

BIOGRAPHIES

ALBERTO MANZI (1924–1997)

SOURCES

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Alberto Manzi was born in 1924 in Rome. In 1942 he received his diploma as nautical engineer as well as school teacher. This dual approach: technical-scientific and pedagogical, would mark the entire life span of Alberto Manzi, helping to define his educational proposal. He participated at the II World as a submariner. After the war he graduated in biology and began his activity as a teacher (Maestro) - or as one could say as many teachers - as well as a writer for children.

THE PRISON TEACHER

Manzi's first experience as teacher is in a juvenile prison in Rome, at the re-education institution Aristide Gabelli. From 1946 - 47 he had to teach 90 students, ages 9 to 17, 18 of them analphabets. As he told Roberto Farné in an interview in 1997, he earned the right to do school challenging the head of the group of the boys with fists (good TV teacher, The Alberto Manzi lesson). The results were remarkable. At Gabelli, Manzi made a monthly newspaper, the first of its kind in a reformatory, and in collaboration with the young prisoners, was born the story of Grogh from which would come out the first novel: *Grogh, the story of a beaver*, published by Bompiani in 1950 and translated in 28 languages.

TEACHER OF THE POOR

The first half of the fifties represented an important moment of transition in the biography of Manzi. After the Roman experience in the reformatory Aristide Gabelli, he taught in Campagnano di Roma, as he prepared for his second degree in pedagogy, later specializing in psychology. In the early fifties, he is dedicated to the problems of education of the popular classes, and specifically to what had always been the crucial and unresolved issue of the modern and national educational system: the remoteness of rural areas, its inaccessibility. To the problem of rural schools, Manzi dedicated his notes, like 1950 the open letter to the Minister of Education and the 2 pages of "Thoughts to a school of today".

TEACHER IN SOUTH AMERICA

Surely a central event of those years, was the trip to Latin America. In the summer of 1955 by the University of Geneva Manzi received a commission

for scientific research in the Amazon rainforest. He went to study the ants, he would find out a lot more. It was the revelation of the social conditions of the rural Latin American world between the Andes and the Amazonas, and the beginning of a relationship, not without dangers, which would last for over twenty years. From then on, every summer, Manzi would go to teach 'the Indians' reading and writing, first alone and then with a group of college students.

The 'maestero' drew up a real program for the education for Latin American peasants and in its activities could count on the support of the Pontifical Salesian University. Accused from the governments of Perú and Bolivia of being a "Guevarist," he was considered "a persona non grata" and denied entering the countries. He will return to these places clandestinely, until 1984.

Of that experience are four novels left:

- *The moon in the barracks* (1974) and *El loco* (1979) published by Salani,
- *And it came Saturday* and *Gugù*, published posthum in 2005 (Iesa, Monticiani).

TEACHER IN TELEVISION

All this first phase of he's educational activities culminated in 1960 with the famous transmission *It is never too late* (1960-1968). The director of RAI was looking for a teacher to teach adult analphabets. The idea of the program and title was from the ten general director of public education. *It is never too late* is considered to be one of the most important pedagogical experiments in adult education. He taught reading and writing to more than one million of Italians. In 1965, *It is never too late* was awarded in Tokyo, on indication from UNESCO, as one of the most successful television programs in the fight against illiteracy. In 1987 Manzi was called from the Argentinean government for a 60 hours training course for university professors in order to elaborate a "National Plan for Literacy" based on the experience *Non è mai troppo tardi*. Two years later Argentina received the international prize for the best literacy program in all South America from the United Nations.

TEACHER IN RADIO

In 1951 Manzi won a radio award for a children's play presented on the radio. Since then he had a collaboration with

"the radio for schools", for forty years, from 1956 to 1996. 1951 he had already realized a novel with the narrative contributions of the young listeners, which was entitled *The Treasure of ZI CESAREO*. He had understood the potential of radio which was ideal to stimulate imagination and creativity. He was author of various transmissions and he also wrote and reworked fairy tales for children. In 1996, the 40 transmissions of *Curiosities of Italian Language* for Italians abroad and foreigners learning the Italian Language, were his last collaboration with Radio Rai.

