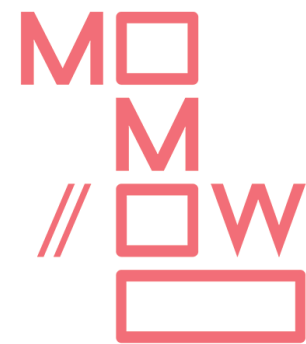


Women's Creativity since the Modern Movement (1918–2018)

Toward a New Perception and Reception



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THE MODERN MOVEMENT



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Women's Creativity since the Modern Movement (1918-2018)
Toward a New Perception and Reception

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Artists of the Thread between the Thirties and the Sixties, from Artistic Craftsmanship to Industry: Two Exemplary Cases Anita Pittoni and Fede Cheti

Introduction

In 1924, an Italian silk industrialist, Carlo Piatti, wanted to launch a competition among artists, which had a remarkable success, to redevelop 'artistically' the design of a traditional feminine accessory, the shawl. At that time, focusing on 'art in the rescue of industry'¹ had been a courageous choice: a movement for redevelopment of production, to reaffirm the national tradition of craftsmanship quality, but oriented towards an organization of industrial work. For industry it was still intended a serial production, entrusted to the artistic design made with embroidery and hand procedures, by skilled workers, thus still ensuring the uniqueness of the product and a quality that justified prices not yet for everyone.

However, an era of transitions was opened, inextricably linked to contradictions. If many like Carlo Carrà and Roberto Papini², or Agnoldomenico Pica praised the overcoming of the old hypertrophic world for a modern beauty free from frills and more technological, others like Elisa Ricci, wife of art critic Corrado, wrote in 1925: women's hands 'have created graceful works of art such as the brutal speed of the machine will never do'.³ She was in defence of the manual ability overtaken by the

attraction for the anonymous modernity of the machine, capable of 'the miracle of giving beautiful things for everyone'. In the pages of Elisa Ricci, the eulogy to the industry from the mouth of a young female graduate at the Academy betrays the paradox, what the machine itself cannot replace: and coincides with what in the next two decades Anita Pittoni would have defended following two irrepressible urgencies: Creation and Independence.⁴

Her own age Fede Cheti rides similar fields during the Thirties till the end of the war with a significant contribution to the 'cause' of the feminine handwork in field of artistic textiles. Evidence of this direction can be confirmed by her presence among the artisans and artists involved by ENAPI (National Agency for Crafts and Small Industries) during that period.⁵ But close to end of the Forties she gradually embraced a modern vision oriented toward the industrial production (in dialogue with art), demonstrating her smartness and her spirit of adaptation to the unavoidable changings that were yet coming after the war.

Anita Pittoni and a New Textile Manual Industry

Anita Pittoni was born in Trieste (1905–1982) where her needle and crochet from symbols of forced domesticity, due to financial hardships of her family,⁶ become instruments of affirmation of her own creative process. After the early death of his father, Anita's guardian becomes his uncle Valentino - a Socialist deputy in the Parliament of Vienna, and founder of the Women Worker Cooperatives of Trieste, Istria and Friuli. From him she probably inherited the attention to protect her future laboratory's workers, respecting their domestic commitment in coexistence with work. Therefore between the 1930s and the 1940s in Italy, at the time of autarchy, she transformed governmental conditioning into creative ideas. Actually, in 1929 she opened her handwork textile laboratory for clothing, furnishings and exhibition displays, where had already habit to use national fibres before the beginning of autarchy⁷ that was adopted since 1934 following the economic sanctions imposed to Italy by its invasion of Ethiopia. She also was early involved in the renewal and enhancement

1 *Il concorso nazionale Carlo Piatti per la decorazione degli scialli di seta* (Milano: Galleria Pesaro, 1925); Anna Mazzanti, "Il manichino artistico e il suo allestimento: Marcello Nizzoli, da Monza al mondo," *Ricerche di S/Confine*, (2018). Anita Pittoni's fellow citizen and friend Maria Lupari (1901–1961) participated to Piatti's competition, while was attending Rosa Menni Giolli textile laboratory in Milan, and perhaps was one of the principle *traits-d'union* between Pittoni and the Milanese cultural circle. Michela Messina, "Anita Pittoni e Maria Lupari: Creazioni tessili tra le due guerre," *Ricordando Anita Pittoni: Atti della giornata di studio* (Trieste, November 22, 2012), edited by Walter Chiareghin (Trieste: Istituto giuliano di storia, cultura e documentazione, 2013), 93–106.

2 Carlo Carrà, *Il rinnovamento delle arti in Italia* (Milano: Il Balcone, 1945); Giovanni Papini, *Le arti d'oggi: Architettura e arti decorative in Europa* (Milano-Roma: Bestetti e Tuminelli, 1930).

