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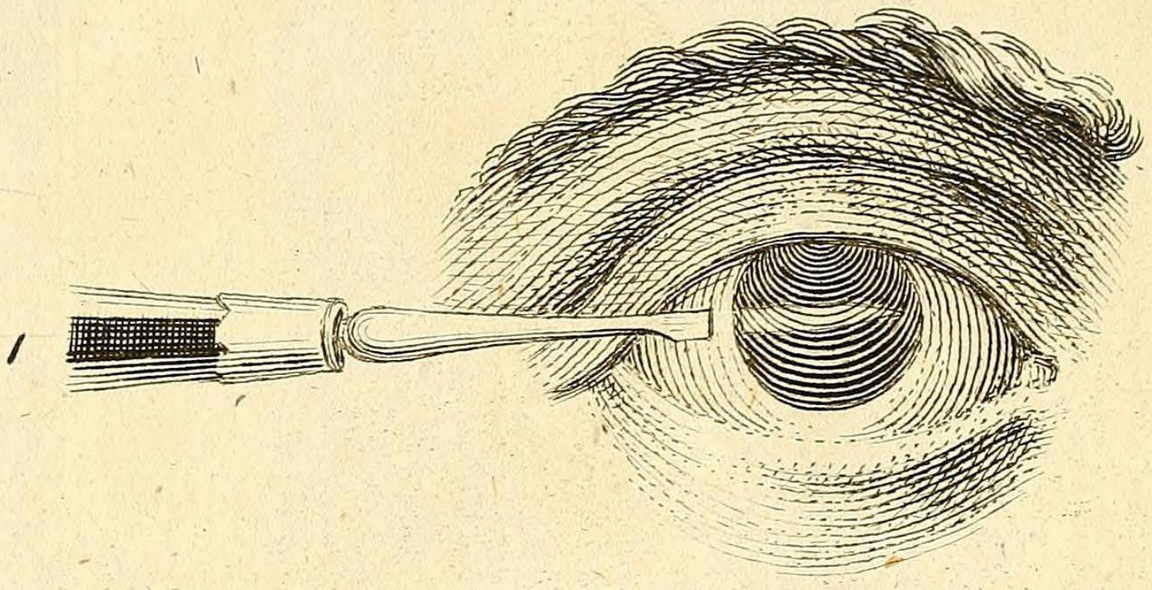

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Gerard Vandergucht, Cataract surgery and effects on vision, 1713, detail (from William Cheselden, Anatomy of the Human Body, London 1750, plate XXXVI).

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Graphic Design as a Universal Language: Symbols and Codes in the Vision of Gio Ponti

Alessandro Spennato

Abstract

Graphic design was a tool for Gio Ponti to synthesise his design and communication, bringing together art, architecture, and design in a consistent visual language. This study looks at the role of graphic design in his work, highlighting its function not only as a means of representation but also as an independent code capable of conveying complex concepts. Through an iconographic and semiotic analysis of his works, the influences of the Bauhaus, Futurism and Italian Rationalism are explored, contributing to the definition of his graphic style, characterised by modularity, geometry and an innovative use of colour. The research also investigates the relationship between editorial graphics, architectural production and industrial design, demonstrating how Ponti's style has become a constantly evolving visual matrix. Finally, the potential for mutation of his language in the contemporary context is analysed through digital graphic experimentation and new branding and interactive design applications. The article highlights how graphic design for Ponti was not merely a means of representation, but a form of visual thinking capable of transcending eras and contexts, confirming itself as a fundamental reference point for contemporary design.

Keywords: graphic design, visual language, Gio Ponti, symbols, geometry.

