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ART VS
DESIGN**



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DESIGN VS ART IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

Visual Grammar of the Mediterranean Landscape: Chromatic, Iconic and Object Identities

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Keywords

Territorial Identity, Mediterranean Landscape, Visual Communication, Design for Cultural Heritage, Perception.

Abstract

The paper deals with the enhancement of the Mediterranean identity in terms of visual communication starting from the landscape as the crucial aspect in creating a coordinated theme for the territory. In this context the landscape is read both as natural environment and as an extension and expression of the collective self (in anthropological and sociological terms), of a people's culture and their way to relate with spaces. Therefore it is important – in the design approach – to isolate some identity elements able to summarise the values, qualities and features of a territory.

We are interested in communication design of Mediterranean visual identities and in the dynamics of building visual common codes. This research collects some case studies about the territorial communication field divided into three categories:

Colours: in this category we can find those projects that are focused on the color as a visual code able to return the complexity of a place and its recurrent chromatic features.

Icons: this category includes those projects that use the iconographical language to represent shapes and figures that are part of the collective imaginary and/or can be considered a possible “grammar of Mediterranean signs”.

Objects: herein we can find those projects that connect the material culture present in the traditional handcrafted objects with the natural landscape in a mutual relationship of tangible and intangible values.

From this critical analysis some interesting issues emerge:

- the relationship between *stereotypes* and *visual recurring themes* in interpreting the system of values and creating the territorial identity;
- the relationship between *abstraction* and *description* in choosing a communication style able to synthesise the soul and mood of a place.
- the creation of a “*grammar*” of *minimum elements* of a graphic language mixing *art and design*.

1. Introduction. The languages of the territory

Valorising the identity of a territory means to face with a complex system of values. Nowadays, designers find themselves in the condition of designing in a very complex context.

Designing complexity requires a design process structured in simple elements: “An intelligence exercise based on the production and interpretation of symbols, codes, and languages” (Pizzocaro, 2004, p 66).

However the modern western culture – following the avant-gardes around the turn of the last century – tends to break complex systems into minimum elements in order to isolate signs and icons and catch the identity of things. Furthermore, we can suppose that in front of a complex system (like the territorial one), the individual is led to reduce the perceived reality into modules.

This action is not present only in the design approach but also in the daily life experience: Augoyard (1979) suggests two “linguistic figures of walking”: synecdoche and asyndeton. The first one thickens, that is amplifies the detail and reduces the totality. The second one separates, that is fragments the continuity.

Measuring a place means to deconstruct it, fragment it in several scales, to catch those elements which make it homogeneous highlighting its discontinuities; measuring a place also means to identify an interpretation able to represent and communicate it.

Indeed, when we manage a territorial analysis we have to follow three steps: collection, organisation and interpretation of data (Cavalleri, 2008).

In the case studies presented here, the treatment of data is crucial: we can recognise both an analytical approach and a synthetic one; indeed, some of them are based on the reinterpretation of recursive elements present in the actual Mediterranean context and in the collective imaginary while other ones are focused on a graphic synthesis able to communicate a “unique” image.

As we already said, the topic is the enhancement of the Mediterranean identity in terms of visual communication starting from the landscape as the crucial aspect in creating a coordinated theme for the territory.

The Mediterranean land is an interesting mix of different cultures, influences as well as geographical and anthropological crossings; for this reason we won't speak about a unique identity but about a “plural identity”. This aspect – understood as a value – affects the synthesis of the visual representation and the modalities with which we select the traceable constants both in the natural and anthropic landscape.

Indeed in this context the landscape is read both as natural environment and as an extension and expression of the collective self (in anthropological and sociological terms), of a people's culture and their way to relate with spaces. Therefore it is important – in the design approach – to isolate some identity elements able to summarise the values, qualities and features of a territory.

We are interested in communication design of Mediterranean visual identities and in the dynamics of building visual common codes.

Between 2001 and 2004 an interesting research project named *Medesign* focused on the studies and potentials of the design

applied to Mediterranean area as well as the valorization of the Mediterranean heritage, has been carried out by a network of Italian design universities. In the plurality of the contents, the research touches also some topics very close to the visual identity: a path through the signs and a reflection about the Mediterranean aesthetics. “The Mediterranean is not simply the place when human made landscapes vibrate with history and are lavish in smells and colours, light and form. It is less a geographical space than a symbolic one”. (Fagnoni 2004, p. XXIII). This region is made of changes, conflicts and migrations; also for this reason is interesting to reflect about the identity or – better – the identities of a place so much complex and “plural”.

