

Eugenio Quarti and Alessandro Mazzucotelli, Two Protean Figures: Artists, Artisans, Industrialists, Teachers

Irene
de Guttry
Italy

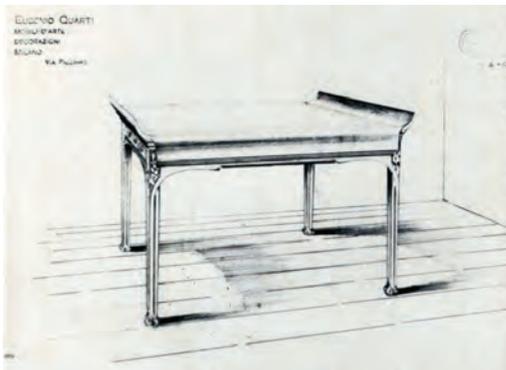
At the beginning of the 20th century the theorists of Modernism felt that in order to renew the decorative arts there was a fundamental need for collaboration between the artists who designed the works of art, the artisans who crafted them, and the industrialists who, through mass production, helped disseminate them. In fact, two of the leading lights of Art Nouveau in Italy, the cabinetmaker Eugenio Quarti and the blacksmith Alessandro Mazzucotelli, both artisans of working class origins, crafted themselves the objects they designed. Once they achieved success, they were so burdened with requests that they had to expand their workshop and turn them into a veritable industrial factory with over 50 employees. They thus played all three roles, combining manual dexterity with artistic talent, an entrepreneurial attitude, and even a vocation for teaching. As bearers of a message of renewal, they were asked to teach in the schools of the Società Umanitaria philanthropic institution. In their case, art proved to be a tool for social elevation.

Born only two years apart - Quarti in 1867 (like H ctor Guimard), and Mazzucotelli in 1865 - they left their respective native towns (Villa d'Alm  in Bergamo province for Quarti, Lodi for Mazzucotelli) to find work in Milan, *the city that rises* in the words of Boccioni, a capital of

business and of industry. Companions in many adventures, the cabinetmaker and the blacksmith frequented artistic circles where they were beloved and respected by critics and appreciated by modernist architects (they worked with Giuseppe Sommaruga and Luigi Conconi). They both participated in the leading national and international exhibition of decorative arts.

At the age of 14, Quarti was sent to Paris by his father, also a cabinetmaker, to learn the trade. In 1888, after a brief but intense period spent working in Carlo Bugatti's workshop, he opened the first workshop of his own in Milan: it took him ten years to free himself of Bugatti's influence. Indeed, his furniture in the early 1890s betrayed a *Moresque* style, in ebonised wood with ivory and bone inlays and metal appliqu s, and was exquisitely trimmed: the perfection of his craft was a constant characteristic of his work.

As a youth, Mazzucotelli dreamed of being a painter or a sculptor, but his parents could not afford to put him through school, and he was forced to work for a living. At the age of 18 he joined the workshop of the Milanese blacksmith Defendente Oriani and learned all the tricks of the trade from him. Six years later, in 1891, he took over the workshop.



Eugenio Quarti,
Study room
exhibited at the
First International
Exhibition of Modern
Decorative Art,
Turin 1902;
pencil drawing
of the desk
(Bertarelli Civic Prints
Collection, Milan)



On the European Art Nouveau scene, replete with representatives of the enlightened bourgeoisie, Quarti and Mazzucotelli were a unique example of working class pride and social elevation.

The intellectual growth and maturation process that brought the two artisans to become champions of modernity took place over the course of the 1890s. For Quarti, the turning point came thanks to his friendship with the painter and art merchant Vittore Grubicy - who represented the divisionist painters Segantini, Previati, Morbelli and the cabinet maker Carlo Bugatti, who as early as 1888 exhibited his furniture in London. Grubicy introduced Quarti to artistic circles, encouraged him to draw, and kept him apprised of new trends: Japonism, Art Nouveau and nature as a source of inspiration *from life*, Morris's theories on the valorisation of applied arts, and the rejection of historicist eclecticism.

Mazzucotelli's initiation took place thanks to his mingling with artists in the evening schools of the Società Patriottica, and especially his

relationship with the painter Giovanni Bertami who, roused by modernist doctrines, abandoned easel painting and founded the largest Art Nouveau glassworks factory in Milan.

Quarti was awarded a grand-prix at the 1900 World Fair in Paris, while Mazzucotelli drew the attention of critics as the only Italian master blacksmith to exhibit modern works.

