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THE WOMEN'S MAKING



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PAD #18 | THE WOMEN'S MAKING**O. EDITORIAL #18**

The Women's Making by Shujun Ban & Marinella Ferrara	006
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I. A BIG PICTURE OF WOMEN'S MAKING

The Women's Making: a Historical Review by Marinella Ferrara & Shujun Ban	015
"What Women Designer Want". The Female Point of View in the Fashion Creative Process by Vittorio Linfante	041
Women Crafting Today: a Literature Review by Shujun Ban & Marinella Ferrara	065

II. FORERUNNERS

Women's Entrepreneurship in Fashion Design During the 20th Century. The Case Study of Teresina Negri and GRISINA by Roberto de Paolis & Umberto de Paolis	085
Rosa Menni Giolli and the Passion for Batik. Middle and Far Eastern Influences Between the Two Wars by Anna Mazzanti	110
Design and Science, From the Bauhaus to Neotropical Research at USP: the Trajectory of Marta Erps-Breuer by Ana Julia Melo Almeida & Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos	146
Gertrud Goldschmidt and Ruth Vollmer. Mathematical Experimentations and the Legacy of Bauhaus Trained Women by Virginia Marano	173
The Art of Daily Life Objects. Charlotte Perriand and Clara Porset Dialogue with Tradition by Antonio Stefanelli	196
Clara Garesio, Ceramic Art and Design in the Neapolitan Context by Alfonso Morone & Susanna Parlato	215

III. ABOUT CURRENT PRACTICES

- Designing Contemporary Living Spaces:
a Feminist Perspective in Urbanism Coming from Col·lectiu Punt 6 in Barcelona** **241**
by Vera Renau
- Identity and Care in the Daily Life Project of in Changing Women** **259**
by Debora Giorgi & Tiziana Menegazzo
- How do Women Industrial Designers Succeed in the Workplace?
Getting In and Getting On** **283**
by Cathy Lockhart
- Crafting Futures: Inspiring Interdisciplinary Innovation
with Young Craft Artisans in Malaysia** **306**
by Marianne McAra & Lynn-Sayers McHattie
- “It Tells You What it Wants to Be”
How Women Make, with Immanence, Love, Decay and other Transgressions** **329**
by Melanie Levick-Parkin

IV. INTERVIEWS

- Textile Design between Tradition & Innovation.
Interview to Brigitte Perkins** **354**
by Debora Giorgi
- Women Sensibility Applied to New Materials and Technologies Processes / 1
Interview to Ross Steven** **367**
by Marinella Ferrara & Shujun Ban
- Women Sensibility Applied to New Materials and Technologies Processes / 2
Interview to Nicole Horn** **377**
by Shujun Ban & Marinella Ferrara

V. BIOGRAPHIES

- About the Authors** **391**



FORERUNNERS

Clara Garesio, Ceramic Art and Design in the Neapolitan Context¹

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Keywords

Ceramic, Teachings, Artistic Expressiveness, Craftsmanship, Personal Path.

Abstract

The field of ceramic is always throbbing with experimentations of design planning, artistic expressions and handcrafts. Clara Garesio has been capable of expressing herself in all these variations as well as being active in the area of education throughout her career. Born in Turin in 1938, she studied at the “G. Ballardini” State School of Ceramic Art of Faenza, which was a cultural melting pot in the 50s and the 60s. She moved to Naples in 1962 and became part of a cycle of teachers in charge of initiating the G. Caselli State Vocational School for the industry and craftsmanship of ceramic, an institution that advocated the revival of traditional high-level craftsmanship. Naples offered her the opportunity to deal with the old tradition of porcelain crafts from Capodimonte, thus leading to creations that revived and innovated the traditional iconographic heritage. Her production ranged from artistically expressive objects, intended for architecture and public areas, whilst being also committed in designing tile modules, ornamental elements, and crockery shapes. A revisitation of the artist's life will enable us to contextualize her work in the Neapolitan setting and compare it with other design experiences intertwined with the fields of ceramic and craftsmanship.

1. Although this text is the result of a collaboration between the two authors, Alfonso Morone compiled paragraphs 2 and 4, whereas Susanna Parlato wrote paragraphs 1 and 3.

