

INTERVIEW

Drawing With Your Mind

An image communicates more than a thousand words. An illustration has extra advantages over a verbal description or a photograph: it shows things that may well not exist, it synthesizes and makes complex thoughts comprehensible, it expresses concepts and makes them accessible also to those who speak a different language.

The ability to draw is a useful quality but it is not enough. Often we have seen excellent drawings from an academic point of view that leave us totally indifferent, while a child's drawing - albeit approximated or out of proportion but instinctive - has made us smile, conferring an emotion.

To investigate these "secrets" of illustration, we visited one of the major Italian illustrators, Guido Scarabottolo, who through his precious work, has been helping us for over twenty years to present "immaterial", often complex topics on the Perini Journal, making them lighter and more easily "digestible".

A person who speaks softly but thinks strongly.

Guido Scarabottolo was born in Sesto San Giovanni in 1947. He graduated in architecture from Milan's Politecnico with a thesis in urban planning. After a brief experience in an urban planning studio, in 1973 he joined Arcoquattro, a group of young architects involved in graphic and exhibition design. Since then he has worked with some most renowned Italian publishers, the RAI, the main advertising agencies and national companies.

Presently, his works appear regularly on Internazionale magazine and on the Sunday supplement of the Sole24Ore newspaper.

Since 2002 he has been illustrating book covers for Guanda publishing, for which he is also the designer and art director.

Perini Journal

What is an illustrator's job? How can you describe it to those who are used to seeing the final result of your work on the pages of a periodical, on the cover or inside pages of a book?

There is a difference between periodicals and books.

Historically, the job of an illustrator is to make a text "brilliant", to attract the attention of the reader. There are several ways to accomplish this. For example, if the text is in "handbook" fashion, then the illustration is didactic. But the way to illustrate that I am most at home with consists in treating the theme of the text autonomously, suggesting other interpretations of the information, perhaps also through irony. Almost as if the illustration were an intervention in a debate.

For books it's different. The cover is an important component for its sale. The writer, publisher and illustrator can be considered a team that collaborates in the overall work. Each figure intervenes in the realm of his or her competencies in order to better define the image of the final product. Of course, the same thing happens for the definition of all the elements of communication (posters, advert pages, brochures...) that are part of a wide-ranging, complex operation.

In this type of work, too, I try to put something of myself, something personal, always in the respect of the tastes and competencies of the author and the publisher.

How does one become an illustrator? Of course, one must be familiar with drawing in some way... But what else is needed?

There are no special itineraries to follow - or at least there were none when I started out.

There are schools... but as with all jobs, they cannot guarantee the acquisition of a professional level that is based

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per force on very personal features.

The technical aspect counts very little: sometimes it can actually be an obstacle.

You need a good cultural background. You must be able to understand the text that you are to illustrate: some articles on the philosophy of science featured in the Sole24Ore or certain treatises on corporate safety of the Perini Journal are not for everyone.

You need a bit of training in translating the images of the reasoning in a possibly non-banal way, although sometimes banality helps make the message more understandable.

I had chosen architecture because I considered it one of the less specialist faculties for someone who wants to draw. A more specialist training such as the art academy scared me.

I like every form of popular representation that is slightly amateurish because, notwithstanding norms, they can be freer from the point of view of expression. I have passed through several ways of working, trying to choose those that are closest to my inclinations along the way: a form of apprenticeship for a fee.

I received great help in my personal growth by working with humanitarian organizations or cultural magazines. Since I was not remunerated economically, I could enjoy all the freedom of expression and research necessary in order to mature.

Your fixed production, between the 100 cover pages a year for Guanda publishing and the illustrations for the Sunday supplement of the SOLE24ORE is certainly challenging. Every work entails an analysis, an elaboration and an answer...

For Guanda publishing, I have a two-fold role: I am art director and illustrator and so I follow the entire gestation procedure of the book which is much more complex than it may seem. It's not just a creative work. The cover pages, largely entrusted to me or for which I myself entrust the illustration to others, are produced at least six months before the book is published. Besides teamwork between publisher and author that we were speaking about before, the cover page is shown to booksellers responsible for commercializing the book. The opinion of the different protagonists could lead to modifications in the title or in the illustration. It is a long job and not always straightforward.

For example, for a cover page that was, in my opinion, modest, I received compliments from an Irish Nobel Prize winner and, on the contrary, I had a lot of trouble in finding solutions (lots of re-workings!) that could be accepted by an Italian Nobel Prize winner who, in the end, preferred using one of his own drawings.

