

Lessons to Learn? Past Design Experiences and Contemporary Design Practices

Proceedings of the ICDHS 12th International Conference
on Design History and Design Studies

Edited by: Fedja Vukić, Iva Kostešić
Zagreb 2020

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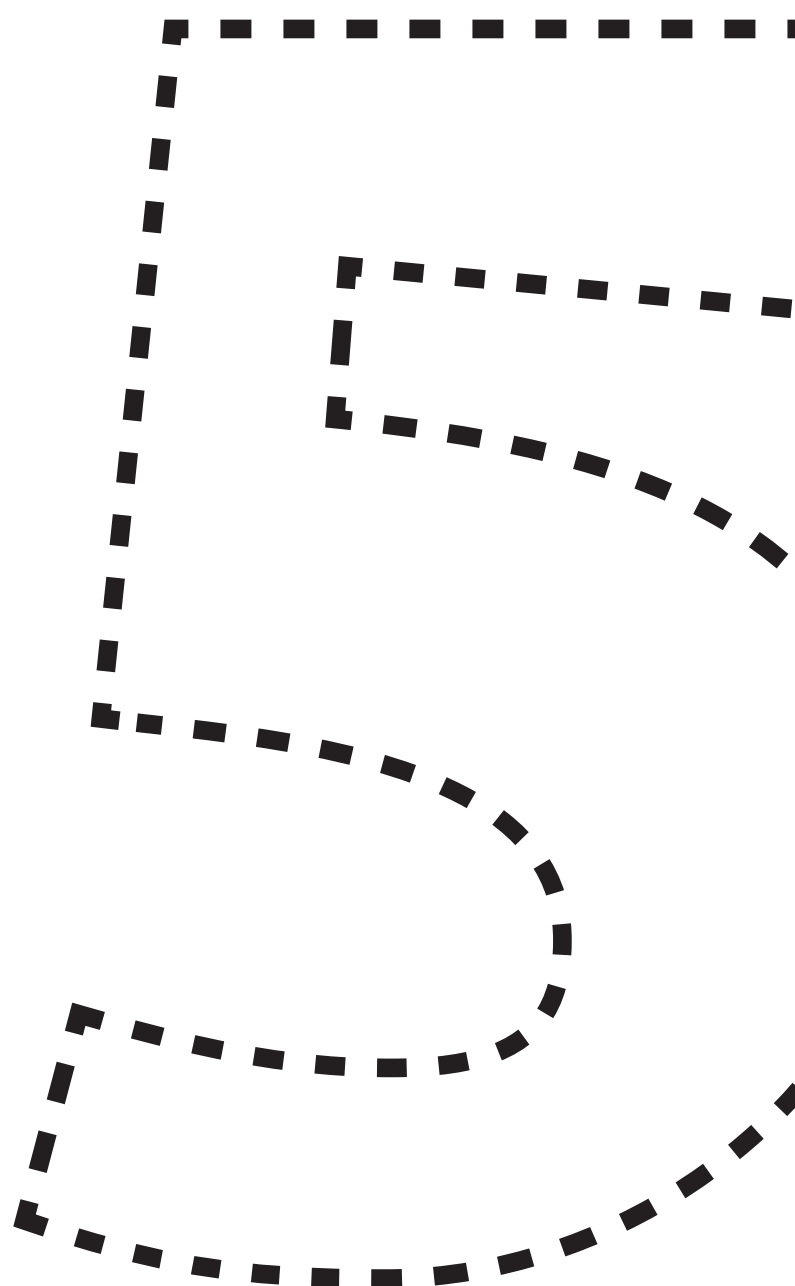
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Challenging Orthodoxies II



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Women in Italian Graphic Design History: A Contribution to Re-write History in a More Inclusive Way

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Rewriting history, Italian graphic design, women designers