1. Education, the Influence of International Artistic Currents

A merely female interpretation of Clara Garesio would be rather abating. Her story is with no doubt that of a woman who worked in the field of ceramic art, a predominantly male domain at the time, yet she succeeded in making her mark. Extensively, having assembled various worlds such as that of education, production of handcrafts, artistic expressiveness, and design, through the experimentation of various materials and processes, Garesio deserves to be known for her uniqueness. The reason why her work has never achieved national recognition, despite the unquestionable value of her artistic career and personal background, was perhaps for her bashful personality, reluctant to public relations. It is thanks to her pupils and colleagues, who have had the chance to witness her educational and professional commitment, that the importance of her ceramic art activities has been acknowledged.

Two recent books about the artist, *Clara Garesio. Fuori dall'ombra* (2017) by Francesca Pirozzi and *Fiorire è il fine* (2016), edited by Franco Bertoni², shed a light on the main traits of her biography, by looking at the scenes and events that marked her long and hard-working life.

Born in Turin in 1938, she pursued her vocation at an early age and studied in her hometown at the Municipal School of Ceramic Art, before continuing such studies at the prestigious G. Ballardini State School of Ceramic Art in Faenza, where she was given the opportunity to study ceramics in depth

2. Clara Garesio's biography includes these recent essays as well as prior, but fundamental, papers: Alamaro, E. (2006), *Il ritorno di una desaparecida della ceramica italiana degli anni cinquanta: Clara Garesio*, «La Ceramica Moderna e Antica», 256, novembre, pages 8-9 Biffi Gentili, E. (2006), *Vietri: last but the best*, in *Le ceramiche di Clara Garesio*, Menabò, Salerno.

before graduating in 1957. In its heyday, the school of Faenza was an important centre for the entire country because of the many expressive and productive experiments (Della Piana, 2010). As Garesio herself stated, the teachers and pupils worked and experimented together in the school laboratories, therefore, research and teaching went hand in hand.

Gaetano Ballardini was an art historian and founder of both the *Premio Faenza* and of the ISA of Faenza. His activity turned the town into a thriving scene full of innovation. Not only did he strive to reconstruct the collections of the International Museum of Ceramics, which had been damaged during the war, he also ensured that museum hosted many exhibitions at the time. Amongst the exhibits were those of Picasso and Miró since the two Spaniards had recently begun to use ceramic as an expressive medium. As a result, the museum became a centre of cultural exchange for contemporary art expressions from all over the world (Pirozzi, 2016).

The school of Faenza applied an especially innovative method for the Italian scene, such method is rooted in the educational experience of one of the most important artistic schools of the 20th century. The Vchutemas experience in Russia is of particular interest for its advanced technical-artistic workshops, which was prior to Bauhaus, and was hence a forerunner of the artistic-industrial school model.

The ISA in Faenza on the other hand, was equally engaged in proving that the restricted idea of craftsmanship being a merely practical school was wrong, hence introducing the research of materials and processes, whose nature was undoubtedly more industrial due to the two fields of study implemented: art and technology (Bojani, 1995).



Figure 1. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on decorative theme of fish, extract from a table original size 70 x 100cm; Personal archive of the artist.

The manager during Garesio's years of attendance was the physicist Migliani, who was eager to explore new vitreous enamel with his pupils in the several workshops.

Angelo Biancini was another guide to Garesio, he held the post of teacher of plastics, previously taught by Domenico Rampelli. This double-faceted nature, at the same time expressive and industrial, was the background of the ISA of Faenza's key contributions to a new definition of ceramic production, detaching it from the mean view of it being a minor form of applied art. Although female figures grew within the school's community, the predominant preconception allowed only men to pursue the best professional careers. Goffredo Gaeta, Giuseppe Spagnuolo and Carlo Zauli, pupils that were contemporary to Garesio,

gained international attention from the fifties and went on to collaborate with important architects such as Gio Ponti, whereas women were allocated exclusively to teaching posts.

In such a setting, Garesio commenced her earlier production, and the initial stimuli came from the school, for instance, was appointed to produce a ceramic set for clients.

Simultaneously, she started her first collaborations, these include the one with the well-renowned local ceramist Carlo Zauli (Pirozzi, 2017).

From an art critic's standpoint, this educational period shows how Garesio's expressive research³, before she was even 20, featured a great awareness of and involvement in advanced pictorial research carried out by the *Group of Eight*, that evolved around abstractionism, realism and the informal (Ugolotti, 1958).

Meanwhile, Garesio started a parallel figurative re-elaboration besides abstract research, by embracing "an actual stylization code, that is at the same time agile and descriptive, as well as slim and ornamental" (Pirozzi, 2017, page 42) that resulted in the reinterpretation of recurring narrative subjects inspired by religious, epic, historical and fictional themes.

