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Why woman?

Napoleone Ferrari

“First of all, they built a temple to Panionion Apollo such as they had seen in Achaea, calling it Doric because they had first seen that kind of temple built in the states of the Dorians.

Wishing to set up columns in that temple, but not having rules for their symmetry, and being in search of some way by which they could render them fit to bear a load and also of a satisfactory beauty of appearance, they measured the imprint of a man's foot and compared this with his height. On finding that, in a man, the foot was one sixth of the height, they applied the same principle to the column, and reared the shaft, including the capital, to a height six times its thickness at its base. Thus the Doric column, as used in buildings, began to exhibit the proportions, strength, and beauty of the body of a man.

Just so afterwards, when they desired to construct a temple to Diana in a new style of beauty, they translated these footprints into terms characteristic of the slenderness of women, and thus first made a column the thickness of which was only one eighth of its height, so that it might have a taller look. At the foot they substituted the base in place of a shoe; in the capital they placed the volutes, hanging down at the right and left like curly ringlets, and ornamented its front with cymatia and with festoons of fruit arranged in place of hair; while they brought the flutes down the whole shaft, falling like the folds in the robes worn by matrons. Thus in the invention of the two different kinds of columns, they borrowed manly beauty, naked and unadorned, for the one, and for the other the delicacy, adornment, and proportions characteristic of women”ⁿ.

Vitruvius

When faced with the uncertainty of choosing a style to adopt as his own - a decision we all have to make when we wish to create even only a fragment of our everyday world - Mollino banished his doubts by following his own natural preferences and inclinations.

Vitruvius and the ancient Greeks sanctioned a fundamental dichotomy in styles. The disadorned Doric column, which holds up the temple the way the vigour of a hero sustains the Greek polis, is a symbol of austerity of manners, a representation of sturdiness and solidity, gravity and monumentality. Not exactly the qualities of Mollino's work. We find lightness elegance in the curves of his designs, in his maple furniture, and in the curves of his velvet-lined walls and in the reinforced concrete slabs of his architecture. A style awarded by nature in virtue of the female form and carriage, together with the whim for ornament and sensual gratification.

Conversing and vying with our own past, with serene detachment and free from any controversy, as he himself would have said, Mollino enjoys and feels the need to graphically compose his own 'canon' - the absolutely clearly organic architectural order he chose for his constructions. It does not seem too hazardous to compare "Lina" with the classical architectural orders, in natural and particular proximity to the Ionic.

The fact that photography is the means used for this representation is an indication of his consideration

for this (almost) new chemical-mechanical instrument capable of replacing pencil and brush, one might say, and in any case chosen by him as a characteristic medium for his modernity.

In order to decipher this better, it would be wise to venture further into the precarious ground of psychoanalysis and of its founding father, Sigmund Freud, the godfather of the Surrealist movement, which was such an essential point of reference for our architect. Mollino favours a feminine order, which is no less powerful and yet very different from the 'phallic' order with its brawny ostentation - rather like in his drawings, which are harmonious yet full of character. Of all the twentieth-century avant-garde movements, it was the Surrealists who focused most on women. And indeed many brilliant women and women artists, took part in this movement with an active and organic presence. In particular, the Surrealists investigated the relationship and qualities of the two sexes and challenged the bourgeois concept of the separation of these two identities, foretelling their potential for intermingling.

But it is worth following the interlacement with classical antiquity. For centuries the Greeks carved the nude male body while, with a sensitivity opposite to that of our contemporary world, they almost always portrayed women dressed in long robes ⁱⁱ. It is true that the male body was considered to be 'the' model of perfection but the doubt remains that some higher wisdom may have concealed that vision. It appears that the male body is all there, nude in its vigorous and unmistakable directness, while we traditionally view the female figure as changeable and malleable, as a more complex and elusive matter, with an instinctive character of its own.

It would be an illusion to think we can take in the female body at a glance - it is a body that is quintessentially clothed. It is an invitation - a private invitation - to be undressed with patience and passion. Like the works of Mollino, whose depth we are unlikely to fully understand at first sight, and which need to be courted before they will freely and fully offer themselves up.

In classical mythology, Psyche is a young girl who is so beautiful that she cannot fail to frighten away any pretender, or she is a butterfly that abandons our body when lifeless. The Surrealists adopted the woman-butterfly metaphor, which was possibly the most successful metaphor on women in history. In the same way, a metaphor of psyche and unsuspected duplicities can be seen in the shadow projected by "Lina" on the back of the curtain (fig. 2), which Mollino frames in the cut of the photograph, bestowing it with the same weight of bodily physicality.

