

Narrated and Imagined Objects. Luca Meda and Drawing

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Abstract

Through the analysis of Luca Meda's work, of which some sketches from his personal archive are presented, the contribution proposes a reflection on 'design drawing', focusing on the relationship between its two natures –one more technical and the other artistic– which in some cases interpenetrate harmoniously.

The duality that was attributed to the industrial designer –a figure in the making in the 1950s– and the burden of having to harmonise 'technical possibilities' with 'possibilities of form', finds in Meda a successful synthesis in the use of manual drawing, an indispensable and effective tool both for technical design and for the poetic contextualisation of the object, almost a trait d'union between a concrete world, the one pertaining to technological aspects, and an abstract sphere, in relation to the symbolic values of objects and the emotional universe of the designer.

Starting from Luca Meda's multiple training –and bearing in mind the impact that new technological tools have on current design activity– the contribution identifies 'design drawing' as a real working methodology, still considered a foundation for the designer's training. It is presented as relevant and inescapable precisely because of its ability to integrate two forms of knowledge, the technical and the artistic, often wrongly considered antagonistic.

Keywords: imagery, art, Ulm, technical objects, sketches.

Introduction

The contribution proposes to show how the 'design drawing' –conceived with Rosselli [1957, p. 1] as "a complete and unitary fact from its birth between technical possibilities and possibilities of form"– played different roles in the analytical, imaginative and communicative phases of Luca Meda's design activity: a tool at the service of the definition of the structural and technical details of the object, but also a fundamental device for conferring poeticity to objects.

Starting from the importance that the practice of drawing has had in Meda's activity and tracing its originality back to the education received by the designer, the authors, in their conclusions, aim to broaden the reflection in the horizon of a 'cultural refoundation' based on the integration of technical and artistic knowledge as the essential basis of every design discipline.

To do so, the authors rely first of all on direct knowledge of archive sources, mostly consisting of drawings as well as study models and other materials, as well as on the fundamental support provided by the critical reading of the recent volume *Luca Meda, Architecture, Design, Drawings* [Braghieri, Carboni, Maffioletti 2021]. The conclusions are instead based on the reflections proposed by Richard Sennett in his famous *L'uomo artigiano* [Sennett 2008].

Design and imagination

An indissoluble link exists between design and imagination [1]. Both terms refer to the 'sense of possibility', i.e. the human

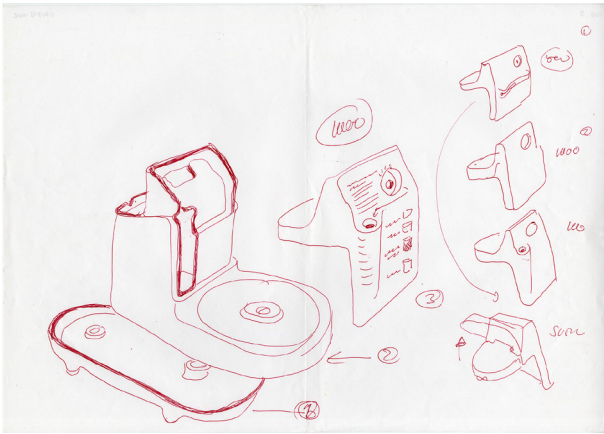


Fig. 1. Study sketch for a food processor with front controls, 1996.

faculty of figuring in factual reality a reality-other or, in the words of Paul Jedlowski, of “partially emancipating oneself from the constraints of the existing” [Jedlowski 2008, p. 238]. Michele Sinico [2016, p. 171] has accurately reflected on this connection: “imagination is precisely that throwing thought forward, into the projective, towards a future that does not yet exist as effected reality”. In this dialectic, a decisive role is played by ‘design drawing’, which is recognised as having the task of acting as a mediation tool, a true operational-symbolic bridge, between factual reality and a reality that does not yet exist as such.