At about the age of 20, she began taking part in exhibitions as a representative member of the ISA of Faenza, hence she achieved her earliest accomplishments such as the *Premio Faenza* prize in 1956 and 1957 as well as taking part in the *XI Triennale di Milano* in which she exhibited a large blue, black and white decorative panel.

3. As regards such topic, Ugolotti wrote a review of a pair of porcelain containers and a large glazed ceramic vase from 1956, which was published in the journal "La Ceramica" (Ugolotti, M.B., 1958 b, *Il mondo in ceramica*, «La Ceramica», XIII, 4th of April, pages 48-49, page 27)



Figure 2. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on graphic decorative abstract theme and sculpture, original table size 70 x 100cm; Personal archive of the artist.

Although perfectly coincident academically wise, male and female paths in Faenza were divergent when it came to world of work. While Garesio's male fellow students are renowned, these include the names of Goffredo Gaeta, Giuseppe Spagnuolo, Carlo Zauli, the work of women appears to be palpable clear if not marginal to the historical and critical accounts of art dating back to that period. Garesio expresses the awareness, without specifics claims, of different perspectives that men and women might have, considering them as a social condition rooted in the culture of the time. "Women were educated and raised to work behind the scenes. Female troops paved the way to the men's actions, which then became of public domain, accordingly it was the man's name that came to the fore"⁴.

The total absence of visibility, however, hasn't hindered the prosperity and richness of her production, in which her educational work became a means of experimenting.

2. Teaching and Experimenting in Shapes in Isernia

After completing her studies in Faenza in 1957, she briefly returned to Turin, where she started her first apprenticeships, initially in Victor Cerrato's workshop, and then she worked for the local Vi.Bi factory.⁵

4. From the authors' interview with Clara Garesio, 14th of February 2020.

5. Founded in Turin in 1952, Vi.Bi Manufacturing produced, purchased, imported, and exported modern earthenware, artistic and common use ceramics. During Turin's economic boom, the factory expanded rapidly and by the mid-fifties, it employed over fifty workers, and it became actively involved in artistic research, which resulted in collaborations with Clara Garesio, as well as other important figures such as Mario Mesini and Mario Brunetti, and later on in the sixties, with ceramist and decorator Elsa Lagorio. In its later years, the factory impressed the logo "New Style" on its ceramics, however, it went out of business in 1972.

In 1958, the director of the ISA of Faenza, Emiliana, recommended her to ceramist Giorgio Saturni, who was the director of the G. Manupella Art School in Isernia, where she taught ceramic decoration and technology. The spell in Isernia, her first experience in Southern Italy, lasted for three years, and was a merry and productive example of her commitment. These years featured intense teaching activity that continued along with personal artistic productions and experimentations⁶. The school's location together with the craftsmanship surroundings undoubtedly facilitated research on a specific object: that was the vase. In this case, the *vase* was detached from its practical nature, that is an ancestral container, to take up a sculptural connotation through the technique of coiling, enriched with majolica a superficial embellishment. Such artistic experimentation was in fact Garesio's contribution to the renovation process of ceramics of that time. It was her attention to the details of superficial adornments that brings her research closer to a more graphic style, rather than to traditional ceramics, henceforth she was loomed into a vaster and more complex research of expressing the abstract and the informal.

The production of this period was very rich⁷, in this regard,

6. For a visualization of some of Garesio's projects, drawings and products see the following videos: *Il percorso artistico della ceramista Clara Garesio, dalla formazione faentina alle opere più recenti* <https://youtu.be/NkntZf62H8c>; *Clara Garesio. Taccuino di disegni nr. 1* available on <https://youtu.be/n25BhZossio>; *Clara Garesio. Taccuino di disegni nr. 2* available on <https://youtu.be/n25BhZossio>; *Clara Garesio. Taccuino di disegni nr. 3* available on <https://youtu.be/XS1rSfQudio>.