The great history of graphic design, both in Italy and internationally, reserves a secondary or minor role for women. Some publications have recently placed this question into a critical form, trying to understand the reasons for it, as well as accounting for gaps and absences (Breuer & Meer, 2012; Gomez-Palacio & Vit, 2008; Kirkham, 2000; Pansera & Occleppo, 2002; Piscitelli, 2015). However, if we refer in particular to what we could define as the golden age of Italian graphic design — in a time span between the 1950s and the early 1970s — few female figures have emerged, and those that have, are more like exceptions rather than as a result of a contextualised and intentional historical body of research based on a different point of view, when compared to the ones identified as masters and paradigmatic cases. This paper aims to underline sources, methods and criteria to be adopted to achieve a possible rewriting of history in a more inclusive way, identifying a series of lesser known personalities who have the full right to be considered pioneers and role models.

Introduction

Only in recent years, have some female protagonists been re-evaluated by considering more than the authorial figure (as in the case of Lora Lamm, see Ossanna Cavadini et al., 2013; Piazza, 2012) or the design and intellectual contribution in a partnership in which the leading role was male (Lica Covo Steiner, see Begozzi et al., 2011; Gunetti, 2015; Steiner, 2015). Certainly, those are notable personalities who have the full right to be considered role models, whose importance must in any case fall within the contexts in which they have operated. And it is precisely the relevance of the context, if not the individual life paths, that should be highlighted for a woman; Yesterday and today, the construction of a career must also take into account a whole series of factors that can determine choices and professional fortunes. As underlined by Breuer and Meer (2012):

‘[...] the design career requires a full-time commitment. With its implicit demands on a person's entire and exclusive attention, design work presumes the consent of one's life partner and requires sophisticated management skills from both sides for the organisation of everyday life — as well as financial resources, which are often unavailable to young designers. At a first glance, this situation appears to be gender neutral; however, it is especially ambivalent for women. Frequently, they bear the greater burden in connection with the work-life balance.’ (Breuer & Meer, 2012, p. 41).

Analysing magazines and yearbooks from the time span of interest (between the 1950s and the early 1970s), a whole host of women



Figure 1. Brunetta Mateldi, 'L'Ufficio Moderno' [The Modern Office], magazine cover, 1967.

designers have emerged, often eclectic, who have worked at a professional level equal to that of the many men mentioned. But of these, there is practically no trace of them today. Designers who did not live in the shadow of bulky male figures, but who had their own professional autonomy and were certainly not relegated to a hobby dimension. Figures such as Simonetta Ferrante, Ornella Linke-Bossi (Gunetti, 2018), Claudia Morgagni, Anita Klinz (Pansera, 2017) and others, demonstrated an active and participatory presence. There are those who have carved out their own extra space in teaching, some in personal artistic research, or have contributed to activities in various associations (such as within AIAP, the Italian Association of Visual Communication Design), feeding a professional system that up to today, was read mainly in a male key.

Through the portrait of some of these forgotten protagonists, I therefore intend to propose a more inclusive view of the history of Italian graphic design. A discipline and a professional activity that in the period of the economic boom up to the years of the oil crisis (and that for the discipline mark the clear transition from authorial graphic design dimension up to the separation between graphic design and advertising), has established itself as an indispensable protagonist to communicate the Italian industrial and cultural system.

Back to the Sources

Looking to specialist publications (e.g. yearbooks, magazines, periodical publications and catalogues) starting from the second half of the 1950s, it is evident that there is a limit to the quantity of projects that females contributed to in Italy. A partial reading of course, but nonetheless useful to identify missing, yet significant personalities, as well as to evaluate an actual, growing presence over time. A reading, which ranges from pure quantitative data, to the identification of the most relevant personalities, allows us to also trace individual paths, which can uncover role models of the time.