The ‘design drawing’ is usually recognised as having a bifid nature: on the one hand, technical drawing, relating to technological and production aspects; on the other, artistic drawing, relating to the symbolic values of objects and the emotional universe of the designer. This makes explicit a peculiar characteristic of object design: it is not an autonomous activity, it is therefore not the fruit of the ‘free play’ of the imagination, but is a heteronomous activity, limited by technical, economic, cultural and political factors. In short, the design imagination can be defined as the human faculty produced by the dialogue between technical imagination and sociological imagination [2]. For this reason, the ‘sense of possibility’ that characterises design activity, when it does not turn into idle reverie or abstract utopianism, can be described in Musil’s words [2014, p. 14]: it is “an impetus, a will to build, a conscious utopianism that is not dismayed by reality but treats it as a task and an invention”.

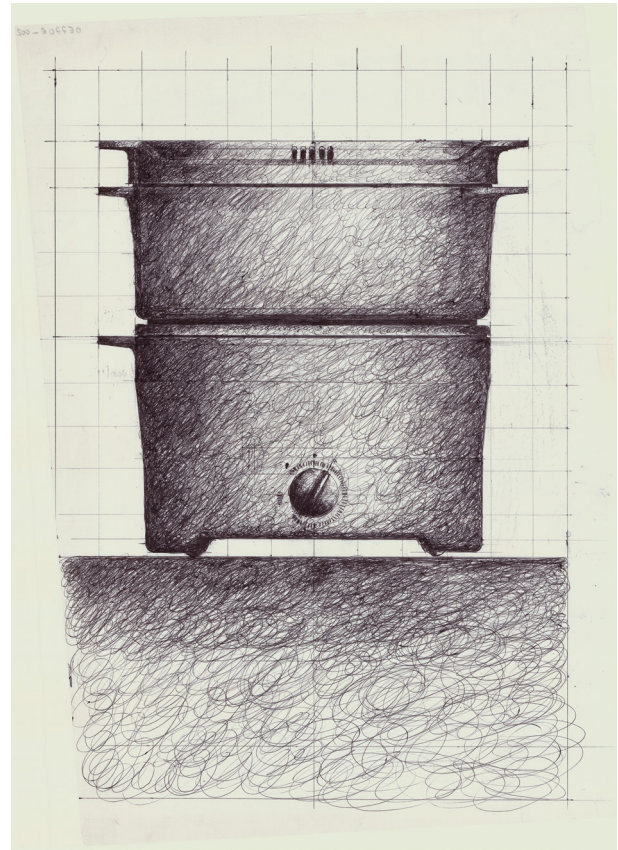


Fig. 2. Study sketch for a rice cooker, 1991.

The task of harmonising ‘technical possibilities’ with ‘possibilities of form’ finds in Luca Meda a fertile example that suggests how ‘design drawing’ can play the role of a mediating tool and at the same time points out how pedagogical imprinting influences the genesis or development of innate capacities.

Luca Meda’s design work is essentially based on the tool of manual drawing, which assumes different functions, passing from a device for immediately fixing and translating the idea to a tool for personal investigation and conceptual elaboration, to a more traditional and useful means of technical representation capable of dialogue with other

