

## Luca Cottini. The Art of Objects: The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878–1928

Elena Bellina

Volume 41, numéro 1, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087335ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v41i1.35900>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (imprimé)

2293-7382 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bellina, E. (2020). Compte rendu de [Luca Cottini. The Art of Objects: The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878–1928]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 41(1), 155–157. <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v41i1.35900>

lavoro di ricerca dell'autrice rivela una profonda passione per Salgari. Il suo saggio rappresenta senz'altro un contributo notevole e importante per gli studi salgariani, sconsiglierei tuttavia la lettura a coloro che non conoscono gli scritti di Salgari, in quanto l'autrice non tratta in questo primo volume delle loro trame, e questi lettori si ritroverebbero alla fine della lettura con un bagaglio di molti dettagli tecnici sulle pratiche editoriali relative alle sue opere, ma del tutto ignari dei loro contenuti. È consigliato invece a tutti coloro che hanno letto con passione le opere di Salgari al fine di guadagnare una conoscenza più ampia di questo fenomeno letterario e culturale che ha trasformato generazioni di giovani italiani.

PAOLA BASILE  
*Lake Erie College*

**Luca Cottini. *The Art of Objects: The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878–1928*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. 289. ISBN 9781487502836.**

In an age characterized by the global influence of designer technological products, Luca Cottini's *The Art of Objects: The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878–1928* presents a timely and innovative overview of the fifty years during which Italy moved from a post-Unification identity to modern industrialization. The book offers a comprehensive discussion of the mechanical evolution and cultural significance of daily objects destined to change modern life, including wristwatches, photographs, bicycles, radio, gramophones, cigarettes, toys, clothes, and furniture. Instead of focusing on major historical events, Cottini investigates how a number of Italian craftsmen and industrialists were able to transform traditional products into the iconic mass goods that constitute most of the Made in Italy sector, thus mapping the nation's shifting cultural and political role on the international scene. In this sense, the book provides a convincing comparative approach to modern Italian culture elegantly bringing together Italian studies and design studies, along with literature and material culture. It also speaks to our present time by offering an updated perspective on Italy's metamorphosis at the turn of the twentieth century that resonates with the cultural value of contemporary entrepreneurship.

At the core of Cottini's argument is an attempt to reconstruct Italy's transition to modernity through an intriguing examination of symbolic moments and key players during its first fragmented industrialization. It is in the overlooked

early connections between high/low-brow culture and industrial production that Italy's unique path can be uncovered. According to Cottini, between Italy's Unification and the advent of Fascism, the experimental collaborations between the arts and industry managed to convert the Italian peninsula into a creative laboratory. This modern laboratory followed in the steps of the Renaissance tradition of the artisanal *bottega* and, as such, it was a place where skills, knowledge, and managerial spirit could fashion ideas into material goods and assign them modern intellectual values. This is why design stands in the book as the connecting link between art, industry, and culture. The level of *techne* that Italian design inherently entailed turned mass products into cultural objects and, at the same time, it transformed culture into a constitutive part of modern industrial discourse. Nineteenth-century Italian industrialists reinvented the concept of the *bottega* and successfully brought it to a mass-scale level.

Cottini looks at objects as intellectual byproducts and cultural makers through which he reconstructs the Italian experience of modernity on the individual and collective levels. Through impressive archival research, the author surveys the daily issues of national newspapers and magazines (particularly *Corriere della sera* and *Illustrazione italiana*) published between 1878 and 1928 in order to map the changing linguistic and visual landscape of ephemeral products along with the cultural and philosophical debates surrounding their appearance and circulation. *The Art of Objects* consists of eight chapters. The opening and closing chapters focus on a detailed overview of Italy's industrial history, from its early artistic experiments to the birth of full Italian industrial awareness. The other six chapters are fascinating, well-argued case studies centered around goods that entered the Italian market and moved from artisanal retail to mass industrial production between the 1870s and the 1920s. During the same decades, these objects became fashionable icons redefining socio-cultural practices based on modern concepts such as time, motion, vision, and memory. Starting with Chapter Two, Cottini unveils a rich comparative approach in which he pairs an object, such as Bulgari wristwatches, with a corresponding philosophical category—in this case, time. While documenting the intellectual and scientific debate of the 1880s on the topic of standardized timekeeping, he underlines how Italy achieved international prestige by hosting major international gatherings which prepared the world for the 1884 Meridian Conference in Washington D.C. ratifying Greenwich as the origin of modern time. The scientific events that took place between Rome and Venice influenced the Italian market. Greek jeweler Sotirio Bulgari established his first atelier in Rome in 1888, positioning himself and his watches within the

context of the eternal city, whose image he used to advertise his high-end devices. Senatore Borletti, too, opened his watch-making factory in Milan in 1896, branding his technological venture with the classical Greek image of the discobolus. Italy started to chase modernity while protecting its own distinctive *bottega* tradition and anchoring mass production to its past.

A similar impulse can be seen in the development of photography and the birth of the moving image industry that boomed in Turin, Florence, and Rome between the 1890s and the 1910s. As Chapter Three demonstrates, classical art found renewed life through artistic photography and the visual illusions that a camera could create and turn into desirable commercial goods. From the iconic views of Florence popularized by the Alinari Brothers, to the first picture of the Holy Shroud displayed in 1898, or the wonders of early cinema, photography quickly transported Italy into modernity. The same transformation happened with the mechanical advancements that made it possible to produce large quantities of bicycles with which Italians could swiftly move across time and space, and with the way gramophones, phonographs, and radios popularized Enrico Caruso's voice and Italian Opera all over the world, as Cottini extensively discusses in Chapters Four and Five. And as Chapters Six and Seven contend, along with goods, industrial production fashioned modern lifestyles connected with cigarettes, toys, clothes, or furniture and the new ideas of home, play, and social mobility they conveyed.

*The Art of Objects* proves how modern industrial products permeated everyday life, newspaper pages, as well as poetry, literature, and history. They became artistic objects because, as Cottini convincingly holds, Italian industrialists compensated the delay with which Italy underwent its first modern industrialization by enhancing mass production with artistic beauty. They worked with artists and craftsmen who shaped cultural values for these objects, from their inception to the commercialization, thus offering a compelling overview of half a century of Italian cultural history.

ELENA BELLINA

*University of Rochester*