3 Elisa Ricci, *Ricami Italiani: Antichi e moderni* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1925), IX.

4 Bruno Maier, "Due scritti inediti di Anita Pittoni," *Archeografo triestino*, 53 (1993), 125.

5 "Il tappeto annodato a mano," *Domus*, 116 (August 1937), 20–21; "Gli italiani debbono innamorarsi della loro produzione artigianale," *Domus*, 151 (July 1940), 76–77.

6 After the premature death of the father engineer, the embroiderer mother was forced to sacrifice Anita's wishes of studying to allow education to her two brothers.

7 "Autarchia: Economia," Treccani - Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/autarchia> (accessed May 21, 2018); "Materiali e tipi autarchici: La cultura del prodotto tra industria e artigianato nell'Italia dei primi anni quaranta," AIS/Design Storia e Ricerche, <http://www.aisdesign.org/aisd/category/studiericerche/numero-4-novembre-2014> (accessed February 6, 2018); Beppe Finessi (ed.), *Autarchia Austerità Autoproduzione*: (Mantova: Corraini s.r.l., 2015), Exhibition catalogue.

of ENAPI. In Pittoni Archive at Trieste is kept her report to ENAPI, dated 1931, about the artistic value of fashion and its role as product of the intellect to be protected. In support of the small business Pittoni seeks solutions to safeguard production in its artistic spirituality and technical perfection, calming costs and prices according to organized work. So, she promotes the design of paper patterns, samples of yarns and weaving to be entrusted to workers who develop the work as if it came from her hands. And she reflects on the markets and how not to succumb to their impositions, too.

Therefore, favourable coincidences contributed to her success and active militancy in support of a very modern Italian 'industrious' rather than 'industrial' handicraft. Otherwise, her 'autarkic' production was based on the enhancement of feminine dexterity, on the updating of traditions, on experimentation with 100% national fibres and on her optimism that guided to the certainty that every country can impose itself with its raw materials if it is rich in ideas,⁸ coinciding with the trends of autarkic culture promoted by the Fascism. On the other hand Anita was a figure of great autonomy, a free spirit dedicated to one's own creativity. She deeply believed in the active link between art and craftsmanship while the dominant male aesthetics of Croce associated the pure lyrical intuition (*intuizione lirica pura*) with the faculties of the artist, separated from the craftsmanship at the thresholds of the era of reproducibility.⁹ Never tired of repeating what a basic ideal: 'idea, matter and technique form an inseparable complex, proposing each other and using each other'. She still writes in 1962:

'Arte e vita non sono in me un binomio, ma una cosa sola: l'energia creatrice è nella vita di ogni giorno; è un'energia di cui la vita ha bisogno per avere un senso.'¹⁰

This interior rigor leads her to the organization of work and the school-workshop, called 'Studio d'arte decorativa' that she led from 1929 until 1947 in Trieste. Here the value of touch was the only priority against any type of machine, even the hand-woven textile frame, avoiding any industrialization encouraged by the government that she felt deny the operational and mental processes. Therefore, she is an example of the delicate and contradictory transition from arts and craft to design industry age coinciding with the establishment of a political Italian regime with which Pittoni had several affinities, but at the same time escaping from the control of the female role.

8 Anita Pittoni, *Industria tessile senza macchina* (1936), Fondo Pittoni, Archivio Diplomatico, Biblioteca Civica A.Hortis, Trieste, then merged in Anita Pittoni, "Industria tessile senza macchina," *Rassegna dell'Ente Nazionale della Moda*, Torino (May 15–31, 1939), 54–58.

9 Cristina Benussi, "Anita Pittoni: Per un'estetica," *Ricordando Anita Pittoni: Atti della giornata di studio* (Trieste, November 22, 2012), edited by Walter Chiereghin (Trieste: Istituto giuliano di storia, cultura e documentazione, 2013), 26–39.

