



FRANCO GRIGNANI

Franco (alias Francesco) Grignani was born in 1908 in Pieve Porto Morone, in the province of Pavia. After having studied in a technical high school in Pavia, in 1926 he undertook two years of studies in Mathematics at the University of Pavia. When he was still nineteen, he took part in the events of the second generation of Futurists. He was frequently published in the single editions of *Il Torchio addominale*, edited by the students' association.

In 1928, he moved to Turin to study Architecture and in the Piedmontese capital he came into contact with Fillia and the environment of the second Futurism in Turin, which led him in 1933 to officially participate in the movement with his work *Introspezione* at the *Grande Mostra Nazionale Futurista* in Rome, together with artists co-opted by Marinetti. This exhibition went around many Italian cities, before ending up in Germany and there being lost in a fire (together with almost the whole of Grignani's artwork from the Futurist period: 22 oil paintings and 77 drawings).

In 1934, after completing his studies in Architecture, he moved to Milan; in the same year, at the *Galleria delle Tre Arti* in Milan, he took part with four works in the exhibit *Scelta Futuristi Venticinquenni*, subtitled *Omaggio dei Futuristi Venticinquenni al Venticinquennio del Futurismo* in honour of Umberto Boccioni.

His figurative experimentations dedicated to speed and mechanics only lasted about six years (in typical Futurist fashion), with Grignani soon moving onto more abstract subjects, especially through photography which allowed him further developments and led him to appreciate Abstractionist and Constructivist avant-garde ideas.

The first graphic works are from 1935 and were shown in a collective exhibition at the Italian Pavilion of the *Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* International Expo in Paris in 1937.

In Milan he began to attend various galleries, including «the most geometric», *il Milione*, and usually walked «in front of the caffè Craja, peeking inside to see the Pythagorean painters» [*].

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

In 1940, as Italy entered World War II, Grignani was assigned as an officer in charge of an aircraft-sighting course. Inexperienced and with few tools available, he redrew and hung the silhouettes of enemy planes by tracing them from the images found in



the German propaganda magazine *Signal*. Teaching others how to quickly spot moving shapes in a short timeframe led him to what would become the final essence of his work as an artist and graphic designer; recalling those moments he will say: «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 for brands of national importance who for years supported him in the realisation of important advertising campaigns: for Pirelli, Montecatini, Zignago, Necchi, and many others.

At the end of the war, inspired by Milan's lively new wave of designers, he returned to his work as a graphic designer, while also devoting a strong interest in the perception within the psychology of form, which resulted, in the 50s, in his dynamic anticipation of what would later be called OpArt. Grignani experimented with new techniques by using industrial textured glasses to achieve effects of vibration, or photo emulsion transferred onto canvas, inquiring into aspects of texture, sub-perception, flou, blurring, distortion, moiré, and induction. He was not interested in being defined by any of the various art groups that sprung up after the war; he carved his own path based on his own artistic interests.

Continuing in this personal "methodology of vision" (as from the name of an important exhibition at the *Rotonda della Besana* in Milan in 1975), he resumed his graphic work as a result of yet another experimental laboratory to observe and control optical phenomena and managed to achieve the best results on the covers and the ads within the magazine *Bellezza d'Italia*, published by Dompé pharmaceuticals, for which he had been the Art Director since 1947 throughout the fifties. These ads were seen as a true revolution compared to other 1950s ads of romanticised work and family life. In 1954, his work for *Bellezza d'Italia* earned him, the Award for the colour advertising page, participating for his first time in the National Advertising Award (*Premio Nazionale della Pubblicità*).

Since the early 1950s, for a decade, he collaborated with *Studio Boggeri*, one of the best and most important design studios in the world.

In 1952, the five founders of AGI, the *Alliance Graphique Internationale*, selected the 60 best graphic designers in the world to create the first historic group: Grignani was invited from Italy together with Bruno Munari, Giovanni Pintori and Erberto Carboni, later becoming president of the Italian section from 1969 to 1981.

In the same year, Grignani started a 27 year-long partnership with Alfieri & Lacroix, a renowned Italian printing company that allowed him full creative freedom. The advertising campaign carried out for A&L earned him the gold medal of the 11th National Advertising Award for specialised 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 the start in 1956 to 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.

Invited by many universities from the English-speaking world, he always refused to leave Italy.

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

In 1968 he participated – until 1976 – in the *Exhibition Design (ED) group*, founded by Silvio Coppola, with Giulio Confalonieri, Bruno Munari, Pino Tovaglia, and Mario Bellini with aims of research, design, and dissemination.

In the same year, he was commissioned for the cover design of sixteen science fiction novels for Penguin Books, to be published the following 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* in which more than one hundred and forty of his works could be seen on display.

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 NABA, the *Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti*, opened in Milan, and he was asked to become part of its teaching staff and head of the visual department, which is still named today in his memory. This was the start of a long experience in teaching, though this came along with an incessant activity of research and with the creation of increasingly complex mathematically-based works.

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

At the end of 1998 he was bed-ridden because of a degenerative illness, and on 20 February 1999 he died in Milan, his adopted 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 present 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