Before moving to the specific analysis through the case studies which represent a Mediterranean portrait of places, we have to locate this approach in a perceptive framework. We have to mention some spatial modalities expressed in a formal organisation of elements: *paths*, *references*, *edges*, *knots*, *zones*. According to Lynch (1964) these categories are related to three analytic components: *identity*, *structure*, *meaning*. *Paths* are canals along which the observer habitually or occasionally moves around, they are not only streets but also rivers or railways, they are each and every longitudinal sign able to guide directions. *References* are punctiform elements where the observer does not enter but perceives from outside: signs, stores or – in the landscape – towers, hills, trees. *Edges* mark a threshold, a change of perception like shores, banks, walls.

Knots are focal points, strategic places where the observer can enter. They are connections, crossing points where a change of direction happens. They are defined places like squares or monuments “Knots are conceptual mooring points in our cities” (Lynch, 1964, p.113).

Zones are parts of areas that determine an “inside” readable also from outside, they have a border.

All these elements take meaning in the relationship among them in order to compose an urban and landscape syntax of the territory. An integrated system of signs, each of which takes meaning in the totality.

In parallel to this approach we are going to trace other visual paradigms based on the adjectivisation of the shape:

Relationship between figure-background: the outline of some elements of a building or a landscape can be either clear or unclear, making the readability of the subject more or less understandable and giving more relevance to the figure or the background.

Shape simplicity: when the observer tends to simplify the figure in elementary shapes especially, the subject is not perceivable as a totality.

Continuity: continuity of edges, areas, surfaces, colours, materials. In this case the concept of rhythm and frequency intervenes. This element fosters the perception of a complex physic reality highlighting its gradients of homogeneity.

Preeminence: each place - as an aggregator of single elements - has signs more visible or recognisable than others. These signs can confer a symbolic value to a place; they become attention attractors and catalysts.

Directional variation: directrices – and their symmetric or asymmetric, regular or irregular trend – become elements of union or cuts of a place. They articulate the rhythms of the following contrasts: close-faraway, high-low, indoor-outdoor. *Vision corners*: privileged standpoints from which discovering pieces of landscape, like the movie frame with filters (i.e. fog, glass walls...).

Mouvement awareness: all those elements that foster the spatial synesthetic perception, that follow the ground course and, therefore, they allow to perceive a slope, a difference in height in a dynamic way. It means to be able to remember the place more easily and – in a certain sense – to own it.

The above-mentioned elements (Lynch, 1964) contribute to read a territory and to extract its identity features. For this reason we will use some of these key-points in reading the representation of the Mediterranean identity in the following cases.

2. Case studies

This research collects some case studies about the territorial communication field divided into three categories: *colours*, *icons* and *objects* according to a visual semiotic approach that interprets messages in terms of signs and patterns of symbolism. In this choice we took into account some criteria: those projects which outline a Mediterranean identity not just focusing on a unique and representative image but through an articulated system of communication (visual grammars, codes and so on); those projects which focus on the culture as a main lever to ground the visual identity; those projects

which are based on values of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Indeed, according to the Saussure's theory (1916) a sign can be a word, sound, or visual image; he divides a sign into two components: the signifier, which is the sound, image, or word, and the signified, which is the concept or meaning the signifier represents. Following this statement, we can trace a sort of "plural identity" of Mediterranean area made of different interpretations on the part of international visual communication designers.

2.1. Colours

In this category we can find those projects that are focused on the colour as a visual code able to return the complexity of a place and its recurrent chromatic features.

Herein, we will trace a path where the communication design for valorising the territory will focus on colours as a visual code able to transmit the richness and the complexity of a place.

The identity value of the chromatic gradient is readable in the naturalistic aspect of the territory - both in landscape expanses and in architectural landmarks - as well as being recognisable in the anthropic field where signs, colours and materials connote the environment.

Herein, we define "chromatic" those landscapes made of "minimum chromatic units of the landscape" (natural and anthropic) deduced from the study of the analysis of the territory and necessary to synthesise its identity.

2.1.1. *Riminintorno* by Studio Caputo, Gs Associati, I-Design, Agenzia Image, Stefano Mariani, Massimo Casamenti (2001)

The project *Riminintorno* – focused on a system of roundabouts in Rimini province – follows a design approach very interesting in terms of colour application.

The landscape elements are arranged in an analytic abacus divided in: seaboard, river and hill.

For each territorial strip, materials, flower essences, and colours have been mapped in order to define a matrix useful to extract guidelines for infrastructure artefacts.

These roundabouts are not simple elements of connection and intersection but an integrated system of places. Indeed each of them has a specific identitary function: this identity is expressed through the colours taken from the matrix explained before, which is able to define a sort of “territorial alphabet” made of capital letters (initials) that correspond to specific words (identitary values).

In this way the seaboard, the river and the hill present an alphabet of values like “G” as “Genuine”, “C” as “Cordial” spreading out identitary elements in the territory.

Recognisable perceptive element: *preeminence* > the roundabout from a passage intersection becomes a focal point, an attractor and a catalyst.