Introduction

During the 20th century, graphic design underwent a significant transformation, establishing itself as an autonomous and strategic language of contemporary visual communication. Among the figures who have left a distinctive mark on this process is Gio Ponti, who integrated art, architecture and design into a coherent and innovative expression system. The breadth of Ponti's output, which ranges from everyday objects to monumental architecture, finds one of its main focal points in editorial graphics, mainly through the magazines *Domus* and *Stile* [Rossi, Buratti 2016, p. 333]. In these contexts, Ponti not only promoted new ideas of living and design, but also developed a graphic language based on visual synthesis, compositional modularity and the narrative value of drawing. His approach to graphic design is rooted in the broader modernist tradition of the early 20th century. The Bauhaus, with its ideal of integration between art, technology and industry, and Italian Futurism, with its dynamic forms and typographical experimentation, were theoretical references that profoundly influenced his research [Spennato 2024, p. 129; Ghianda 2020]. However, Ponti distinguished himself by interpreting these stimuli according to his vision. He developed a graphic language based on geometric, symbolic and chromatic elements capable of communicating complex concepts with immediacy and effectiveness. Line, form and colour in his sketches and compositions (fig. 1) take on a narrative and

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conceptual function: for Ponti, drawing is not simply representation, but a "vision of the project" [Ponti 1957, p. 17].
As recent studies [De Caro 2022] highlight, Ponti's graphic practice can be interpreted through 'heretical language', where the sign escapes its purely descriptive function to become a poetic construction, an active device for design and communication. His aesthetic, while essential, is rich in cultural meanings, proposing a visual code capable of crossing materials, formats and contexts, from ceramics to architecture, from editorial graphics to furniture.
This article aims to analyse the role of graphic design within Gio Ponti's design practice, exploring its evolution about the cultural, technological and artistic transformations of the 20th century. Through an iconographic, semiotic and comparative approach, we will investigate how his graphic works –sketches, textures, covers, modular structures– contributed not only to the definition of an Italian modernist aesthetic, but also to foreshadowing many of the trends in contemporary graphic design, particularly in the fields of branding, digital design and visual interaction. Starting from his historical and cultural context, we will examine the influences, techniques and visual strategies that made Ponti's graphic language so exceptionally original, also paying attention to its recent reinterpretation through digital tools, motion design and interactive installations, confirming the vitality and transformative power of his design legacy.

Historical context

The Italian twentieth century was a century of profound cultural, economic and social transformations that decisively shaped the development of architecture, design and the visual arts. The succession of historical events – from world wars to fascism, from the economic boom to the emergence of the consumer society– created fertile ground for experimentation in design, in which new languages and new aesthetic paradigms took root. During the 1930s, Italian Rationalism promoted a modern architecture based on essential geometries, functionalist principles and a critical adherence to the European Modern Movement [Dellapiana et al. 2020]. At the same time, industrial design took its first steps towards an autonomous identity, thanks in part to the work of companies such as Olivetti, which was able to synthesise aesthetics and industrial production into an integrated vision of design culture [Sparke 1986]. The post-war period represented a season of radical renewal: Italian design gradually gained international visibility, thanks to an innovative tension that combined formal research, visual communication and attention to new lifestyles. The birth of *Made in Italy* found a catalyst in significant events such as the Milan Triennale and in specialist publications such as *Domus*, both centres for disseminating an idea of elegant, cultured and accessible modernity [Ghianda 2024; Pansera 1993]. In this scenario, the figure of Gio Ponti stands out, capable of working across architecture, design, applied arts and editorial graphics. His language combines traditional craftsmanship, technological innovation, classical memory, and modernist sensibility in an original and distinctive synthesis.
Projects such as the Pirelli Tower (1956–1960) marked a turning point in Italian architecture, introducing a new model of light and transparent verticality [Palandri 2019], while his work in product design, from Richard-Ginori ceramics (fig. 2) to furniture for Molteni&C (fig. 3), reveals a constant search for balance between function and ornamentation.
Ponti's graphic work reflects a conception of design as a cultural expression rather than a purely technical one. Through his editorship of *Domus*, Ponti promoted the idea of design as a device for thinking, a tool for planning and a means of visual narration [Rossi, Buratti 2016]. Architectural design, in its sketches and graphic elaborations, takes on an analytical and compositional function: it not only represents space, but invents, interprets and transforms it [De Caro 2022]. This approach is ideally aligned with the theories of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, for whom architecture is "the expression of an idea", of a profound cultural vision and not just a technical solution [Visentin, 2009, p. 2]. Even in object design, Ponti goes beyond superficial decoration to integrate symbolic and constructive motifs into the very structure of the design, as demonstrated by his work for Richard-Ginori and the furniture he designed for Cassina and Molteni&C.
The dynamism of its lines distinguishes Ponti's graphic design, the narrative use of signs and the integration of figurative elements and modular structures. In the covers of *Domus*, in ceramics and architectural sketches, lines do not simply define contours, but construct visual rhythms, spatial tensions and perceptual emotions. This conception of the line as a narrative element fits perfectly into the tradition of 'narrative graphics' that characterises the best European design of the 20th century [Ruggiero 2020]. Colour, an essential element in Ponti's poetics, is not limited to a decorative function but takes on an expressive and symbolic

