

Hotspot Milan

The Perks of Working on the Other Side of the Alps

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Until recently, histories of Italian graphic design have argued that the so-called “Milanese School” emerged from the relationship between the Italian and the Swiss graphic scenes. As Carlo Vinti put it: “the arrival of Swiss designers in Italy, on the Zurich-Milan axis, has often been seen in terms of a successful marriage between a kind of functional and calculated Swiss prose and an Italian *impromptu* poetic vein.”¹ The intertwining of Swiss rigor and Italian playfulness is a recurring trope in accounts of Swiss graphic designers in Italy. This historiographical canon is the result of stereotypical simplifications that put Swiss and Italian graphic traditions at opposite ends of a virtual field of graphic design.²

Most studies on the relationship between Milan and Swiss graphic design have explored their design exchange as something unidirectional, looking at it in terms of what graphic designers born and

trained in Switzerland brought to Milan, and their impact on the local scene. The relationship, though, was mutual in that both parties had something to gain. Adopting a transnational approach to national design canons—here understood as constructed discourses that cannot be fully explored from within a country—this essay approaches Milan as a hotspot for Swiss graphic design, and investigates the factors and actors that pushed Swiss graphic designers to cross the Alps.³

The city

Graphic design, and design more broadly, found an advantageous ecosystem of cultural organizations and economic, industrial, and political structures in Milan, all of which supported the development of the practice, and favored international design exchanges.⁴ Since the end of the 19th century, Milan had become the heart of the Italian printing industry: the majority of newspapers with the largest national circulations were printed in the city, and the major publishers had established their headquarters there.⁵ Milan was where the practice of graphic design emerged in Italy: here early design education courses were held (the *Scuola del Libro*), specialist magazines were launched (*Risorgimento Grafico*, *Campo Grafico*, *L'Ufficio Moderno*, and *Linea Grafica* amongst others), and institutional organizations were founded (ADI—Association

for Industrial Design, and Aiap—Italian Association of Advertising Artists).

The city's great economic and cultural potential made Milan an attractive destination for Swiss graphic designers. From the 1930s onwards, a remarkable number moved to Milan for short or longer periods of time. In the postwar period, the number of Swiss graphic designers active in town grew as the Italian economy boomed.⁶ As Lora Lamm put it: "in the late 1950s the Milan scene was so fascinating for us graphic designers, it opened a new dimension."⁷ Located about 54 kilometers south of the Swiss border, the city was conveniently positioned, and a direct train line made connections between Switzerland and Italy easier despite the Alps lying between them. Once in Milan, newcomers could rely on an informal Swiss network of professional and personal relationships, even though, as the Swiss copywriter Silvio Calabresi (Aldo Calabresi's brother) recalled: "we just wanted to blend in."⁸ The extent to which one was an active part of the Swiss community in Milan varied from person to person, but it was almost inevitable that people knew each other.⁹ Professionally, they tended to seek each other out, so more often than not, Swiss art directors hired Swiss graphic designers as their assistants and collaborators. [Figs. 9, 10]

Graphic design studios

The usual progression of Swiss graphic designers in Milan featured first a stopover at Studio Boggeri.¹⁰ Antonio Boggeri, a self-trained photographer and modern graphics enthusiast, founded his agency in 1933. It offered an innovative setting to a growing number of industrial clients: a group of professionals able to manage advertising from concept to production.¹¹ From the early days, Boggeri carried out a constant search for designers on the other side of the Alps. The outcome of this recruiting policy was the transit of a succession of Swiss graphic designers who used this work experience as a springboard for their subsequent careers in Italy. Indeed, at Studio Boggeri they came in contact with some of the major companies and design-literate clients that existed at the time.

Imre Reiner, born in Hungary, was the first Swiss designer to work at Studio Boggeri, back in 1933.¹² Soon after Reiner, Xanti Schawinsky (formerly of the Bauhaus) joined the team until 1936. Max Huber arrived in Milan in 1940, fresh from his studies at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich, but went straight back to Switzerland to serve in the military.¹³ Once the war was over, Huber moved back to Milan, picking up where he had left off. In 1946, Carlo Vivarelli was briefly in Milan, where he collaborated with Boggeri.¹⁴ The following year, Walter Ballmer moved to Milan and worked for Studio Boggeri until 1955. In

1953, it was the turn of Aldo Calabresi, who became Boggeri's chief adviser over the following ten years.¹⁵ Bruno Monguzzi discovered the works of Studio Boggeri while flicking through the second issue of *Neue Grafik*, and started working with them in 1961.¹⁶ Other Swiss graphic designers who worked for Boggeri over the years include Lora Lamm, Max Schneider, Warja Honegger-Lavater, René Martinelli, and Hans-Ulrich Osterwalder.¹⁷

