

mosaic of partnerships and contacts as reflected in the complex artistic development of Ponis's manufactory, in its frequent presence at exhibitions and in numerous important public and private commissions in interior design and decoration.

#### MITA ON SHOW

During its fifty years of activity, MITA took part in numerous national and international exhibitions, a fact also reflected in the many diplomas to be found in the archive.

Although not attested by the period documentary sources, on the occasion of the Fourth Monza Triennale in 1930 Ponis was responsible for the carpets on display presented by DIANA, the laboratory of decorative arts Mario Labò had founded in Genoa two years earlier, one for the dining room and the other for the ladies' salon, designed respectively by Labò and Oscar Saccorotti. Also made on MITA looms were further carpets also exhibited at Monza: one furnished the professional studio of the Pennati company in Cesano Maderno, designed by the architects Paolo Buffa and Antonio Cassi Ramelli, while the other, for the living room of the Meroni & Fossati furnishing company in Lissone, designed by the architect Vittorio Cabiati. In the official catalogue both appear as made by DIANA. It can therefore be assumed that, in the early years of manufacturing, Labò and Ponis were working together in a kind of creator-executor relationship. However, the situation seems to have developed very quickly, since in the early 1930s articles

appeared in "Domus" which explicitly mentioned MITA and Ponis. The archive has also turned up the design sketch for the carpet *I Lottatori* (The Wrestlers) by the Palermo painter Alberto Bevilacqua for the Athletes' room, again at the 1930 Triennale. Also found were designs by Francesco Di Cocco, on display here in the section dedicated to MITA carpets, which show clear similarities in style and composition with the tapestry *I leoni di mare* (The sea lions) that the Roman artist presented at the same exhibition, as confirmed by Lidia Morelli in an article that appeared in the January 1931 issue of "La casa bella".

In the 1930s, MITA participation at the Milan Triennals continued regularly. The Nervi-based manufactory returned to the Giovanni Muzio Palazzo dell'Arte in 1933, 1936 and 1940, the last one before Italy's intervention the Second World. MITA also took part in two Universal Exhibitions, the first in Brussels in 1935 and then in Paris in 1937, winning the silver medal in both cases.

After the war, the company returned to Milan and participated in the first post-war Triennale in 1947, which also included a MITA carpet design competition involving, among others, Antonia Campi, Ettore Sottsass Jr. and Lyda Levi; further editions followed in 1951 and 1954. On that occasion MITA exhibited the tapestry *La favola* (The Fairy Tale) by Luzzati, who later returned in 1973; by this time Ponis had already passed away and his wife, Teresa Maddalena Pascocci, who had always been her husband's irreplaceable collaborator, was in charge of the company.

# Artistic Textiles

Art and design in the production of MITA 1926 - 1976

#### MITA 1926-1976

The acronym MITA comes from the company's original name – *Manifattura Italiana Tappeti Artistici* (Italian Artistic Carpets Manufactory) – changed later to *Manifattura Italiana Tessuti Artistici* (Italian Artistic Fabrics Manufactory). It was founded in October 1926 by Mario Alberto Ponis "with the aim of using new mechanical inventions in the manufacture of classic hand-knotted carpets". After an initial phase of manufacturing carpets with non-original oriental designs and decorations (one of the most popular models bore the name *Smirne*, the ancient name for Izmir), Ponis began to collaborate with artists and architects who helped him try out innovative stylistic and iconographic themes. Apart from the important contacts he maintained with leading exponents of the futurist movement – documented in the exhibition by sketches by Fortunato Depero, but also attested by his bond of friendship with Fedele Azari and by the sale of MITA carpets to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Giacomo Balla – what turned out to be crucial in the years between the wars were his collaborations with Milanese architects – not only Gio Ponti, a frequent visitor to the factory at Nervi and promoter of its activities on the pages of "Domus", but also Tomaso Buzzi, Paolo Buffa, Emilio Lancia and Gigiotti Zanini. Decisive in this context was also the relationship he established at the turn of the 1930s with the Genoese architect Mario Labò and with DIANA (Decorazioni Industrie Artistiche Nuovi Arredamenti – New Furniture Artistic Decoration Manufactories). But equally important was his encounter with the sculptor Arturo Martini, several of whose plaster and terracotta works Mario Alberto Ponis kept in his private art collection.

