

Chimneys and Social Symbolism

By Fabrizio Trisoglio

*"Come, let us build for ourselves a city,
and a tower whose top will reach into
heaven, and let us make for ourselves a
name, otherwise we will be scattered
abroad over the face of the whole earth."*

(Genesis 11:4)

In the cultural representation of human ambition to supremacy, whether material, moral or ideological, history demonstrates a tendency towards the vertical dimension: e.g. monoliths, towers, bell towers, chimneys and, in modern times up to the present day, the skyscrapers of large multinational companies, all of which suggest an image of power in their perceptive transfiguration.

In the industrial era, the chimney undoubtedly represents an architectonic dream, but it is also the unmistakable representation of a desire to dominate. Like the bell tower, a symbol of both spiritual and laic power in the Middle Ages, the chimney was the object of a profound debate between two opponents, different but equally valiant: the entrepreneurial middle class and the working class.

During this debate, which lasted for over one hundred years, it was only at the end of the 19th century that this architectonic element was interpreted as a symbol and recognized as a sign of power, especially through its artistic portrayal.

Chimneys, beyond their picturesque dimension, began to express strong social tensions and a new connotative meaning. The middle class at the height of its economic, politic and cultural control saw in the chimney the symbol of a "nobility of work" a new element that identified its own social achievement with respect to the other classes: the landed aristocracy, the military elite, and the clergy.

This icon of power reaches its highest peak in trademarks, in stock options and in business communication. The chimney is magnified, its billowing smoke darkens the sky, strongly suggesting its productive power.

On letterheads and trademarks, chimneys slowly came to prevail over bell towers, castle towers, earlier symbols of power. Some examples of this are the Rossi D'Angera letterhead (image 1) and the Società Anonima Tensi trademark (image 2). In the first case, the chimney is in contrast with the tower of the castle, symbol of longstanding military power;

while in the second one, it is in contrast with the spire of Virgin Mary on top of the Milan cathedral, symbol of ecclesiastical power. It is remarkable to compare this image with a photograph taken at the beginning of the century showing the cathedral and Santa Radegonda power plant (image 3), in which it is impossible not to notice how the chimney and the highest steeple of the cathedral challenge each other. Many other images of this period reflect a similar challenge.

It is clear that there is a new element of supremacy appearing among those that dominated the horizon for centuries: bell towers, belfries (for example, numerous alarm bell towers in Belgium and in the north of France). The towers of the castles found themselves challenged in height by the tenacious expression of an identity that was previously unrecognized.

We cannot ignore the importance of this portrayal in business communication. Chimneys became the protagonist on both business medallions and advertising posters. An example of this process is the cover of “Veni VD Vici” (image 4), a unique publication edited by the Società Anonima Verzocchi in which the activity and history of the company are shown through the illustrations of famous artists of the time such as Mario Stroppa, Fortunato Depero, Marcello Dudovich, Pietro Marussig, Giovanni Greppi and Marcello Nizzoli. The images proclaimed the resistance and the toughness of V&D firebricks while the cover depicted chimneys – his image emphasized the product, alluding not only to the idea of productivity, but also the power of the company.

Finding a single image that exemplifies advertising communication is practically impossible; numerous illustrations, brochures and posters show this tendency. Many of these were created by famous artists such as Mario Stroppa. The representation of the Pirelli della Bicocca plant (image 5) on the cover of the periodical of the Touring Club Italiano of June 1912 is emblematic. Here Mario Stroppa portrayed the chimney as the focal point from which the entrepreneurial soul of the company issued, masterfully evoked by the smoke in the sky under the shape of the company.

If the company creates social promotion and mixes consolidated hierarchies, this is not important only for the entrepreneurs, but also for the working class that grew out of the factory system. From the last decade of the 19th century, the working class countered with a totally contrasting image of the chimney. Seen as a symbol of cohesion and conflict, the chimney increasingly appeared in numerous illustrations of the socialist periodical journals, but also in many postcards, cyclostyles, caricatures and sometimes (in Russia and in Poland) in state posters (image 6).

There are many examples of these images in political journals such as «*Avanti!*», as well as minor illustrations and postcards. Political satire is a significant element; if we wish to have a complete perspective, we cannot ignore the relevance of Giuseppe Scalarini’s drawings (image 9) nor the illustrations of *Asino* or *Simplicissimus* (image 10).

In the years of protest, the poster is surely the most representative in the vast quantity of available material. The strong image of the clenched fist of «Lotta continua» (image 11) is an unequivocal sign. Here the chimney turns into a human arm, becoming the symbol of an unrelenting political and social struggle.

After years of conflicts and struggles, the decay of ideologies led to a moment of reflection: the chimney became part of the collective imagination as a symbol of the industrial society and its actors. The sensitivity and vision of such great artists as Seurat (image 12), Rousseau, Boccioni (image 13), Sironi (image 14), Otto Dix and many others, less well-known, but no less important, opened the way to the perception of a significant new feature of modernity.

The visual and perceptive shock of the Industrial Revolution appears to have diminished over time and with it, all the forces that made this period unique. On the other hand, the spread of industrial archaeology has led to the retrieval of the material bases (illustrations, posters and other print sources) on which it is possible now to reconstruct the identity of this exceptional period.

These shared values have spread slowly among the population, creating a common consciousness towards the material and immaterial remains of industrialization. Examples of this development are the Tate Modern Gallery in London or the logo of the British soccer club, Motherwell. The first, a former thermoelectric power plant built by Giles Gilbert Scott, is no longer a center of production; at present, it is a contemporary art museum where art, industry and collective memory join together and create a meeting point for all communities in the shadow of its chimney. The second, with stronger working-class origins, shows how the town's chimneys have become such an important part of a community as to be represented on the logo of the local soccer team.

Nowadays, chimneys are the last traces of the large "cathedrals of labor" of the past, preserving our historical memory of a complex period. Through this legacy, it is possible to create a meeting point, free from one-sided ideologies and feelings, where we share the strong roots that the industrial era has passed down to our current day.