RETURN TO SCHOOL

The school where Alberto Manzi returned at the end of his television experience was the same where he was already teaching for years and where he would remain until the achievement of the pension, Istituto Fratelli Bandiera in Rome.

Manzi's teaching was based on the idea that the student does not come to class with an empty head, ready to be filled by the master, and that teaching means at the same time content delivery and refutation of false beliefs. He wants to transform the school in respect of the child. In June 1975, teacher in elementary school, he refused to classify the students and explained the reasons for his decision: classify meant "to prevent a conscious learning, obliging to accept established definitions, educating to lies and falsehood...". In 1977, Law No. 517 of August 4 imposed on teachers of elementary school the personal evaluation form of pupils. The teacher was required to fill out and keep updated a document had to be reported, "with systematic observations", the maturation levels reached by children. The following year Manzi explained to the head master that he would completed the II quarter assessments only if they would demonstrate the validity of the vote and the classification in the growth process "in intelligence, in solidarity, in friendship" of the pupils. Alberto Manzi refused to fill out the evaluation forms and for two consecutive years, devised a stamp "DOES WHAT HE CAN. WHAT HE CAN'T HE DOES NOT DO." From 1978 to 1980 he didn't follow the Ministry request and was referred to the Disciplinary Board of the Authority of Rome and was suspended from teaching for two months and half his salary was cut.

MANZI AS A WRITER

A few years after *Grogh* Manzi writes *Orzowei*, for certain the most successful book of the author; won the Andersen Prize in 1956, re-edited by Bompiani in the same year after leaving in 1955 to Vallecchi and translated into 32 languages. *Orzowei*, "the foundling" is the derogatory nickname of Isa, a white boy abandoned and growing up in a village of the Zulù tribe. His will be the fate of a man doubly excluded. Cast out from the world who also had welcomed lost child, Isa is closed to a return to the white community. *Orzowei* was an immense international success. In 1980, Rai will obtain 13 episodes and a film version. The theme song was played on 33 and 45. Thanks to this, Isa the Orzowei "...rejected by all and died with the hope that whites and blacks one day could live together and get along beyond the skin color and the tribe ...", reached a resounding success, becoming the hero of a generation.

Alberto Manzi during his life has taken many and varied activities. Thanks to these he was assigned several awards, including international awards: for novels and stories, for radio, for television broadcasts, for pedagogical activities and writings for the youth. These awards are represented by different objects: antennas and nibs of gold, diplomas, plaques, trophies, medalsThe Collodi Prize for *Grogh, the story of a beaver* was the first of a long series, while the Bardesoni Prize for the comedy *Tupiriglio* was the last. Among international awards, the recognizing the UN stands for the program *It's never too late*. In 1962 he was also appointed Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic. After being part of the Commission for the Law in Defense of Minors 1993, the following year Manzi accepted the candidacy for mayor of the municipality of Pitigliano offered to him by the Democrats of the Left and becomes Mayor. 4th of December 1997 Manzi dies at the age of 73.

Manzi is one of the most important Italian writers for youth, he writes numerous tales and books with recurrent topics that are still important in our days: the relationship of men with their environment, values of freedom and solidarity, the refusal of any form of violence and racism.

BRUNO MUNARI (1907–1998)

SOURCES

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Bruno Munari was an Italian artist and designer with wide-ranging skills. He worked as a painter, sculptor, and industrial designer, he was a graphic artist and filmmaker, a writer and a poet. Munari believed in the power of simple design to stimulate the imagination. He is considered one of the greatest protagonists of art, design and graphics of the 20th century, always maintaining unchanged his whimsical creativity to support his constructive survey of form through visual and tactile experiments, and his great ability to communicate through words, objects, toys.

