANCO GRIGNANI

Franco (alias Francesco) Grignani was born in 1908 in Pieve Porto Morone, located in the province of Pavia. Following his education at a technical high school in Pavia, he pursued two years of mathematical studies at the University of Pavia starting in 1926. Remarkably, even at the young age of nineteen, he actively participated in the activities of the second generation of Futurists. During this period, his work was regularly featured in the unique publications of // *Torchio addominale*, which were curated by the students' association.

In 1929, he relocated to Turin to pursue studies in Architecture. While in the Piedmontese capital, he immersed himself in the world of second-generation Futurism and connected with Fillia. This engagement eventually led him to officially join the movement in 1933, with his work *Introspezione* exhibited at the *Grande Mostra Nazionale Futurista* in Rome, alongside artists co-opted by Marinetti. This exhibition travelled to various Italian cities before reaching Germany, where it tragically perished in a fire. Regrettably, this fire also consumed nearly all of Grignani's artwork from his Futurist phase, including 22 oil paintings and 77 drawings.

In 1934, upon finishing his architectural studies, he relocated to Milan. That same year, he participated in the *Scelta Futuristi Venticinquenni*, an exhibition held at the *Galleria delle Tre Arti* in Milan. He showcased four works as part of this event, which was subtitled *Omaggio dei Futuristi Venticinquenni al Venticinquennio del Futurismo* paying tribute to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Futurism in honour of Umberto Boccioni.

His figurative experimentations related to speed and mechanics (in typical Futurist fashion), continued for approximately six years. However, Grignani's artistic evolution led him to shift towards more abstract subjects, particularly through his engagement with photography. This medium provided him with new avenues for artistic development and enabled him to embrace the ideas of the Abstractionist and Constructivist avant-garde movements.

His initial graphic works date back to 1935 and were exhibited as part of a collective presentation at the Italian Pavilion of the International Expo *Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in Paris in 1937.

In Milan, he started frequenting various art galleries, including «the most geometric», *il Milione*, and often passed «in front of the caffè Craja, peeking inside to see the Pythagorean painters» [*].



In 1938 he began his pioneering work as a graphic designer, collaborating with firms like Cyma-Tavannes, SCAC, Fiat, Editoriale Domus, Electrolux, Fratelli Borletti, and many others.

In 1940, as Italy entered World War II, Grignani was appointed as an officer responsible for an aircraft-sighting course. Despite his lack of experience and limited resources, he meticulously redrew and displayed silhouettes of enemy planes, using images from the German propaganda magazine *Signal* as references. This experience of teaching others how to rapidly identify moving shapes within a short time frame marked a significant turning point in his career as an artist and graphic designer. Looking back on those moments, he would later remark: «The first thoughts on vision problems and the interdependence between eye and mind are from these years» [*].

In 1942, he married Jeanne Michot, a fashion figure artist known for her work with nationally renowned brands. She played a vital role in assisting him in the creation of significant advertising campaigns for companies such as Pirelli, Montecatini, Zignago, Necchi, and many more.

After the war, influenced by the burgeoning wave of designers in Milan, he resumed his career as a graphic designer. Simultaneously, he developed a profound interest in the psychology of form perception, leading to his pioneering work in the 1950s, which anticipated what later became known as Op Art. Grignani conducted experiments with innovative techniques, such as the use of industrial textured glass to achieve vibrational effects and the transfer of photo emulsion onto canvas. His inquiries delved into aspects of texture, sub-perception, flou, blurring, distortion, moiré patterns, and induction. Grignani charted his own artistic course based on his personal interests, avoiding alignment with any particular art movement that emerged after the war.

Continuing in this personal “methodology of vision” (as from the name of an important exhibition at the *Rotonda della Besana* in Milan in 1975), Grignani applied these principles to his graphic design work. He achieved remarkable results on the covers and advertisements within the magazine *Bellezza d'Italia*, published by Dompé Pharmaceuticals. Grignani had served as the Art Director for this magazine since 1947 and continued to do so throughout the 1950s.

His advertisements in *Bellezza d'Italia* were considered groundbreaking in comparison to other 1950s ads, which often depicted romanticized representations of work and family life. In 1954, his work for *Bellezza d'Italia* earned him the Award for the colour advertising page, marking his first participation in the National Advertising Award (*Premio Nazionale della Pubblicità*).



During the early 1950s and for a decade, he collaborated with *Studio Boggeri*, one of the world's premier design studios.

In 1952, the five founding members of the *Alliance Graphique Internationale* (AGI), invited the 60 best graphic designers in the world to form the first historic group. Franco Grignani was one of the designers chosen to represent Italy, alongside other prominent figures like Bruno Munari, Giovanni Pintori, and Erberto Carboni. He later served as the president of the Italian section of AGI from 1969 to 1981.