After the war – during which MITA manufactured suits and accessories for the Italian Air Force – the Nervi manufactory began to expand its production range by entering into new partnerships. As it gradually moved away from carpet weaving, MITA began to specialize in the production of fabrics and tapestries, made primarily for shipping companies or on public commissions, as in the case of the Aldo Bosco's tapestry for the meeting room in the new RAI headquarters in Genoa made between 1967 and 1968.

Throughout his active entrepreneurial career Ponis never

stopped experimenting with new avenues of artistic research, and in the late 1950s, thanks to contracts drawn up with artists such as Enrico Paulucci, Emanuele Rambaldi, Oscar Saccorotti, Emanuele Luzzati, Leo Lionni, Eugenio Carmi, Emilio Scanavino and Arnaldo Pomodoro, he launched various limited-run editions of panels, printed on hemp and linen, which were presented as genuine designer multiples. In the mid-sixties, evidence of the factory's mission to keep diversifying its production came in the making of laminated panels for ships, railway carriages and residential furnishings using the same decorative motifs as for fabrics.

Unless otherwise indicated, all the works come from the M.A. Ponis MITA (Nervi) Archive and are on loan to the Wolfsonian – Palazzo Ducale Fondazione per la Cultura, Genova

#### MITA SETS OUT TO THE SEA

MITA produced a wide range of textiles in a variety of sectors. However, its collaboration with the leading Italian and foreign shipping companies deserves special mention. Its first involvement in this sphere dates back to the years between the wars, when the Nervi-based manufactory produced several models of carpets for the shipping lines *Navigazione Generale Italiana* and *Sitmar*.

The real turning point in this context came after the war, and coincided with the beginning of the company's long period of intensive collaboration with Italy's two leading naval interior designers: Gustavo Pulitzer Finali and Giovanni "Nino" Zoncada, both of whom moved to Genoa around 1947-1948. MITA became involved with their design and decoration projects at the time when the *Conte Biancamano* (1949) was being restructured and re-furnished for the *Italia Società di Navigazione*. It was for this ocean liner that Ponis's factory made the long-thread wool tapestry designed by Mario Sironi that hung on the back wall of Pulitzer's first-class lounge.

Later MITA made a tapestry designed by Michael Rachlis for the first-class reading room on the steam-turbine propelled ship

## Artistic Textiles. Art and design in the production of MITA 1926-1976

by Matteo Focchessati and Gianni Franzone

Palazzo Ducale, Loggia degli Abati

March 25th - June 19th, 2016

Opening hours: 3pm/7pm from Tuesday to Friday; 10am/7pm Saturday and Sunday; closed on Monday

THE TICKET OFFICE IS AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE SALGADO EXHIBITION

PALAZZO DUCALE Piazza Matteotti 9 - 16123 Genova - info: ☎ 010.8171663 - www.palazzoducale.genova.it

Free admission to the Wolfsonian (Via Serra Gropallo 4, Genova Nervi) for the holders of the MITA exhibition ticket

## WOLFSONIANA

in the Nervi Park the first Italian museum devoted

to the decorative and propaganda arts of the period 1880-1945

*Andrea Doria*, which set off on her maiden voyage to New York on January 14, 1953 and tragically sank in the Atlantic on 26 July 1956. Another important tapestry by Enrico Ciuti was then made, again for Pulitzer, for the first-class lounge on the ocean liner *Cristoforo Colombo*, launched in 1953.

MITA also made a decisive contribution to the success of the Costa style, thanks to the work of Zoncada, who collaborated on the decorations and interior design of the principal liners that made up the Genoese fleet. Worthy of note: the *Mosca 58* curtains in mixed linen by Emanuele Luzzati for the motor vessel *Anna C.* (1948); the *Rosemarie* soft furnishings by Oscar Saccorrotti and *Ginevra* by Lele Luzzati for the motor vessel *Franca C.* (1965); and *Cordoba* by Enrico Paulucci for *Federico C.* (1961). Also worthy of mention are the two large tapestries *Composizione astratta* (Abstract Composition) by Paulucci and *Il Flauto magico* (The Magic Flute) by Luzzati for the *Eugenio C.* (1965-1966). In 1968, a year after his famous stage sets for the Rossini opera at Florence's Maggio Musicale, Luzzati also created the tapestry *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie) for the *Carla C.* As a final example, the Genoese artist Luzzati, like others who worked for MITA, was responsible for designing the souvenir scarves the shipping companies had specially made and which were then presented to the female voyagers at the end of the cruise. Worthy of particular mention are the ones made for the Spanish motor vessels *Cabo San Roque* and *Cabo San Vicente* belonging to the Seville company Ybarra y Cia (1960), whose interiors were again designed by Pulitzer.

