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## *A Restless Voyager of the Image*

### **Gemma De Angelis Testa**

For me, Armando was an apparition, a long-awaited presence. His smile - clear and disarming as that of a child - illuminated his square-jawed face, revealing a dimple, his eyes exuded enthusiasm, in an ever-curious quest to capture the new.

"You have to be creative, even in the most banal things, the everyday loses its everyday quality if you confront it with creativity, as if for the first time." With these words Armando aroused my curiosity and interest from our first encounter.

Armando and art were and are my life's dream. Since childhood I have had a close relationship with books, which were my only playmates, along with my siblings. Books nurtured my dreams, helping to keep me somewhat detached from reality, and along with art they have remained my most trusted and essential companions as I have journeyed through life. It was a book that created a bridge between Armando and me.

While an adolescent I happened to read the lives of Van Gogh and Modigliani. My infatuation for the latter was such that I announced to my family that some day I would marry an artist. When I met Armando, in Venice, I was barely twenty-one years old. I was on the beautiful beach of the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido, and as always, I had some books with me, including Sigmund Freud's *Psychoanalysis of Genius*. If I remember well, what I had gotten from my reading of the initial pages was that the child, on reaching adulthood, becomes ashamed of his childlike quality, considering it negative in the eyes of society, while the artist lives out his own fantasies naturally and spontaneously, and doesn't fear this characteristic, which is shared by all persons of genius. That morning on the Lido I was dreaming and thinking about all this, when suddenly I noticed a magnetic presence. I raised my eyes and saw Armando, of whose existence and name I was unaware. He was far away, talking to someone, but he filled the space, while the others remained out of focus. Extremely elegant, he was wearing a white linen suit, despite the heat, and on his head, his ever-present Panama. He moved as if his body was trailing his words. I learned that he had recently separated from his wife and that he lived alone in Turin. In Venice we were able to see each other, going together numerous times to the Biennale, and as we got to talking it seemed significant to us that my name was the same as that of the important female figures in his life. We were also struck by the coincidence of similar events that had occurred to both of us at different times in our lives. Chance seemed to have brought us together, and love led us to marry, eight years later.

Armando devoured images from his surroundings and from books. A journalist once asked him what he would miss most if he were forced to live on a desert island, and he answered without hesitation, "art catalogues." We often traveled to visit museums and galleries, we would return home empty-handed, and our luggage was filled solely with emotions and energy. Armando was not a collector, and the idea of buying paintings didn't lure us, with rare exceptions. Later, aware that my passion for art might be transformed into something else - and this became a reality after his death - he expressed a desire to be able to have the walls at home as white and immaculate as sheets

of paper onto which he might mentally trace signs, without the interference of other images that might distract from his creative work. His curiosity extended from the Egyptian pyramids to tribal art, from Piero della Francesca to Jeff Koons, from cinema to photography, to architecture. But he also looked at the simplest and most obvious things, he took in what he saw, and after a long period of development, ideas erupted, sometimes after years, in other forms. He was fascinated by simple signs, the cross, the sphere, the triangle; he loved many artists, including Michelangelo, Picasso, the architects Gropius and Le Corbusier, but he had a special weakness for Mondrian and for the German architect Mies van der Rohe, director of the famous Bauhaus school, shut down by Hitler in 1933.

"Less is more," is Mies van der Rohe's notorious phrase, and Armando repeated this often, to himself and to others. With the advent of marketing in advertising, which entailed market research, briefs, strategies and various campaigns, he too was assaulted. He sometimes was forced to give in on a formal level, and this created a certain sense of dissatisfaction, to the point where one night, he told me, he dreamed that Mondrian rebuked him and exhorted him to return to his basic forms. Armando was capricious and unpredictable in his art; he himself stated that he didn't know if tomorrow he would like what he liked today.

His approach to the world was outside any scheme; he was endowed with enormous cheerfulness, love and enthusiasm for all aspects of life. Charismatic and ironic, he didn't hide his restlessness, his exuberant vitality or his nonconformity. Fascinated by people, he held sway over them; he loved to surround himself with a crowd of young friends who followed us, even on our trips to distant lands, during which we, myself included, could barely keep up with his tireless energy.