But Studio Boggeri was not the only Milanese agency to benefit from the arrival of Swiss graphic designers. Its competitor, Studio Grignani, also hired a number of designers who were trained in Switzerland. The founder of the agency, Franco Grignani, was a former assistant of Boggeri, and the director of the printing company Alfieri & Lacroix.¹⁸ Gottfried "Godi" Leiser and Ruedi Külling were amongst the Swiss employees of Studio Grignani: the former from 1954 until 1955, the latter between 1955 and 1957.¹⁹

Some Swiss graphic designers eventually founded their own studios in Milan. Thanks to their previous work experience, they could benefit from a network that proved to be instrumental once they opened a business on their own. Their "Swissness" was also beneficial, as the kind of graphics they designed conveyed a set of connotative values upon which Italian clients wanted to capitalize.

Together with Ezio Bonini and Umberto Cappelli, Aldo Calabresi established the agency CBC in 1963, where he was in charge

of editorial design. CBC can be seen as one of the first attempts in Italy to combine the aims and approaches of an advertising agency with those of a graphic design studio. It remained active for almost twenty years, until the advent of commercial television in Italy led to a significant change in customers' demand.

Walter Ballmer founded the graphic design studio Unidesign in 1971, after having worked at Olivetti since 1955. At Unidesign, Ballmer specialized in branding and visual identities, and the studio could count the fashion brands Valentino Garavani and Colmar, and the ski resort Sestriere amongst its clients.²⁰ Some Unidesign clients were interested in associating their public image with an understanding of Swiss graphic design that was shared at the time by the design community and certain sectors of Italian society.²¹ Having commissioned its visual identity first from Max Huber and later from Ballmer, the Milanese printer NAVA is a case in point: as both were Swiss, they brought added value owing to the celebrated reputation of Swiss graphic design, which appealed to NAVA for marketing purposes.

Several Swiss agencies were also active in Italy.²² The Swiss advertising agency GGK—founded in 1962 by Karl Gerstner, Paul Gredinger, and Markus Kutter—exemplifies this trend. In 1964, GGK opened an office in Milan that was active until the late 1980s. The office was successful in combining the precepts of Swiss

graphic design with the creative revolution in the field of advertising coming from the USA. Some of the designers who moved to Milan to work for GGK eventually founded their own agencies. This was the case with Friedrich “Fritz” Tschirren, who founded the advertising agency STZ (1975–2013) with Hans Rudolf Suter and Valeria Zucchini.²³

Unimark International was another key actor that turned Milan into a hotspot for Swiss graphic design in its variant as an “International Style.”²⁴ This international graphic design agency was founded in 1965 by an international group of designers including the Italian Massimo Vignelli, the Dutch, Milan-based Bob Noorda, and the Americans Jay Doblin and Ralph Eckertstrom. Vignelli in particular became one of the advocates of the International Style on both the local and international scenes, and his work “exemplified the Swiss style as the foundation of an international style.”²⁵

Clients

One of the assets of Milan was that it offered an opportunity to work for a number of major companies.²⁶ Potential clients for Swiss graphic designers included Olivetti, la Rinascente, Pirelli, and Fiat. Their role was crucial in attracting graphic designers trained on the other side of the Alps, thereby helping to turn Milan into a hotspot for Swiss graphic designers.

To work for Olivetti in the postwar period was possibly “one of the best jobs worldwide as a graphic designer.”²⁷ Indeed, designers could count on an almost unlimited budget and lack of time pressure, together with an enviable network of collaborators and international exposure. Studio Boggeri acted in most cases as an intermediary between the company and foreign graphic designers. In the 1930s and 1940s, Schawinsky and Huber worked for Olivetti on behalf of Studio Boggeri. Ballmer’s career followed a similar pattern in the postwar years, when Adriano Olivetti hired this former collaborator of Boggeri as one of his art directors in his Advertisement and Development Office. [Fig. 11] Between 1955 and 1970, Ballmer designed a series of now iconic advertising campaigns based on the sole use of typography in combination with photography and geometric elements. The redesign of the Olivetti logo in 1970 brought Ballmer international renown and possibly facilitated his successful candidature to the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI) the following year. While Ballmer was with Olivetti, the photographer Serge Libiszewski and a number of assistants—such as Anna Monika Jost and Urs Glaser—also represented Swiss graphic design there.