2.1.2. *Regional cromatic samples* (Emilia vs Sicily) by Raffaella Trocchianesi (2009)

This project communicates the identity of these two regions through a series of chromatic samples related to natural atmosphere and environment, food, materials.

In this way we have a synesthetic vision that intertwines different levels of perception of the territory features.

The representation is inspired by a chromatic palette used in the graphic field. The chromatic sample referred to Emilia is made of “red Lambrusco”, “Green Appennino”, “Grey fog” and other colours/references that represent this land. While Sicily region is made of graduations that remind to “Pistachio green”, “yellow citron”, “pink bougainvillea” and other Mediterranean hints.

Recognisable perceptive element: *vision corners* > the reality is expressed and synthesised through the filter of the colour.

2.1.3. a7 motorway signage in Valencia Community by Paco Bascuñán, Nacho Lavernia and Daniel Nebot (1985) by a request of the industry Trade and Tourism Ministers of the Valencian Community.

They develop a system of illustrations through the technique of silk-screen printing paper collage; herein, the Mediterranean mood – merry and coloured – is well recognisable communicating the variety of touristic offers in Valencian coasts. The designers cut and paste serigraphied papers with loud and flashy colours, trying to catch the Mediterranean and festive spirit of the touristic area around Valencia along the Motorway 7 route.

The illustrations were done on billboards with extruded aluminium while the headlines were done with letraset.

Indeed, the design of this signage system has become one of the identification of the Valencian Community. The motorway layout along the Valencian territory is a route from where discovering the Mediterranean coast landscape.

The project is not based only on architecture references but on other elements like climate, beaches, gastronomy: more abstract and constant aspects on this landscape that form its identity. Therefore, the concept tried to gather the global idea of Mediterraneanity, avoiding clichés, giving priority to the graphic aspect and offering a vivid, amusing and luminous view, always from an overall perception. The drawings and colours get mixed and the result is a comprehensive vision of the ways of enjoying the Mediterranean landscape.



Figure 1. *a7* motorway signage in Valencia Community by Paco Bascuñán, Nacho Lavernia and Daniel Nebot (credits: Bascuñán, Lavernia, Nebot).

This system works like a sort of accumulation of different “layers” of graphic hints and information (expressed through panels) along the route; in this way, at the end of our experience, we can understand the sequence and the richness of the all pieces of landscape we have caught during our trip (Fig. 1).

Recognisable perceptive element: *relationship between figure-background* > the graphic style is flat, the relationship between figure and background cancels any depth on field.

2.2. Icons

This category includes those projects that use the iconographical language to represent shapes and figures that are part of the collective imaginary and/or can be considered a possible “grammar of Mediterranean signs”.

As we already said, the modern western culture – following the avantgardes around the turn of the last century – tends to break complex systems up into minimum elements in order to isolate signs and icons and catch the identity of things.

In particular Turri (1998) talks about *coremi* and *iconemi*: the first are “minimum territorial units” and the second are “iconic perceptive units” within a system of signs able to represent a wider concept of the territory.



Figure 2. *Porto City Identity* by Eduardo Aires. The iconic system is inspired by the blue tiles (*azulejos*) that cover the historical buildings of the city (credits: Eduardo Aires, source: <http://www.eduardoaires.com/studio/portfolio/porto-city-identity/>).

2.2.1. *Porto City Identity* by Eduardo Aires

In the *Porto City Identity* project by Eduardo Aires, the iconic system is inspired by the blue tiles that cover so many histor-

ical buildings of the city. Stories are told in those *azulejos*. He created a white and blue system of icons that every person living (in) Porto could be and feel represented with. It is a dynamic and “in progress” system: new icons can be added to the system and old ones can stop being used.

The design attitude is the parallelism between the traditional and the new iconic landscape: the first one made of figurative drawings able to trace a detailed narrative, the second one made of outlined strokes that synthesise different symbolic elements of the city.

