

Not only Dolls: Lenci's Adventure *by Pier Luigi Bassignana*

The exhibition *Arte e industria a Torino. L'avventura Lenci. Ceramica d'arredo 1927-1937 (Art and Industry in Turin. Lenci's Adventure. Decorative Ceramics 1927-1937)* which took place in Turin from March 23 to August 22, 2010, has drawn attention to a little known chapter of Turin's industrial history - the development of industrial activities in the period between the two World Wars. These activities are distinct from Turin's traditional engineering role, especially that of automobile production.

The history of Lenci Ceramics [founded in 1919, the factory produced figurines, wall plaques and decorative ceramics] is emblematic of the influence exerted on the cultural and artistic environment in Turin. Lenci's Turin was, indeed, the city of the industrial, artistic and cultural initiatives organized by Riccardo Gualino [a wealthy industrialist and patron of the arts at that time] and a driving intellectual center of [the revived artistic and social movement of] "second Futurism".

The Centro on line storia e cultura dell'industria [Online Center for Industrial History and Culture] produced the video *La Torino di Lenci (Lenci's Turin)* to accompany the exhibition, published on the website www.storiaindustria.it

On April 23, 1919, Enrico Scavini, business agent, formally requested Turin's prefecture that he be granted the rights to the trademark 'Lenci', an acronym for *Ludus est nobis constanter industria [Play is our constant work]*: a motto created by Ugo Ojetti, using the letters of 'Lenci', the pet name of Scavini's wife, Elena König.

From a formal point of view, this official act represented the founding of the Lenci doll factory; however the origin of the company can be traced back to a tragic event for the couple when their first daughter suddenly died victim of a Spanish influenza epidemic. To react to the depression that followed this event, Elena König started to create rag dolls, imagining that they could be toys for her lost child. At first, known only among the friends of the family, Elena König's dolls soon achieved popularity with a wider public who appreciated them for their simplicity but also for their creative and meticulous workmanship.

Success was immediate. The world was emerging from a long and bloody war and felt a strong desire to turn the page. Lenci's dolls, with adorably expressive features and dressed in colored clothes, were a perfect answer to this need and in contrast to traditional dolls, with ceramic

heads and crinoline dresses, which were fragile and costly, these had the advantage of being made of felt and therefore, unbreakable and less expensive.

The company's success was also determined by their participation in many of the exhibitions of the time, starting with the first International Exhibition of Decorative Arts held in Monza in 1923, where Madame Lenci received an honorary diploma. Other important recognitions followed: in particular, during the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925; and during the International Exhibition in Turin in 1928.

On the wave of success, the production of the company expanded to include not only dolls but also clothes for children, furniture for children and accessories for women. Along with the production the number of employees grew as well, from the few people of the first years (a seamstress and a modeler) rising to 600 people in 1930, with the consequent transfer of the activity from via Marco Polo 5, to the larger structure of via Cassini 7.

With the growth of the company, the first problems also began due to ruthless competition, that could produce less expensive products just copying a few models. Therefore, to compensate for the decrease in sales caused by this competition, in 1928, Lenci began to produce ceramic art. To produce these pieces, the company called upon some of the most important artists working in Turin in that period: from Gigi Chessa to Felice Tosalli, from Giovanni Grande to Sandro Vacchetti, from Teonesto Deabate to Mario Sturani.

Ceramic production temporarily helped to increase the sales of the company, until the Financial Crisis of 1929 during which, profits declined sharply. To avoid bankruptcy in 1933, the couple accepted an external associate, Pilade Garella, who in 1937, became the sole owner of the company.

The Garella family secured Lenci's survival for a long period, until 1997, when the ownership passed to Bambole Italiane srl, which continued the activity until 2002, when the company declared bankruptcy and was definitively closed down.