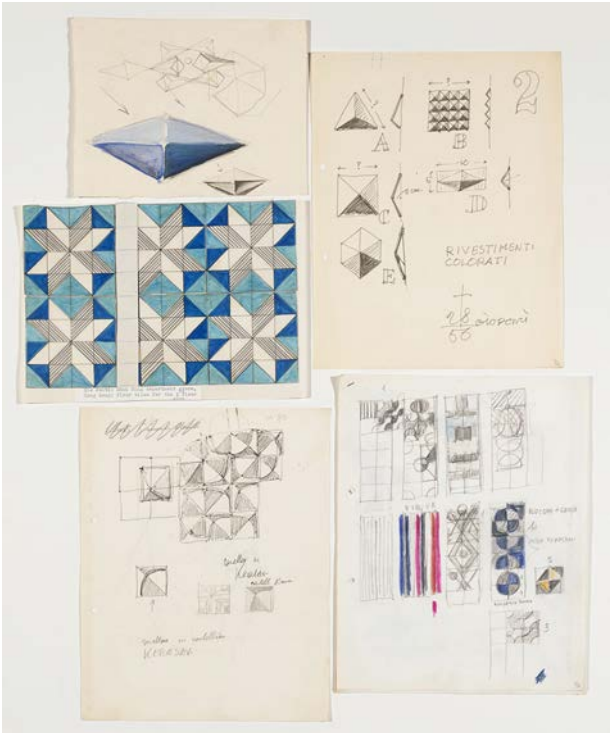

Fig. 1. Study of lines, shapes and colours for a ceramic covering in Hong Kong, 1978 (<www.arsvalue.com>).

Fig. 2. Cup and Vase from the Stuoia 1923 line, Gio Ponti, Ginori 1735 (<www.ginori1735.com>).

role. The colour combinations, often bold and experimental, amplify the communicative power of the compositions, creating visual atmospheres capable of evoking emotions and profound meanings [Ghianda 2020; Ponti 1952].
Modularity, present in both graphic compositions and architectural projects, recalls the principles of systemic design: repetitive geometric patterns generate order, rhythm and variability within surfaces, anticipating much of contemporary research on pattern design and parametric design. Analysing Ponti's graphic language means grasping the depth of an expressive approach to design that goes beyond mere technical function to become cultural construction, narrative invention and universal code. As demonstrated by recent digital reinterpretations of his work, Ponti's style is still an active model today, capable of dialoguing with emerging practices in graphic design, immersive communication and parametric design. Gio Ponti's vibrant legacy confirms the value of drawing as a constantly evolving design language capable of crossing eras, technologies, and imaginations while maintaining its extraordinary innovative power.

Geometry, rhythm and proportion in his drawings

Gio Ponti's graphic work is characterised by a rigorous and refined attention to geometry, rhythm and proportion, which are the true structuring principles of his design poetics. In Ponti, geometry is not limited to an exercise in formal order: it is transformed into an autonomous visual language, capable of condensing a complex stratification of spatial, narrative and emotional meanings into a few strokes. Every line, every module and every proportional relationship in his designs is not the result of mere decoration, but the tangible expression of a profound design philosophy in which form and idea are inextricably intertwined. Colour in Ponti's graphic and architectural designs follows two main lines. It is often used to suggest textures, materials and surfaces, created through dense and modulated graphic symbols. The use of texture in his sketches not only enriches the compositions visually but also becomes a method of communicating the sensory qualities of the objects and environments designed (fig. 4). These configurations are not simply decorations, but authentic graphic architectures capable of conferring dynamism and visual depth to objects [Ghianda 2020; Scalzo 2020].