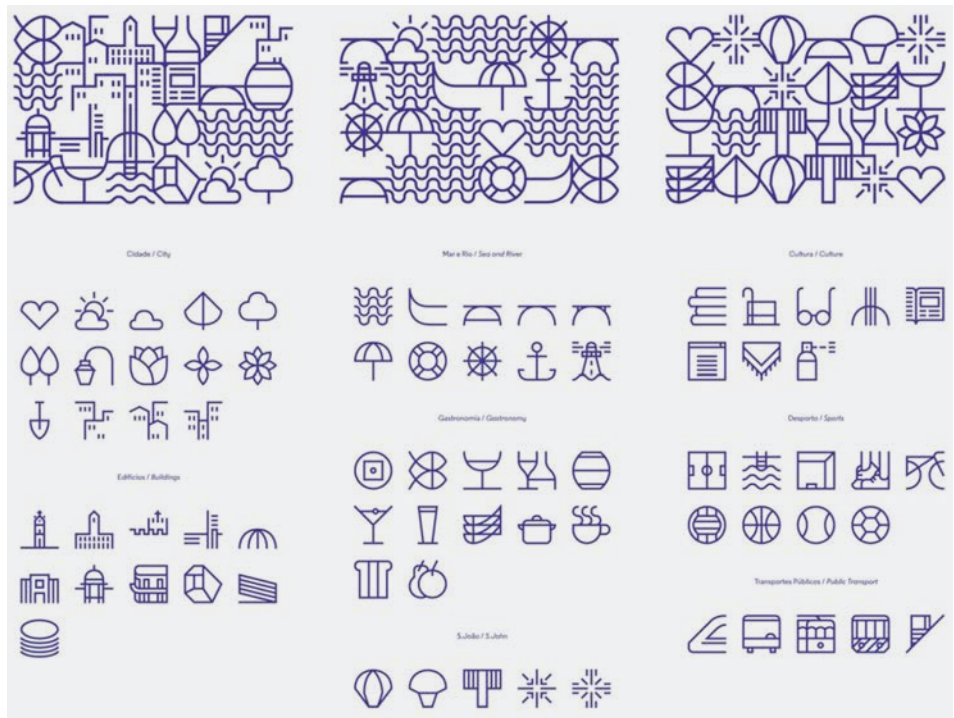


Figure 3. *Porto City Identity* by Eduardo Aires. The grammar of icons is divided into seven categories: “City”, “Sea&River”, “Gastronomy”, “Sao João celebration”, “Culture”, “Sports”, “Public transport” (credits: Eduardo Aires, source: <http://www.eduardoaires.com/studio/portfolio/porto-city-identity/>).

This grammar of icons is divided into seven categories: “City” made of recognisable elements of Porto (trees, houses, lampposts, towers, the house of music by Koolhaas, the bridge by Eiffel...) and environmental presences (trees, flowers, sun...); “Sea&River” (the lighthouse, the anchor, the life buoy, the ship’s wheel...); “Gastronomy” (fish, Porto wine, fruits, bread...); “Sao João celebration” (fireworks, installations, hot-air balloons...); “Culture” (glasses, books, traditional hand-crafted products...); “Sports” (sport fields, balls, bicycle...); “Public transport” (tram, train, bus...).

All these elements can be combined in different ways in order to compose infinite Mediterranean landscapes (Fig. 2-3). Recognisable perceptive element: *relationship between figure-background* > the icons (as outlines) stand out on the monochromatic background.

2.2.2. *Festa della Musica Mediterranea 2019* by Emanuele Mocciano

The cultural event *Festa della Musica Mediterranea 2019* in Gangi (Sicily) designed by Emanuele Mocciano is based on multicoloured *azulejos* geometric patterns that constitute the Rubik’s cube faces: dynamic transformation of different combinations and matches (in terms of cultural and music contaminations).

The main concept of the visual identity is inspired by a cross-road of peoples and cultures; the graphic mood is shared by all countries that overlook the Mediterranean Sea. It is based on *azulejos* as a “key sign” present in the architecture typical of South Europe, North Africa, from Gibraltar to Middle

East. The tradition and the folklore are re-interpreted in a new graphic language (fig. 4).

Recognisable perceptive element: *directional variation* > the graphic pattern becomes a modular system made of figures (tiles motive) on sides of the cubes. The “game” of this system is to change the combination in order to obtain potential infinitive decorative landscapes.



Figure 4. *Festival della Musica Mediterranea 2019*, Sicily (visual communication by Emanuele Moccia-ro) is based on multi coloured “azulejos” geometric patterns that constitute the Rubik’s cube faces.

2.3. Objects

In this category we can find those projects that connect the material culture present in the traditional handcrafted objects with the natural landscape in a mutual relationship of tangible and intangible values.