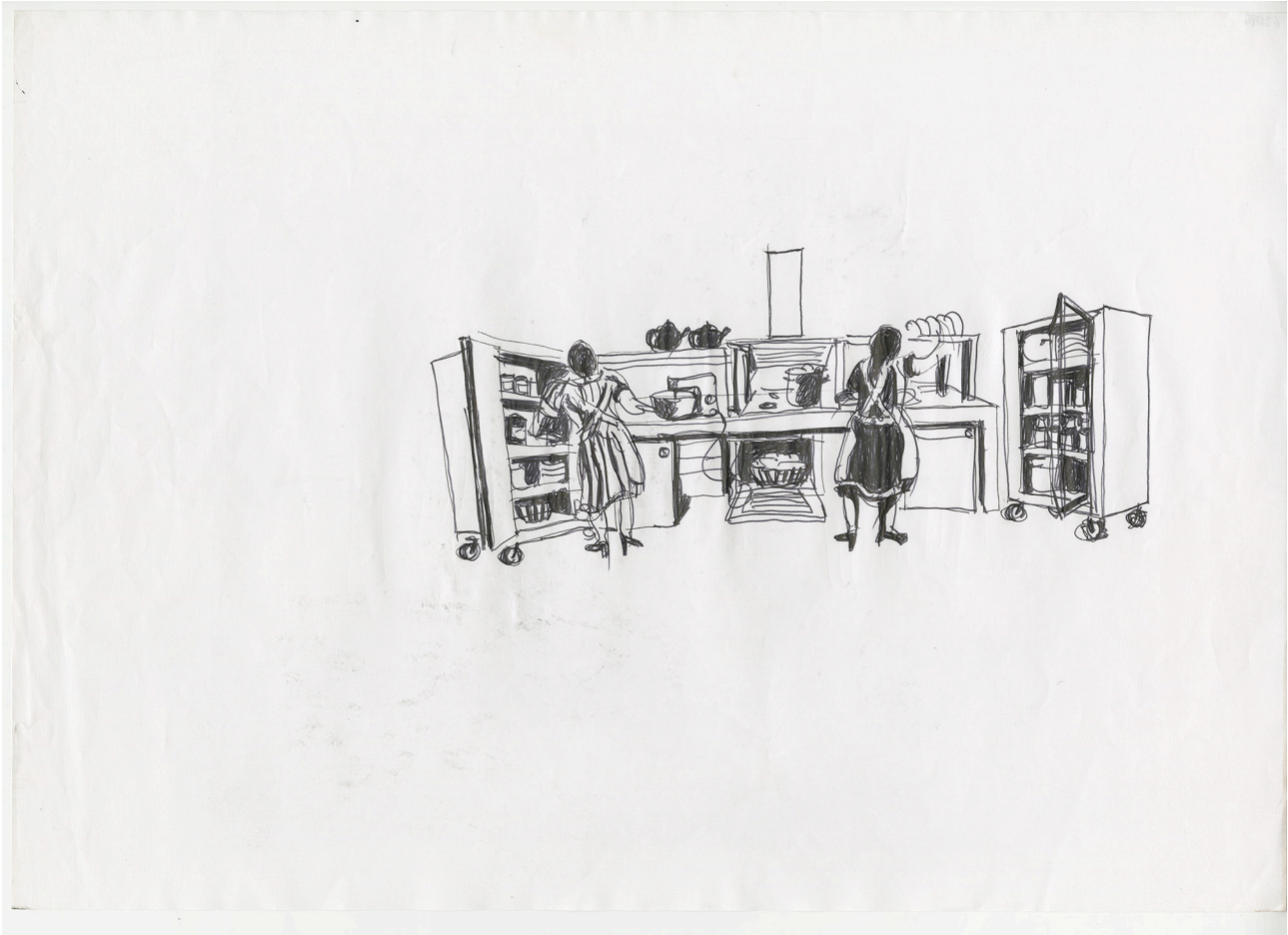


Fig. 3. *Cucina Banco*, 1995, drawings for the catalog.

interlocutors. Fundamental in substantiating the unprecedented three-dimensional prefigurative capacity of the internal (technological) part of certain objects, as well as essential in giving shape to the aesthetic framework and reference imagery in which Meda's objects are born and live, drawing, as a measured interpenetration of technical and formal aspects, allows us to define a true working methodology, which finds its genealogical reason in the bi-

ographical events of the author and in his multiple training, nourished by the Milanese artistic environment as well as by the brief but formative German experience in Ulm. In Meda, the 'sense of possibility' thus finds a happy synthesis in the use of manual drawing, an indispensable and effective tool both for technical design and for the poetic contextualisation of the object, a true *trait d'union* between factual reality and possible reality.

Design and drawing

In Luca Meda's design work, drawing whether used as a device for personal investigation or in dialogue with other interlocutors, takes on a dual form, both the artistic form that contextualises/decontextualises objects within the symbolic universe, the world of affections beyond their mere use, and the technical form that privileges the form of the axonometric exploded view and axonometry to verify the feasibility and rightness of the form-content relationship.