The first decade of the 20th century, which in Italy coincided with the rise, triumph, and decline of Art Nouveau, was for both artists a period of explosive creativity, achievement, and success. They were both over thirty by then. At the 1902 Turin Fair - the first international exhibition dedicated exclusively to modern decorative arts, with the participation of Mackintosh, Tiffany, and Behrens - Mazzucotelli obtained the highest praise for his stand,



Eugenio Quarti,
Detail of an oak
cupboard exhibited
in Turin in 1902,
Drawing published in
Arte Italiana
Decorativa e Industriale,
February 1904



Eugenio Quarti,
One of the doors
of the Kursaal casino
in San Pellegrino Terme;
watercolour drawing
of a decorative detail,
1907
(Bertarelli Civic Prints
Collection, Milan)

which his friend Bugatti had decorated. Quarti himself was so famous by then that he attended as an out-of-competition participant. After this event, the board of the newly established Società Umanitaria appointed them as directors of its first two schools of applied arts, whose educational principle was to *achieve practical utility through the simplicity of decorations; obtaining a style that defines our era through painstaking, perfect execution*. Before assuming their posts, the Società funded a trip to London and Paris so that they could see the new developments first hand. Quarti and Mazzucotelli extended the trip to Belgium and Netherlands for a broader perspective.

The Società Umanitaria, an extraordinary charity institution, was established thanks to a bequest by the philanthropist Prospero Moisè Loria to the Municipality of Milan *for the purpose of putting the deprived, with no distinction, in*

a position to help themselves by providing them with jobs, assistance, and education.

Starting in 1903 - at that time the applied arts were held in the same regard as the so-called major arts - Quarti and Mazzucotelli dedicated themselves selflessly to teaching, seeing in their students the same hardships they went through. While they had been absorbed by very demanding client orders in Italy and abroad, a rapid shift took place over the course of a few years from a floral, soft, and naturalistic Art Nouveau style to more rigid forms, with a focus on geometry, influenced by the rigor of the secessionist movement. This gradual evolution is evident both in their final works and in preparatory sketches. These drawings both Quarti's and Mazzucotelli's - are held in the Bertarelli Civic Collection of Prints at the Sforza Castle in Milan.





Alessandro
Mazzucotelli,
Wrought iron
and glass
dragonfly lamp
exhibited
at the 1906 Milan
Sempione Exhibition
charcoal sketch
of a dragonfly
(Bertarelli Civic
Prints Collection,
Milan)



Quarti's lines are slender and delicate, his depictions precise. The item of furniture to be built is complete with all its details, and the models are then faithfully reproduced: the Art Nouveau character of the studio desk presented at the 1902 International Exhibition in Turin manifests itself in the great purity of its lines. It is a hymn to lightness, the carved legs are slender, and the tabletop is a flat surface whose shorter sides curve upwards. Although the decorative motifs - leaves or flowers - are inspired by nature, they are so stylized as to become unrecognizable. Curved lines are understated; there are no sharp corners; the impression is of constant fluidity. Quarti, who was a connoisseur of wood, chose his materials in light of their function and the way they would be carved. The dining room cupboard decorated with floral carvings - also exhibited in Turin in 1902 - was fashioned from oak, a strong, tough wood: the marked chiaroscuro of the decorations highlights their plasticity and relief, while the threadlike metal appliqué betray their Art Nouveau origins

due to the flowerbud-shaped knots interrupting the linear motifs. Quarti created all the wooden furnishings - furniture, panelling, and doors - for the Kursaal municipal casino in San Pellegrino Terme, an imposing building completed in 1907, which Mazzucotelli also worked on. Quarti's style lost its Art Nouveau mellowness and evolved towards a more rigid and stylized Proto-Déco approach.

Mazzucotelli's drawings are very different in style. His charcoal lines are thick and well marked, his depictions dynamic with the immediacy of a sketch. His drawings are the first step in his working process. Based on the field observation of flowers, leaves, insects, and small animals, the blacksmith made a quick initial sketch; later, in the studio, he would use it to prepare a more accurate, analytical drawing. The next step was a life-size drawing on a pierced cardboard cut-out. In some cases, prior to forging the final work, Mazzucotelli made a clay or putty model of it. The dragonfly, a topic of international Art Nouveau was

a challenge: an icon of lightness and fragility wrought out of iron seemed to be a contradiction in terms. Mazzucotelli applied eyes to the dragonfly's body, fashioned wings out of iron leaf, and moulded the legs from a small square iron wire. Thanks to his exceptional manual dex-terity, he was able to portray - in the words of Rossana Bossaglia, the first great scholar of Italian Art Nouveau - *the life breath of the animal*. The bolts necessary to keep the works together were highlighted to become decorative elements. The lamp displayed at the Sempione exhibition was imitated for years by blacksmiths all over Italy. The snake was a typical Art Nouveau decoration motif due to its natural sinuosity. Mazzucotelli adopted it as a subject for decorative sculpture and used it as