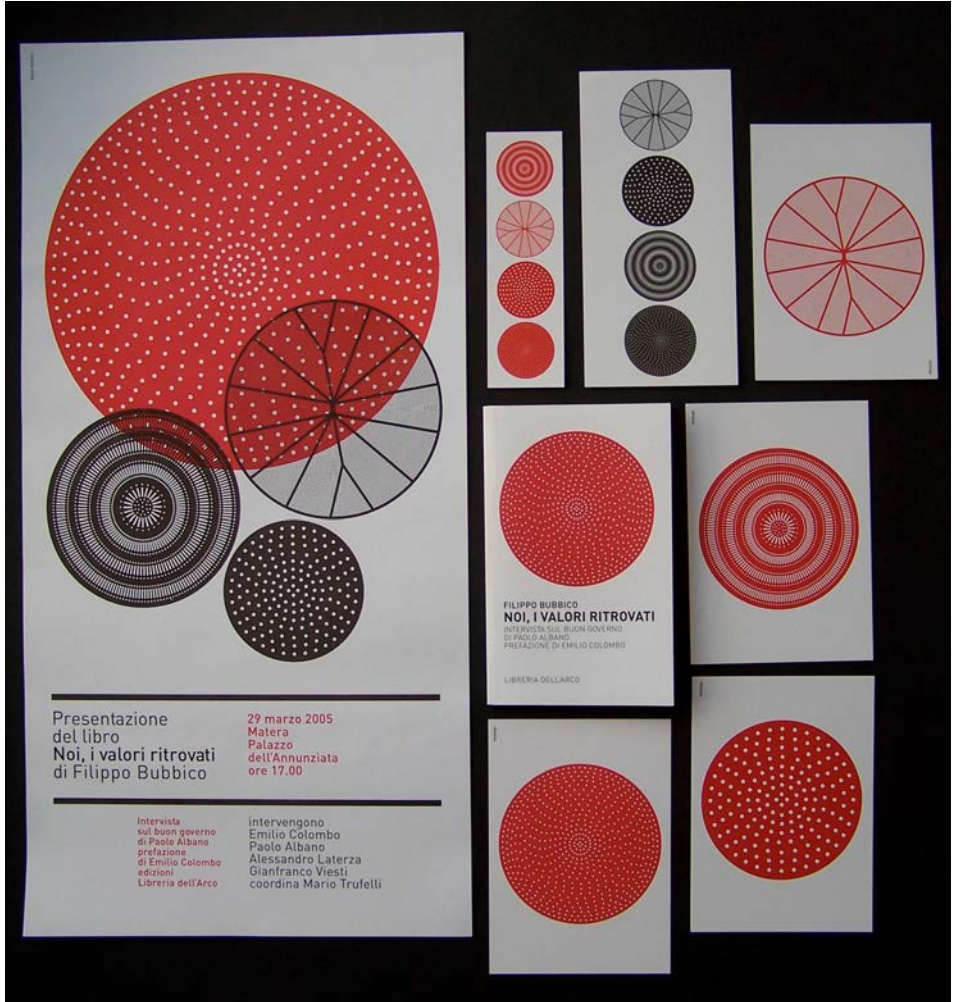


Figure 5. Mauro Bubbico book illustrations “*Noi, I valori ritrovati*” by Filippo Bubbico (credits: Mauro Bubbico).

2.3.1. Mauro Bubbico's illustrations *Noi i valori ritrovati* (2005)

Mauro Bubbico's illustrations in the book *Noi i valori ritrovati* (by Filippo Bubbico) are based on the overlapped graphic synthesis of rounded traditional tools (sieves and whiles) and natural elements like sun and earth.

Herein, the Mediterranean soul is enshrined in traditional objects that assume symbolic and ritual meanings: in his series of sieves Bubbico stages the metaphor to separate the wheat and ryegrass, the good and the evil. In this way he revitalises the local culture and – at the same time – he communicates an ancestral feature of a territory.

He works with “poetic” objects able to tell stories and evokes images of a traditional past: drive-away evil eye, hackles, soup tureens, old pictures, gears, small carousels, aviaries... and so on.

These objects are not relics to venerate, they are “short circuits”, pieces of a story, they are seeds. Without them, without their patina, the bi-dimensional Bubbico's graphic would be mute.

His decoration is not a style, because it absorbs the primordial dimension and the poetic tradition translated in a contemporary way. Only in this way the “equipments” of the folklore are not located in rhetoric rooms of an old style-museum but they are mediators of cultural messages (Piazza, 2016) (Fig. 5-6-7).

Recognisable perceptive element: *relationship between figure-background* > Bubbico starts from the tridimensionality of the objects to go towards their dematerialisation.

He makes it possible through a communicative interpretation where the object is almost not recognisable because it is simplified and translated in a graphic way. In doing so, we do not contextualise the object (figure) in its actual context (background), but we have a sign extracted from the object (figure) on a white field (background).