Without going too deeply into every metaphor and paradox, which would be like returning to an entirely masculine order of empirical certainty and rational control over matters, we find clues and, in Mollino's symbols, we find a taste that enriched his sensitivity and inspired his actions. We can also draw a legitimate interpretation concerning that ineffable temperament that would never explain or be explained, and that even mischievously took pleasure in drawing red herrings across the trail to lead his critics and colleagues astray. He was an illusionist who kept his works-in-the-making secret and the devilish embroiderer of silver-salt canvases whose lively and restless imagination invented scories and fables for grown-ups.

SCRAMBLED OR BOILED?

Better than anyone else, Turin-born painter Albino Galvano, a friend of Carlo's ever since they were boys, provided an insight into the Teatro Regio in Turin, which in 1973 destiny turned into a sort of last will and testament of Mollino - his last creation. And, if we imagined we had to write the script for a film on Mollino, that is the only way it could be.

"Now the first surprise a visitor finds on entering the new auditorium is to see that it has turned into an egg. 'Ab ovo', Italo Cremona would have said or written - and indeed he really must have written it somewhere. Eggs feel just as at home in Turin as they did in the ancient world, if we can trust

Bachofen, Casorati, and others. But the egg of antiquity, and Casorati's more recent one, represent an egg viewed from the outside, while the one cracked open as the 'Nuovo Regio' is on the other hand an egg - whether Freudian or Jungian one cannot say - that contains all the egg as the all-embracing matrix; the theatre as a return to the foetal condition... We have been flippant: after all, what we know about Bachofen, Freud and Jung authorises us to delude ourselves that they would have smiled at the joke, and we apologize to our readers for having made fun of him, as well as of ourselves and of the manes of contemporary culture."ⁱⁱⁱ

A sceptical inspection of the ground plan of the theatre clearly reveals that the body of the building has been designed in the manner of a female bust. The egg-shaped auditorium has been unequivocally laid in the welcoming lap of the patient lady. "The very movement that led us to joke is probably the one that accompanied [Mollino's] brilliant creativity as an architect with a smile of Socratic irony, while he devised the area destined for the acting-out of the drama in the modules of the archetypal original as the container for an incipient life. It is almost an interpretation of the 'opera', as the space of countless possibilities that the chick dreams about inside the egg. And, in Carlo Mollino's egg, we will dream of the torment of Azucena, the abandonment of Isotta to the metaphysical void and Puccini's 'love letters to the seamstresses of Italy', as De Benedetti described them. Mockery!"^{iv}

It would however be unduly misleading to reduce the Teatro Regio to no more than this metaphor, and indeed not even Galvano did. First of all, the "Regio" works thanks to the same meticulous planning care that enabled Mollino to win the public competitions for the headquarters of the Società Ippica Torinese and for the Chamber of Commerce in Turin, for example. What is most striking about the Regio is the extraordinary skill with which space is moulded: the Piranesi-style crossing of the overhanging walkways in the foyer, which form a sophisticated labyrinth, or the juxtaposition of cosy, secluded areas with others that are open, full of light and modern. The wall coverings and upholstery and the structural materials exalt each other, cold and hard with a modern dryness about them or soft and elegant in the finest tradition of the city. Mollino endured "with equal intensity an attraction to functionalism, to the ideal of a building as a 'living device', and to nostalgia for the 'calm, luxury and voluptuousness' of Baudelaire".^v

The intuition of two exceptional engineers, Musmeci and Bertone, solved the problem of combining the expressive and functional needs of the special structures in reinforced concrete, and rendered the theatre extremely interesting from a constructional point of view. Above all there is Mollino's stamp that "places a lucid rational rigor at the service of an adventurous temperament, laden with sensitive and sensual feelings that sustained his creative vein through confrontation with the need for a calculated art as is that of an architect".^{vi}

Indeed that creative vein that is Nature's special gift to woman. Woman and mother, apparently endowed with an excess of nature, just like the artist laden with *misterium creationis*. The Teatro Regio is not just an ode to opera or some prank played on organic architecture. With stony languidness it celebrates woman as the closest creature to share the agonies and joys of Mollino's labour pains.

I could not say if all this is essential for us to understand Mollino's visual devotion and passion, which led him, from the 30s to the early 70s, to produce thousands of portraits of women, by far his favourite subject in photography. Looking through his exercise books from his elementary-school days, there remains the fact that the young Carlo was immediately fascinated by stories of little boys and girls. Indeed the earliest known work of his in our hands, produced when he was in his twenties, is inspired by this subject (fig. 8).

PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS

In many cases, the initial seed which led to Mollino's countless interests was sown by the strict hand

of his father Eugenio. Photography and drawing, which, for Carlo, seemed predestined to be together right from the start, are no exception.