In this regard, the drawing of the *Cuociriso* is also emblematic of how the use of the same technique (recurring in Meda) –the Bic biro on paper– lends itself to representing different languages: from the millimetric precision of the stroke for defining the components of the mechanical object (fig. 1) to a strongly expressive description that animates the object, giving it plasticity (fig. 2).

Considering Meda's assertion –“one cannot speak of industrial objects as if they belonged to the empyrean of abstract things, outside the contradictions of the economy, outside people's opinions” [Mantica 2021, p. 263]– it is natural to detect in the objects designed by Luca Meda a propensity to propose themselves as archetypes, in their evocative capacity of familiar memories imbued with domesticity (fig. 3), and in their being immersed in a sort of ‘synchronicity’ that from the author's subjective bearing touches the notes of a collective imagination, abstracting its essence in a fluid continuity between past and future.

Meda's ‘things’ [3] are thus, from time to time, transfigured through drawing, which often resorts to the expedient of the ready-made, decontextualising and recontextualising the object that becomes the undisputed protagonist of a world that oscillates between the real and the imaginary, as if it were the fruit of a dreamlike transcription (fig. 4). It is the imagination that transforms the dimensions (never deformed) of the depicted object, which, often set in natural landscapes, takes on new meanings, becoming a sort of other than itself.

It happens with technical objects –even the most rigorous– that the drawing constructs the scene used almost as an expedient to make them appear more ‘human’, mitigating their technicalities. Significant in this sense are the drawings of *Caffeconcerto* (fig. 5) –one of the most industrial products among those conceived by Meda [Chiesa 2005]– whose lines are softened by the organicity of the essential signs that trace an unequivocal foreshortening of a sea coastline –a recurring theme that intertwines the search for a real place with one he idealised– or various Girmi appliances (fig. 6) immersed in unreal scenarios.

In the furnishings, while not renouncing the description of mechanical details, the introduction of human figures [4] signals the ‘reality test’ of the design object: for example in the *Ho Chair* (fig. 6, 7) where the roundness of the female figure portrayed from behind counterpoints the hardness of the ‘studs’ and allows a verification of the aesthetic enjoyment of the real object, simulating the moment of its use. Through the drawing of the bodies, a ‘visual synecdoche’ is thus composed: in some representations of the *Vivette* armchair, the idea of comfort is conveyed not by the object itself but by the relaxed body (fig. 8), just as the female figures that populate the Girmi world (fig. 9) represent the theatre of domestic preparation, of tradition reinterpreted in a horizon made up of technological aids.

The drawing used as a device to fix and immediately translate an idea therefore uses two narrative registers, the artistic one (which includes real or imaginary figures, human or animal) where the body [5] (in its precise and proportioned definition) acts as a link bridging the gap between space and furniture, and bringing art and design closer together [6] (fig. 10) and the more technical one, the legacy of training [7] as well as the result of a talent for three-dimensional representation of objects. If in the representation of the world of furniture, the body participates more explicitly, even in the descriptions that appear purely technical, the same attention emerges, especially in the design of household appliances where the interaction component through the interface is a fundamental tool for communicating with the user and facilitating the use of devices [Chesa 2021].

Used for investigation and personal conceptual elaboration and as a traditional means of technical representation, drawing in Meda transfers in other cases the reasoning on the object, its functionality, its components, the relationships between form and content.

The accuracy of the detail depicted (fig. 11) (whether of furniture joints or mechanical parts) (fig. 12) restores control over the entire project, and the refinement in the combination of materials or colours (or non-colours) speaks of a personal sensibility developed within the framework of cultured references (fig. 13).