10 Anita Pittoni, "Poesia e artigianato," *Notiziario dello Zibaldone* 34 (1962), 4.

Fibres/Fabrics/Techniques

As a designer of hand spinning techniques - she is responsible for the invention of a new interpretation of knitting and crochet techniques used until then only for lacework. Her 'dough of national fibres generated new original fabrics' mixed, natural and synthetic, able to tame the original improprieties. Every difficulty represented a new challenge to be overcome with creativity: she writes 'hemp is a coriaceous fibre, tough and rough',¹¹ as also remembered by newspapers, therefore difficult to work and repelling to the touch: before the autarkic recovery and the inventions by Anita Pittoni 'the word hemp had the same hard taste of the rough bread of the peasant, heavy and indigestible, albeit good and healthy'.¹² Even the broom is an irregular yarn, now resistant now soft, with unpredictable small fragments of wood fragments,¹³ a 'beautiful, [fiber], wild, dark in color, light in weight' said Pittoni, while copper and golden thread were sharp. Adding the most ductile synthetic yarns¹⁴ she found the way to mitigate natural improprieties and with innate instinct she chose the suitable points to enhance their characteristics (and also invented one 'il punto alto leggero ad intarzio'¹⁵). The knit stitches in form of ring made with the irons or crochet created elastic fabrics of a whole new nature: retain the characteristics of the fibres in perfect *cascatezza* for curtains, fabric furnishing or clothes as well designed to geometric patterns that do not mark the shapes but correct them. Pittoni textiles allowed to engage the threads of various colors so that they did not see each other the joints on the front and back, using also very few –as remember her fellow Ginevra Giannuzzi– because Anita preferred simple geometric shapes and for clothing unique pieces, as shown by the paper pattern models for simple, comfortable clothes, according to the needs of the modern woman in the city, in her sports, on the beach.

The numerous patterns for cloths kept in her archive they seem to be mathematical algorithms of an 'intellect open to the exact sciences', as said a close friend of her Claudio Grisancich,¹⁶ recalling

11 Anita Pittoni, *Arte, artigianato, tessuti: Le arti applicate*. (Conference typewritten proceeding, November 12, 1935); Anita Pittoni, *Appunti su una nuova industria manuale tessile*, 1936 in *Articoli lavoro e arte e relazioni*, 4: Attività Tessile, RP MS MISC 212/118.7, Fondo A.Pittoni, Archivio Diplomatico, Biblioteca Civica A.Hortis, Trieste.

12 "La canapa e l'arte: Tecniche nuove e materie nuove," *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, June 29, 1935.

13 Ginevra Giannuzzi, "Una maestra vulcanica e indimenticabile," *Anita Pittoni: Straccetti d'arte, stoffe di arredamento e moda di eccezione*, edited by Marilì Cammarata (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 1999), 100, Exhibition catalogue.

14 She often listed the fibers used: 'hemp - fishermen's yarn - natural colored or colored; the yarns Snia Viscosa like the *sniafiocco*, the pure flake, the lanital [fiber derived from milk casein through an industrial process]; the yarns of Cisa such as Angersol, Cisnivea, mixed hamp ribbon, Cisalfa; the broom' in Pittoni, *Appunti su una nuova industria manuale tessile*; Roberta Curtolo, "Anita Pittoni e i filati autarchici," *Anita Pittoni: Straccetti d'arte, stoffe di arredamento e moda di eccezione*, edited by Marilì Cammarata (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 1999), 9. "ples of the director was the "

15 Maier, "Due scritti," 125. Pittoni presented it the first time in 1931 in her first article published for *Domus*.

16 Claudio Grisancich, "Uno spazio per vivere e lavorare," *Anita Pittoni: Straccetti d'arte, stoffe di arredamento e moda di eccezione*, edited by Marilì Cammarata (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 1999), 103.



Anita's hands that move the wool needle or the hook (Fig.1) that reflect the programmatic clarity of her textures and numerous statements. She also produced programmatic texts, written to publish, now shared with Agnoldomenico Pica, which clearly summarize the principles and characteristics of her work. With the same clarity she transmitted technical and educational contents both in texts of instructions for use at distance and to pupils, perfectly responding to the educational needs of the ENAPI; was thus entrusted in 1931 with an artisan teaching workshop for 15 pupils after the growth of her notoriety thanks to the first personal exhibition at the Galleria Bragaglia in Rome (1929), where her work was noted by Gio Ponti, and the consequent call to the 1930 *IV Triennale di Monza delle Arti Decorative e Industriali Moderne*.

At the same 1931 dates the first short course for hand work illustrating the new *punto leggero* in the form of an article that inaugurates the collaboration of Anita Pittoni with *Domus*. In marrying the spirit of the magazine, with its optimism, Pittoni declares the intent to update the old female loves for art and thread, also suitable for the woman 'of today, busy more than ever in a thousand different things': proposes a simple and quick point for an artefact without 'flourishes or fringes', and then seizes the opportunity to receive indications on exact colors, to refer to her address, the 'Studio di arte decorativa'.¹⁷ Later, between 1933 and 1934, she curated five issues of the magazine *Lil* (*Lavori in Lana a mano*) by Turin's Borgosesia wool production, founding the Italian origin of the newspapers for *Practical school of modern Handwork In Wool*.

