



The Value System of Objects Through the Interpretation of Photographic Language

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Abstract. The design object finds in photographic representation a way - parallel to that of graphics - to the indispensable process of design reading. Photographic research has long been intertwined with the process of cultural qualification of the design object. The project that photography brings to bear on design is a visual narrative which, through an immediately comprehensible language, stands as a true parallel narrative, interrelated, yet not necessarily coinciding altogether with that of the written word. The object begins to circulate through the different channels of communication - from corporate catalogs to advertising pages and magazines - reaching distant people and places, sometimes even before the physical object enters the channels of distribution. This symbiotic relationship means that the object is very often accompanied by a valuable wealth of images, documenting and communicating its value system and its design, production and commercial processes, enriched over time by the shots taken by several 'hands', that is, by different authors who offer the opportunity for a multifaceted reading of the product. This text intends to give an example of the added value that photography represents for design through a series of paradigmatic cases (such as Gio Ponti's Superleggera or Ettore Sottsass's Valentine), which traverse the history of Italian industrial design from its early stage.

Keywords: design photography · designer photographer · cultural values · photographer's creativity · design furniture

“Photography is an act of design. It's a fundamental step in the process of creation in both architecture and design”

Michele De Lucchi

“Italian design has found with photography [...] an alternative way to communicate the results of its research”

Antonio Arcari

The value system by which objects are characterized finds in the representation given by photography an indispensable tool.

In this sense, the analysis of a great master of photography for design (or design photography) such as Aldo Ballo (1928–1994) - the most famous of the Italian photographers who devoted themselves expressly to the photographic interpretation of the object -, takes on paradigmatic value. He argued that photography should be able to



Fig. 1. Mauro Masera, *Superleggera* by Gio Ponti, Positano, 1961. Iuav University of Venice, Project Archive - Mauro Masera Fund

“go inside objects”,¹ in terms of capturing their essence and sublimating their different values.

And it is well known how Aldo Ballo, together with his wife Marirosa Toscani (1931), had an extraordinary ability to use photographs of products to synthesize and convey strictly technical-functional and aesthetic-formal information as well as symbolic and socio-cultural meanings.

As Giuliana Gramigna (1995, pp.65–80) has written, Aldo Ballo’s was “a cultural approach to the object [...] evident from the earliest experiences of his still-lives” because “the object was his great passion from the very beginning”.

In order to highlight the formal and functional innovation represented by Olivetti’s *Lettera 22*, in the early years of their career, Aldo and Marirosa literally invented a “luminous table” on which to place the product so that the light, coming from below, would pass through it, making the detail of the keyboard embedded in the body legible. From then on, the table would have a crucial role in their studio equipment. Light and easy to carry, *Lettera 22* fully complied with the main requirements, that is, compactness and size reduced to a minimum: the roller was integrated, with only the knob protruding, and the room taken by the spacing lever was minimal. Lightness and ease of transport were interpreted by the zenith shot which, by deceiving the eye, turned the typewriter into a (nearly) two-dimensional object.

Photographic research, on the other hand, has always been intertwined with the process of cultural qualification of objects, and the same is true for design processes: “photography introduces the thing, showcases it, emphasizes it, glorifies it” (Seelig and Stahel, 2004, p. 6).

Among the qualities of objects restored by photography there is, first of all, the ‘formal’ one. Here the values of the object are united with those of the photograph

¹ From the conversation with the author, Milan, June 8, 2017.

since photography is a project in itself and therefore in search of an expression, a formal/linguistic value (as the photographer's stylistic signature) that goes with that of the object represented.

Photography is a *distinct* tool from writing, "it becomes the body of writing" (F. Lambert, cited in Fiorani, 2006, p. 162) to narrate the object, that is, the product. In fact, photography is a congenial way both to the process of indispensable design reading of the object (i.e., the product) and to the indispensable corollary of the work done by the designer, as Michele De Lucchi has stated on several occasions² "Photography is an act of design. It's a fundamental step in the creation process in both architecture and design" (Balena, 2016, p. 5).