His elementary school teacher noted in his exercise book that "Carlo Mollino has a great attraction for drawing - one might almost say a passion. Once he said to me: Signorina, I'd spend the whole day drawing".^{vii} Looking through the metres of working drawings in pen and wash prepared by his engineer father for his constructions, there can be no doubt that spending the day drawing was a family habit. But Eugenio also used to keep photographic documentation of the buildings and large complexes he designed. He too was an amateur photographer and in the early 1910s he had already arranged a darkroom in the family villa in Rivoli. He must also have explained to young Carlo the advantages of photographic retouching (fig. 11), which he often used to improve his pictures. As early as 1911, there were tangible results and the meticulous school teacher noted: "In colouring this postcard, Mollino has tried to give a more realistic aspect by adding the missing elements: smoke, clouds and birds" (fig. 10). From then on he never stopped retouching 'his postcards' to make them more realistic to his lively, penetrating and fulminating eyes. Eyes that struck both his friends and enemies. Photographic retouching calmed his irresistible desire to transform the reality, which never entirely satisfied him, by bringing drawing and photography physically together and always influencing each other. The theoretical formalisation of his personal style of photography was put on paper in the 444 pages of his "Il Messaggio dalla Camera Oscura", which was originally drafted in 1943, during the war, and subsequently published in 1949. "Message from the Darkroom" remains the most complete definition of Mollino's poetics - and not just of his photography - and is an essential reading for anyone who wishes to have to do with our architect.

Mollino began to use photography as a work tool from the beginning of 1934. The first photos were of his first building, the headquarters of the Farmer's Federation in Cuneo, for publication in the *Architettura* journal. All his photos of architecture were intended for publication in periodicals, as were his photomontages, but from his second building onward, Mollino increasingly used professional photographers for documentation purposes. The art direction of the process, however, remained firmly in his hands. His instructions for the photographer were extremely detailed, including position, camera angle, lenses, and time of day to ensure a certain type of light. After the photographs were taken, the contact prints were given to Mollino who often gave fresh instructions for another shot. Printing then followed. It was almost always only a portion of the picture that was selected, and where necessary the final photo was retouched using pencil or airbrush. The instructions were written on tracing paper or contact prints and carried out by professionals. The most spectacular and intense result of this transformation of reality can be seen in his photomontages.^{viii} Though not actually carried out by Mollino, they were devised by him with absolute precision.

The first photograph of an interior (not designed by him) taken in 1935, was used as a model for an illustration in his serial novel "L'amante del Duca" published in *Il Selvaggio*.^{ix} This picture was later printed in a large format, entitled "Silence" and signed. But in 1935, the time was not yet ripe.

In early 1937 he took the first photos of his Miller house^x and sent them to Giò Ponti for publication. Ponti did not publish Miller house (doing so only in September 1938) but he chose a picture of the entrance at Miller house as a photographic work of art in itself for the cover of *Domus* in April 1937. This was the consecration of Mollino as a photographer, and he gained confidence as he began to discern a new form of expression.

Over the following years, Miller house became the setting for his portraits.^{xi} They were almost exclusively black-and-white portraits of women, taken with a Leica or a Rolleiflex. Printed in a large format of about 30 x 40 cm, they were retouched, titled and signed. In January 1939 Mollino joined the Turin Photographic Society and started exhibiting his works in national exhibitions and competitions.

In 1943, when he left Miller house during the war, he stopped taking this sort of photograph. Within the space of about five years he produced a series of 41 photographs considered worthy of his signature.

Meanwhile, he never stopped photographing his interiors for publication in *Domus* and *Stile*. After Miller house he also took shots of the house for Ezio d'Errico and Devalle house. This provided a corpus of important photographs that afford an insight on Mollino's poetics. The environment is still surrealist and, as for architecture, photography is a means he used to portray his vision of space and his feelings: images and constructed reality are indissolubly bound together. Mollino was very careful to publish his work as he was fully aware of its fragility, indeed it survived to a large extent to this day thanks to this documentation. Other projects (the apartment block in Sanremo and the "Ricefield Farmhouse Bedroom") were destined only to exist in his sketches and photomontages.

After 1941 - after Devalle house - he did not continue to directly devote himself^{xii} to the documentation of his interiors and almost always left the photography to his friend Moncalvo or other professional photographers, though continuing to maintain control of the entire operation right through to the final print ready for publication.