When the AIAP was formed (then the Italian Association of Advertising Artists) in 1955, following the split from the component of the Advertising Technicians, among the 70 'secessionists' headed by Franco Mosca, 5 women designers were present (Umberta Barni and Brunetta Mateldi of Milan, Alda Sassi of Turin, Annaviva Traverso of Savona and Celeste Visigalli of Rome).¹ Already in the AIAP yearbook published in 1963 (characterised by a beautiful cover by Franco Grignani), 199 members were counted, of which 13 were women. Of these, only 7 submitted their work for publication: Umberta Barni, Brunetta Mateldi, Claudia Morgagni, Elena Pinna, Annamaria Sanguinetti, Rosaria Siletti Tonti (originally from Naples but active



Figure 2. Alda Sassi (Alsa), Martini, poster, 1955 ca.

in Milan at the time) and Verbena Valzelli Guerini (Brescia). The following year, in the first edition of the book 'Due Dimensioni' [Two Dimensions] (Huber et al., 1964), out of 480 designers published, 20 were women. Another significant oversight was evident in the periodical publication 'Due Dimensioni'. Each issue was dedicated to one or more graphic designers, studios or agencies, to offer a contemporary cross-section of design production through synthetic monographic readings. Of the 27 issues published over a period of about 10 years, it was only possible to find female graphic designers in two of them. Both women were Swiss, and both were active at La Rinascente: Gisela Tobler was published in 1967 in the first issue and Giovanna Graf in the third issue, which was edited in 1968. Several women held creative direction roles at La Rinascente, including Amneris Latis (1954 – 1964) and Adriana Botti Monti (1962 – 1971), both personalities on which in-depth studies should be done.

In *Storia del Design Grafico* [The History of Graphic Design] by Baroni & Vitta (2003), the most successful manual of its kind in Italy, only two female Italian graphic designers are mentioned (Laura Micheletto, in partnership with Heinz Waibl and Anna Ronchi). By contrast, in *La grafica in Italia* [Graphics in Italy] (Fioravanti et al., 1997), the presence of women is recorded with a certain objectivity throughout the time period considered by the curators, which goes from the end of the 19th century to the 1990s. For example, Emma Bonazzi (1881 – 1959), artist, poster artist and graphic designer, and Anita Klinz (1923 – 2013), who is known for her art direction at Mondadori, are mentioned; as well as Kate Bernhardt, as one of the first collaborators with Studio Boggeri in 1933. However, no monographic chapter is dedicated to them and no other names emerge in the time frame of interest of this paper. A different scenario is evident for *Visual Design. Cinquant'anni di Produzione in Italia* [Fifty years of Production in Italy] (Iliprandi et al., 1984), in which the contributions of Titti Fabiani (1939) and Ornella Linke-Bossi (1935) are indicated as significant, but also those of others belonging to later generations.

Publications in magazines during this time were also sporadic, but it was possible to identify other profiles of interest. As an example, it is worth mentioning two fellowships like those of Carlo and Maddalena Angeretti (Studio C + M Angeretti)² and Iris and Bruno Pippa.³ Two profiles that allow for the investigation of not only design production, but also of the dynamics, which in the early 1960s could be established in a work environment such as graphic and advertising design, and how certain stereotypes on areas of competence (which of men, which of women) were not corresponding to the professional practices of the time.

¹ As promptly reported in *La Pubblicità* [Advertising] (1976), 10 (xxx), p. 8 (a special issue dedicated to AIAP).

² Castiglioni, V. (1964), *Studio C + M Angeretti. Linea Grafica* [Graphic line], 11/12, pp. 293-300.

³ Bonfante, E. (1960), *Iris e Bruno 'i disobbedienti'. Linea Grafica* [Graphic line], 9/10, pp. 337-344.

As an example of that, it may be interesting to read an excerpt from an article published in *La Pubblicità* [Advertising] (1970) entitled ‘Sono silenziose, ma sono presenti’ [‘They are silent, but present’]:

*‘[...] men, stop pretending to write texts about bras or baby diapers; on products against cellulite or margarines, when you often do not even know how to buy a shirt [...]. You also have to stop pretending to have the happiest intuition in certain creations or advertising actions, you that, without leaving the house, move psychologically with elephantine grace in the world of children and women. Let’s also say certain truths.’*⁴