In the postwar period, the department store la Rinascente became a laboratory for the promotion of design culture. From 1950 to 1954, Huber worked as art director there, and designed its logo.²⁸ Amneris Liesering Latis relocated to Milan from



Figs. 9, 10

Fig. 11



Messaggio a stampa di tutti i livelli nel processo creativo.
L'immagine è il risultato di un processo creativo.

olivetti



Fig. 12

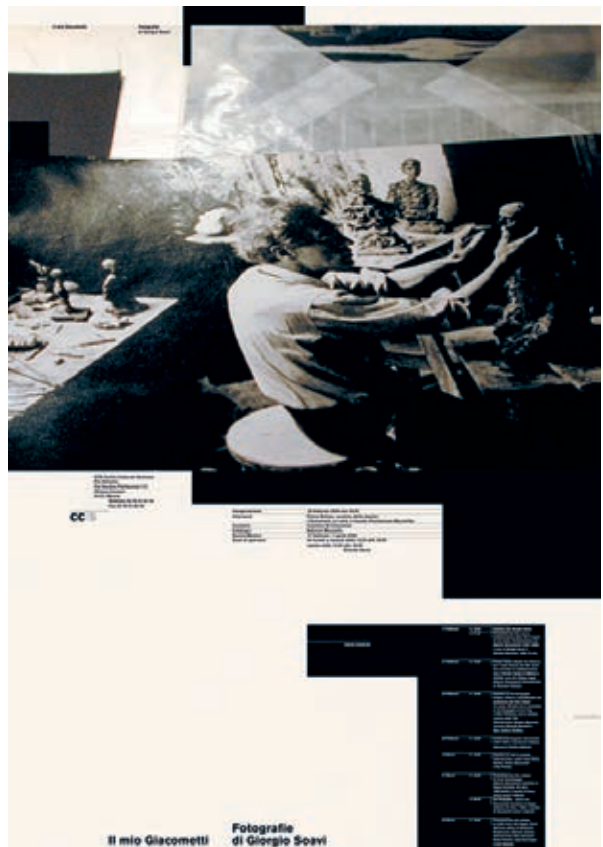
Figs. 9, 10
Sergio Libis (Serge Libiszewski), self-portraits taken on his arrival in Milan, Apr. 30 and May 1, 1956.

Fig. 11
Walter Ballmer, poster "Olivetti Italia," from the poster series Olivetti International, silk-screening on paper, 68.5 × 48.5 cm, 1975.

Fig. 12
Lora Lamm, poster "Volentieri a scuola - la Rinascente" (Glad to go to school - la Rinascente), offset print on paper, 70.5 × 100.5 cm, 1956.

Fig. 13
Felix Humm, poster for *Il mio Giacometti. Fotografie di Giorgio Soavi* (My Giacometti. Photographs by Giorgio Soavi), inkjet print on paper, 100 × 70 cm, 2000.

Fig. 13



Lugano to follow her Italian husband after World War II. She worked as advertising director at *la Rinascente* from 1954 to 1964, and then founded a consulting agency for department stores. Lora Lamm moved from Zurich to Milan in 1953, and after a short time at Studio Boggeri as a substitute for Aldo Calabresi, she joined the advertising office of *la Rinascente* in 1954. For five years, Lamm worked exclusively for the department store. [Fig. 12] Her use of illustrations, typographic compositions, and photographs contributed to the creation of the “Rinascente Style.”²⁹ This department store also hired the photographer Serge Libiszewski, who described *la Rinascente* as a “pilgrimage destination” for Swiss designers and photographers because it was an avantgarde company ahead of its time in the field of product, graphic, and shop window design, with no equivalent in Switzerland.³⁰ Libiszewski had formerly been employed in the office of Müller-Brockmann, but moved to Milan in 1956 at Huber’s invitation and opened his own photographic studio there in 1962, working for, amongst others, Olivetti, Pirelli, Alfa Romeo, Citroën, Bosch, Giorgio Armani, and Prenatal.³¹

The variety of registers featured in the visual communication of Pirelli stemmed from its various collaborations with different graphic designers that the tire company promoted over the years. Swiss graphic designers who worked at Pirelli included Lora Lamm, Max Huber, Walter Ballmer,

and Jean Robert. Gerhard Forster’s case is particularly interesting in this context. Fresh from his studies, Forster arrived in Italy in 1963 after winning a competition organized by Pirelli. In the following three years, he designed posters and layouts for its in-house magazine.³² One of his works for Pirelli features in the collection of the MoMA in New York, but the museum curiously considers Forster as an Italian author.³³ This misunderstanding matches Richard Hollis’s observation: “it was difficult to separate what was Italian from what was imported from neighboring Switzerland.”³⁴