7. The activity of this initial, though decisive, period in Clara Garesio's production, as indicated in Pirozzi (2016), page 14, is well-documented today in a *corpus* of works, most of them owned by the artist and part acquired by the MIAAO in Turin and the Industrial Artistic Museum in Castellamonte (Turin) to which a file of papers and photographic reproductions of works, produced by the ceramist in order to prepare for teaching examinations.

the field of industrial processes was being explored, such as studies on the development of tile modules, and catalogues of crockery and ornamental models. These were features that aligned her with contemporary themes of design culture. This was a period of intense collaborations, which mushroomed in the ceramic department of the ISA of Isernia, with other renowned ceramists like Saturni, Belloni, and Mercante, which, despite the town's provincial situation being even more noticeable in the 50s, raised Isernia's involvement to the most advanced at a national level⁸.

3. The Neapolitan Experience: the Didactics for Innovating the Porcelain of Capodimonte

Clara Garesio moved to Naples in 1962, she was given a teaching post at the new State Vocational School of Industry and Craftsmanship G. Caselli, where she taught professional design and plastic. The school had opened a year earlier, and it was strategically intended to renew the seventeenth century tradition of Capodimonte ceramics, adjusting their manufacture to the modern context, as well as promoting apprenticeship as a means for new production opportunities. In order to highlight such purpose, the school was located in what was previously the Royal Factory of Capodimonte Porcelain, the venue of the original Bourbon plant⁹.

8. For a complete report on the School of Art of Isernia, see Biordi, R. (1961), *L'Istituto Statale d'Arte di Isernia*, in «La Ceramica», June, pages 45-47.

9. For a greater understanding of the origins of the ceramics of Capodimonte within the frame of Bourbon artistic productions, see the *Porcellana* section, Vega de Martini and Alvar González-Placios in the catalogue entitled *Civiltà del '700 a Napoli* (1734-1799), vol.II, Centro Di, Naples 1979-1980.



Figure 3. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Flower vases for lathe molding, original table size 70 x 100 cm. Personal archive of the artist.

Founded by the Minister of Public Education, at the time MP Giovanni Bosco, the school is located on what were once the premises of the porcelain factory that had been founded by Charles III of Bourbon, King of Naples and Sicily, in 1743. Professor Giorgio Baitello was appointed as director and organizer, who at the time was directing the State School of Ceramic Art of Sesto Fiorentino (Florence). The school was named after Giovanni Caselli, who decorated the royal factory upon Charles III's request. The pupils could choose between a range of courses and specializations, such as moulding, shaping, decorating and ceramic-chemistry.

The Caselli was meant to revamp the traditional manufacturing of Capodimonte ceramics in a systematic way, in the context of the cultural revolution of the sixties that ended up permeating the field of craftsmanship as well.

There is no doubt that personalities incline to assimilating creative and industrial aspects, such as Clara Garesio, would be instrumental to this prospect (Pansera, A. 2015).