In other publications of the time, it is noted that many of the women practitioners were confined within the areas of the artistic approach and of the aptitude for drawing if not in that even more prejudicial than the exceptional. Although some questions had already been asked at the time, answers or more detailed investigations were not necessarily followed through. Dino Villani, an advertiser, artist and first president of AIAP (when the association was still ATAP, bringing together artists and advertising technicians), and for a long time, president of FIP (the Italian Advertising Federation), in introducing the work of Claudia Morgagni, writes that:

*‘It is not easy to suppose for what reasons the number of women who dedicate themselves to advertising and graphic design is so modest and rare. Also among the poster artists there are no female signatures [...]: instead we find them among the ever more numerous fashion illustrators and this would demonstrate that they tend to deal with those activities that best match their character. [...]’*⁵

Although Villani's comments may have been in good faith, it is clear how strong the cultural prejudice of the time was on the activities that women designers could devote themselves to. It is also possible to notice a certain distraction by the author in observing professional practice. Moreover, there is a scarce propensity to encourage the emergence of the female presence in the profession.

In the transition from authorial poster design to graphic design and creative direction, there are certainly interesting female authors. To follow, some of them will be presented. They have been identified primarily by the lists of AIAP members, but also by the sources mentioned above.

Among the 70 founding members of AIAP in 1955, there were 5 women ‘artists’ who worked in graphic design and advertising, named as such in order to distinguish them from technicians. The most relevant is **Brunetta Moretti Mateldi** (Ivrea, 1904 – 1989, Milan) (Biribanti, 2018),

a quite imaginative, original character, known simply as Brunetta. (Fig. 1) With a background in Arts, having studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna and the Albertina of Turin, she moved to Milan in the mid-1920s, and in 1930 married the painter and satire cartoonist Filiberto Mateldi. She began her career as an illustrator for women's and other magazines such as Lidel and Harper's Bazaar, and as early as the 1930s, she designed advertisements for clients such as La Rinascente, Calze SiSi, Martini and Bemberg. For twenty years (1957 – 1976), she illustrated Camilla Cederna's column ‘Il lato debole’ [The weak side] in *L'Espresso*, in which she ‘pictured’ the evolution of fashion in such a significant way as to be awarded the Illustration Award by the weekly magazine *Epoca* in 1969. She was also responsible for the exhibition design of Montecatini and Italviscosa at Fiera di Milano.⁶ Always involved in AIAP's early activities, in 1956 she was awarded the ‘Garter Award for Advertising’ (‘Premio Giarrettiera per la Pubblicità’): an interesting, extemporary and allusively ironic board composed by Pino Tovaglia, with an humorous cut-out photo of Benca (nick-name of Carlo Benedetti).⁷ As Emilio Radus wrote:

*‘[...] her drawings serve faithfully the fashion industry and are a feast for the eyes. They are able to represent with few clever signs, and to make an effect, even make a drama. Never humorous in the word's common sense, they are lively and witty. They are daring, but gently so. Brunetta's art is politeness with open wide eyes.’*⁸

If Brunetta was a well-known figure, somehow a true star of the time, a character that still needs to be fully discovered is **Alda Sassi** (Turin, 1929 –), known as Alsa, whose posters re-interpret the typical style of Italian poster art in a modern perspective. She boasts an abundant production, in particular for shipping lines (Lauro, Italia, Lloyd Triestino). She took part in the first National Exhibition of Advertising Artists in 1956 (Fig. 2).

Another interesting figure is **Anna Maria ‘Annaviva’ Traverso** (Savona 1915 – 2003), a poetess, painter and potter. Following her marriage to the futurist Giovanni Acquaviva in 1935, she joined the movement; in 1938 she published her lyrical poem ‘Aeropensieri’ [Airconditioner] in *Mediterraneo Futurista* [Mediterranean futurist], and in 1944, published her poem ‘L’universo dai passi di Gesù al Calvario’ [The universe from Jesus' steps to Calvary], which was illustrated with her husband's etchings. Active in advertising with Studio Sira in Genoa and Savona, she would become its co-owner, specialising in beauty and confectionery product packaging for clients including Paglieri, Casinò Municipale di Sanremo, and Genoa's Provincial Tourist Board.⁹

⁶ In Pesavento, G., Palieri, A. (1953). *Chi è in pubblicità* [Who is in advertising?]. Milan: Editrice L'Ufficio Moderno [Publishing office, The Modern office], p. 119.