Before him, Antonio Arcari, photography historian and critic, had expressed himself in the same terms: "another moment in the relationship between photography and design should be sought in the contribution that the designer asks of photography in the phase of formal research and throughout general and professional training" (1975, p.6–7).

The relationship between object and photography, then, is the search for a balance between what the object represents and what the photograph, by mirroring it, adds to its status: on the one hand, the photograph is the representation of what the object is. But, on the other hand, the photo constructs the object, designs its image, gives it an identity and becomes an integral part of the making of its history.

1 Functional Values (But Not Only)

In the same 1975 article, Arcari also points out that this kind of photography is distinctly "descriptive, informative, becoming a critical reading of the object". Moreover, Arcari underlines that the photographer ought to have "a particular sensitivity and good knowledge of the historical and cultural course that industrial design has followed from the origins of the industrial revolution to the present day" (pp. 6–7). In the take-off phase of industrial design, the design object needed to be *described* and the public had to be *informed, educated* about the meaning and task of industrial design. In this process, in order to respond to such requirements, photography was "a *docile* [adaptable, AN] working material", still according to Arcari (1975, p. 7).

In the pioneering phase of Italian design in the 1950s, photographs of objects were, in the hands of the most gifted authors, a fascinating narrative of insightful, smart problem solving; they were - precisely as Arcari said - descriptive and informative, at a time in history when it was necessary to make the modernity of products understandable.

In the famous image of the Arco lamp by Giorgio Casali (1913–1995) - another masterful interpreter and leading figure of design photography in Italy, along with the Ballos - the author makes an eloquent synthesis of function and behavior. The set is given by a logical sequence of elements: the lamp that illuminates the table at which a man is seated; behind him, a lady standing under the arch, which clearly suggests the possibility of moving around the table, behind the diners, without the lamp base standing in the way. It is all there! Nothing could be added or taken away from this composition. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is the most recurring image of the Arco lamp; it somehow represents its "identity card", which has always accompanied it.

² Cf. Calvenzi, Gregoriotti, 2009, p.214.

The same clarity of intent had already characterized Casali's arrangement of both set and framing for the Superleggera chair: the focus is on the gesture, made by the model, to lift the chair with a single finger by means of a pull scale (which becomes the fulcrum of the composition), a gesture that instantly attracts the viewer's attention and clarifies the main functional requirement of the chair - 'informs', as Arcari says.

Also, a common feature of the two images by Casali is the human presence of models, who are, however, at the 'service' of the object, not stealing the scene from the real protagonist. Gillo Dorfles (1982, p. 536) defined this as "a kind of shooting of the object that makes it a protagonist, in the same way as a human character". And it is to accommodate this need that the photograph of the models is taken from behind: to bring viewers 'into' the scene, to make them participate and direct their attention toward the real protagonist of the shooting.³

At the same time, among the objects of Italian design, the Superleggera is the one that best embodies its craft tradition. And if Casali's photograph aimed specifically at describing the chair, a few years later Mauro Masera (1934–1992) drew attention to its cultural value as a refined descendant of the *Chiavarina*, the archetypal chair from the Ligurian farming tradition.

However, the set chosen by Masera (in collaboration with Michele Provinciali) is the evocative landscape of Positano (Fig. 1), not too far from the Sorrento coast, where Ponti himself was about to build the hotel "Parco dei Principi", in which the Superleggera would find a coherent context to fit in.

Returning to the chair's main prerogative, material and visual lightness, graphic designers Giulio Confalonieri and Ilio Negri, acting as photographers in this case, offer a different perspective for the pages of Cassina's catalog in 1959.

Their interest does not lie in the formal description of the object. Their interpretation focuses instead on sublimating the rigor and sobriety of the configuration of the chair. By adopting a graphic play of multiple overlapping horizontal lines and organized light and shadow, as in a symphonic score, they also bring back to memory Ponti's half-black half-white version of the chair.

In this regard, Mario Piazza writes (2013, p. 50):

The cut is widescreen, as in certain Hollywood films. In the vast, unadorned space, shaped by a grazing light, the skeletal lines of the chair stand out in a play of positives and negatives. The atmosphere is theatrical. The point of view, refined and beautifully achieved, draws a line, a horizon, with the different seats. The lightness of the chairs becomes a noble presence. The image communicates an achievement: the subtle stroke of a drawing has been transformed into a mass-produced object. The framing choice is meant to express an idea of change in designing and manufacturing.

