

Design as a social and political commitment: Albe Steiner

It is difficult to **deal with** this **outstanding** figure in Italian visual design, as you never know **whether** to **stress** the cultural-political level or the design-didactic one. Through observation of his **cross-disciplinary** design activity it is possible to reconstruct the socio-cultural context and the area of design studies and practice of his time. Albe Steiner was born in 1913 in Milan. He was the nephew of Giacomo Matteotti, an anti-fascist hero **kidnapped** and then murdered after he had made a passionate speech in Rome condemning Mussolini's leadership of Italy on May 30th, 1924. Albe was only 7 years old and when he drew his first poster: the face of the dictator and just one word: "Assassino". He began his work as a graphic artist in 1939 when it didn't yet exist as a profession. He fought as a partisan in Valdossola. After the Italian Liberation, he worked with Elio Vittorini for the "Politecnico", the most influential review of the period. From 1946 to 1948 he was in Mexico where he met Hannes Meyer (ex Bauhaus' **chairman**) with whom he worked on a **literacy** campaign and at the "Taller de grafica popular" (People's Graphic Workshop). He came back to Italy in 1948 where he taught until 1971 (with some brief interruptions). He was a founder member of **art guilds** such as the Centre for graphic studies, AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale), ADI (Associazione per il Disegno Industriale), ICTA (International Centre for Typographic Arts). He worked for a lot of photography, design

and modern architecture reviews including "Note fotografiche", "Radiofoto", "Cantieri", "Stile Industria", "Interiors" (U.S.A.), "Metron", "Costruzioni Casabella", "Domus" and "Edilizia Moderna". He worked for some of the most important Italian companies like Pirelli and Olivetti. He took part in various commercial and cultural **exhibitions**. He designed a considerable number of political and cultural propaganda posters for the Communist Party, national associations of partisans and political deportees in Nazi camps. One of his best known is the poster for the exhibition "Mostra della ricostruzione" held in Milan in 1954. It is also very important to mention his role as an art director for La Rinascente in Milan from 1950, where he organized the exhibition called "Estetica del prodotto" leading to the creation of the "Compasso d'Oro" **award**. His last works were concerned with posters for the 1974 referendum on divorce.

art guilds: *associazioni professionali/istituzioni culturali*
award: *premio*
chairman: *presidente*
cross-disciplinary: *interdisciplinare*
to deal with: *trattare di*
exhibition: *mostra*
to kidnap: *rapire*
literacy: *alfabetizzazione*
outstanding: *straordinario*
to stress: *mettere in risalto*
whether: *se*

(Adapted from: <http://www.aboutitaliandesign.info/history-of-industrial-design.html>)



Albe and Lica Steiner

1  Answer the following questions.


- Did Albe Steiner believe in the use of graphic design as a tool for social protest?
- What do you know about his famous uncle?
- What historical event do you think influenced Steiner's life most?
- Do you think the posters for the referendum supported the side in favour of divorce or the one against it?
- Comment on the following quotation: "Representing Resistance meant translating secret actions into images, poorly documented for security reasons, and at the same time showing events which had taken place in different places varying from region to region. It was very difficult to explain it and make people aware of it, even in 1945."


(Adolfo Mignemi, author of several publications on the Italian *Resistenza*)



2  Analyse this poster by Steiner and consider the following aspects:

- the complexity of the subject matter;
- the meaning of the colours;
- the target.

3  Write a review of the poster, saying what you like of it and what you don't, justifying your opinions about it.

4  Fill in the blanks of this passage about the murder of Giacomo Matteotti with the words in the box.

advantage • complicity • invalid • kidnapped • opposition • Parliament • politician • protest • responsibility • return

Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist **1**, wrote a book entitled *The Fascists exposed*. He attempted to have the 1924 elections declared **2**, He had compiled a file of Fascist crimes to be published abroad. In May 1924, he attacked Benito Mussolini in a speech in **3**, Mussolini called it "outrageously provocative" and said it deserved "some more concrete reply " than a speech in **4**, Ten days later, some Fascists thugs took their leader at his word. Matteotti was **5** and murdered. Opposition deputies accused Mussolini of **6** in the murder. Over 100 deputies withdrew from the Chamber of Deputies in **7**, In the long term this was a mistake, because it meant that there was no **8** voice in parliament. The King refused to censure the Prime Minister and Mussolini soon turned the incident to his **9**, He recovered his courage and addressed the Chamber on 3 January 1925, assuming full **10** for all that had happened.