In 1952, Franco Grignani initiated a collaboration with Alfieri & Lacroix, a prestigious Italian printing company that provided him with complete creative freedom. Their partnership lasted for an impressive 27 years, allowing Grignani to produce innovative and influential advertising campaigns. His work for Alfieri & Lacroix was so impactful that it earned him the gold medal at the 11th National Advertising Award for specialized advertising for technical magazines (*XI Premio Nazionale della Pubblicità per l'annuncio specializzato per riviste tecniche*) in 1961.

He was also Art Director, content selector, and author for the magazine *Pubblicità in Italia* from its inception in 1956 until its closure in 1985.

In 1957 Grignani won the gold medal for the planning of the arrangement and the setting of the Graphic Arts exhibition at the XI Triennale in Milan. Among his clients of this period appeared Montecatini – for which, in addition to many product ads (Ducotone, Meraklon, Moplen, Movil), he designed several pavilions at the *Fiera Campionaria* in Milan – and Montedison, Mondadori, Marzotto, Necchi, Pirelli, Fiat, Ermenegildo Zegna, Bassetti, Italfarmaco, Sandoz, Bayer...

In 1959 he won the Golden Palm for Advertising for the Necchi campaign.

In 1962 he won the *Leone d'Argento* at the first national photography exhibition in Venice.

In 1963 he designed the Woolmark logo which would become, according to opinion polls, the most significant trademark ever realized.

In 1965 he was called to sit beside Aldo Novarese, director of Nebiolo's *Studio Artistico*, to collaborate on new typefaces with Pino Tovaglia, Giancarlo Iliprandi, Bruno Munari, Ilio Negri, Till Neuburg, and Luigi Oriani for over a decade.

In 1965 he was invited to be a speaker at *Vision 65*, the first *World Congress on New Challenges to Human Communication*, at the Southern Illinois University of Carbondale, together with such personalities like Max Bill, the geodesic architect



Buckminster Fuller, the philosopher and sociologist Marshall McLuhan, and Roger Stevens, arts councilor for President Johnson.

In 1967 he received the highly coveted recognition merit of the ICTA, the *International Center for the Typographic Arts* of New York, for the *Typomundus 20*.

He was as well part of the *Typomundus 20/2* jury for the selection of the twentieth-century communication graphics in 1969, and also a member of the jury at the 3rd International Poster Biennial in Warsaw in 1970.

Despite receiving invitations from numerous universities in English-speaking countries, Franco Grignani always refused to leave Italy.

In 1966 he was the absolute winner in the contest for the new Piaggio logo.

In 1968, Franco Grignani joined the *Exhibition Design (ED) group*, which was founded by Silvio Coppola and included notable designers such as Giulio Confalonieri, Bruno Munari, Pino Tovaglia, and Mario Bellini with aims of research, design, and dissemination.

In the same year, Grignani received a commission to design the covers for sixteen science fiction novels to be published by Penguin Books over the next two years.

In 1972 he participated at the 36th Biennale of Venice in the Experimental Graphics section.

In 1973 he was elected Honorary Member of the STA, the *Society of Typographic Arts* of Chicago.

In 1975 the City of Milan organized a retrospective show of his work at the *Rotonda della Besana*. This exhibition featured over one hundred and forty of his works.

From then on, he devoted himself almost exclusively to art; his areas of experimentation ranged from inductions (1955) to permutations (1959), vibrations (1962), dissociations (1967), periodics (1967), psycho-plastics (1969), hidden diagonals (1975), and hyperbolic (1980) and symbiotic structures (1986).

In 1980, the *Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti* (NABA) opened in Milan, and Franco Grignani was invited to join its teaching staff. He became the head of the visual department, and this department is still named in his memory today. This marked the beginning of a long and influential career in teaching, during which he continued his research and created increasingly complex works inspired by mathematical concepts.



In 1983 Pieve Porto Morone, his native village, organized an important anthological exhibit in honour of their fellow citizen.

Towards the end of 1998, Franco Grignani's health deteriorated, and he became bedridden due to a degenerative illness. On February 20, 1999, he passed away in Milan, the city he had adopted as his home.

Even looking back on his works as a whole, it's impossible to confine Grignani to a specific movement, not least because he made a point to be different from everyone else.

Despite his solitary research, he was highly influential within studies and inquiries into visual perception, as well as international graphics.

The constant evolution of his graphic work, as well as the coherence of his method, have always aroused a keen interest among young graphic designers.

His experimental works and creations are still preserved in the collections of the MoMA in New York, the Stedelijk and Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as the MACBA in Buenos Aires and the MACC in Caracas.

[*]: from the Italian-French magazine *arte e società*, 6/7, 1973