

Business Communication in the Mansutti Foundation posters

One of the special treasures of the Mansutti Foundation is the 280-strong collection of insurance posters.

The collection, in its variety and comprehensiveness, represents an alternative and most effective way of approaching the world of insurance and learning about the history of insurance companies, through the graphic arts.

The posters have the incisiveness and immediacy of images and are the fruit of the encounter between the world of the suppliers of goods or services and the world of design, starting around the middle of the 19th Century and lasting for another hundred years. It brought into being a flourishing of poster art, which frequently reached a high artistic level.

It is in those decades that the poster finds its own identity and its definitive form, detaching itself decisively from the world of art, in the classical sense. In this context, posters represent an

excellent means of communication for an insurance company, allowing them to inform the public and convince them of the advantages to be had from being insured.

Through the forcefulness of figurative language, the insurance companies communicate their advertising message which must be immediately understandable and accessible, especially for a largely unsophisticated public; it must not be forgotten, in fact, that in the 19th Century the potential customers that insurance companies were addressing were, by and large, the often semi-literate peasant class.

The concept of insurance is substantiated in a picture and communicates through it, and the language used must necessarily be that of the customer. This is why the history of posters from the 19th Century starts out and develops in the social fabric.

The relationship between the customer and



the insurance company has an emotional component, and so the company is always in search of a suitable visual language, where pictures have an emotional impact. Hence two dominant themes emerge: the desire to reassure and protect on one hand and the desire to warn about risks on the other. The poster by Adolfo Busi, made for F.A.T.A. (Fondo Assicurativo Tra Agricoltori) in 1955, expresses this concept in an extraordinarily effective way: over corn fields threatened by rain the warning of the bells rings out : “Be insured!”

The codes of communication – whatever approach or type of language is used – remain in any case anchored to the need to emphasise man’s social and ethical values: in particular the family dimension, centred above all on the reassuring image of motherhood, although sometimes entire families are represented (as for example in the beautiful poster of the Swiss company La Genevoise). Health and protection of children is another theme that is highlighted. The predominance of female figures is another striking aspect: woman is often the protagonist

and acquires a strong social value because she embodies family values and is the symbol of prosperity. A smiling peasant woman in a corn field is depicted by Busi, Ballerio and Boccasile, as well as by Dudovich, first in a floreal Art Deco style which was characteristic of the Twenties and then in a more mature social realist style in the Thirties (the poster of the Assicurazioni Generali showing a smiling young peasant woman with a sheaf of corn in her arms is dated 1938).

On a parallel plane to the context of the family we have the world of work, which, as has been mentioned, has connotations particularly of a rural setting; in fact, looking at the posters in the Mansutti Foundation, it becomes clear that rural scenes are most frequently represented: cornfields, wheat sheaves, lively, smiling peasant girls, muscular sowers at work, or, as in the poster for the Compagnia di Assicurazione di Milano, luxuriant and colourful pomegranates, the universal symbol of fertility. Alongside this kind of late 19th Century realism there are also references to the past and, especially in Italian



posters, to the glorious Ancient Roman epoch, with the appearance of Emperors, classical-style statues, soldiers naked to the waist with mighty helmets and shields. In some cases the classical hero is embodied by a man of the times (in various INA posters of the Fascist period the figure of Benito Mussolini frequently appears). The rural theme – as well as coming closer to the customer – effectively expresses the potential for fertility and growth implied by the gesture of sowing or by nature itself; it all goes to symbolise the success of investing in insurance. Particularly significant is the poster made for the Dutch company Utrecht, where in the foreground a man is shown intent on planting a shrub, while in the background his family gather fruit from a laden tree.

The message has a double effect: to intimidate and to show the potential customer the best way of preserving the “fruits” obtained through hard work, emphasising the greatness, competence and solidity of the company, values which in this clever strategy, which today we would define

as “marketing”, are summed up in a single symbol. Just think of the lion of St Mark of the Assicurazioni Generali, the historical symbol of Venice and at the same time an icon of strength and dignity, or the phoenix of the same company, the mythological bird that is reborn from its own ashes.

Initially the tendency is to warn customers, centering communication on the ominous effects of risk, as for example in the poster of the Compagnia Toro (Compagnia Anonima d'Assicurazione di Torino), made around 1934 by Osvaldo Ballerio, where a young peasant couple in the middle of a cornfield flee from an oncoming thunderstorm; the woman holds a child in her arms and the caption below stands out: “Farmers: insure yourselves against hail damage”.

But as time passes the codes of communication turn more frequently to a more frivolous and engaging language; this becomes evident at the end of the Second World War, a tragic historical event which marks a turning point in the codes



of business communication, with the advent of the contemporary age.

For its historical and sociological connotations, the poster arouses more and more interest as an example of costume, as a creative work, and as a historical document, as exhibitions and numerous publications centred on posters in recent years fully confirm.

Graphic art still represents today the most popular form of artistic expression that has ever existed. And if in its individual existence the poster is destined to be short lived (it is created in fact with the aim of not lasting in

time), in the historical dimension it has value for the evidence it gives, since it maintains – unlike painting – a stronger and more immediate link with the reality of its times, in the 21st Century, as in the 19th.

Such posters are today rare objects since they are made of perishable materials. The examples in the Mansutti Foundation are carefully preserved in excellent condition and can be easily viewed on the premises or in a virtual gallery online (www.bibliotecamansutti.it). So this collection is indeed a vital resource.

Paying a visit to...

Claudia Di Battista
Librarian at the Mansutti Foundation