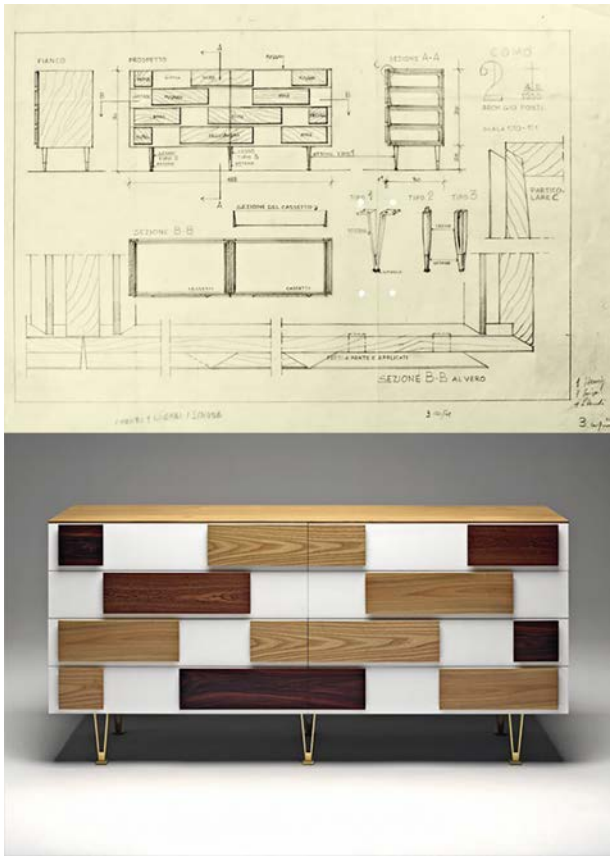

Fig. 3. Chest of drawers, study and technical drawing by Gio Ponti (Domus, 1952 - Gio Ponti Archives). Below, the reissue. D.655.1 Cassettone, *Molteni&C., 2023 (<moltenimuseum.com>).*

Rhythm, understood as the dynamic articulation of compositional elements, is another fundamental principle of Ponti's language. In his covers for *Domus*, as in his architectural sketches, rhythm emerges from the modular repetition of geometric shapes, the orchestrated variation of solids and voids, and the tension between linearity and curve. This approach recalls Futurist influences and the modernist conception of space as a dynamic field of visual forces [Rossi 2016; De Caro 2022]. As for proportion, Ponti drew on the classical rules of the golden section and Renaissance theories on the harmony of parts. However, his interpretation was never philological or academic: he freely reworked the proportional canons, inventing visual relationships capable of generating balance without rigidity, harmony without staticity. The interiors of Casa Ponti in Via Dezza in Milan (1956-57) and the furniture designed for Molteni&C testify to this skill in constructing fluid and dynamic proportions.
In Ponti's graphic design, the line is emancipated from its mere delimiting function to become a narrator of rhythm and structure. The design sketches, characterised by rapid, fluid and often overlapping strokes, do not simply describe shapes, but construct visual paths, suggest spatial articulations and evoke materials and atmospheres. This expressive use of the line is part of a tradition which, as Maria Elisabetta Ruggiero [Ruggiero 2020] observes, considers the graphic sign as a narrative device, not just a technical representation. Colour also plays a constructive and symbolic role in Ponti's language. Far from being mere ornamentation, colour articulates surfaces, defines visual rhythms and introduces emotional meanings. In his graphic designs, Ponti adopts unusual and bold colour palettes, anticipating much of contemporary research on the emotional function of colour in visual communication [Ponti 1952; Rossi 2016]. The adoption of repeated geometric modules, the alternation between order and variation, the narrative use of line and the significance of colour configure Ponti's design as a systemic language ante litteram. This approach anticipates many contemporary practices in parametric design, pattern-based design and generative art, which today interpret graphic design as the dynamic construction of formal and semantic relationships [Calvano 2022]. In this sense, Ponti's graphics should not be read solely as historical evidence of a modernist aesthetic, but as a dynamic archetype still capable of inspiring new modes of visual design. His lesson, based on integrating geometry, rhythm and proportion in a flexible and poetic syntax, represents a methodological heritage of extraordinary relevance for contemporary design.