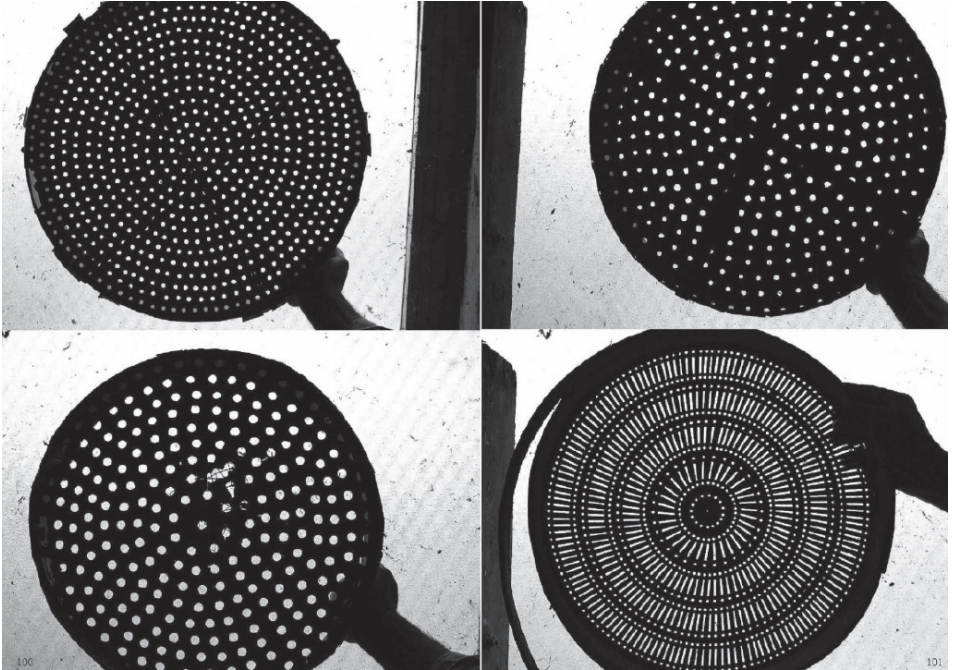


Figure 6. Sieves: inspiration for the illustrations “series of sieves” (credits: Mauro Bubbico).

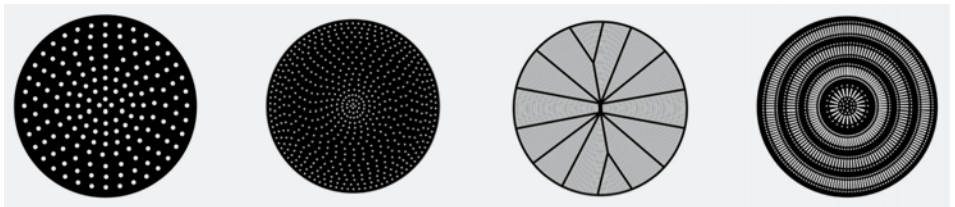


Figure 7. Mauro Bubbico illustrations: “series of sieves” (credits: Mauro Bubbico).



Figure 8. *Bàttoro Sardinia PB1dingbats* by Stefano Asili. New fonts inspired by the traditional weaving “bàttoro in posta” (credits: Stefano Asili).

2.3.2 *Bàttoro Sardinia PB1dingbats* by Stefano Asili

In the project *Bàttoro Sardinia PB1dingbats*, Stefano Asili developed new fonts starting from the traditional weaving named “bàttoro in posta” which reproduces the serial geometric pattern typical of Sardinian sacks working on the match between the textile grid and pixel in order to give shape to a new visual identity of the island for Expo 2015.

In the summer of 2015, the Autonomous Region of Sardinia asked two groups from the Departments of Architecture of the Universities of Sassari and Cagliari (coordinated by Nicolò Ceccarelli and Stefano Asili) to develop a new visual identity of the island for Expo Milano 2015. This identity will become the visual pillar of the communication strategy of Sardinia in the coming years.

He designed a set of typefaces with a strong local identity. He called them *Bàttoro* (after the name of the traditional weaving from which they take inspiration) and PB1 (as *pibione*, the Sardinian word for the weaving dot). The equation pixel = pibione established the modular and serial way of the graphic research. The created fonts are decorative, good for headlines and logos or recursive and intertwining patterns. The claim is “Sardegna isola senza fine” (Sardinia endless island) but for longer texts, which need to be read without any difficulties, he used the Open Sans. In addition to the first two sets, he created a set of dingbats made up of figures of traditional Sardinian weaving, plus some new and imaginative, specifically designed. Furthermore (in collaboration with Matteo Buccoli, Francesca Oggiano, and Claudio

Rossi), he designed a set of figures called *Sardinia Dingbats*, with which you can process virtual tapestries by typing on the keyboard. The serialisation of the compositions follows a way he had already studied for the typographical tapestries inspired by the local ones; these typefaces give to designers and craftsmen a powerful tool for always creating new combinations.