He used a language all his own, extremely personal, with a bizarre lexicon. Sometimes he welcomed visitors with the words, "Settle in," playing down his own presence and putting them right at ease. He would then proceed to converse in a Turinese accent, a habit he never lost, and which inserted an ironic coloring to the question: "And these gentlemen, what do they think of this drawing?" Telling a story, excited, he would give a sly laugh in advance, as if there were some information that only he had understood, before others. Even while conversing, and in any case throughout his everyday life, he drew incessantly on whatever material was handy: paper, catalogues, books. His hand couldn't resist an uncontrollable need to transcribe into drawing the depth of images created by his imagination. He was obsessed with numbers and letters, which he imbued with human characteristics, but above all with fingers, which he painted and photographed over the course of the years, until they became the subjects of a photographic series that, to his eyes, documented the phases of a performance.

Curious about people, the quality he appreciated most in others was goodness; he himself was kind and generous, and he felt disarmed in the presence of a good person. He knew how to listen and he also had the capacity to understand people, the simpler the better, often transforming even a banal phrase or an episode into something charming and original, to the point that the interlocutor unexpectedly felt like the center of attention and discovered him or herself to be extremely intelligent. Armando was inexhaustibly communicative, and he managed to infect and transmit to others a sprinkling of his brilliance.

For twenty-two years he was my sweet companion, husband, friend, lover, my everything. Our tie was strong, and we were joined symbiotically in happiness as in sadness, leaving no room for any intrusions. The years I spent with him were magical and intense; it was like living in a film projected at high speed.

Armando thought he had robbed me of his youth, which he could no longer offer me, but this was something only he worried about, for I never felt this lack, nor did I feel any apprehension about youth that was no longer there.

My memories of Armando are memories of travels, of encounters, of visits to museums and galleries, of ideas exchanged, of witty remarks that we laughed over together, of our never boring conversations that also demanded things from others and of which he never lost control, orchestrating even their silences.

We were accomplices in happiness and in the rediscovery of the world together, we loved jokes that we played and of which we sometimes remained the victims. Time passed us by and seemed to have no end, in the bliss of savoring together every shared experience, even in the telling, each jealous of any thought left unexpressed by the other. We vied to please each other, holding a dialogue through art, since without this dialogue it wasn't possible to reach his heart.

I also had the privilege of having him as a teacher who encouraged me above all to develop a "personal" vision of a work of art. I assimilated his lessons, his capacity for synthesis. He taught me to interpret the formal and structural beauty of a sign, of a character ... the simplicity and dialectical relationship between image and message, the expressive potential of a depiction that, in order to last over time, must go beyond its utilitarian destiny ... the importance of the sense of space of the white background where figure and writing impressively emerge ... the use of primary colors. But above all, he repeated to me that mental exercise and continuous curiosity are the proper diet for the brain of a creative person. After his death, I missed this constant urging, I projected my imagination in other directions, but even today I surprise myself by developing images for products for nonexistent clients.

His lessons gave rise to a veritable professional collaboration: for about twenty-two years we conceived, discussed and worked together on many posters and graphics. It was exciting to work alongside him. I don't know how to draw, but as he himself stressed in a letter, which I consider one of my most cherished possessions, written a couple of years before his death: "Even on trips she is nearby to study my themes, even if she doesn't know how to draw, she has given me more than one idea, to mention a few: the pen arm for *Corriere della Sera*, the helmet of hair with the laughing mouth in the *Sorrisi e Canzoni* (Smiles and Songs) campaign, and so many, many times that I can't even remember. She managed to help me so much with ideas, advertising and pictorial opinions...." I didn't pay much attention to marketing, but thanks to the baggage of images that we had in common, and to his experience, we succeeded in understanding each other and in collaborating. Sometimes it happened, as in the case of the poster for the fiftieth anniversary of the Pirovano printing house, that both our works were printed - the poster conceived by Armando, with the large comma, and one conceived by me, with two red hands that were clasped. Armando always created or in any case supervised the campaigns developed by the agency's various creative groups. Even the most minute elements that we came upon during our travels - a crab, an iguana we found on a little island in the South Seas, might become the inspiration for a book jacket, a silkscreen or an entire advertising campaign.

After the death of his brother Mario, Armando asked me to direct Arno Film, his historic film company that created Paulista, Caballero and Carmencita for Lavazza coffee, the planet Papalla for Philco, the hippopotamus Pippo for Lines, and so many other fantastic characters. The experience was positive, I lavished new energy on the projects and was proud of the recognition and prizes that followed.

Armando has been called the father of modern advertising; he said, however, that he would have preferred to be the brother-in-law, or even more, to not be that at all, but instead to be eighteen years old. At other times he asked for deduction of only ten years.