¹⁷ Anita Pittoni, "La donna moderna: La casa e il lavoro femminile," *Domus* 38 (February 1931), 66–67. At the time the laboratory was in Trieste, Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, 19, in the attics of sisters Wulz, Anita's guests, mannequins, and eccentric friends, owners of the photographic studio established in the city that was a springboard for Pittoni clothes.

The generous disposition of Anita Pittoni to spread the professional secrets in the name of the value that recognizes the female manual practice, is explained not only in a professional ethical ideal but betrays an underlying artistic, inimitable and individual disposition as we understand among the lines of the editorials pages in the same *Lil*'s booklets.¹⁸ This confirms how much the personality of Pittoni cannot be integrated with the schemes: is not an artist, not an artisan, not an industrial designer but a bit of all these together.

The Artist

Anita Pittoni is resolute; art and machine are not asin accord as how much indeed art and craftsmanship are. She writes bluntly:

Una tale lavorazione non interessa solo il momento: essa sorge piuttosto come inventiva e segna il principio, nella produzione di stoffe artistiche, di nuove applicazioni tecniche che non comportano il minimo impianto di macchine (neanche telai a mano), sconvolgendo il tessuto nel suo intimo, donandogli una nuova architettura.¹⁹

She was considered an artist by critics as well architects from Pulitzer to Ponti, BBPR, Albini and others, who ask her for collaboration.²⁰

According to Raffaele Giolli, married to the designer of fabrics Rosa Menni, used to gathering the aesthetic value of textile innovations, the uniqueness of Pittoni's work, different from that woven to the loom, must be recognized in the manual skills of the Pittoni process: with 'l'agganciatura ad anello [hooping ring]' are obtained 'different fabrics in the pleated plastic and in the intimate design

¹⁸ Anita Pittoni, "Saper Guardare," *Lil* 3 (December 1933), 9; Pia Rimini, "Con Anita Pittoni fra lane e trame," *Lil* 5 (March 1934), 2; Anita Pittoni, "Il senso della materia," *Lil*, 5 (March 1934), 14. Thanks to Gabriella Norio for having facilitated my consultation of *Lil*.

¹⁹ Anita Pittoni, *Appunti su una nova industria manuale tessile*.: 'Such a process does not only affect the moment: it arises rather as inventive and marks the principle, in the production of artistic fabrics, of new technical applications that do not involve the minimum planting of machines (even hand looms), upsetting the fabric in its intimate essence, giving it a new architecture'.

²⁰ For detailed information on the numerous exhibits, collaborations like interior design, transatlantic, prestigious public and private commissions, see the catalog *Anita Pittoni: Straccetti d'arte*.

of weaving',²¹ articulated as 'the knits [...] of the ancient *cotte d'arme*'.²² In these new weaves, as evidenced by photographic documentation not so different from those Bauhaus that register as a lens the porosity of the plots, resided the aesthetic value of the materials highlighted by the 'abstract fantasies' (Fig.1). In this personal constructive poetics was recognized a surrealist vein, to which not only for geographic and gender contiguity can be associated the name of the artist Léonor Fini, but is Pittoni herself to indicate the plots as a trace of an 'inner life', of an intimate movement that determines the solutions of processing²³ (the surrealist style will also connote her future post-Second World War literary production); the thought runs to the art masters who, like Klee and Kandinsky, at the Bauhaus taught in the weaving workshop and painted similar representations of the world.

Even Pica called Pittoni 'painter', recognizing that 'her fabrics of musical harmony are like a great abstract painting', capable of creating 'the intimacy of an environment' or 'sheathing a smooth feminine body'.²⁴ Moreover the 'primordially' of the autarkic materials (also urged to use it by the second futurist Prampolini²⁵), harmonized with the essential forms of modern designs, according to Pica, 'more modern designs', and as seem to testify some images of the Pittoni clothes matched with African masks reproduced on *Lil* and on *L'Almanacco della donna moderna* between 1934 e 1935. In colonial times, if they declare the adhesion to the autarkic campaign 'Vestire italianamente', trace the attraction for overseas craft practices that produce objects that are never identical, never serial, and at the same time the result of a mysterious artistic vocation.²⁶

However, no folklore permeates the modern language of Anita Pittoni, agree her friends Maria Luperi, colleague from Trieste, and Julia Bertolotti²⁷ (wife of the architect Banfi).