⁷ See the website of AIAP CDPG (Aiap's Documentation Centre on Graphic Design): <http://www.aiap.it/cdpg/?ID=3726&IDsubarea=0&IDsez=131>.

⁸ In Villani, D. (1969). Il ‘premio illustrazione 1969’ assegnato a Brunetta [The 1969 illustration prize awarded to Brunetta]. *Linea Grafica* [Graphic line], 4, July-August, p. 280.

⁹ In Pesavento, G., Palieri, A. (1953). cit., p. 174.

⁴ Translation by the author: Sono silenziose, ma sono presenti [They are silent, but they are present] (1970). *La Pubblicità* [Advertising], 6 (xxiv), p. 10.

⁵ Translation by the author. Villani, D. (?), Claudia Morgagni: Sintetismo spinto sull'orlo dell'esasperazione [Claudia Morgagni: Synthesis pushed to the brink of exasperation], article found in the press review collected by Morgagni and kept in her Archive by the AIAP CDPG. Presumably the article is from the late 1960s.

From Artistic Posters to Graphic Design

10 Dradi, M. (2017). Brunetta, Giulia, Umberta. Primi profili. In Riccini, R. (2017). *Angelica e Bradamante [Angelica and Bradamante]. Le donne del design [The women of design]*. Padova: Il Poligrafo, pp. 185-191.

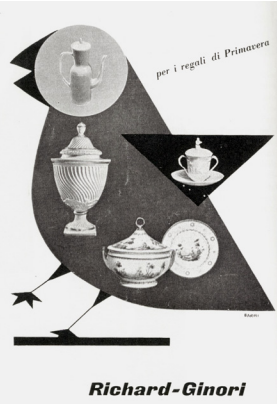


Figure 3. Umberta Barni, Richard Ginori, advertisement, 1958 ca.

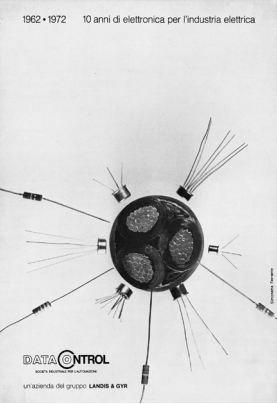


Figure 4. Simonetta Ferrante, DataControl, poster, 1967.

For other reasons, it is interesting to know a little more about **Umberta Barni** (Milan 1927 –).¹⁰ After completing her studies at the Scuola d’Arte of Ferrara and the Scuola d’Arte Applicata del Castello of Milan, in 1947, Umberta started working at Agenzia Ultra (Ultra Pubblicit. since 1959), where she contributed to the creation of more than 100 advertising campaigns. Whilst active throughout the 1960s, following her marriage, her professional activity decreased remarkably. She exhibited at both editions of the National Exhibition of Advertising Artists, which were organised by AIAP and took place at Palazzo della Permanente in 1956, and at the Gallery of Modern Art of Villa Palestro, Milan in 1959. For the quality of her productions, she has received several awards, including one for the Agipgas brand in 1952, where she ranked third. The distinctive feature of her work is the painting-like style, even though she has created more complex compositions (Fig. 3).

As of today, nothing is known about the Roman-born **Celeste Visigalli**, except that in 1974, AIAP awarded her the title of ‘Seniores’ in recognition of her loyalty to the Association. She shares her presence on this special list with such figures as Franco Grignani, Erberto Carboni, Severo Pozzati (Sepo) and Gino Sironi.