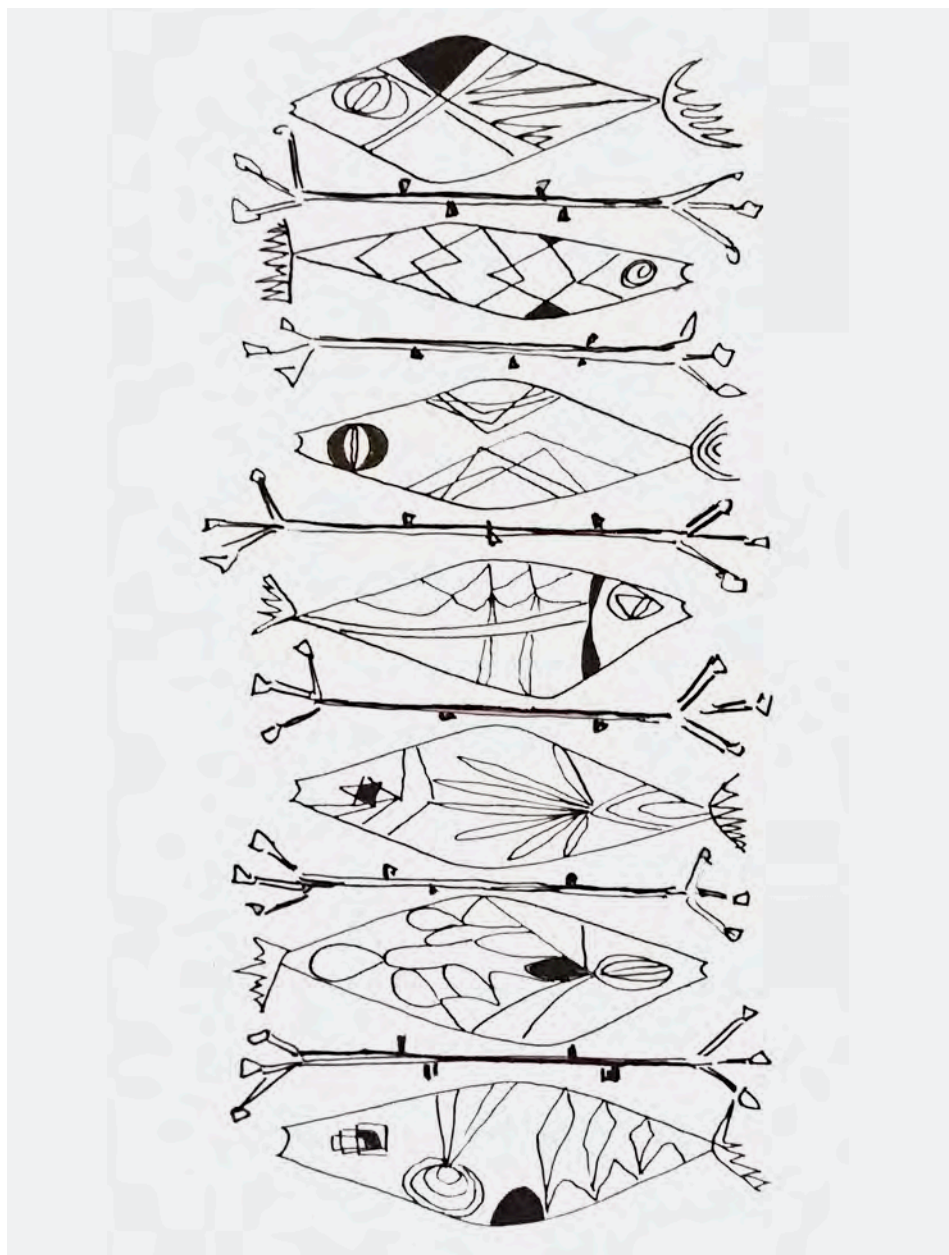


Figure 4. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on a figurative decorative theme of fish, original size 70 x 100 cm. Personal archive of the artist.

One of the principles of Garesio's work, is the need to find a connection between the embellishments and the shape of an object, leading the latter to take on the former.

A process that enabled to assimilate Garesio's teachings, at the beginning of her Neapolitan experience, to the attempt to resolve the dominant conflict of those years between rationality and creative thought, about recognizing a *decisional will* in the crafting project, which will be subsequently summarized by Alberto Rosselli and Paolo Cecchini in their educational work (Cecchini, Rosselli, 1973).

In order to ensure a successful outcome of this strategy, figures like Clara Garesio were fundamental, since their preparation included on the one hand a deep knowledge of traditional ceramic art, on the other hand their innovative ability, was rooted in their experience with the scene of Faenza, where Garesio acknowledged the many expressions of contemporary art, that was influenced by the works of Picasso and Miró.

“As an outsider, I had been summoned to breathe new life into an otherwise repetitive and static tradition”¹⁰.

Working at the *Caselli* school, enabled Garesio to both re-evaluate porcelain when measuring up to the manufacturing tradition of Capodimonte. Moreover, she became part of a community of producers and researchers. Garesio's lessons gave her a way to express herself, since she was used to staying in the shadow, and consequently there was very little communication with the general public. Therefore, her teaching activity was a means of discussion from which she could obtain new stimuli.

10. From the authors' interview with Clara Garesio, 14th of February 2020.

Her lessons resulted in collective class compositions, the same way contemporary art sees smaller components that reach greater expressive energy when assembled together, hence education is an opportunity to discuss and compare, and its outcome is nonetheless the relation amongst the parts. A sort of relational art¹¹, Garesio is the editor that deploys pupils in her compositional enterprise.

The creative production she conducted with her pupils embraces elements of great educational value, that pursue a kind of economy of the creative process. Garesio suggests that one should never throw away anything from the ongoing work, “so much as a disharmonious composition could have a fragment useable as a foothold from which one might progress”¹². Likewise, she encouraged retrieving scrap material, as damaged items might find a new life when assembled and modelled with newer elements. Hence, scrap material became a resource of a creative process whose nature is selective rather than excessive.

4. Craftsmanship Art & Design

During the late fifties and early sixties, traditional ceramic manufacturing methods were subject to an update inspired by the attention Italian design paid to planning, whose focus was mainly on approach and process methods rather than the result, that was nevertheless outstanding (Bassi, 2002).