Anita colours textile architecture with the lightness of a brush but at the same time respecting the purity of the lines (Fig.1). In a typewriting of the 1950s, saved in her archive with the title "È venuta l'ora dell'artista?" she outlines a remote self-portrait:

I think it can not do without the artist, but it is not easy convey him to the textile design, anyway exists a particular intermediary creature who, by instinct and by culture, possesses the comprehensive faculty of the artist's work and a sure technical knowledge.²⁸

Domestic Bauhaus

'It was well heated and we worked well there and with warm hands: sitting [...] on low chairs, especially made for not being affected by too many hours of sitting'.²⁹ These memories come from a worker from the last laboratory, the largest Anita had, in Via Cassa di Risparmio 1 in Trieste. Three laboratory-house had been taken over since 1929,³⁰ where Pittoni combined activities and private life, education and reception of clients. The last, the biggest declares the growth of production to which the participation in all the important national and international exhibitions dedicated to decorative arts must have contributed. The laboratory arrived to have up to 90 workers, although not all daily presences. One of the principles of the director was the 'value of the manodopera' that she guided on the execution of hard materials, through a process of 'rational employment':³¹ in short, fluid schedules to reconcile domestic occupations, so many could work at home following the impeccable clear and mathematical instructions of Anita; she calculated the average execution times for hard materials to work, to establish pay and calculation of the costs of the artefacts, no less important was the goal of updating the technical skills of modern workers.

Anita was iron, almost Calvinist, in the control of production. Tight rhythms left no space for dilettantism, so much that through patterns she could check the work and be sure of its uniformity. The productions so deserved two tags with the artist's signature and that of the laboratory, as well the Bauhaus textile products. Geometrical patterns and poor materials, and rhythms in planning the work recall the German applied arts school, but also its organization of work. In fact, Grisancich defines her rooms as a 'domestic Bauhaus'.

Otherwise the Bauhaus weaving workshop, was based on the machine to produce woven fabrics,

21 R. [Raffaele Giolli], "La mostra di Anita Pittoni," *Domus* 173 (May 1942), 203. Cover of the *Domus* 173's issue was dedicated to Pittoni's fabrics.

22 Agnoldomenico Pica, "Stoffe d'arte tessute a mano," 1, typewritten Italian translation of "Handgearbeitete Dekorationsstoffe," *Innendekoration; Mein Heim, mein Stolz* 50, no. 5 (August 1939), 277–279, <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/innendekoration1939/0297> (accessed May 21, 2018).

23 Benussi, "Anita Pittoni," 29.

24 Agnoldomenico Pica, "Orientamenti autarchici: Stoffe d'arte italiane," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, November 24, 1939.

25 Enrico Prampolini, "Gli artisti per l'affermazione di un prodotto nazionale," *Stile futurista* (November 1935), 16.

26 Anna Mazzanti, "L'Africa italiana: Faccetta nera e primitivismo attraverso le Triennali 1933–1936," *Mondi a Milano: Culture ed esposizioni 1874–1950*, edited by Fulvio Irace et al. (Milano: Sole24 Ore, 2015), 206–211, Exhibition catalogue.

27 Julia Bertolotti, "I nuovi tessuti di Anita Pittoni," *Domus* 124, (April 1938), 42–43; same observation in Maria Luperi, "Anita Tosoni Pittoni e le sue opere d'arte," *Gazzettino di Venezia*, June 26, 1941.

28 Anita Pittoni, *È venuta l'ora dell'artista?*, s.d.[about1950], 3, Attività Tessile, RP MS MISC, Fondo A.Pittoni, Archivio Diplomatico, Biblioteca Civica A.Hortis, Trieste.

29 Ginevra Giannuzzi, "Una maestra vulcànica," 101.

30 The first studio was arranged between 1929–32 in the attic of the sisters Wanda and Marion Wulz, course V. Emanuele III 19, then the didactic commitment by the ENAPI in 1931 and the presence of 15 students leads to the transfer in via D'Annunzio 1. In 1932 the logo with thread passing from the cuna of a needle was designed. In 1935, at the height of success, the decorative art studio moved again. *Anita Pittoni. Straccetti d'arte*, 104.

31 Pica, "Stoffe d'arte tessute a mano," 1.

albeit manual, an indispensable tool for the development of prototypes for industries.³² Anyway at Weimer and then at Dessau laboratory were not banned needles and hands that can be visible in the photographs of the school, but as instrumental recall to the industry activity (Fig.1). Anita Pittoni never wanted to know nothing of repetitive and anonymous gestures of the means of production, denial of all the intimacy of the plots, lost in the threads stretched and combed every soul. So while the geometric pieces of the Bauhaus can be worn by dehumanized models, who wear masks like mechanical automatons as we see in the emblematic photo by Erich Consemüller, the wonderful Wulz sisters, wearing clothes by Anita Pittoni, spur an innate 'sensual wit'³³ anchored to an age in extinction.