The pedagogical issue

Starting from Meda's professional biography [8] and re-reading his iconographic production in this light, we can therefore hypothesise that drawing played a multiple and

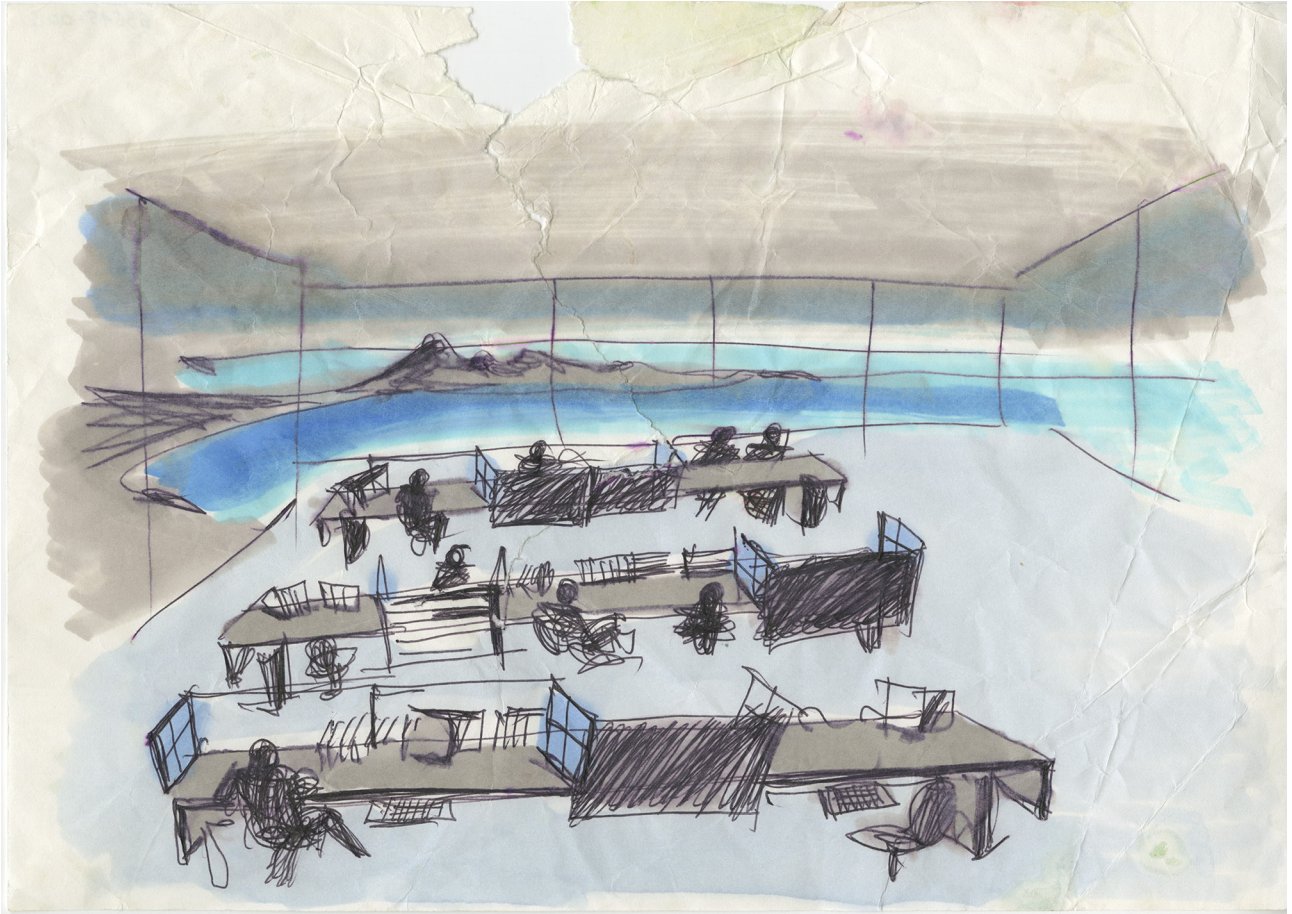


Fig. 4. Untitled, 1996, sketch.