The car company Fiat was another attractive client for Swiss graphic designers. Felix Humm moved to Milan in 1966 to oversee the visual communication of Fiat Italy on behalf of the Basel-based advertising agency Reiwald, which was responsible for the communication of Fiat Suisse. After moving from Turin to Milan and a period with Studio Boggeri, Humm opened his own office in Milan, working for both Italian and Swiss clients.³⁵ Other designers arrived at Fiat after having worked for some of the abovementioned clients. This was the case with Gerhard Forster, who left Pirelli to work for Fiat,³⁶ and Anna Monika Jost, who briefly worked at Fiat in the early 1970s after having assisted Ballmer at Olivetti between 1965 and 1967. Their mobility is evidence of the demand for Swiss graphic designers in Milan.

Institutions

Graphic design studios and clients were possibly the most obvious factors that made Milan a hotspot for Swiss graphic design. But its cultural organizations, professional bodies, and educational institutions also played an active role in the design exchange, though this has been often downplayed in the literature, if not completely forgotten.

The Milan Triennale is a case in point. This cultural institution is an often-neglected actor in the relationship between Swiss graphic design and the city of Milan. Yet it played a key role in the mediation of Swiss graphic design locally and internationally from the 1930s onwards. In 1933, graphic works by Imre Reiner and Xanti Schawinsky were included in the German pavilion curated by Paul Renner.³⁷ Three years later, Max Bill curated the Swiss pavilion at the 6th Triennale di Milano in 1936. Their participation aroused interest in the community of Milan-based designers, primarily for “the professionalism and level of specialization of the Swiss graphic designers,”³⁸ but also because graphic design in Switzerland seemed to be a well-defined job when viewed from abroad, with its own schools, remits, and identity, unlike the situation in Italy. In the postwar period, the Milan Triennale moved from being a platform for the mediation of Swiss graphic design to becoming itself a representation of Swiss graphic rules. It was Max Huber who designed the visual image of the first

Milan Triennale after the war, namely the 8th Triennale of 1947, also known as T8. Huber’s design for T8 was based on a visual vocabulary that was rooted in Modernist aesthetics but also aware of their further developments within a Swiss context, and it had a big impact on the history of the Triennale.³⁹

Local organizations provide evidence of the integration of Swiss graphic designers and their desire to collaborate with Italian colleagues. This was the case with ADI. Founded in Milan in 1956, ADI could count on a number of Swiss designers amongst its members, such as Huber, Ballmer, and Calabresi. Their membership of ADI enabled them to be an active part of the Milanese professional scene and to benefit from the association’s network of designers, intellectuals, and industrialists. Local educational institutions provided Swiss designers with further occasions to contribute to articulating a graphic design discourse in Italy. Huber at the Scuola del Libro and Ballmer at the Scuola Politecnica di Design brought Swiss graphic design into the school workshop, and trained a generation of Italian graphic designers according to its methods and rules.

Swiss institutions abroad were also interesting institutional venues for Swiss designers in Milan. For instance, the association of Swiss citizens active in the Milan area (the Società svizzera di Milano) had been active since 1883.⁴⁰ Besides facilitating connections between expats and their homeland, it

organized social and cultural activities, including a carnival ball for which Ballmer designed the invitation card in the 1950s. In 1997, the Swiss Institute set up a branch in Milan. This was first established in Rome in 1947, in a villa bequeathed to the Swiss Confederation by Carolina Maraini-Sommaruga in order to continue the tradition of hospitality for Swiss scholars and artists that she and her husband had begun when they set up their mansion in 1905.⁴¹ Since its foundation, the Institute has promoted the relationship between Switzerland and Italy and has at times also commissioned Swiss graphic designers. This was the case with Felix Humm, for example, who designed the corporate identity for its three Italian venues (Rome, Milan, and Venice). [Fig. 13]

A hotspot for Swiss graphic design

This essay has aimed to reclaim a more active role for Milan within the history of Swiss graphic design. To this end, we have argued that the dissemination of Swiss graphic design in Italy cannot be attributed only to Swiss designers. The city provided Swiss graphic designers with multiple opportunities: with graphic design agencies, design-related international events and organizations, an international clientele, and possibilities for founding their own studios in Milan. Moreover, Milan offered an audience that was receptive to the kind of

visual language and methodologies Swiss designers stood for (or were expected to stand for), hence they found a favorable working environment in the city.