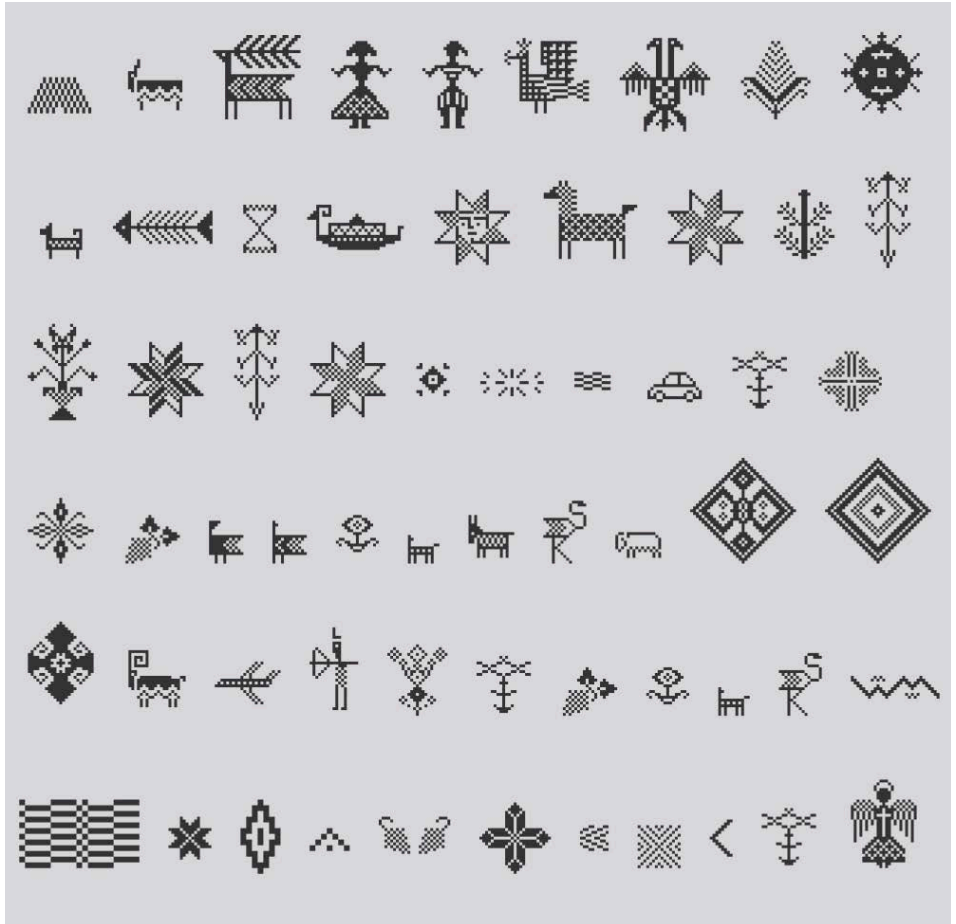


Figure 9. *Bàttoro Sardinia PB1dingbats* by Stefano Asili. New fonts inspired by the traditional weaving “bàttoro in posta” (credits: Stefano Asili).

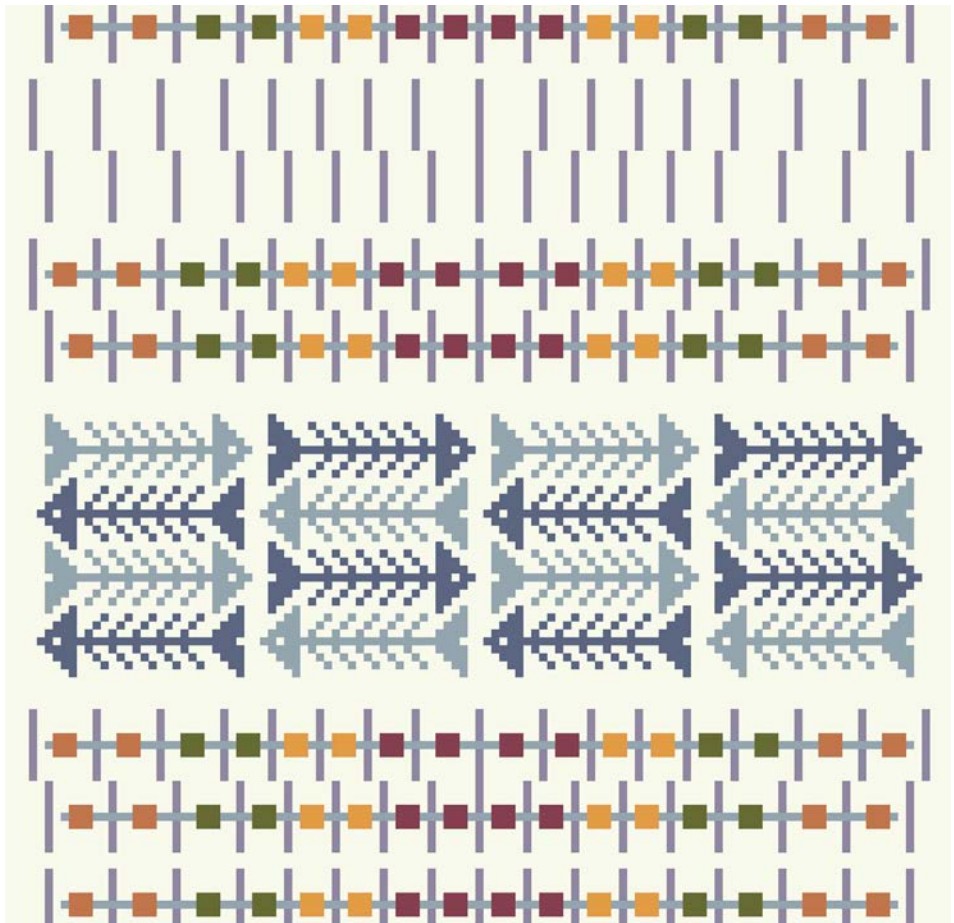


Figure 10. *Bàttoro Sardinia PBidingbats* by Stefano Asili. New fonts inspired by the traditional weaving “bàttoro in posta” (credits: Stefano Asili).

