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ART NOUVEAU TEXTILES IN THE RUBELLI ARCHIVE

Abstract:

At the beginning of the twentieth century Rubelli was one of the two textile companies that survived the dramatic economic crisis following the end of the Serenissima Republic.

While most of the production was still based on the traditional patterns of the golden era of Venetian fabrics, a number of textiles stood out, being characterized by intriguingly new patterns strongly influenced by the emerging Art Nouveau style. Some of them were designed by well-known artists, such as Raffaele Mainella and, later, Guido Cadorin and Umberto Bellotto, others were inspired by royalty, such as the velvet designed for Queen Margherita; all of them represented a dramatic innovation in the field of textile art, opening new possibilities and perspectives both for artists and textile companies.

The paper presents a selection of the Art Nouveau fabrics, sketches and pointed papers preserved in the Rubelli Archive, most of them never previously seen or published, shedding new light on a specific and less well-known period in the history of textile arts in Venice.

Art nouveau textiles in the Rubelli archive

The decade between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century marked an interesting evolution in the history of textiles in Venice. If, ever since the fall of the Serenissima Republic, all the decorative arts had in effect been trapped in the repetitive, stereotyped patterns of previous centuries, these years saw the appearance of a number of outstanding textiles, characterized by an intriguingly new decorative language strongly influenced by the emerging Art Nouveau style.

Some of these fabrics were woven by Lorenzo Rubelli, a company founded in 1889 as a result of Rubelli's acquisition of Giobatta Trapolin's mill; however, while Trapolin had continued to weave the traditional patterns of the golden era of Venetian fabrics, with Rubelli's arrival a significant renewal took place, due to his creative collaboration with some interesting local artists such as Raffaele Mainella, Guido Cadorin and Umberto Bellotto.

Royal commissions

The earliest example of an Art Nouveau-inspired fabric woven by Rubelli is in fact the result of a royal commission; this is ciselé velvet preserved in the company's archive, especially made for Queen Margherita in 1902. During a visit to Venice, the queen had requested a piece of velvet to be made, having a Savoy blue background decorated with daisies, a clear homage to herself, and Savoy knots.

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Ciselé velvet commissioned by Queen Margherita, 1902, Rubelli Archive, Venice

It is particularly interesting to note the composition of the knots, which appear significantly different from their usual iconography: with their curving shapes intertwined together, they appear to celebrate the fluid lines of the “New” style. The velvet was most likely intended for the queen’s private residence, since the Art Nouveau style was initially considered unsuitable for official commissions.

Just the year before, for example, queen Margherita had commissioned Rubelli to weave a magnificent ciselé velvet curtain to be donated to the Armenian monks on the island of San Lazzaro in the Venetian Lagoon: in that case, as the curtain was a formal gift

from the sovereign, the selected pattern was a traditional large scale Baroque-style motif that included vases with flowers framed by leaves and flourishes.

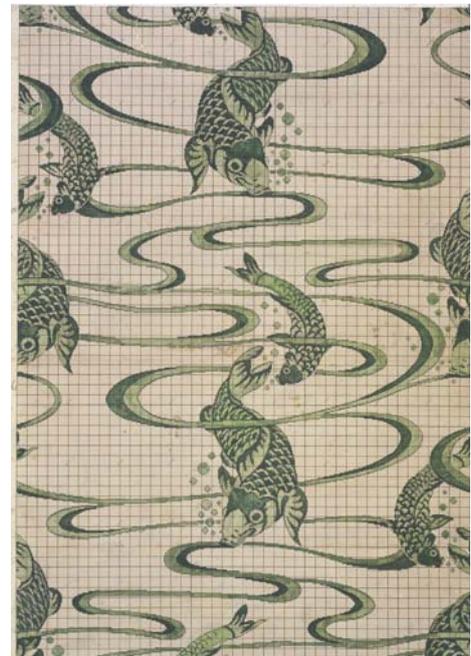
The inspiration from the natural world typical of Art Nouveau clearly emerges in other textiles woven by Rubelli during those years, from the unattributed design featuring a wood-grain pattern dated circa 1905, to the contemporary composition of irises echoing similar motifs created on printed cotton by many other textile companies in France and Germany at that time.

Raffaele Mainella

These themes taken from nature, together with the then very popular Orientalist style, are evident in the drawing and pointed paper designed by Raffaele Mainella circa 1911: on a background populated by fishes, almost three-dimensional wavy lines create the illusion of sea depths, following traditional Japanese iconography where the koi, or carp, symbols of perseverance, fidelity in marriage and good fortune in general, are represented in motion, among columns of bubbles.

The vibrant motif is a fascinating example of the eclectic style characteristic of Mainella, the first of the many artists who collaborated with Rubelli in the creation of exclusive and innovative textile designs in the first half of the 20th century.