On the other side of the Alps, Italians were the largest foreign community in Switzerland at the time, with massive migration during the 1960s. More than 100,000 Italians arrived every year from 1961 onwards. While a bilateral agreement between Italy and Switzerland defined the status of such workers, popular Swiss culture stigmatized this migration. As Max Frisch wrote:

A tiny master race sees itself in danger: workers have been called, and people are coming. They don't eat prosperity, on the contrary, they are essential to prosperity. (Ein kleines Herrenvolk sieht sich in Gefahr: man hat Arbeitskräfte gerufen, und es kommen Menschen. Sie fressen den Wohlstand nicht auf, im Gegenteil, sie sind für den Wohlstand unerlässlich.)⁴²

Italian workers were typically employed in heavy-duty industry in Switzerland, and maintained a strong sense of national community.⁴³ So it comes as no surprise that the few Italian nationals involved in graphic design in Switzerland briefly relocated to Zurich to benefit from the excellence of the curriculum imparted at the Kunstgewerbeschule. Oliviero Toscani and Salvatore Gregoriotti studied in Switzerland and eventually became key players in an Italian

and international context as art directors, photographers, and graphic designers. Nevertheless, by moving to Milan for short or longer periods, Swiss newcomers had a great deal to gain. So instead of thinking of Swiss graphic design in Milan in terms of influence, one should also recognize the perks of working on the other side of the Alps. In doing so, the relationship between the Swiss and the Italian design scenes is rebalanced to reveal a mutually beneficial design exchange.

- 1 Vinti 2013: 28.
- 2 Richter 2007; 2014b.
- 3 Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2016b; Meroz & Gimeno Martínez 2016.
- 4 Branzi 1988; Riccini 2001; Vitta 2011.
- 5 Montecchi 2001; Ortoleva 1996.
- 6 Fornari & Profeta 2016.
- 7 Lamm & Ossanna Cavadini 2013: 163.
- 8 Calabresi 2013.
- 9 Libiszewski & Kuhn Libiszewski 2017.
- 10 Barbieri 2017: 124–192.
- 11 Fossati & Sambonet 1974; Monguzzi 1981; Boggeri & Monguzzi 2005.
- 12 Besomi 1984; Wild 2006.
- 13 Fioravanti, Passarelli & Sfligiotti 1997: 104–105; Polano & Vetta 2003: 140–151.
- 14 Monguzzi 1981: 56, 58–59, 61; Waibl 1988: 118–119; Odermatt 1998: 158.
- 15 Monguzzi 1981: 76, 78, 82–99, 101–109, 111, 114; Waibl 1988: 160–161.
- 16 Monguzzi & Ossanna Cavadini 2011: 1–2, 6–7; Waibl 1988: 190–191.
- 17 Fornari 2016.
- 18 Polano & Vetta 2003: 178–187; Ossanna Cavadini & Piazza 2019.
- 19 Richter 2007: 24; Leiser 2009; Feusi 2010.
- 20 Ballmer 2003.
- 21 Barbieri & Fornari 2018.
- 22 Galluzzo 2018.
- 23 Morganti 2011: 12.
- 24 Conradi 2010.
- 25 Hollis 2006: 13.
- 26 Vinti 2013: 30.
- 27 Gottschalk 2018.
- 28 Huber 1982.
- 29 Vinti 2013: 36.
- 30 Libiszewski & Kuhn Libiszewski 2017.

Italy	design scenes	local and international	clients	networks	48
31	Cataluccio 2015; Bianda & Ossanna Cavadini 2010.				
32	Waibl 1988: 178–179; Vinti 2007: 216.				
33	See www.moma.org/collection/works/6039?locale=it (accessed Mar. 17, 2020).				
34	Hollis 2006: 255.				
35	Camuffo, De Luca & Girardi 2004; Richter 2007: 80; Georgi & Minnetti 2011: 63.				
36	Odermatt 1998: 48.				
37	Burke 1998.				
38	Vinti 2013: 30.				
39	See Piazza & Annicchiario 2004. More than sixty years after Huber's design for the T8, the Milan Triennale has yet again entrusted its visual identity to a group of Swiss graphic designers (Marani 2019). Following an international call for projects, a proposal by the Zurich-based agency NORM was chosen for the new logotype of the Triennale. This included a rebranding as Triennale Milano instead of La Triennale di Milano and the use of the typeface Riforma, made available in May 2018 by the Lineto type foundry, accompanied by a specimen thoroughly involved with Italian design history (NORM 2018b).				
40	Broggini, Hardegger & Viganò 2014.				
41	See www.istitutovizzero.it (accessed Mar. 17, 2020).				
42	Frisch 1967: 100.				
43	The controversial conditions of Italian workers in Switzerland are depicted in the acclaimed movie <i>Pane e cioccolata</i> (Bread and chocolate), Italy 1974, color, 110', directed by Franco Brusati.				