

Graphic Frescoes: Two Italian Illustrators, One American Story

Mila Tenaglia (January 28, 2016)



“Una storia americana” featuring the work of Emiliano Ponzi and Olimpia Zagnoli, two of the best known Italian illustrators based in the United States. The ongoing exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute focuses on a superb selection of images that the two artists have produced for the American publishing industry in the last five years.



You are bound to have caught a glimpse of their illustrations while thumbing through the New York Times or the New Yorker. Or you may simply have come across them in a subway station. It is also likely that you have admired their capacity for challenging us to translate words into images, colors and figures.

Emiliano Ponzi and Olimpia Zagnoli may be well known to the New York public, but they don't care to refer to their American story as part of "the brain drain" so often talked about in Italy. Highlighting that point is important to Giorgio Van Straten, the director of the Italian Cultural Institute, where their illustrations are on display.

"Emiliano and Olimpia are emblematic of a wider scene that discovers spaces to find expression and fulfillment in Italy and elsewhere. They are a virtuous example of young Italian creative types finding a hearing and a means of expression in the American scene."

Curated by Melania Gazzotti, the exhibition examines the two artists' successful stints working with the American publishing industry over the last five years. The exhibition also extends beyond the institute; if you happen to eat at one of the Eataly restaurants during the exhibit's run, you'll come across menus the artists designed ad hoc.

The Test of the Global Market

The exhibition flyer features one of the major symbols of the city, the Empire State Building, as rendered artistically by Ponzi and Zagnoli (the same image graces this issue's cover). One look suffices to discern their different yet complementary graphic/artistic styles. On the left side is Zagnoli's handiwork: bold features, bright colors, and a huge sun setting behind the skyscraper. It echoes designs from the 1960s and '70s. The right side of the flyer is designed by Ponzi, who privileges faint colors flanked by thick shadows.

Ponzi and Zagnoli both began working with the United States remotely, years ago, where they grew to be increasingly appreciated by the American public and publishing world.

"To really put yourself to the test," says Ponzi, "you have to compete on a global market against the best players. It's a constant competition that pushes you to refine your technique and your 'poetics,' to differentiate yourself more and more and offer your highly personalized vision of things. It's a good way to grow."

So is the discriminating factor the size of the market?

"Yes. The average American art director has more experience simply because he engages with more illustrators and in more situations. It doesn't mean he's more talented, but rather that he is often able to manage the workflow with greater speed and precision."

In Italy, Ponzi has collaborated with prestigious publications like La Repubblica and the publishing houses Feltrinelli and Mondadori. He has also received awards in Europe in various categories from the Society of Illustrators, and he recently published a book of illustrations with Penguin Books in England.

But his time in New York has been fundamental to his artistic career, as is attested to by the commissions he receives from various editors and publications. His designs also change depending on which side of the Atlantic he's on.



“When I’m in New York,” he explains, “the verticality has a perceptual impact on what I produce [that is] at times almost claustrophobic in a horizon that never rests but is always a game of empty and filled spaces. On the other hand, when I’m in Italy or Europe, the view has a little more breath. It dominates and becomes more rarefied as it retreats into the distance.”

New York Opens Your Mind

Zagnoli also describes how the city has changed her. “New York woke me up. It erased my fear of the future. I felt more free to take risks and I understood that conveying your personality through your work is something precious.”

You have probably seen her work in one of the 468 subway stations. In fact, one of her sinuous female figures—a recurring subject in her oeuvre—was chosen for the project “MTA Arts & Design.”

“The woman with glasses is ideally a girl from Harlem leaving home in the morning and arriving at the Statue of Liberty at sunset, when the whole city is reflected in her glasses. It’s a symbol of the resourcefulness of a city like New York, where everyone has a story to tell and can get where she wants to go.”

But what does it mean for an Italian to find success in New York? Zagnoli doesn’t try to obscure the fact that the impact goes beyond professional satisfaction and opens doors that had previously appeared to be closed, “because, paradoxically, the American experience helps you more easily find work in your own country: in Italy, in Europe...”

Hence the brightest Italians, as Van Straten also suggested, don’t escape or emigrate—rather they go and come back, moving freely in a global space in search of their own identity and career.

The Idea for the Exhibition

The idea for the exhibition came to curator Melania Gazzotti while she was leafing through the *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, which she reads avidly. She noticed that the presence of images made by Italian illustrators had grown considerably in recent years and wanted to explore why.

Consequently she discovered the world of contemporary Italian illustration in American publishing and proposed the subject to the Italian Cultural Institute in New York. But the idea behind the exhibition isn’t to celebrate more than the work of these two young artists; rather, it means to give New Yorkers an opportunity to come into contact with Italian excellence.

“The most attentive viewers will recognize illustrations they’ve already seen and discover new works. Most importantly, they will be motivated to find out more about Italian illustration.”

The exhibit “Una storia americana” was made possible by the generous support of Ubi banca. Also not to be missed is the precious catalogue edited by Melania Gazzotti for the art book publisher Corraini Edizioni, which contains interviews with Steven Guarnaccia, Associate Professor of Illustration, School of Art, Media, and Technology, Parsons School of Design, and Paul Buckley, Vice President and Creative Director at Penguin Random House.

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