The Ballos will later add a final chapter to the tale by employing grazing light to enhance the attention to formal details and material texture of ash and straw.

³ A solution already adopted for some time in photography of furniture design. One should think of the photos taken at the Bauhaus, or that of Charlotte Perriand, who presented the tilting chaise longue while lying down on it with her face purposely facing the wall (1928).

2 The Photographer's Creativity as Added Value

A further contribution of photography can also come from the creativity of the photographer alone (the added value mentioned at the beginning), making the one taking the photograph the actual inventor of the image of an object in some cases.

When Klaus Zaugg (1937–1994) is entrusted with a photo shoot for Gaetano Pesce's newly born UP series of seats in 1969, the Swiss photographer gives considerable importance to the figure of the woman - as well as in the symbolic intention of Pesce's project - which is always present in the numerous shots he takes. He also decides to project the sessions in an unusual and evocative setting (that of the Verzasca Valley). The result is a true *photo-reportage*, with a series of striking images; the shots do not have a different hierarchical value, but they all express the same disruptive communicative force. Zaugg thus lends a futuristic image to the armchair, in line with the space-age mood of the moment, thanks to the dresses and fluffy white wigs of the numerous models, adding connotations to the project not anticipated by Pesce.

An unexpected result, arising from the creativity of the photographer alone, is the work of Sergio Libis (1930) for the Tizio lamp, designed by Richard Sapper for Artemide.

Sapper always relied on Libis - he considered him his "personal" photographer - to create the photographic image of his designs. Believing that Libis had a particular sensitivity in understanding his objects, Sapper did not give precise directions but left him maximum freedom of interpretation.⁴ In the case of the Tizio, it was a matter of describing with a single still life the movement made by the lamp arm. In order to achieve such a result, Libis uses the classic stroboscopic technique in which the background must necessarily be black and the object portrayed (the lamp) white (a color, however, not envisaged by the production up to that time).

The company agreed to make a white prototype, and once a poster with this image was published, it was so successful that Artemide, from then on, also put a white version of the luminaire into production.

3 Narrative, Symbolic and Experiential-Relational Values

It is evident that the project which photography brings to bear on design is an immediately comprehensible visual narrative, standing as a true narrative, parallel yet not always completely coinciding with that of the written word. Photography then becomes an alternative form of "writing" - literally, "body of writing" according to Arcari (1975) - to narrate the object.

As previously underlined (Sapper and Libis), the relationship between designer and photographer can become one of elective affinity, leading in the most harmonious cases to a true co-authorship of the image project. The 30-year intellectual and operational cooperation between Ponti and Casali is a case in point: what was not directly expressed in words by Ponti in his texts became explicit through Casali's eloquent images: Casali was, for Domus, "not so much 'the magazine's photographer' [...] but an essential figure in a cultural project where human attributes have as much value as technical skill" (Zancan and Grima, 2013, p. 9).

⁴ From the conversation with the author, May 10, 2017, Agazzano (Piacenza).

The 'job' of photography is also to bring to light all the symbolic and emotional content of the object, beyond the narrative that writing entails. In the history of design, it is not unusual that the designer feels the need to narrate and communicate through photography, using this medium as a working tool (Arcari, 1975, p. 7), as an immediate and effective form of expression.

In this respect, too, Ettore Sottsass led the way. For Ettore, as Michele De Lucchi has learned and recalls, being able to photograph was "an indispensable skill," necessary first and foremost to "investigate, deepen, and communicate"; "the object and the photograph he had taken of the object were for him one and the same" (Balena, 2016, pp. 5–6).

This was the case with the *Gray Furniture* of the early 1960s, photographs of which were taken in collaboration with photographer Alberto Fioravanti⁵: "In the photographs I took at Poltronova the idea is that furniture isn't a catalogue of quaint objects placed in the home, but instead the design of a place, of an existential state..." (Balena Arista, 2016, p. 7).