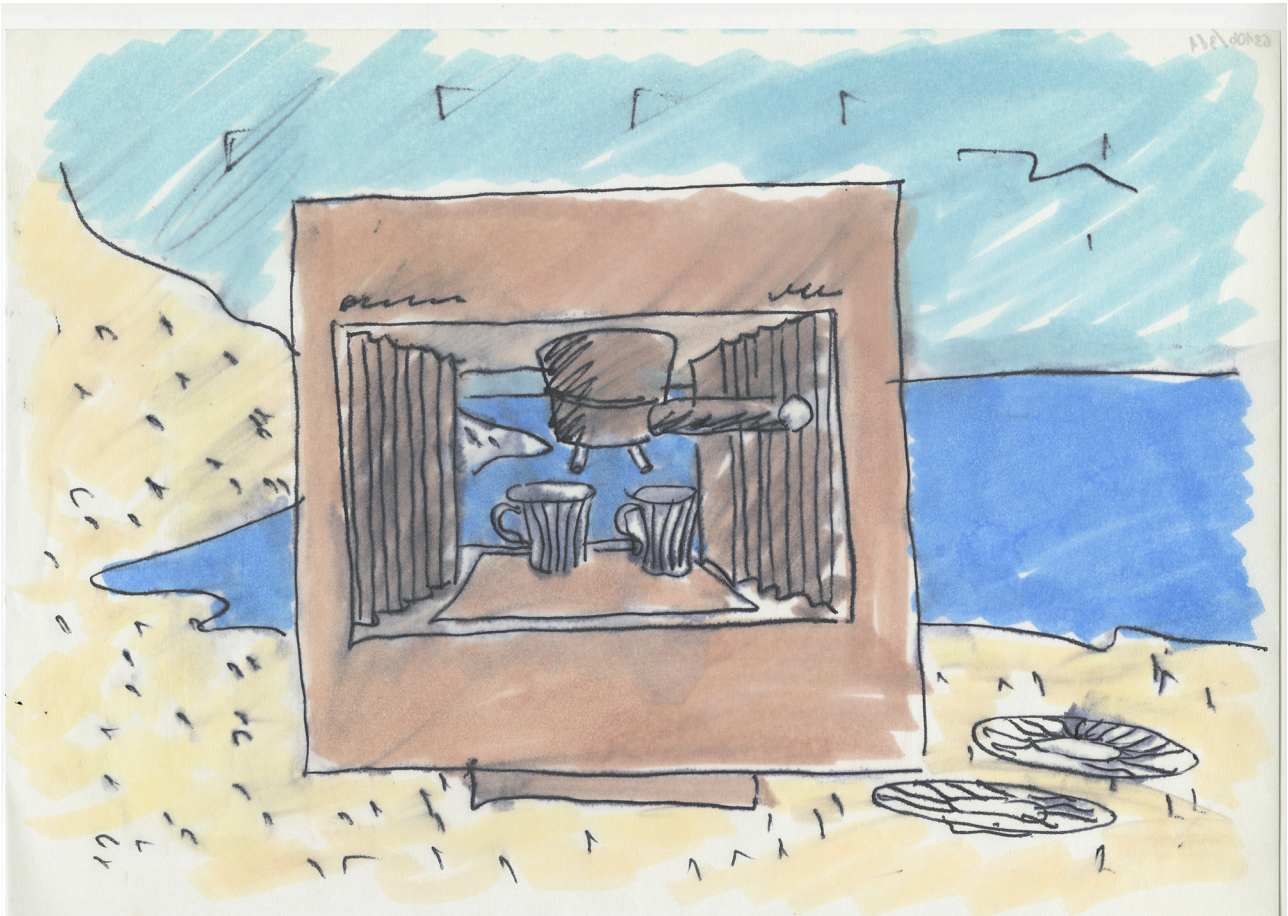


Fig. 5. Coffee machine, Caffèconcerto, 1983, study sketch.