The typographical tapestries arise from a research on the iconography of the Sardinian traditional textile. They are inspired by the innovative approach of Eugenio Tavolara, Ubaldo Badas, and Costantino Nivola who – in the 50s and 60s – gave a new run-up to a millenarian handcrafted culture. The recursive order of the traditional textile was guaranteed through a semantic deviation able to hide the “language

game” of an alphabetic code. An algebraic system based on reflections, rotations, and overlapping was applied to a typographical font inspired by Sardinian textiles.

The final result is a decoration that opens itself to borderless customisations taking inspiration from a lecture by Alighiero Boetti (Fig. 8-9-10).

Recognisable perceptive element: *vision corners* > Asili totally changes the point of view with which treat the traditional handcrafted product in order to reinvent a new style to communicate the soul of Sardinia region. Indeed he mixes tradition and innovation, antique processes and new codes.

2.3.3. *Intrecci di comunità*. Un dialogo fra tradizione tessile e riuso creativo by Etno Project, curated by I. Guglielmetti and D. Ronzio with the Lombardy Region public co-founding.

This project is focused on *pezzotto* product: traditional rough rug from Valtellina area made of several strips in waste textile. Herein, this product – high cultural gradient – is considered as an expressive support of a local culture and – also for this reason – interpretable and translatable.

In this context the topic of the translation is linked with the design vocation to deal with codes and integrate communicative elements in systems of local objects.

The translation is an action that creates a relationship and determines a passage; this aspect is very important if we talk about design and handcrafted practices and the valorisation of the tradition through innovative languages.

The translation can be considered as a creative action able to invent new representative objects with their own autonomy and a renovated cultural value.

In this project the translation expression happens in “inter-iconographic” terms: the texture of the textile product is visually translated in landscapes which characterise the territory where the product itself is made. It is a visual association which expresses a chromatic and narrative coherence.

In these comparisons (landscape pictures + *pezzotto* textile) we can read some connections and assonances with colours and signs of the Valtellina landscape. A capacity that seems to affirm the necessity to express – beyond trends – the belonging to a place, a community, a shared aesthetic memory (Guglielmetti & Trocchianesi, 2017) (Fig. 11-12).



Figure 11. *Intrecci di comunità* by Etno Project (Ilaria Guglielmetti, Diego Ronzio). The photograph matches give visual suggestions about the relationship between pezzotti, local areas and textile wastes (credits Ilaria Guglielmetti).



Figure 12. *Intrecci di comunità* by Etno Project (Ilaria Guglielmetti, Diego Ronzio). The photograph matches give visual suggestions about the relationship between pezzotti, local areas and textile wastes (credits Ilaria Guglielmetti).

3. Critical issues

From this critical analysis some interesting issues emerge:

- the relationship between *stereotypes* and *visual recurring themes* in interpreting the system of values and creating the territorial identity;
- the relationship between *description* and *abstraction* in choosing a communication style able to synthesise the soul and mood of a place.
- the creation of a “*grammar*” of *minimum elements* of a graphic language mixing *art and design*.

This last point takes the cue from the “coremi” and “iconemi” by Turri (1998) that defines the first as a “minimum territorial units” and the second as a “iconic perceptive units” within a system of signs able to represent a wider concept of the territory. Of course the concept of identity takes shape and meaning when the perceptive elements constitute an “unicum”, when they are read in a context that comprehends the relationships among parts in a complex system of values.

In the cases presented before we can recognise a grammar made of *visual recurring themes* representative of the Mediterranean area rather than *stereotypes*. Indeed stereotypes are a simplification of the common imaginary of a place, they are fixed images in people’s vision; instead, herein, we can see constant and variable elements that constitute the visual identity of places. The interpretation and re-interpretation of representative “keys” of the Mediterranean identity allows a dynamic system of signs and visual codes based on recurring and expanding topics: colours (mainly blue, white, yellow, orange, green tones), environmental and architectural icons (sun, sea, lighthouse, bell towers ...), local processes (handcrafted and rural objects). The cases chosen interpret the Mediterranean identity in a balance between *description* and *abstraction*: they are descriptive because they use external features of elements and objects but at the same time they are abstract in embracing an evocative communication register able to suggest the soul and mood of a place. The style is not redundant or common, it evokes, stylises, inspires. Furthermore, we can read a sort of Mediterranean landscape made of typical units of identity represented through symbolic and graphic themes able to outline an interesting territorial portrait.

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v

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