Madame Fede Cheti

Fede Cheti (1905–1979) came from a textile industry owner family located in Liguria region in Italy.³⁴ She moved with her mother to Milan during the 1920s, here she started to produce handcrafted carpets and to design fabrics for an inner circle of aristocratic friends.³⁵

Soon after her work was presented at the *IV Triennale di Monza delle Arti Decorative e Industriali Moderne* in 1930³⁶ and at the *V Triennale* of Milan in 1933, she founded in 1936 her school of carpets called 'Scuola tappeti Fede Cheti' and based in via Manzoni 23 in Milan.³⁷ During the 1930s (arguably in occasion of these exhibitions) Fede Cheti met Gio Ponti, with whom she established a strong collaboration and a long-lasting friendship. The relation with Ponti let her to be introduced into the circle of Milanese architects, so the presence of Fede Cheti at the VI, VII and VIII Triennials (1936, 1940, 1947) is ascribable with a series of carpets and fabrics for furniture and living space

presented at these exhibitions.³⁸ One of her first collaboration took place for the *Mostra dell'Abitazione* during the VI Triennale in 1936, curated by Franco Albini and Ignazio Gardell.³⁹ Techniques and materials used by Fede Cheti during this period followed the minimalism of rationalist interiors: hand-knotted wool carpets with different thickness, characterized by monochromatic textures or simple geometrical patterns and fabrics covering for furniture upholstery realized with raw materials like hemp or wool. It is possible to affirm that the path of Fede Cheti's work runs parallel to Anita Pittoni's one till the end of the Second World War.

Toward the 1950s Industrialization

One of the first significant Fede Cheti's post-war roles was being part of the official committee of the *Convegno delle Arti Decorative e Industriali Moderne* organized in the margins of the VIII Triennale of Milano on June 1947. The conference included functions, limits and relationships between handcraft and industry among the field of applied arts, with a particular focus on social, economic, artistic and schools problems. In synthesis its goal was to define: industry's functions within decorative arts field; guidelines for the two types of production, both for the national and international market; characteristics and objectives of triennial exhibitions of decorative and industrial arts, also in relation to a new statute.⁴⁰

After the VIII Triennale experience other two important exhibitions were relevant for Fede Cheti during the post-war years: *Lo stile nell'arredamento moderno* (1948)⁴¹ and *Il mobile singolo* (1949).⁴² The first one was set up inside Fede Cheti headquarter in via Manzoni and involved architects and designer like: Franco Albini, Fabrizio Clerici, Gio Ponti, Carlo Mollino, Ettore Sottsass, Pietro Chiesa, Carlo Enrico Rava, Guglielmo Ulrich, Ico and Luisa Parisi, Giulio Minoletti and others. The relevance of Fede Cheti's figure among Milanese cultural environment is well explained by the words of Enrico Freyrie on *Domus* pages:

Questa mostra è stata ideata da Fede Cheti – impetuosa creatrice di tessuti di arredamento che tutti conoscono – come una prova di qualità: sotto un certo punto di vista di considerazione

32 Sifrid Wortmann Weltge, *I tessuti del Bauhaus: L'arte e l'artigianato di un laboratorio femminile* (Milano: Vallardi, 1993), 114.

33 Claudio Grisancich, "Uno spazio per vivere e lavorare," 107.

34 Fede Cheti was born in 1905 in Savona, daughter of Emanuele Cheti and Gemma Sansevero. Her grandfather, Giuseppe Sansevero, was the founder of a prestigious textile industry founded in 1880 near Genoa.

35 Flavia Folco, "Fede Cheti (1905–1979): Una savonese da riscoprire," *Sabazia* 22/23 (1997), 34.

36 Maria Vittoria Alfonsi, *Donne al vertice: Incontri con Maria Vittoria Alfonsi* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1975); Piera Antonelli, "Fede Cheti," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 34 (1988). http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fede-cheti_ (accessed February 2, 2018); Folco, "Fede Cheti," 34; Anty Pansera (ed.), *Dal merletto alla motocicletta: Artigiane/artiste/designer nell'Italia del XX secolo* (Milano: Silvana Editrice, 2002); Emanuele Costamagna, "Storia della Triennale di Milano: Le sezioni del tessuto fra gli anni '30 e '50: Il caso Fede Cheti," (Masters dissertation, Università Ca'Foscari di Venezia, 2010).

37 Antonelli, "Fede Cheti."

38 Costamagna, "Storia della Triennale."

39 Together with: Renato Camus, Paolo Clausetti, Giuseppe Mazzoleni, Giulio Minoletti, Gabriele Mucchi, Giancarlo Palanti e Giovanni Romano.