11. Relational art is a form of contemporary art that flourished in the mid 90s and implied the active participation of the audience in shaping and defining the work they are enjoying. Nicolas Bourriaud (2010) *Relational Art*, Postmedia Books. (ed. originale *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 1998).

12. The authors' interview with Clara Garesio, 14th of February 2020.



Figure 5. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on graphic decorative abstract theme and sculpture, original table size 70 x 100cm; Personal archive of the artist.

In 1973, Enzo Mari submitted a proposal, called *Samos*, that consisted in planning through the use of matrices. He came up with 21 models that included vases, bowls, and trays, that all resulted from matching, overlapping, and welding rods, lozenges, and discs by means of wire drawing.

The final result was hence a series of incomplete products, merely matrices, drafts, whose final fulfilment could only occur thanks to a craftsman's intervention (Pedio, 1980).

The local scene saw Gio Ponti's works between 1960 and 1962. He made white and blue ceramics for the Parco dei Principi hotel in Sorrento, and for these items he used the same compositional principle, that implemented a basic, but efficient, intuitive method. This implied the deployment graphic matrices to generate a series of chromatic and compositional alternatives, each one intended for a different area of the hotel (La Pietra, 1995). The research of a balance between handcrafts and manufactures, was what the basic intention of such process.

Likewise, Nino Caruso followed the same principle in his experimentations for CAVA, a firm established in 1960, in the context of the Amalfi Coast, where 18th century ceramic floor tiles, known as *riggirole*, were still produced. Caruso suggested using slip casting to produce architectural coverings, that would present an embossed texture. The tiling shapes up with the juxtaposition of plastic modules, it is its variation, however, that generates variable textures, in which the specific generating element is indistinguishable (Cristallo, Guida, 2015). Roberto Mango's research followed suit. This was carried out in Naples during the fifties and was published in issue 313 of the magazine *Domus*.



Figure 6. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on graphic decorative abstract theme, original table size 70 x 100 cm. Personal archive of the artist.

A reportage project, his research initially focused on the historical tradition and eventually reached an innovative solution, namely a series of *unfinished objects*. More specifically, *spaghetti* shaped models of ordinary objects, in drawn ceramic paste, were braided like twigs. Trays, cups, candleholders, and lamps were all used to train young apprentice craftsmen, and revealed the need to promote learning processes by using ceramic manufacture instead of finished items (Guida, 2020). It came to be an instruction manual that could be used and customised by each craftsman and as it enabled a diversified mass production.

The above mentioned examples of interaction between design and ceramics show how marked the conceptual and process nature was, regardless of the innovation path.



Figure 7. Clara Garesio; Study drawings; Variations on abstract decorative themes and shapes of vases, original size 70 x 100 cm. Personal archive of the artist.



Figure 8. Clara Garesio; Notebooks; Variations on abstract decorative themes and shapes of vases, - original size 70 x 100 cm. Personal archive of the artist.

Based on deploying local resources, the innovation projects convey a vocation typical of handicraft production. Meanwhile, in the Neapolitan scene, Garesio too was stimulated in a more systematic confrontation with the productive world, as a matter of fact Garesio's early years in Naples already showed a kind of transition towards themes that were representative of that mediation. This perfectly suited her, since artistic and productive research enable to establish a rapport with design.

Researching the synthesis between design, craftsmanship and expressive research, was a challenge taken on by many other protagonists of the Neapolitan scene, such as Riccardo Dalisi, who conceived the most popular model after collaborating with the tinsmiths of Rua Catalana¹³.

Aside from any essentially personal qualities and peculiarities, this course of action happens to be favoured by a strategy, recommended by Caselli himself, that encourages ties with other companies in the industry as well as suggesting exhibitions where both pupils and teachers can take part, such as *Mostra Mercato dell'Artigianato* in Florence (its 1966 edition was won by Garesio, who had made a coffee set), and *The International Home Show* at the *Mostra d'Oltremare* in Naples, for which the school selects the best works from the students every year. Often in need of completing civic and religious constructions, Naples offered many job opportunities, which Garesio regularly shared with her husband, the sculptor Pirozzi. Besides these activities, she occasionally took part in handcraft productions of Capodimonte porcelain, and more extensively, of the Mediterranean and Amalfi Coast tradition. Garesio would often spend her summer holidays on the Amalfi Coast, where she eventually got in touch with many local producers, to whom she suggested developing models that she herself had conceived. This initiated the integration of the Amalfi manufacturing tradition, Pirozzi's book reports (2017,

