

A Study Day for Culture, Communication and Business at the Isec Foundation

By Carlo Vinti

On 16th June 2008 at the headquarters of the Isec Foundation (Istituto per la Storia dell'Età Contemporanea) in Sesto San Giovanni, a study day was held on *Culture, Communication and Business in Italy*.

The conference, organized by Giorgio Bigatti and myself, and promoted by Isec together with the Lombardia Institute of Contemporary History, the IUAV University of Venice (the Venice Higher Learning Institute of Architecture) and the town of Sesto San Giovanni, confirmed the growing interest in the relationship between business and culture in Italy: in particular in the period following the Second World War and Italy's subsequent "economic miracle". At this time Italy's large industry involved intellectuals, artists and designers for the creation of their public image.

Bigatti reminded the public in his opening speech that the study day followed a Venice conference held in 2006, which had centered mainly on the people studying arts, architecture and design. In contrast, Isec's conference focused on historians of economics and industry; business scholars who presented a different point of view on communication strategies and cultural policies of such renowned Italian companies as Eni, Finmeccanica, Italsider, Olivetti, Pirelli and La Rinascente.

In my talk, I underlined three aspects common to the experience of these large entrepreneurial groups:

1. A method for constructing the corporate image developed mainly from the inside;
2. The attempt to find connections between the so-called "two cultures";
3. And finally, a controversial relationship, not easy to understand, between professional knowledge that has grown out of Italian experience and corporate theories originating in the United States.

Throughout the day, these themes were brought up repeatedly during the debate and in practically every presentation that followed.

First of all, several speakers, referred to the strict internal control exerted on promotional and image-related activities by large post-WW II companies. Up to the mid 1960s in the main large companies, there were large departments named "press and advertising division", "advertising section" or simply "advertising office". Although it is sometimes difficult to trace the activities of these internal divisions in company archives, their reconstruction often proves to be very fruitful.

Indeed, through these divisions, a strong corporate esthetic and cultural identity was created following the Olivetti model.

Donato Barbone, whose speech was dedicated to Pirelli, provided extremely interesting information about the years when the “advertising” of the Milanese company was directed by Leonardo Sinisgalli and then by Arrigo Castellani. At that time, the poet Vittorio Sereni, also worked at Pirelli as head of the press office and it was he who looked after the company’s advertising material. Therefore, it is not surprising that on the pages of a valuable corporate magazine, cited by Barbone, one found only debates about art and technique, subjectivity and objectivity in the field of advertising communication.

Fabio Lavista also analyzed the role of some specific offices of the large Italian company; for example groups such as Olivetti, Iri and Eni created offices whose role was to attempt to set up an economic plan in Italy.

If Italian industry of the 50s began to experiment with the introduction of humanistic knowledge like psychology and sociology into the company culture, undoubtedly the advertising and public relations offices as well as in the departments managing the relationship with the personnel also initiated an ambitious, generous and sometimes ingenuous attempt to link classical culture with the industrial, technical and engineering environment. This is a perspective which originated at Olivetti and subsequently spread to other centers of Italian large industry, thanks to people like Leonardo Sinisgalli. On this point, Giuseppe Berta reminded us that we should drastically revise the superficial judgments which, at the time, referred to a sort of feudal court gathered around Adriano Olivetti. Berta insisted on the necessary – not merely ornamental – relationship of the intellectuals in the Ivrea Company, mentioning in particular, Riccardo Musatti, the visionary advertising director for Olivetti until his death in 1965 who was lucidly aware of Italy’s “Southern Problem”. Similarly, Franco Amatori underlined that *La Rinascente*, in its period of greatest expansion after WW II, actively supported design and created culture, organizing famous exhibitions within the department stores, while it defined efficient strategies of managerial rationalization and introduced innovations in marketing.

Many others speakers during the conference highlighted how, during that period, it was possible to realize a beneficial exchange between the “two cultures” that went beyond the mere recruitment of writers and intellectuals.