Theories and techniques of visual language transformation

The evolution of visual language in design and architecture has always followed a transformation process dependent on cultural, technological and aesthetic factors. In the case of Gio Ponti, the transformation of graphic codes resulted from a constant tension between experimentation and the search for expressive synthesis. The contemporary reinterpretation of his work raises important questions regarding transferring his style to new contexts and media. The concept of transformation in graphic design is not limited to simple reproduction. However, it refers to a process of translation in which the original symbols are adapted, modified and, in some cases, radically reworked to interact with the existing visual language. The transformation of visual language occurs through a series of different processes. One of the most important is abstraction, which reduces an image to its essential elements, eliminating unnecessary details and emphasising formal structures. Abstraction is a recurring feature of Ponti's graphic work, who, even in the early stages of design, tended to simplify forms to improve legibility and compositional coherence. Another process is variation, which recalibrates graphic elements by altering their scale, colour and spatial arrangement. This method, also used in Richard Ginori's decorative designs and on the covers of *Domus*, allows new visual solutions to be found while maintaining stylistic consistency. Reduction is another principle of transformation in which elements are removed to intensify the visual impact of an image. In Ponti's work, the reduction of detail was often used to express archetypes of reality. In his interior designs, for example, essential lines define spaces without excessive decoration. Combining these processes makes his graphic language suitable for contemporary reinterpretation, especially in the context of digital graphics and new visual representations. Digital technology has radically changed how historical graphic works are analysed, transformed and reproduced. Digitisation has made it possible to rework Gio Ponti's designs with tools that increase the possibilities for variation and adaptation, while remaining faithful to the essential elements of his aesthetic. For example, using vector graphics software allows his compositions to be deconstructed and reconfigured, emphasising the modular aspect of his visual language and making it adaptable to

Fig. 4. Initial sketches and colour tests for the flooring of the Hotel Parco dei Principi in Sorrento, Gio Ponti, 1962 (<artemest.com>).