At the same time, Sottsass also worked with Fioravanti at Olivetti. Among various photo shoots, the promotional campaign for Valentine was unique and still presented itself as an opportunity to reiterate the importance of photography in conveying the values and meanings of a product.

In the text published in *Notizie Olivetti* (June 1969),⁶ the strengths of the machine are emphasized:

"A line decidedly different from the traditional line of our other portable typewriters was chosen by the designers. [...] The keyboard stands out clearly from the rest, and this is made even more evident by the juxtaposition of colors - red and black - making the writing instrument an 'object' capable of being noticed, of being used even by a public less professionally motivated towards mechanical writing".

To achieve his goal, Sottsass, who coordinated the promotional campaign in collaboration with graphic designer Roberto Pieraccini, involved other photographers in addition to Fioravanti (including Cesare Colombo) and gave them all two samples of the machine so that they could film them in the most diverse everyday situations in which people might have used it.

"We went and put the Valentine everywhere, in as many places as possible, to see how it behaved and what was going on around it. We then took a lot of pictures. After a little while, we had gathered extensive documentation, a kind of reportage of the journey made among people by an object and not by a person" (Sottsass).⁷

After all, it is known that Sottsass's objects "have never been merely functional in the sense of use or ergonomics, nor even merely decorative. They have always had a strong symbolic charge, dense with meaning: "objects as catalysts of cultural perception" (B. Radice, 1993, pp. 48–50). In the case of Valentine, one can speak of true experiential values, of interaction with a decidedly wide and varied target of users.

⁵ See G. Castagnola, C. Colombo, A. Fioravanti, (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Photography*, Milan: Peruzzo, 1969; <https://archividigitaliolivetti.archivistoricolivetti.it/collections/entity/detail/82147/> [27/09/2022].

⁶ <https://www.storiaolivetti.it/articolo/93-valentine-design-E-grafica-per-un-prodotto-cult/> [25/09/2022].

⁷ *Ibid.*

Years later, Sottsass would find with Santi Caleca (around 1950) a new syntonic collaboration for the images of his projects, mainly ceramics and glass. Sottsass also transferred his vision of photography to Caleca, suggesting how to shoot objects. Recounts Caleca, “Even before he was a designer and an architect, Ettore was an artist and a photographer. He often asked me for photographs with long shadows. He would advise me, for example, to shoot foreshortening rather than framing objects frontally, both to manage the light better and to have more depth of field. He has greatly influenced my work.”⁸

4 The Designer Photographer

The importance of photography for design has grown exponentially over time. If as early as 1959 G. Carlo Argan, on the occasion of the fourth edition of the Compasso d’Oro award, had polemically observed how the object was then “consumed” as an image even before being used as a product, in 1975 Antonio Arcari still argued, “today we know most of the objects produced by industry thanks to the diffusion of the image that photography gives us of them [...] with such intensity and overbearingness that it conditions our choices” (p.7).

From the 1980s onward, we have also witnessed the emergence of the figure of the designer photographer, as Tom Vack (1948) - a new master of authorial photography who has lived in Italy since 1989 - has defined himself (Ceriani, 2017, p. 109). Vack’s philosophy is based upon his will to “represent an object in a photo rather than take a photo of an object” (Bergamini, 2014) and he does so through a mode that is veined with dramatic lyricism, with almost theatrical atmospheres.

The images of De Lucchi’s Tolomeo lamp for Artemide and Ron Arad’s Double Soft Big Easy sofa for Moroso bear witness to this. They clearly show how this Chicago-born photographer prefers to tell the intrinsic motivation of objects through dense atmospheres. In his images, the object is the absolute protagonist, described only by color and light.

5 Conclusion

The language of photography is, therefore, a powerful medium that allows objects to show their full meaning and the wealth of values they carry. In this symbiotic relationship between photography and design the role played by the author of the images by means of his or her work is an added value. In fact, the articulated narrative that results can arise as a result of the creativity of the photographer alone and his or her expressive language, or as the result of a choral, symbiotic work with the designer. In any case, this is a process that, in most cases, leads to a conscious, incisive document, deeply linked, and somehow inseparable, from the object itself.

⁸ From the conversation with the author, Milan, April 28, 2017.

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