Over the years it is possible to identify other personalities, like **Simonetta Ferrante**, still active today as an artist and calligrapher (Cerritelli et al., 2016; Guida et al., 2011). Born in Milan in 1930, she studied in Milan and London (Central School for Arts and Design). Returning to Milan and encouraged by Felice Casorati and Primo Conti to pursue an artistic career, she devoted herself instead to graphic design, collaborating with Max Huber, Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Bob Noorda and Bruno Munari. Then in 1961, she opened her own studio with Carlo Pollastrini and Giovanna Graf. Until the ‘70s, she was involved in graphic design (e.g. Esselunga supermarkets, 3M-Minnesota, Mondadori, Rizzoli, DataControl), alternating with more and more intensity, pictorial experiments contaminated in many cycles of works from a strong calligraphic imprint, combining the two souls of her visual research. Ferrante stands out not only for her particular career path, but as one of the first women to open her own professional business, dealing with publishing, advertising, visual identity, she rises far above the stereotypes of the time (Fig. 4).

Finally, in terms of professional autonomy, the case of **Claudia Morgagni** (1928 – 2002, Milan) (Guida, 2016) is symptomatic. Her work is repeatedly reported in magazines, catalogues and yearbooks. She studied painting at the Brera Academy, then followed courses in ceramics (in Faenza) and mosaic (in Ravenna), as well as graphic design in Paris.



Figure 5. Claudia Morgagni, Esso, poster, 1956.

Conclusions

During her apprenticeship, she was introduced to artistic circles of the time, which brought her into contact with Mario Robaudi, a Milanese sculptor who would become her husband. She later separated from Robaudi at the end of the 1960s, after having had three children with him. Morgagni commenced her own professional activity in 1957, continuing to collaborate with advertising agencies or managing her own clients. Sources and documents indicate that she was able to charge very respectable fees, equal to those of her male colleagues. Her clients included Esso (Fig. 5), Orzoro, Kneipp, Pellizzari, Lanerossi, Ruffino, Ibm, Montedison and Decca. What is of interest is a rich production, from advertising to exhibits, from layouts to illustrations, extended over a period of time ranging from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s. An autonomous figure, economically and professionally, wife, mother and also educator, having held classes at the Brera Academy, at the Scuola Umanitaria and for a long time at IRSOS (today IRSOS Albe Steiner of Milan), for dual necessity: practical and ideological. In fact, she was strongly convinced of having to contribute to the formation of young people as a social duty. A professional commitment, certainly emblematic, in many ways to be intended as pioneering.

The profiles briefly outlined in this essay so far represent only a cross-section of a much wider professional reality, of which however, it is more and more evident, there are few traces. Thus, it is still necessary to continue investigations in order to make an accurate recollection of Italian graphic design history. However, to do this, perhaps some criteria should be redefined in order to put into practice an objective inclusion of those that to date, have been excluded from the great histories, but are believed to have full dignity of being defined as models, if not pioneers. Certainly, the quality of the designs must be taken into due consideration, but other criteria must also be adopted, better centred with respect to the context.

One aspect that emerges precisely from the profiles mentioned above is that of professional autonomy, of those practitioners who in the years following the Second World War, started their own businesses, took on responsibilities, covered different roles and interacted with clients and suppliers. Although many of them worked and lived in a city like Milan, in an environment of rapid social and industrial evolution, in constant contact with the world, and of which in those years, was one of the centres, they undertook independent careers, in a predominantly male context. A context that conditioned or tried to direct them towards stereotypical roles.

The multiplicity of roles is another factor. For a woman at the time, carving out her own independent practice was in effect an almost heroic

result, if the profession had to be accompanied by conventional social and cultural roles: being a wife, being a mother, taking care of the family home, looking after the offspring. At the time, the graphic design profession allowed flexible management of daily time, but independence could be relative if it were not possible to achieve stable economic results of a certain size. This multiplicity of roles evidently ‘weighs’ more heavily on women, if not differently than for men. And as such, it should be considered as an additional element of evaluation and enhancement.