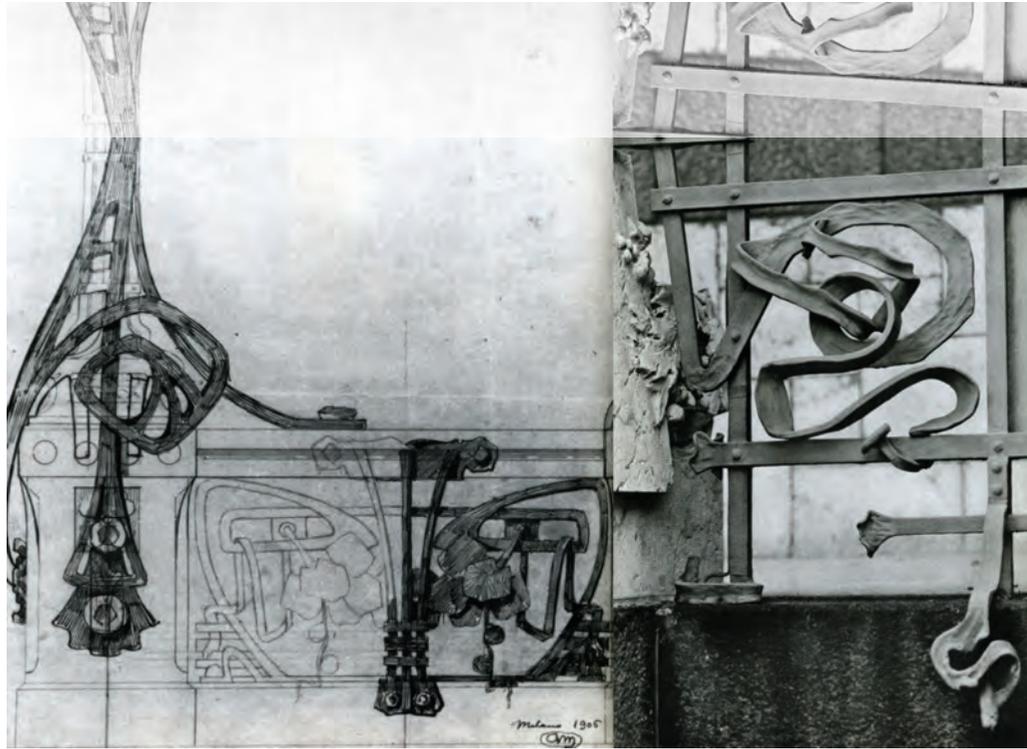
a support for his lamps. The first time he displayed one of his serpent sculptures was at the Sempione exhibition, but over the years he would create numerous versions of it, with one or more animals. Also in 1906, he built the gate for a villa at Crocetta del Montello. Iron wraps itself around stone as if it were a soft, full-bodied, limber ribbon unfolding in soft, eccentric curves. Mazzucotelli was responsible for all iron works at the Kursaal casino in San Pellegrino Terme, including the two large wall-mounted lamps at the sides of the entrance. The preparatory sketches emphasize static issues and the balance of the composition. The palm leaf decorations, only hinted at in the drawing, are actually lavish and lush. This proved to be one of his last naturalistic depictions: although



Alessandro Mazzucotelli, *The serpents*, wrought-iron sculpture and drawing of table lamp, 1906



Alessandro
Mazzucotelli,
Ink sketch
of lamp stand
and railing for
Villa Antonina
in Crocetta del
Montello,
1906
(Bertarelli
Civic
Prints
Collection,
Milan).
The unfolding
ribbon theme
was taken up again
by Mazzucotelli
in the gate for
Villa Romeo
in Milan
(R. Bossaglia,
A. Hammacher,
Mazzucotelli,
Milan
1971)



plants and animals would continue to be a part of his decorations, from then on Mazzucotelli would depict them in a highly stylized manner. For him, as for Quarti, the floral Art Nouveau era was over, as evidenced by the pennant that crowned the Kursaal.

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Drawing
of large wall lamp
for the facade of the
Kursaal casino in
S. Pellegrino Terme.
The double curve gives
the lamp élan;
the lavish
palm fronds on
the lamp are merely
hinted at on the
preparatory sketch.