"The anxiety of always knowing how much there is that is new, one's curiosity not tied by barriers, but free to flit about in all fields, is creativity's first step," Armando liked to say, and he called himself and indeed was a restless voyager of the image. This search for originality led him to

bounce from one technique to another, in order to explore all paths of visual communication. He crossed over from advertising to painting, from graphics to television, from design to writing, and he even designed the façade of the building that, to this very day, houses the Testa agency in Turin. The revolution that Armando introduced into the field of advertising and the development, closely linked to him, of advertising in Italy, derives from his first love, painting. Armando began as an abstract painter, and painting was his mode of expression in his early years. Later his experience in the printing world, where the practical demands of life had led him, resulted in his simplification of color and sign. But there was no separation between his lives as an advertising man and as a painter. "I want to continue painting, because it is one of my few moments of freedom. And I am convinced that there must be total interaction between painting and advertising. My path doesn't include painting as a respite, as a digression from my everyday profession," Armando wrote over the course of the years.

He could easily move from a figurative poster to an abstract one, from photographic realism to fluorescent signs that still seem very modern. Despite being known for his white backgrounds with a central image (the white background having now become a shared patrimony of all poster designers), he was the first, both in Italy and elsewhere, to adopt fluorescent backgrounds in the 1950s. He set great store by photography, using color photos exactly as he used a brush. In 1977 he stated in the magazine *Diaframma*, "Photography is painting with the camera. I look at a photograph the same way I look at a drawing, I manipulate a photograph, I leave it whole and make use of it, but exactly in the same way as when I draw an image."

While he drew he often asked me what I thought about one of his new creations, and when I asked him what it was meant for, he would answer, "what it will be used for has no importance: look at the sign, look at the form."

His creations often emerged autonomous, unconnected to the client's requests. The silk-screens with animals, begun in 1958 and worked on until 1982, were personal investigations, not conditional and not "destined" for advertising, and this is also true of the ironic series, Food, which he embarked on with the apple in 1974 and, of necessity, terminated in December of 1991. These subjects belong to the fantastic dimension of a playful imagination. In other cases, as with the "sphere and a half" for Punt e Mes and the Finger Star of the last poster for Cinema Giovane (Young Cinema), the design emerged autonomous, and only later did Armando decide to use it for advertising purposes. The essence of the communication, what lay behind, was acquired, and Armando studied each campaign down to the smallest details. Yet he managed to avoid becoming violated or flattened by his extensive research, and he didn't lose sight of advertising as a whole, always keeping in mind the various media employed.

The ability to understand art is not acquired easily, and it is even more difficult to speak about art when it is applied to popular products, but Armando succeeded in expressing himself artistically, because his images, apparently simple, were simultaneously "cultivated" and amusing.

He cared a great deal about the public's sensibility, the way they are accustomed to living with works from the past, and their familiarity with certain visual harmonies, colors and light. He made use of the media, from television to newspaper and magazine pages and the city walls, utilizing them as if they were art galleries at his disposal.

"Knowing how to enjoy an emotion alone means having the rare gift to succeed in fully appreciating the artistic message." And he continued, "...photography reproduces everyday obviousness, it looks the obvious full in the face, while the dream needs an oblique vision. Painting is a dreamy metaphor. Advertising, however, almost always administers images that are taken for granted..."

Although with different goals, Armando, like early man and like Renaissance artists, sought to enter

into contact with people through images. His was a creativity that, rooted in the Italian pictorial tradition, had little to do with Anglo-American models that concentrated more on the marketing aspect.

For Armando, advertising people have a cultural and ethical responsibility to the public; advertising is a witness, not only to commercial communication, but also to the history of the country. It must carry out an educational function, teaching and transmitting the message of art.

Contrary to amoral advertising, false motivation, false information, the rhetoric of "a whiter wash," Armando felt that certain atmospheres, equipped with ambiguous words, subterfuges and slow-working assurances, abused the intelligence of the public and exploited its ingenuousness.

His Caballero, Papalla, the geese Cesira and Ambreus and the Saiwa train were unsurpassed; they have amused generations, young and not so young. Armando not only stimulated the imagination of those who were around him, but he created a veritable dialogue, including with the television viewers who watched his film strips every evening, stimulated in their attention and imagination. These were not passive subjects, but were, instead, visually and intellectually involved.

His imagination ignited that of the public. Caballero and Carmencita are pure cones that he animated in stop motion, as in animated cartoons, frame by frame. It was the first time that such basic characters were created. They took shots at each other but had no arms; it was the rhythm of the action, the humor of the situation and the imagination of the public that provided arms, hands and lips. Thus Papalla is a sphere, which carries out even fewer movements, but which acts like a human being.

Armando's immense art gallery of works was the street, the world of life, which we all traverse and where we all are free to enter.