The other theme which appeared frequently at the conference was the relationship between Italian professional experience and American managerial theory and methodology, frequently subject to a process of adjustment, renegotiation and reinterpretation. Sandro Rinauro’s contributed significant observations regarding the wariness and resistance of Italian managers towards such methods as market surveys. The cultural prejudice that Italian managers and intellectuals showed towards the quantitative methods of statistics was clearly reflected by the debate among the supporters of marketing and of American theories on advertising and writers, artists and graphic designers working in the advertising offices of Italy’s large industry at that time.

Regarding the assimilation of American business culture, from the 1950s the introduction of concepts such as human and public relations was extremely relevant. These concepts played an important *role* in the public iron and steel industry; for example, as illustrated by the film *Le mani! La testa! Gli occhi! Eugenio Carmi, un artista in fabbrica* (Genoa 2006), which was shown to the public attending the study day. At the Cornigliano steel plant in Genoa, the prevailing notion, typical of public relations, was that the company should be a “glass house” whose every aspect is open to the view of the public. From the beginning, this task was entrusted not only to the journalistic talent of the public relations office, but also to the visual direction of an artist like Eugenio Carmi, hired in 1956 by Gianlupo Osti, an enlightened manager of Finsider and spearhead

in the first years of Itlasider's history, of important cultural initiatives such as the exhibition *Sculture nella città* held in Spoleto in 1962.

The extraordinary features of this experience emerge clearly in the video directed by Fabio Bettonica (conception, texts and script by Eugenio Alberti Schatz and Valentina Carmi), gathering the testimonies, among others, by Gillo Dorfles, Umberto Eco and Arnaldo Pomodoro. Through Carmi's skill, this video powerfully reconstructs the work of the blast furnaces and continuous trains, the sheet metal and other semi-processed products, the workers and the life of the entire corporate community; the film also shows how more abstract data on the economic trend of the company was transformed into an extremely stylized image that was underpinned by a utopian vision of the relationship between arts and industry. Carmi was present during the projection and spoke at the end of it.

The other presentations centered on further important companies of the 1950s. Alberto Bassi analyzed the successes obtained by Breda (a railway construction company) in the different areas of the project: from architecture to industrial design, up to the graphic planning of the promotional materials. Biagio Longo spoke about Aem (gas and electricity suppliers) communication, while Daniele Pozzi dealt with the case of Eni, analyzing the strategy of commercial communication adopted when the company was managed by Enrico Mattei. The strict relationship with American culture, the creation of a study service populated by young people, the modern language of graphic communication, industrial cinema and architecture were all the aspects which made Eni an extremely interesting example apart from those aspects strictly linked to Mattei's personality.

The changing fortunes of other industries mentioned during Isec's study day were often linked to an individual manager or entrepreneur who had managed to act as a bridge between industry and the production of culture. Paolo Rossi, speaking about this, wondered whether individuals like Giuseppe Luraghi, Adriano Olivetti, Giuseppe Martinoli or Gianlupo Osti could be considered managers who lent themselves to culture, or intellectuals with great managerial skills.

However, the disappearance of these personalities was not the only reason for the decline of the model of corporate image focused on culture. Paolo Bricco clearly underlined that Adriano Olivetti's legacy in his company, for example, lasted for a long period of time; as long as it was possible to find continuity with his particular vision of the company at least in the field of design and cultural policy.

According to Nicola Crepax', who spoke about Luraghi, the world in which it was possible to dream of a new technical-classical integration in the name of industry ended along with the Ford company's model of mechanized production and his ambitions of participating in the lives of workers' and of the company. At the most specific level of communication strategies, the emergence of alternative models linked to marketing certainly played an important role, as did the growing disenchantment with industry by the same intellectual field that previously admired it so much during the 1950s,.

Reconsidering all the contributions to the study day at the Isec Foundation, the need to know and understand that period better is clear, perhaps enlarging the analysis to some less famous examples. We should certainly avoid all nostalgic recollections that gloss over the contradictions of those years. One important prospect would be that of trying to retrace continuity trends and to understand the legacy of the pioneering stage of Italy's economic boom, full of easy enthusiasm and fortunate intuition in the relationship between culture and business in Italy.