### MARIO ALBERTO PONIS. ENTREPRENEUR, INVENTOR AND COLLECTOR

A man of many interests and numerous talents, Mario Alberto Ponis (Florence 1893 – Genoa 1970) was not only the capable businessman who ran MITA but, following in the family tradition – his father Crescentino was a railway employee who had a passionate interest in mechanics and produced numerous inventions, including a hand-printer and a hydro-cycle – he developed a wide range of highly varied patents.

In addition to designing loom models that were used in manufacturing, in 1954 he designed the caravan known as the *Chiocciola* (Snail) – “a towed motor vehicle for sleeping in, with a lowerable roof” – which was presented that same year at the 36th Turin International Motor Show.

He had been an air enthusiast since his boyhood; it all started one evening in June 1908 when together with his father he had watched, from the old parade ground in Turin, stunts performed by the French aviator Ferdinand Marie Léon Delagrangé. In 1914, Mario Alberto passed the course for pilot

officers and saw action as an aviator on several fronts during the First World War. In the second half of the 1930s, mindful of these experiences and taking advantage of the war-mongering national political climate, he began to collaborate with the Italian Air Force. For them he patented – and had specially made by MITA – heated flying suits, parachutes, emergency food bags, special life jackets and, with the help of Luigi Vietti, a particular “metal helmet equipped with a means of protection against the cold and the heat and which also served camouflage purposes”; these were to make his fortune.

His personal collection of works of art, many of which are still in the possession of his heirs, testifies to the relationships and friendships he nurtured during his long career as a businessman. In addition to paintings by Oscar Saccorrotti, Emanuele Rambaldi, Enrico Paulucci, Emilio Scanavino and Emanuele Luzzati, who designed the patterns for MITA fabrics after the Second World War, Ponis also collected works by artists close to Mario Labò with whom he had formed a somewhat lively professional connection in the early days of his adventure. It was through Labò that Ponis came into contact with Arturo Martini in the second half of the 1920s; and from that period date the plaster panel *La tempesta* (The Tempest; c. 1926) and the terracotta *Le bagnanti* (The Bathers; 1927), which was later put into production by ILCA (*Industria Ligure Ceramiche Artistiche* – Ligurian Artistic Ceramics Factory) – founded by Labò in Nervi in 1928 – and a copy of which was for a long time part of the collection kept by Arturo Ottolenghi, whose German wife, Herta Wedekind, made designs for MITA carpets.

In 1940, when Ponis decided to move the company into a larger, more functional building, he appointed Luigi C. Daneri as the architect. At the time, Daneri embodied the most modern and up-to-date trends on the scene in Genoa. The building, which still stands in Via Santa Maria Assunta in Nervi, reflects the architect's allegiance to the dictates of Italian rationalism and international functionalism: clean, clear volumes; light colours and cutting-edge materials, such as concrete-framed glass blocks; and ribbon windows that free up the perimeter walls and allow light to flood the building's working areas.

### MITA CARPETS

The *Manifattura Italiana Tappeti Artistici* (Italian Artistic Carpets Manufactory) was opened in October 1926 in premises on Via Campostano 3 in the Nervi district of Genoa. Ponis's goal was clear from the start: he wanted to launch the mechanized production of hand-knotted carpets in order to “... bring down the cost price to a level much lower than the

one hitherto imposed by other processes or by imports, while achieving a highly artistic intent that is clearly reflected in the name and followed in the directives,” as he himself put it on December 2, 1927, when writing to the Board of Small-scale Manufacturers of the Province of Genoa. At the time the company had seven looms operated by as many workers but, as early as the following March, Ponis transformed it into a public company, doubling its share capital and bringing in partners “so as to gain more momentum and to increase production”.