I do not read the books for which I must make the cover page. In general, a summary by experts who assess the literary quality of the work is sufficient, and from that I get the inspiration for the illustration. The mechanism of translating the contents of the image is an alchemy that I am not able to describe. In general, I try to read the book's summary at night, I sleep on it, letting my subconscious work for me, and the next morning I try to collect the results.

For the Sunday cultural supplement of the Sole24Ore the rhythms are different. The time available to make the illustration is one or two days, tops. They send me a short article or a brief summary of a book that must be reviewed and that is what I work on.

The difference between working with Italian newspapers and American ones such as the New York Times - with which I collaborate occasionally - lies in the fact that the latter are much more demanding: they require 2-3 different proposals and on the final choice, they often suggest modifications. They are very professional. In the case of Italian newspapers, we often do not deal with art directors but rather with editors who do not have specific training in regards to the image. In these cases, sometimes I get a bit uptight on requests for modifications that I do not agree with.

Besides the fixed commitments that we have mentioned, what are some of the other assignments you have received?

Recently, I have catered the image of the Salone del Mobile di Milano; for a chain of bookstores I made some drawings on panels to be placed in the sales points; movie posters. I catered the images for the celebrations for Goldoni, and I made the drawings for the most recent carnival in Venice; posters for the Athens and Epidaurus theater festivals; the image for the literature Festival against the mafias in Lamezia Terme; illustrations for the Tokyo department store selling home products and European products of excellence.

Through a New York agent, I also occasionally receive requests for illustrations for newspapers and magazines. I have also illustrated some children's books.

Your relationship with the PJJ dates back to over twenty years ago. The topics are often complex and articulated: how do you arrive at the illustrations that we find in the magazine?

To produce good drawings, the client is very important. I enjoy working with the interlocutors of the PJJ because

they leave me great freedom. For this reason, despite the specificity of the topics, I have not yet gotten bored: I have a good time and the work comes out better.

Who were your “masters” in the field of illustration?

Historically, I’ve had several different inspirers who have helped me to build my way of working piece by piece. At the beginning, Folon suggested to me the idea that good things can be done even with a rudimentary drawing. Then Edelmann (the author of *Yellow Submarine*, editor’s note) and the New York group Push Pin with Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast, who have greatly influenced both graphics and illustration from the seventies on. But for me, the most important artist was Saul Steinberg: he invented everything. He was like those great explorers of the 19th century who changed people’s vision of the world. Compared to him, I feel like a tourist of illustrations.

Side by side with your profession as illustrator, you also perform the activity of an artist by producing drawings and sculptures that have been exhibited on several occasions. What relationship is there between these two activities?

To performing this work that requires the ability to respond quickly you must not fossilize yourself. And you must remain recognizable. This implies a research activity and a reflection that in my case becomes concrete in, let’s say, experimental works. This is for me a space for amusement, an activity that I have never thought of rendering economically productive. Every formal research that finds no outlet in the activity of illustration can be used on this other front that I consider to be on the limits of art. There is research work that remains closed in a drawer for years without anyone knowing it exists. On the contrary, a series of my drawings signaled out by the New York Times have remained at my art dealers’ for a long time without anyone realizing it.

The steel structures are prevalently two-dimensional: cut sheets starting from a vector drawing. These shapes often become the matrix for printing monotypes; other times they are left to rust on sheets of paper, giving rise to drawings that are always different. I find this procedure very interesting: from the drawing to the sculpture, from the sculpture to a new drawing that encompasses the quality of the sculpture.

We know that you are very much tied to Topolò: can you tell us what takes place there?

Topolò is a town on the border with Slovenia, above Cividale del Friuli. The village that was becoming depopulated was revitalized by Donatella Ruttar and Moreno Miorello with a contemporary art “festival” (music, cinema, poetry, visual arts...) that is being held for 18 years now during the first weeks of July and that sees the participation - even playful and ironic - of artists coming from the entire world. Within this event, following a previous experiment that I made in Givigliana, I proposed instituting the Pinacoteca Universale di Topolò (PUT) picture gallery that features copies of the works of art in the realm of painting, produced in the simplest way possible, by anyone who wants to participate. This is the third year already and we have collected 150 works. All the information on this initiative can be found at: www.put-topolo.org. •