40 "Fede Cheti: 1936–1975: Tracce di una storia italiana," AIS/Design Storia e Ricerche, <http://www.aisdesign.org/aisd/fede-cheti-1936-1975-tracce-di-una-storia-italiana> (accessed February 2, 2018).

41 Guglielmo Ulrich, *Arredatori contemporanei* (Milano: Gorlich, 1949).

42 Guglielmo Ulrich, *Arredamento, mobili e oggetti di arte decorativa* (Milano: Gorlich, 1950).

internazionale e nei riguardi di una esportazione (cioè di una diffusione e di un potenziamento del lavoro italiano) essa era dunque necessaria.⁴³

The second exhibition explicitly dedicated to the ‘single furniture’ define a common vision shared by both Fede Cheti and the Milanese architects involved into the event, which included two main concepts: the single piece of furniture must have its own ‘personality’ and functionality, strong enough to resist to any composition in order to release interior settings; and a particular attention to materials processing with a view to a modern industrial production.

This was the spirit and the ambition that will drive Fede Cheti through the next three decades of her carrier (and life): she smartly understood that it was the moment to move toward an industrialization process, maintaining at the same time her creative nature. Combining technical innovation in textile production and an always-recognizable design is undoubtedly Fede Cheti’s main achievement.

The very first occasion of great visibility for Fede Cheti arrived during the IX Triennale of Milan in 1951 when she was included as one of the main firms into the textile section (curated by Cristina Boeri Mariani and Marco Zanuso), but also providing other settings with her creations.⁴⁴

The distinctiveness of Fede Cheti’s textiles was not based on a predilection of certain themes more than others, or for a similarity of subjects: on the contrary, themes have an extraordinary difference of subject, style, manner (big flower motifs, reproduction of antique prints, mixed figurative drawing, striped patterns, watercolour technique and many more), materials and production processes. In 1953, for example, she launched a new collection called ‘Collezione dei negri’ based on the technique of printed tapestry canvas with big drawings. In this case her attention was dedicated to the ‘matter’ of textile.⁴⁵ Before, with chintz, the matter didn’t have almost any weight, it was all about colour and drawing: the thin and smooth chintz surface kept back touch as a sense, giving more emphasis to the sight. Three years later, in 1956, it was the time for a new patent by Fede Cheti, a new textile called ‘tessuto cinese’, which had the aspect and ‘freshness’ of a straw textile, but it was a composition of nylon fibres: extremely strong, washable like plastic and foldable like clothes, suitable for curtains, furniture and walls upholstery, printable.⁴⁶



Fede Cheti’s International Resonance

These are just a few of Fede Cheti’s contributions to the post-war Italian textile industry. No wonder if her artistic and entrepreneurial capacities brought her rapidly toward an international success. Fede Cheti’s artistic fabrics had been exposed in 1937 in Paris, in 1938 in New York and in 1939 in Berlin.⁴⁷ Her international resonance was already confirmed in 1948 when the American photographer Irving Penn shot her portrait for *Vogue America* (Fig. 2).⁴⁸ The same year Fede Cheti was present inside the important exhibition titled *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* that under the coordination of Gio Ponti represented a crucial moment of contact between the Italian and the American market after the Second World War. Drapery fabrics and glazed chintz designed by Fede Cheti were exposed together with other renewed Italian firms of that time like: Arte Artigianato Tessile (Rome), Antonia Battini (Rome), Emilia Bellini (Florence), Geggia Bronzini (Venice), Quirica Dettori (Sardinia), Irene Kowalska (Positano), Linificio & Canapificio Nazionale (Milan), M.I.T.A. (Genoa), just to name a few.⁴⁹

43 Enrico Freyrie, “Dimostrazione di qualità del nostro lavoro,” *Domus*, 226, (July 1948), 56.

44 Lecce, “Fede Cheti: 1936-1975.”

45 “La collezione i negri di Fede Cheti,” *Domus* 281 (April 1953).

46 Fede Cheti, “Un nuovo tessuto stampato brevettato,” *Domus* 315 (February 1956), 60–61.

47 Antonelli, “Fede Cheti.”

48 From May to June 1948 Irving Penn travelled across Italy. During his trip he took also several photos depicting Milanese architects that were later published inside the article written by Ernesto N. Rogers, “Milano: Design Renaissance,” *Vogue America* 15 (September 1949), 152–157.

49 Meyric R. Rogers (ed.), *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* (Roma: Compagnia nazionale artigiana, 1950), 64–65.