But Mollino was by definition restless, and once he had mastered a subject he became tired of it. In the mid 1930s he started skiing, becoming an instructor in 1942, and then started drafting a volume on skiing techniques which was finally published in 1950: "Introduzione al Discesismo" - an introduction to downhill skiing. For a number of winters and springs he became absorbed in skiing photography, going down with rheumatism after spending long nights in cold, damp refuges. Some of these photos were included in the 41 autographed works worthy of exhibition, three were published in "Il Messaggio", and another 65 were used to illustrate his book on skiing.

On the walls of his home and studio he was to keep a number of prints of his favourite subject, his Austrian friend Leo Gasperl, as he twisted and turned on his skis. They must have been a reviving sight for him as he spent his nights a.e the drawing board, reminding him of the origins of the sweeping curves, like arabesques traced in the snow, that he used to outline building walls and coffee tables.

In the 1950s, after the death of his father in December 1953, Mollino went through a period of crisis which kept him away from his work as an architect for many years. In those days he began to take photographs of nudes, initially with his Leica. and then with a Polaroid camera.

In 1955-56 he rented a small apartment in Villa Scalero in the hills above Turin. He redesigned the interior and, up to 1962, this was to be the only setting for his photographs, which were shot with colour negatives, but sometimes printed in black and white. From this moment on he never again signed a photograph. The prints were smaller (10 x 15 cm) and were very often meticulously redrawn and retouched and, for the first time, in colour. With the colour variations suffered by the prints in time, the once invisible retouchings have now become apparent.

He also began a meticulous search for clothes to be worn by his models, choosing them with the same care of an architect he used to design the interiors for his settings. Already in the 1930s, some of the clothes that recur on different models muse have been his. Later on, when he started using Polaroid, he had hundreds of garments, shoes and accessories to choose from. Right from the early 1960s, intrigued by the latest techniques, colours and immediacy of the Polaroid picture (about 8.5 x 10.5 cm), he almost entirely abandoned the use of negatives. Villa Zaira, which he bought and renovated, was ready in 1964. It was a little chalet on the hills overlooking Turin, and the theatre for his 'shows'. For some years now, the professional studio where he worked had been transformed into a temporary nocturnal backdrop for his Polaroids, which were almost all in black and white. In 1968 his apartment in via Napione was ready at last, and he also used this as a photographic setting, even though only occasionally.

An interminable photographic activity kept Mollino busy for about twenty years. A mystery since he never published, never exhibited and never sold any of his photos. Only some of his friends knew a little about this activity, for every now and then they would receive female portraits in the form of New Year's greetings cards (pp. 266, 281).

One wonders if Mollino was not also referring to his photography when he wrote to a friend: "You need only think of some of the apparently useless work of much of my life". Apparently useless, possibly, like that of skiing and flying, and designing racing cars and ballrooms.

As useless as that of spending eight years reconstructing his "house for the warrior's rest"^{xiii} in via Napione, a rented apartment he never lived in, and his fourth bachelor house in the city. Here he kept some albums of small photographs of women, some of them mounted with dried flowers and impressed with his initials (pp. 268, 270, 277). An army of butterflies as companion pictures for those reproduced from real, covering the entire wall of an equally useless room in his apartment - one that was not a sitting room, nor a dining-room, nor a bedroom.

If he had not been busy working on the Chamber of Commerce and the Teatro Regio in Turin during those years, as well as practicing aerobatics with his biplanes, we might have said that it was just the work of a visionary. A visionary who was all too anxious about the butterfly-psyche that his short (165 cm) mortal remains would leave behind.

ⁱ Vitruvio Pollione, *De Architectura*, IV book, 5-7.

ⁱⁱ Cfr. Joseph Rykwert, *The dancing column*, The MIT press, Cambridge, 1996, pag. 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ Albino Galvano, *Carlo Mollino e il nuovo Regio*, "Atti e Rassegna Tecnica della Società degli Ingegneri e degli Architetti in Torino", 9-10, September-October 1973, pp. 153-154.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 154.

^v Albino Galvano, *T come Mollino M come Torino*, "TDesign", I, September-October 1985, p. 28.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 27.

^{vii} One of Mollino's primary school exercise books preserved in the Alinari Archives in Florence.

^{viii} Mollino also conceived photomontages of the Società Ippica Torinese in 1940, of the Lago Nero sledge-life station, of Casa del Sole in Cervinia in 1948 and of the condominium in Sanremo in 1949.

^{ix} C. Mollino, *L'amante del Duca*, "Il Selvaggio", 30 April 1935, p. 4.

^x A studio-apartment leased in Turin in 1936 and furnished for his own use.

^{xi} The ride of the book that Ermanno Scopinich dedicated to Mollino's photographs: *Occhio Magico*, 4, Scheiwiller, Milan, 1945.

^{xii} Excepting a few photographs of his M3 house of 1946.

^{xiii} As Mollino used to define it.