The first MITA artefacts were traditional “oriental” rugs but soon Ponis sensed the direction of market demand and decided to add “modern” models. His relationship with the futurist Fortunato Depero put him ahead of his time. Depero, who in 1919, together with his wife Rosetta Amadori, had opened the *Casa d'arte* in Rovereto, from which also came the famous tapestries in marquetry of coloured cloth, some of which were presented with great success at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925 and the following year at the 15th Venice Biennale. The link with Depero is confirmed by the design sketches for carpets on display in this section and some examples of their correspondence, but also by the copy of the famous “bolted” book which the Trentino artist printed in 1927 and gave to Ponis with a signed dedication.

Ponis was someone who wanted to renew the art of carpet-making and so it was inevitable that he should come into contact in Genoa with the architect Mario Labò, who at the time was engaged in an interesting attempt to modernize local production in the field of the decorative arts, as shown by the opening of DIANA (*Decorazioni Industrie Artistiche Nuovi Arredamenti* – New Furniture Artistic Decoration Manufactories) and ILCA (*Industria Ligure Ceramiche Artistiche* – Ligurian Artistic Ceramics Factory), both established in 1928. It was no wonder that MITA was responsible for some of the rugs made by the DIANA that Labò presented at the 4th Triennale of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art held in Monza in 1930. His contact with Gio Ponti must have begun around the same time: this led to an artistic partnership that proved fundamental to the future development of MITA and to a sincere friendship that outlasted their professional collaboration, as is clear from the correspondence and many greeting cards still in the possession of the Ponis heirs. The Milanese architect not only created designs and decorative patterns for MITA carpets but also promoted the production of the Nervi manufactory from the pages of “Domus”, the magazine he had founded in 1928. Ponti was also the conduit that joined Ponis with other architects of the “Novecento Milanese”: Paolo Buffa, Tomaso Buzzi, Emilio Lancia, Gigiotti Zanini. It was Labò, however, who formed the link with Arturo

Martini, who, also at the end of the 1920s, executed some designs for MITA products, the sketches for which are still kept in the archive.

### MITA FABRICS

After the phase of production conversion during wartime, once the war was over MITA resumed its activities at the factory in Nervi, expanding from the manufacture of tapestries and knotted woollen carpets to included textiles. In this new phase Ponis soon sought to expand his circle of professional relationships, at the same time as keeping alive some existing collaborations that had begun in the interwar years (such as those with Emanuele Rambaldi and the brothers Oscar and Fausto Saccorrotti), as well as reinforcing his close partnership with Ponti and the group of architects and designers who at the time revolved around the magazine “Domus”: one need only think, for example, of Corina Steinrissler, the Swiss designer of the curtains for a Milan apartment designed in 1953 by Alberto Rosselli, or Giorgio Host Ivessich from Trieste, who that same year oversaw the interior design of the bedrooms and the Barracuda bar at Santa Margherita's Grand Hotel Miramare, using MITA fabrics, made to designs by himself and Mario Alberto Ponis.

During that period the furnishings for another fashionable restaurant bore the MITA brand: armchairs and sofas in the restaurant La Gritta in Portofino were covered with the Ormeggio fabric by Enrico Paulucci who, in the same period, was also responsible for several tapestries manufactured in Genoa and was the leading figure at the end of the 1950s – together with Carmi, Luzzati, Rambaldi, Saccorrotti and Scanavino – in a new production line of artistic panels which was exhibited in Genoa, Florence and Caracas.

With his outstanding artistic instinct Ponis chose to work with representatives of the most innovative expressive trends of the period: on the one hand, he established a firm link with Eugenio Carmi (art director at Italsider and one of the leading figures involved with the *Galleria del Deposito* in Boccadasse) and the group of artists who revolved around the Genoese graphic studio *Firma* (Flavio Costantini, Dario Bernazzoli, Lele Luzzati, Marco Biassoni and his wife Franca Luccardi); on the other, he interpreted the more experimental stylistic trends emerging at the time. The geometric and concretist abstraction of Gillo Dorfles and Rocco Borella – accompanied by neo-cubist films by Edoardo Alfieri and the existential realism of Aurelio Caminati – intertwined in MITA's production at the turn of the sixties with the informal research by Emilio Scanavino and the brothers Gio and Arnaldo Pomodoro.

What we see here are the expressive tendencies of the contemporary artistic debate duly documented by a varied