In 1950 Fede Cheti had already several points of sale all over the main Italian cities and abroad in Zurich and New York. In the same year she got an important achievement when her textiles exposed at the Biennale of Venice were rewarded with the gold medal. But the most successful event dates to February 1960, when Fede Cheti was the only woman and the only Italian entrepreneur present in London to the centennial celebration of Sanderson department stores, the biggest English company of furnishing fabrics.⁵⁰ On this occasion *Domus* dedicated an article to her titled “La ‘personale’ di Fede Cheti a Londra,” which well explains the relevance of this event, in particular mentioning her position as a successful ‘woman’:

Se è vero che oggi donne e uomini lavorano sullo stesso piano, mirano alle stesse mete e le raggiungono spesso, perché donne e uomini hanno le medesime possibilità e la stessa preparazione tecnica, anche a prescindere dalle particolari doti di genialità che gli uni come le altre possono possedere, è anche vero che non facilmente una donna riesce a imporsi con la forza della sua capacità, della sua preparazione e del suo gusto, sul piano nazionale prima ed internazionale poi. [...] Architetti, pittori, disegnatori la sentirono fraternamente vicina e lavorarono per lei che, modesta, ebbe l'intelligenza di capire come le sue idee potessero essere interpretare anche dalla sensibilità di altri artisti in modo da ottenere un gusto che, filtrato in questo modo, non sarebbe più stato solo un gusto Fede Cheti, ma piuttosto quello di un determinato period.⁵¹

To underline the high level of this exhibition, fabrics designed by Fede Cheti were exposed next to Frank Lloyd Wright's ones. Also the Italian newspaper *Il Giorno* reported the event with the headline ‘Accoglienze entusiastiche a Londra ad una “personale” di Fede Cheti. È stata l'unica donna invitata ad esporre le sue originali stoffe d'arredamento’.⁵² And the magazine of the Italian National Association of Upholsterers, *Il tappezziere d'Italia* also titled “Nel centenario della Sanderson Una donna che vale cento uomini.”⁵³

On September 1961 Cheti opened a new store at Madison Avenue number 877 in Manhattan, starting to design the interiors of the highest American personalities residencies of that time, including some houses located in Central Park area, and the famous so-called ‘papyrus apartment’ inside the Waldorf Astoria tower that *Harper's Bazaar* defined ‘an absolute masterpiece’.⁵⁴ And also, the *New York Herald Tribune* celebrated her work into the article “Down With Contemporary... It's Bleak.”⁵⁵

50 Alfonsi, *Donne al vertice*.

51 “La ‘personale’ di Fede Cheti a Londra,” *Domus*, 365, (April 1960), n.n.

52 *Il Giorno*, March 1, 1960. Fede Cheti's archive keeps several telegrams sent by friends and competitors with congratulations about the success of the London exhibition.

53 *I tappezziere d'Italia* (March-April 1960).

54 Antonelli, “Fede Cheti,” n.n.

55 *New York Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1961.

Also, her Country consecrated her success and talent in 1965, when the city of Milan gave her the gold medal of the ‘Premio Città di Milano’, for best Italian creator in the field of decorative arts (the same award was assigned to Lucio Fontana).⁵⁶ Lastly, in 1975, Fede Cheti, at the age of 65, was the first woman elected as Honorary Member of the U.I.S.T.A. (Unione Italiana Stampa Tessile e Abbigliamento).⁵⁷

The Seventies still saw her as a protagonist, but within a contest strongly mutated by a growing competition among the textile sector with which she had to deal with. In this regard it is interesting to read Fede Cheti's declarations to the fashion journalist Maria Vittoria Alfonsi, where her role as a woman emerges prominently as a proponent of an *ante litteram* feminism:

Lavoro esclusivamente con donne, sono ottime collaboratrici [...]. Ma sì! sono femminista: al cento per cento; anche se possiedo una buona dose di femminilità. [...] Perché la donna, indubbiamente, può dedicarsi a qualsiasi attività ritenuta “maschile” senza perderla, la propria femminilità. Ed oggi, in generale, è simpaticissima, emancipata, sa quello che vuole: abbiamo donne che possiamo portare ad esempio agli uomini.⁵⁸

She died on 18 November 1979 near Genoa and after her death the company was taken over by a group of people, one of them was Vittoria Toniolo, daughter of the strictest Fede Cheti's collaborator. Today Fede Cheti's atelier located in via Manzoni 23 is still open thanks to the work of Teresa Clerici and Alessia Fugazzola Zeni. Anyway, the atelier maintains only the name of ‘Fede Cheti’, in fact, they actually use other companies' textiles because all the rights of the original drawings are now propriety of Ratti S.p.A. Company.

56 “Lucio Fontana e Fede Cheti premiati per il 1964–65,” *Il Giorno*, June 24, 1965.

57 Folco, “Fede Cheti,” 36.

58 Alfonsi, *Donne al vertice*.