FUTURISM AND USELESS MACHINES

In 1927 he took part in the events of the second Futurism in Milan, participating in the collective of the Pesaro Gallery as well as the Venice Biennale and the Quadrennial in Rome and Paris in the thirties. 1933 he exhibited his “useless machines”, mechanical devices studied for their aesthetic characteristics, presented as “experimental models to test the possibility of aesthetic information of visual language.” From 1934 to 1936 he devoted himself to abstract painting.

ARTE CONCRETA AND ARTE POVERA

In 1948, together with A. Soldiers, G. Monnet, G. Dorfles, he founded the MAC (Concrete Art Movement). In the fifties his research resumed with a series of “concave-convex sculptures” (1949-65), of paintings “positive-negative” (1951 onwards), of three-dimensional experimental models (Composition on the square; Travel Sculptures; Structures continuous), until the visual experiment obtained with polarized light (from 1953 onwards). In the mid 1950s-’60s Munari was concurrently in Milan with Arte Povera artists such as Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni.

DESIGN AS ART

Munari and many other Italian artists began to publish their ideas in journals, some which are still published, and to make art renegotiating the definition of the true artist as separate from an outmoded, elitist avant-gardism. Munari also published articles and books of essays about the overlap of art and design and the changing roles of art in contemporary society, perhaps the most famous being *Design As Art* (1971).

ILLEGIBLE BOOKS

His *Illegible Books* (1966), known also as *Unreadable Books*, were books made as visual treatments and experiments in form. They seek the same “harmonic relationship between all the parts” that his kinetics did. The same could be said about his children’s books.

CHILDREN’S BOOKS

Munari was interested in the interrelationship between games, creativity and childhood. For this reason, he strove to create children’s materials that would support the maintenance of the young mind’s elasticity and point of view. He did not believe in the inherent value of fantastical stories of princes and princesses, or dragons and monsters; instead, he wanted to create simple stories about people, animals, and plants that awaken the senses. Books with basic story lines and a humorous twist, brought to life by simple, colorful illustrations drawn with clarity and precision. For these works he won the Andersen award for Best Children’s Author in 1974, a graphic award in the Bologna Fair for the childhood in 1984, and a Lego award for his exceptional contributions on the development on creativity of children in 1986. In addition, he created other “pre-books,” to inspire a love of reading in pre-literate minds. Munari’s *Pre-Books (Prelibri)*, first published in 1980, creating spaces for tactile play to encourage musing and contemplation. The twelve small *Pre-Books* are made of “materials like transparent plastic, cloth, paper, and wood. They are meant to tell stories through the visual, tactile, sonorous, thermal, and physical.”

LABORATORIOS

Munari was a fan of simplicity, which he believed was found in both nature and children. He eventually renounced his design career to lead international children’s workshops he called *Laboratorios*, beginning in 1977. In these workshops, Munari focused on the positive creative imagination of kids “who come out of school happy and laughing,” rather than dwelling on institutionalized Modern Art.

THE WORKSHOP SERIES

Roses in the Salad (see title picture) is one of a series of books referred to as The Workshop Series. This series, recently back in print, also includes *Drawing a Tree*, about plant symmetry, and *Drawing the Sun*, a meditation on shadow, color, and ways to portray the sun. The first four books in the Workshop Series were drawn from Munari’s educational workshops offered for children.

XEROGRAPHIES

Another book in The Workshop Series, *Original Xerographies* (1977), which Munari described as “methodical studies performed on an electrostatic copier,” was comprised of what he called original copies. To generate these copies, he moved paper around on the platen glass and turned the photocopied errors into discreet works of art. Munari’s simple but brilliant concept was rooted in his love of play and movement. During the golden age of the Xerox Art movement (from the 1970s to the 1990s), many artists regarded Munari as the founding member of what is referred to in a 1979 photocopy art catalogue *Electroworks* as Generation One: the first artists to experiment with this new medium. His multi-faceted communication skills manifested in many different fields:

- Industrial communication and publicity.
- School books: *The eye and the art*. Art education for middle school, in 1992; *Sounds and ideas to improvise*; *Build creative paths in music education and teaching instrumental*, 1995.
- Games, graphical laboratories and research books.