Furthermore, another topic that I intend to address is that of the variety of commissions and the inconsistency of the subject, widely adopted in the past, of a specific professional ‘reserve’. Women graphic designers, just like their male colleagues, contrary to the prejudices of the time and to some sources cited in this paper, are dedicated to a variety of fields that go far beyond the design for a fashion brand, a department store, or for products aimed at women. They interact with sectors such as heavy industry, chemistry and pharmaceuticals. Producing not only posters, but advertising campaigns, visual identities, exhibits, product packaging and books. Thus, they contributed to the development of the industrial culture that characterised the Italian economic boom and the revival of the country. This variety is also expressed in terms of visual language, not only linked to illustration and to the expressive sign (modality also conditioned by the artistic school formation to which they had access to, before or immediately after WWII), but also the ability to assert according to the most up-to-date tendencies.

According to Simoni (2009), who refers to the fields of teaching and art history from a gender perspective, the reasons for these absences of contributions by women must also be ascribed to a series of historical and cultural factors, determined in more or less intentional ways; but there are other objective ones, such as the lack of sources (p. 141). This aspect therefore requires even more detailed, punctual investigations.

In more general terms, gaining an understanding of the evolution of a professional practice and its relationship with society, production and industry, considering authors currently absent from great histories, can be used to re-read the contours of the profession with greater objectivity. Until now, the history of Italian design has been defined and transmitted in a predominantly male key, which only partially reflects the same practice and production reality, and therefore the society of those years that have been defined as the golden age of Italian graphic design.

What has been proposed in this paper is not simply a list of forgotten women designers. Although mapping and listing may be useful in

constructing an objective reading of the excellencies to be adopted as role models, this operation risks representing a mere attempt at reconciliation or correction. To effectively carry out this ‘reconciliation’, as indeed claimed by Margolin (2001), it is necessary to contextualise the paths, without relying solely on a mere aesthetic evaluation, but rather rejecting this formalistic approach. We need to redefine the parameters, making them actually inclusive, and we need a parallel action of deconstructing the discourses and the rules of the history that we intend to write (Simoni, 2009, p. 140).

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Surface, Deep, Implicit. Basic Design as a Signature Pedagogy in Design Education

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Scholarship of teaching and learning, signature pedagogies, basic design

Borrowing the concept of signature pedagogy from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the present article transposes it to the domain of design studies, with the aim of questioning if, and how, the educational model of basic design could be considered as such. The first part of this paper deepens the notion of signature pedagogy, a conceptual framework codified within the SoTL in order to detect the fundamental criteria that organise knowledge into the multiplicity of its disciplinary and professional sectors. The second part of this paper shifts the attention towards the international landscape of design studies, observing how, in the recent years, a first body of studies and research acknowledging the concept of signature pedagogy from a disciplinary point of view has gradually been deposited. Finally, the third part of this study focuses on basic design, tracing its cultural origins and outlining a possible reading of such an educational model understood as a signature pedagogy, argued according to the three structures — surface, deep, and implicit — from which each signature pedagogy derives its own backbone.

Introduction

In the general landscape of educational research, the last decades have witnessed a reassessment of the role played by professional training in shaping disciplinary perspectives, interpreted as the particular viewpoint according to which single disciplines enact their specific process of observation, construction, and transmission of culture (Repko & Szostak, 2008).

This tendency has paved the way for the emergence of new academic currents, such as the **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning** (SoTL), which is focused on exploring and describing the dynamics underlying the production of knowledge through a ‘systematic inquiry into both disciplinary ways of knowing and students’ ways of learning’ (McKinney, 2012, p. 32).

One of the most relevant contributions advanced by the SoTL, resides in the theory of **signature pedagogies** (Shulman, 2005), a conceptual framework aimed at detecting the fundamental criteria, highly characterised from a disciplinary point of view, that organise and structure knowledge in the multiplicity of its disciplinary and professional sectors.

Moving from these premises, the present article borrows from the SoTL, the notion of signature pedagogy, and transposes it to the field of design studies, with the aim of questioning if, and how, the model of **basic design** — intended as the introductory phase of the designer’s training path — could be eventually considered as such.

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