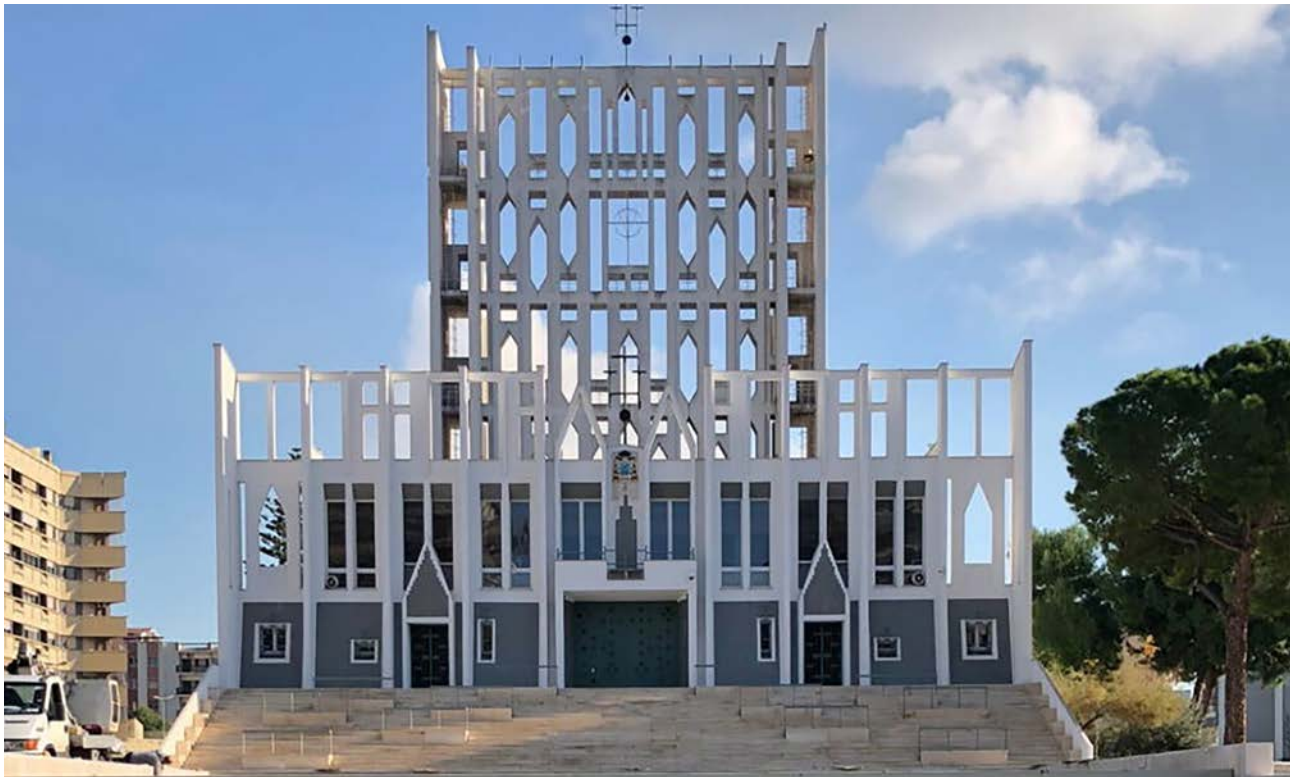

Fig. 5 Cathedral of Taranto (1964–1970) (<ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com>).

contemporary media such as digital design and interactive animation. Digital formatting techniques allow us to explore the fluidity of Ponti's graphic signs, revealing a dynamic dimension that moves away from the static nature of traditional printing. The reinterpretation of Ponti's decorative motifs through augmented reality and 3D printing opens up a new scenario in which his designs are no longer confined to two-dimensional surfaces but can be explored in immersive and interactive spaces. Digital technology also introduces a parametric approach to graphic design, allowing algorithms to reinterpret Pontis' visual codes according to contemporary logic, creating variations in form and colour. This process is particularly evident in recent reissues of furniture and design objects, in which graphic signs are recalibrated according to the aesthetic and functional requirements of the contemporary world. The digital reinterpretation of Ponti's language is not only a faithful reproduction of his works, but also a creative act that extends the possibilities of his vision to new contexts. Contemporary design is no longer based solely on preserving historical memory but is constantly evolving thanks to new media and technologies. This approach keeps Ponti's visual legacy alive and makes it accessible to a new generation of designers and users. By analysing the processes of abstraction, reduction and transformation in Gio Ponti's graphic language, a design system based on visual integration and diversity of form emerges. Abstraction manifests itself in reducing images to their basic structures, eliminating unnecessary details and increasing the

purity of line and composition. This method is particularly evident in his decorative motifs, where figurative elements are transformed into geometric symbols through gradual stylisation. Reduction is a fundamental principle of his aesthetic, applied to both object design and editorial graphics. In his designs for Molteni&C, for example, he eliminates superfluous details to emphasise the symbolic character of the form and make it immediately recognisable as an elegant and simple piece of furniture. Graphic variations are expressed through changes in form and colour, solutions that respond to specific design contexts. On the cover of *Domus*, Ponti uses a variable compositional scheme, experimenting with different combinations of graphic elements to adapt to the themes covered in the magazine. This dynamic approach demonstrates Ponti's ability to constantly update his language without losing stylistic consistency [Rossi, Buratti 2016]. The transformation process of his visual language is not limited to two-dimensional graphics but also concerns his architectural design. The Cathedral of Taranto (fig. 5), with its façade characterised by geometric motifs that create a rhythmic and harmonious effect, is an emblematic example of how graphic ideas are applied to three-dimensional structures [Palandri 2019].

Application of graphic mutation techniques

The concept of graphic mutation in contemporary design represents a crucial junction between historical memory and design innovation. With its distinctive use of line, colour and modularity, Gio Ponti's work lends itself particularly well to processes of transformation, reinterpretation and adaptation, becoming a living matrix for constructing new visual languages. These processes have found fertile ground in the educational and experimental fields. In particular, the academic experience gained in the Graphic Design course I coordinate as part of the three-year degree programme in Design at the University of Florence has provided an exemplary laboratory for critically exploring Ponti's visual legacy. Through a method based on formal analysis, linguistic synthesis, and creative reinterpretation, students approached Ponti's language not as a model to imitate but as a code to be deconstructed and recomposed into new expressive configurations. Adopting advanced digital techniques made it possible to deconstruct Ponti's signs, emphasising their dynamism, flexibility and modular potential. The teaching experience was structured as a journey of conscious transformation of graphic language: not a simple stylistic variation, but a genuine design methodology aimed at redefining the identity of a visual code through successive stages of abstraction, reduction, combination and reinvention. The students' work highlighted different strategies for transforming Ponti's signs. In particular, work was done on the modular superimposition of graphic elements, redefining the rhythmic structure of the original compositions; on the variation of dimensional scales, to amplify the sense of spatiality and dynamism; on chromatic experimentation, through the adoption of contemporary palettes and unusual combinations; and finally, on the construction of new digital patterns, reinterpreting historical ceramic motifs in a systematic way that can be adapted to different media (figs. 6, 7).

