

From design to the Sea

Luca Mori

When the Italian nation was born, its economy was still based on a mainly textile industry and on artisanal and rural activities depending on local traditions for their inherited know-how and, at the same time, on more advanced nations such as England and Austria for the provision of technology. Capitals were scarce as were raw materials, so that the industrialization process was deprived of a strong political and institutional leadership: the concept of “design”, in its current meaning, only emerged many years afterwards.

For years and until very recently, the separation of art and technique, a particularly Italian way of seeing things, has remained deeply ingrained, preventing the recognition of designers’ actual role in the production process and particularly the definition of a modern industrial conscience that would understand the formal implications of the rational use of machines and serial production. The entire Unification experience was marked by a conflict between small groups of intellectuals, enlightened entrepreneurs and a frozen political-cultural establishment. Infrastructure and transportation immediately became crucial elements in meeting the more and more pressing needs to move people and merchandise across a country with very challenging orographical features – the Apennine range separates the productive areas from the sea – that required a particularly ingenious approach. In 1908, for example, Hungarian engineer Kalman Kandó and his Italian technical team devised, for the Genoa-Turin railway stretch, the famous electric locomotive called “Giant of the Giovi”, or project FS E 550. Powered by 3000V three-phase alternating current, this extraordinary machine, built in the Vado Ligure factory, could negotiate particularly steep gradients, which made it strategically crucial during the first world war. Railway tracks quadrupled over few years and such increase contributed to the gradual development of a widespread industrial network supporting the maintenance and design of trains and railway lines. That extraordinary technical-creative effort found its expression in the establishment of Ufficio Progetti FS as the very first integrated design entity in Italy.

The office was instrumental in the great design breakthrough of 1934 that opened the way to light electric locomotives, the so-called *littorine* (diesel rail-cars) which had compartment-free “open space” interiors and 3rd class cars with upholstered, albeit narrower, seats that updated the international wagon-lit layout.

They covered short, typically suburban stretches, with more frequent stops, and reflected a democratic and modern view of railway travel.

Based on the same concept, in 1936 Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig created one of his masterworks, the ETR 200, designed with a streamlined shape in the wind tunnel and boasting restrained and elegant interiors. On Sundays, the popular train trips organized by the OND (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the National Working Men’s Club) took city workers for a cheap fare to the sea and gave them their first taste of tourism.

At the same time the huge migration flow to America and the regime propaganda, along with the appearance of mass tourism, promoted the development, mainly in Genoa and Trieste, of the shipbuilding industry.

Between the two world wars the great dream of designers was not just reaching the sea but crossing it, as they recognized in travel an opportunity to convey their identity to the rest of the world. Some architects then decided they would contribute to create a fair and open society by using machines and technique as tools that would project the great cultural and art heritage of Italy and the Mediterranean into the future.

This was the direction taken by Gruppo 7 and MIAR (Movimento Italiano Architettura Razionalista), beacons of modern culture in the darkness of a nation that was still heavily underdeveloped compared to the rest of Europe. Those were the years of *Domus* and *Casabella*, two magazines founded respectively in 1928 and 1933 to explore new home-living and interior design trends and animated by major figures like Gio Ponti, Gustavo Pulitzer Finali, Giuseppe Pagano. Being in close contact with foreign experiences, they proposed in Italy a

1 — Donato Riccesi, “G. Pulitzer Finali. Il disegno della nave. Allestimenti interni (1925-1967)”, Marsilio editori, Venice 1985

2 — Andrea Branzi, “Introduzione al design italiano. Una modernità incompleta”, Baldini Castoldi Dalai editore, Milan 1999

3 — Paolo Piccione, “Giò Ponti. Le navi 1948-1953”, Idearte, Ideabooks, Milan 2010

4 — Gio Ponti, “Annate l’Architettura. L’architettura è un cristallo”, Vitali e Ghianda, Genoa 1957

new attitude that boldly confided in industry. They welcomed the modern code and adapted it to the Italian artisanal frame of mind that was so respectful of art influence and past heritage. As the representative of a certain Milanese enlightened and sophisticated middle-class, Gio Ponti wrote frequently about ships in his magazine, explaining in 1931 (issue nr. 46) that: “The challenge of ship interior design is not just assuring comfort, elegance, taste. With the contribution of artists and workers, it becomes the vivid reflection of the national civilization that produced the ship”. The star shining bright on its pages was Gustavo Pulitzer Finali, undisputed master of Italian ship design in the early 20th century and the only international-level designer who embraced the modern approach that had its epigones abroad. Unsurprisingly, he was born in 1887 in Trieste, the great mid-European capital that on one hand was lucky enough to absorb the extraordinary Austro-Hungarian technological skill (in turn partly derived from British military know-how) and, on the other, gravitated around the German-language area that had originated the Werkbund and the Bauhaus.