13. For greater understanding read Dalisi, R. (1987) *La caffettiera e Pulcinella*. Research on the Neapolitan Coffee Maker. 1979-1987, Officina Alessi. In which Riccardo Dalisi wrote about the research and creation of can prototypes, that resulted from a collaboration with tinsmiths when carrying out the "Neapolitan Coffee Maker" project for Alessi, *compasso d'oro* in 1981.

pag. 43, note 10) how, starting from the end of the 60s, Garesio regularly visited Vissichio's workshop and Fusco's ceramic studio in Atrani, and Laura di Santo and Alberto Sassone's workshop in Amalfi.

The ceramics of Vietri could rely on a variety of major figures throughout the 20th century, most of whom were women, and were commendable for having combined local expressive and productive methods, typical of the Amalfi Coast, with a more universal and cosmopolitan dimension.

In this respect, a clear example is the so-called “German” period, between the 20s and the outbreak of World War II.

A period in which the traditional methods in Vietri, experienced an evolution, thanks to the contribution of the many foreigners, mainly Germans, who had moved there, attracted by the allure of the Amalfi Coast, where they found employment in the many ceramic manufacture plants in the area (Jappelli, 2004, pages 77-78).

Polish artist Irene Kowaliska¹⁴, the Germans Margarete Thewalt Hannash, aka Bab, Marianne Amos, Elle Dölker brought an extraordinary breath of innovation to traditional ceramics, that was the result of German research in decorative arts dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. When she began visiting the Amalfi Coast, she met local craftsmen. In summer, she would work in shops, mainly owned by students who attended the school of porcelain in Naples.

14. For a deeper study of Irene Kowaliska, read the volume Vito Pinto e Gianni Grattacaso, *Irene Kowaliska* 1939, AreaBlu edizioni, 2018



Figure 9. Vases with various decorative themes and shapes. Personal archive of the artist.

Small companies were able to increase the quality of their production by drawing on Clara Garesio's research both from an artistic and productive standpoint. The entire production of Vietri ceramics had always relied on external help, even before the Germans arrived in the 30s, however tradition had been intact. The German period enriched the repertoire with new icons such as the "little donkey" which has since become the symbol of Vietri ceramics.

However, the integration between the leading artistic research and traditional manufacture continued in the latter part of the century. Several international personalities that are part of a current, that also includes Garesio if she is considered for the variety of approaches. Other names are: the painter Giuseppe Capogrossi who collaborated with the *Pinto Ceramics* firm since the end of the forties, as well as Ugo Marano, who carried out many ventures for the *Museo Vivo* project in the seventies¹⁵. Since the beginning of the new millennium, Garesio has started to show more of her work to the general public, subsequently many of her works are displayed in personal exhibitions and in museums, for which she has received many prizes. Yet, she has never left her teaching workshops for ceramic art enthusiasts.

Looking back at Clara Garesio's artistic career and personal life, it can be definitely stated, together with Bertoni, that the artist "conducted uninterrupted research.

15. A focus on the role of artistic research on Vietri ceramics is given by M. Bignardi, G. Zampino, *Artinceramica. Artisti contemporanei nelle faenze a Vietri sul Mare*, catalogue of the exhibition, Naples, Scuderie di Palazzo Reale, 21st March- 6th May 1997.

Despite time passing by and the cultural interferences, her work includes shapes and techniques as well as research paths previously interrupted and abandoned that come back to life. In a timeless fashion” (Bertoni, 2016, p 11).

Besides the highlighted technical and expressive qualities, the great innovative force of Clara Garesio is well-recognisable even in her strictness and in her vocation in applying and promoting an experimental method, in which educational, productive and expressive research all combine.

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V

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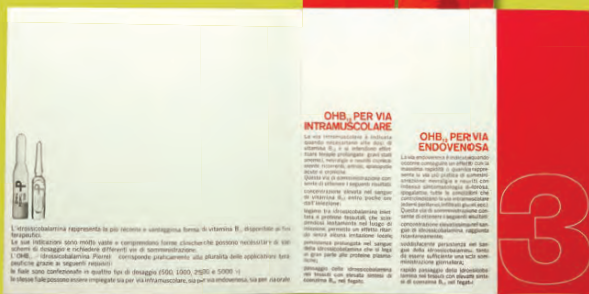
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