Particularly significant were the experiments in typography, where Ponti's fluid, narrative style was reworked into dynamic, hybrid layouts capable of translating the original expressive qualities into visual languages suited to the new contexts of digital communication. This graphic transformation highlighted Ponti's potential as an open archetype, capable of generating new visual languages beyond simple formal references to embrace autonomous and innovative research practices. One of the most fascinating aspects of the workshop was the ability to transform Ponti's two-dimensional compositions into immersive visual environments. The use of digital tools –augmented reality, projection mapping, graphic animation– has made it possible to expand his patterns into three-dimensional space, giving rise to multisensory experiences that go beyond the limits of the surface to become habitable spaces of visual narration.

The transition from traditional graphics to motion design and mixed reality (augmented and virtual reality) has shown how Ponti's language, while rooted in modernist culture, possesses an extraordinary ability to adapt to the emerging languages of contemporary design [Calvano 2022; Ruggiero 2020]. In particular, some experiments have explored the application of Pontian signs to flexible brand identity systems built on principles of dynamic modularity: visual identities capable of changing and adapting to different contexts without losing stylistic coherence, in line with the latest models of reactive and adaptive visual communication. This teaching experience has highlighted how graphic mutation is not just a formal exercise, but a conscious design act, capable of redefining established codes of expression and producing new modes of visual meaning. Gio Ponti's legacy is evident in his ability to influence