With his activity he always walked on the line between cult of reason and cult of beauty, with a marked preference for exceptional qualities and exotic refinement which defined his uniqueness and at the same time his limit. The fertile ground that gave birth to Italian style was made of small businessmen and furniture-related highly skilled craftsmen and was nourished by substantial commissions for the growing fleet of passenger ships; this led to the first examples of partnership between world of production and designers who managed ship construction. It should be noted that the particular style of ship interiors was quite in tune with the flexible and experimental character of the districts (the Brianza area in Lombardy and Veneto first of all) that were then beginning to specialize in this production.

Dulio and *Giulio Cesare*, the first ships built at the Ansaldo shipyard in Sestri Ponente, soon followed by the *Counts* (*Conte Rosso*, *Conte Verde*, *Conte Grande*, *Conte Biancamano*) covered the connection with the United States on the Genoa-New York route. They had a markedly traditional design, with not really streamlined hulls and interiors that reflected the then so popular historical taste. With the *Saturnia* class in the late ’20s, also due to construction experience gained in the war sector, exterior profiles become cleaner and more streamlined. “When one looks closely at the long strips of “fenêtres en longueur” corresponding to the decks surrounding the ship lengthwise, one is almost tempted to make an easy comparison with *Le Corbusier’s villa Stein in Garches*”¹.

Gustavo Pulitzer Finali designed ships like the *Neptunia* and *Oceania* that drew classes closer together by providing even the bottom ones with an acceptable comfort, thus pioneering the cruise-line concept. He had gained his first experience with ship interiors at Studio Stuard where he gave some environments a new formal approach. In the entirely historicist, Coppédé-dominated context of the time, inspiration was drawn by a range of styles including Louis XIV, XV, XVI and Directoire, Tuscan Renaissance, Piedmont Baroque, Spanish Moresque, XV century Florentine, Pompeian, XVIII century Baroque. Pulitzer reached his top expression with the *Victoria* motorship commissioned by Lloyd Triestino and launched in 1931 in Trieste. Its streamlined shape brings the famous *Bremen* to mind.

Helped by structural engineer Costanzi, he designed the 1st class restaurant as an amazing double-height space with large neoclassical mullioned windows. But here the ship frame, in its strut-stringer-beam articulation, is not hidden by ornament as it becomes one with the ship’s architecture and gives it its rhythm. A skilled and refined use of materials underlines this expressive approach also in the use of colour. The soffit of the metal roof-trusses is clad in polished macassar ebony; the side walls are faced with gold leaf, while the cross walls – decorated with Egyptian style bas-reliefs by Cernigoi – are clad in polished Indian walnut. Carpets and upholstery are blue. The buffet recess is fitted with Gio Ponti-designed Richard Ginori china. The ceilings already made use of innovative solutions like indirect lighting and

backlit coffered ceilings. Even the 2nd class polished macassar staircase has a markedly essential and elegant design free of ornamental compromise. Elsewhere there were corners of almost mystical and esoteric suspension, for example in the *Conte di Savoia*’s smoking room-bar, built in 1932 at the Adriatic Shipyards in Trieste. It was a typical interpretation of Italian modernism that mediated elements of metaphysical origin and what Andrea Branzi calls “imperfect neoclassicism”². Here a round plan covered by a gold and silver leaf mosaic cupola decorated with a painted planetary received indirect lighting from its perimeter. Significantly, it was the area Gio Ponti liked the best. He, who made use of Pulitzer’s experience in the ocean-liners he designed in the ’50s with Nino Zoncada³, wrote in *L’architettura è un cristallo*⁴: “The architect, the artist should keep in mind that in architecture function is an implied fact,

never a purpose (...) Architecture should work on the level of art, of enchantment (*qu’elle chante*: says Corbu)”. This condition of close osmosis with craftwork, with material know-how and sense, this opportunity the architect is given of making art and giving his design a strong communication power as a way of providing a new orientation and influence to the fruition of space, is a distinctive character of Italian design in that period. This “experimental” attitude is largely the result of a phase when self-sufficiency dictated the pursuit of new techniques and materials; as it is well known, the Vespa scooter was partially the result of technical solutions used in the aviation industry. In other words, it is an expression of the typically Italian “art of getting by”. Even during the radical experience of ’60s design, the relation with technology would be in Italy more than elsewhere mediated by a strong focus on the interpretation by the subject who “lives” and “uses” rather than on codes imposed from above.