Born in Benevento in 1856, he studied at the Reale Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice, where he absorbed the traditional artistic atmosphere and made himself known for his talent and passion for detail. Following some travels in the Middle East, he went to Paris in 1901, when he began



Raffaele Mainella, pointed paper, circa 1905, Rubelli Archive, Venice

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his activity as decorator. An ante-litteram designer, Mainella dedicated his talents to creating the decoration for an infinite number of publications, also providing designs for embroideries, laces and textiles. A characteristic of his work is the underlying impression, intrinsic to Art Nouveau, that his designs would come to life and become tangible entities. They were not, therefore, merely theoretical exercises, but rather blueprints for the creation of actual objects; an example in point is the drawing that later became a fabric dating from the early years of the 20th century, in which the characteristically fluid Art Nouveau lines merge together creating graceful spaces inside which are realistic motifs of bunches of grapes.

Guido Cadorin

The ciselé velvet designed by Guido Cadorin for the renovation of the Villa Papadopoli dates from 1922. The villa, situated not far from Vittorio Veneto, required extensive repairs as a result of the considerable damage it had suffered during the First World War. In charge of the restoration were architect Brenno Del Giudice and Cadorin himself, whose eclecticism and creativity had already drawn him close to the Modernist movement, inspiring him to apply artistic criteria to everyday objects. In this way, he made an innovative contribution to the history of the Italian Liberty style. His ceramic, wood, glass and textile works, while being strongly influenced by Venetian artistic culture, also reflected his quest for a compromise between traditional and contemporary styles.



Guido Cadorin, ciselé velvet for villa Papadopoli, 1923, Rubelli Archive, Venice

In this perspective, it appears clear that his vision coincided with the idea of the villa's owners, who, having decided to recreate the original splendour of the interiors, instructed Del Giudice and Cadorin to use traditional materials and techniques, such as frescoes, stucco, Murano glasses and velvets, bringing them up to date with patterns inspired by Art Nouveau.

The amazing result aroused great interest in the press at the time, with the publication of numerous articles featuring descriptions of the villa's groundbreaking interiors and pictures of the different areas and details of the decorations.

The velvet designed by Cadorin and made by Rubelli, featuring a large floral motif accented by doves and butterflies, was used in the large oval dining room, which was draped with it from floor to ceiling. This, together with its large windows, created the impression of an almost outdoor space.

The velvet was also displayed in 1923 at the Mostra Internazionale delle Arti Decorative di Monza, the large

gathering and exhibition of the most innovative objects in the decorative arts at the time. Interestingly, the Monza exhibition of 1923 witnessed the presence, either as participants or as members of the board, of the artists who were then working with Rubelli to create innovative textile designs, or would do so a few years later, from Cadorin to Gio Ponti, from Vittorio Zecchin to Umberto Biondo.

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Umberto Biondo

Biondo was to represent a type of transitional figure in the Venetian-style Art Nouveau. His unique style drew liberally from the past, particularly from the Gothic, Byzantine and Renaissance periods, mixing them audaciously with hints of Art Nouveau. His first appearance at the Venetian Biennale in 1914 mostly featured his work in iron - he started in his father's workshop at a very young age - but soon his artistic language evolved and he began to experiment with other artistic media, taking a similar path to Cadorin.

His collaboration with Rubelli began in 1924 with the creation of the metal decorations for the company's headquarters, then in campo san Gallo, just behind St. Mark's square. The collaboration continued in 1927, with the creation of cut velvet on a metallic background. The design is based on a sequence of oval meshes inside which is a motif which is the intrinsic essence of Biondo's style, a mix of Oriental and Venetian elements with a perceptible hint of Art Nouveau.

Biondo and the Ministry of the Navy

The following year Biondo began an intensive period of work as the interior designer of numerous government buildings in Rome. The most interesting and well-documented of these projects is the job he undertook for the Ministry of the Navy. The construction of the imposing Palazzo Marina began in 1911, but it came to a halt several times, and was completed only in 1928. The decoration of the impressive interiors was personally designed, and for the most part carried out by Biondo,



Umberto Biondo, Pointed paper for the Ministry of the Navy, 1928

who created glass lamps, decorative metalwork and furniture, and no less than ten different textiles for the decoration of the many offices and public areas, all unified by a coherent iconographic project, and appropriately based on a naval theme.

His usual decorative emphasis appears, however, somewhat restrained by the significance and formality of the commission: despite that, Art Nouveau's characteristic sinuous lines also find their way inside these elaborate compositions, where nautical knots, flags, roman rostri and *fanò*, the typical navigation lights of the ancient Venetian ships, all mix and mingle. The fabric in this series that most clearly reflects the influence of the New Style is the sumptuous silk damask created for the Sala dei Marmi: the trademark Biondo background mesh, this time diamond-shaped, frames the elegant foreshortened silhouette of a ship alternated with a detail from its maintop.

Conclusions

The originality and great inventiveness displayed by these Art Nouveau inspired fabrics, sketches and pointed papers preserved in the Rubelli Archive, most of them previously unseen or unpublished, therefore shed new light on a specific and lesser-known period in the history of textile arts in

Venice. Although often heavily influenced by the echoes of the past, the New style had its own unique space and spread throughout the Venetian Lagoon, where it expressed itself in creative ways in all the aspects of the decorative arts.

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