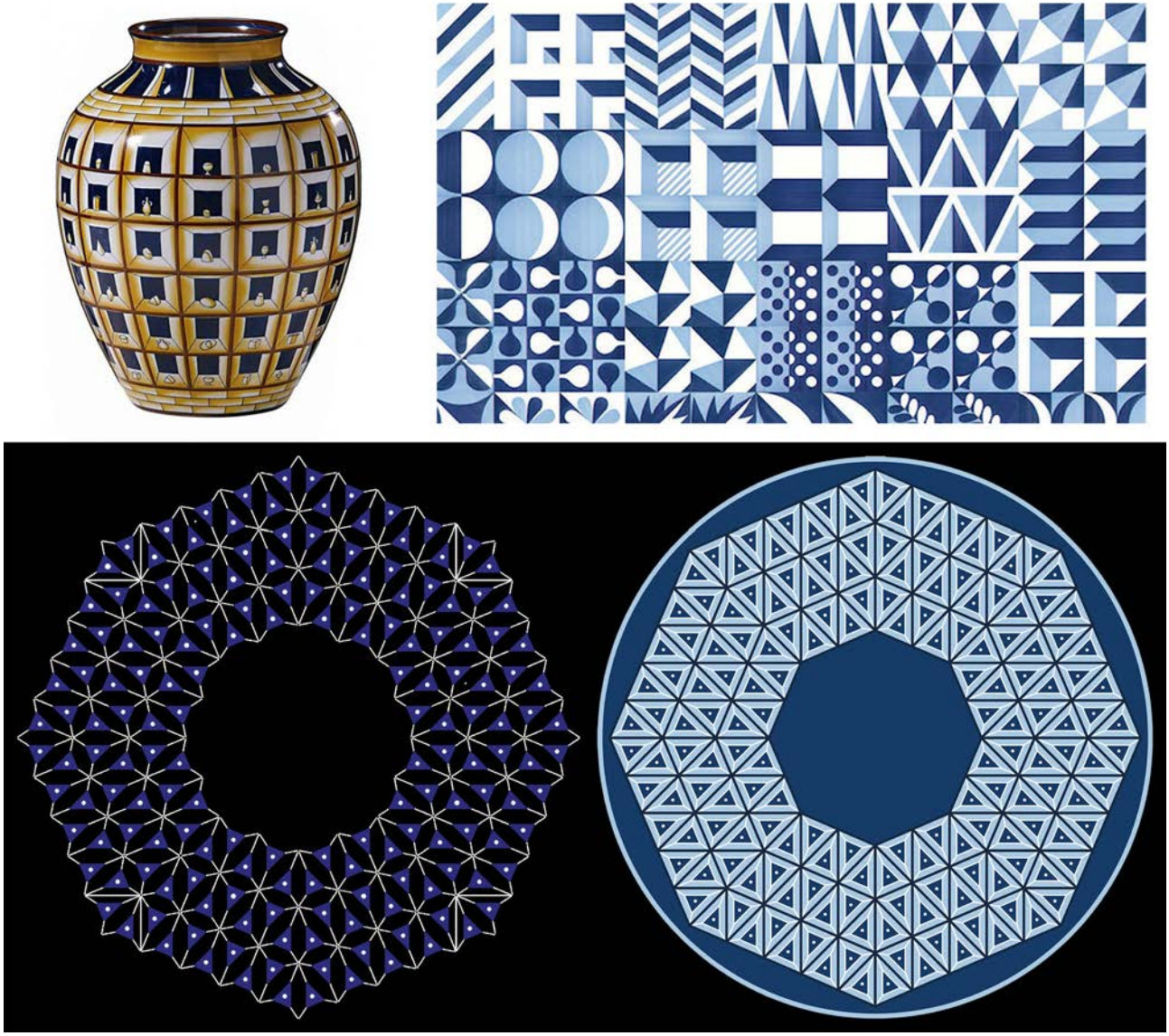

Fig. 6. Design inspiration, technical drawing and final design, Sara Fanelli, 2024.

Fig. 7. Design inspiration, technical drawing and final design, Leonardo Barbensi, 2024.

contemporary design and his extraordinary aptitude for transformation, critical reinterpretation and future projection. Academic research and experimentation have confirmed that his visual language, far from being crystallised in the past, is a living, constantly evolving material capable of generating new imaginaries and suggesting innovative paths in the field of visual communication. An analysis of the results highlights how Pontian design, with its interweaving of modularity, colour, rhythm and geometry, continues to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for emerging languages in graphic design, experiential branding, immersive reality and interactive visual design.

Conclusions

The analysis of graphic mutation applied to Gio Ponti's work has highlighted the extraordinary vitality and relevance of his visual language, which is capable of transcending temporal boundaries and adapting to the needs of contemporary communication. Far from being a static repertoire, Ponti's graphic code is a living, dynamic material, constantly susceptible to transformation, reinterpretation and innovation. Through the methodological approach adopted –based on iconographic analysis, semantic abstraction and design reinterpretation– a vision of Ponti has emerged not only as a creator of forms, but as an inventor of open expressive systems capable of generating new visual configurations based on structural principles of modularity, rhythm, proportion and symbolic meaning. The educational experimentation confirmed that his aesthetic, while rooted in Italian modernist culture, is perfectly capable of dialoging with the emerging languages of parametric design, motion design, augmented reality and immersive communication, suggesting new evolution paths for contemporary graphic design. The value of Ponti's legacy lies precisely in this design infrastructure: a network of principles and visual devices which, when critically reinterpreted, allow us to go beyond the concept of mere historical reproduction and embrace a dimension of active research and creative mutation. For Ponti, design was not just a representative tool but an act of thought: a form of visual narration capable of crossing materials, media, and technologies while maintaining its evocative and expressive power. Today, more than ever, this concept is a fundamental lesson for contemporary visual design, which is called upon to confront the fluidity of digital media, the hybridisation of languages and the need to build dynamic and adaptable visual systems. Analysing Ponti's graphic language means recognising an extraordinary foreshadowing of contemporary design practices: a continuous tension between memory and innovation, structure and freedom, and compositional rigour and poetic imagination. Therefore, Gio Ponti's legacy is not just a heritage to be preserved: it is a living laboratory of design possibilities, an open horizon that invites contemporary designers to reinterpret, transform and reinvent, keeping alive the creative tension that underlies every authentic act of design. As Ponti himself said: "Everything in the world should be colourful" [Ponti 1952] – an invitation not only to contemplate the beauty of colour, but to build new visual worlds capable of exciting, questioning and innovating.

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