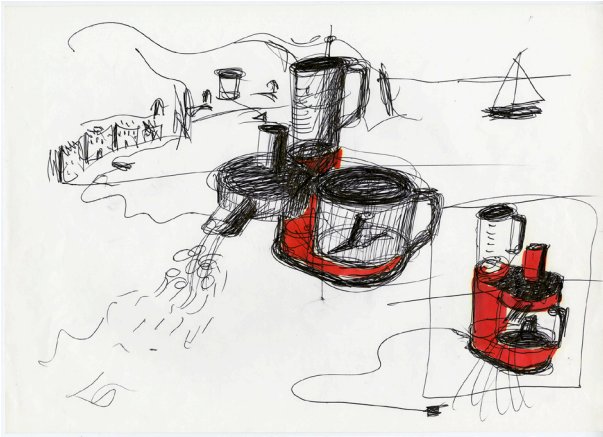


Fig. 6. Mastrogirmi kitchen robot, 1984-87, sketch.

integrated role for the author: a technical tool, always associated with a strong graphic rendering, but also a popular tool that used figurativeness learned from art, offering itself as a privileged instrument in both the conception and communication (in the broad sense) of the project (fig. 14).

As Nicola Braghieri points out, in order to fully understand Meda's ability to do this, it is necessary to refer to his training because "only by following the different and opposing experiences that marked his apprenticeship [...] it is possible to grasp the nature of Luca Meda's character and spirit" [Braghieri, Carbone, Maffioletti 2021, p. 51]: "The two opposing experiences, at the Brera Academy and at the HfG in Ulm, although never completed with a diploma and punctuated by continual disobedience and disaffection, marked his way of working and his attitude towards the world: a continuous inner dialogue between the artistic impulse and interest in the mechanical secrets of form. If the Brera approach favoured a classical education, for which figurative art was the exclusive and absolute expression, the Ulm School directed its teaching and training programme towards an operational interaction of the applied arts [...] with production technologies" [Braghieri, Carbone, Maffioletti 2021, pp. 44, 45].

If Meda's two educational experiences have found a fertile synthesis in 'design drawing', it seems fair to ask whether, despite the diversity of the two pedagogical approaches, common ground exists between them. If we were to fol-

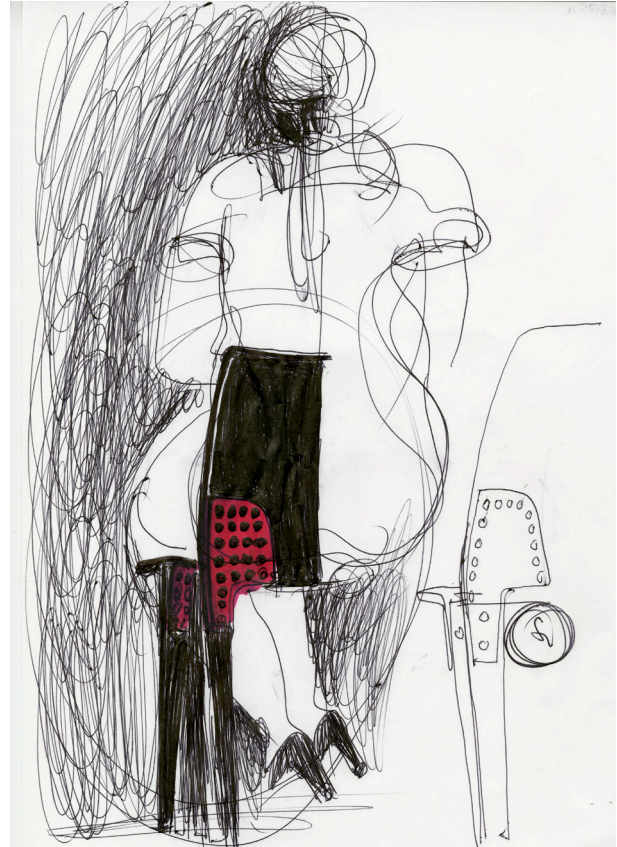


Fig. 7. Sedia Ho, 1998, study sketch.

low the dominant vulgate, the Ulm School should be considered as the purest expression of rationalism in design, whose pedagogical approach categorically rejects all elements of spontaneism and intuitionism that characterise art education instead. This is a reductionist reconstruction. As is often the case in the history of such complex and significant pedagogical institutions, the history of the Ulm School is not a linear narrative. Many phases, many different educational approaches –supported by the freedom that characterises private institutions– have contributed to the development of the subject curriculum that is still widely influential today.

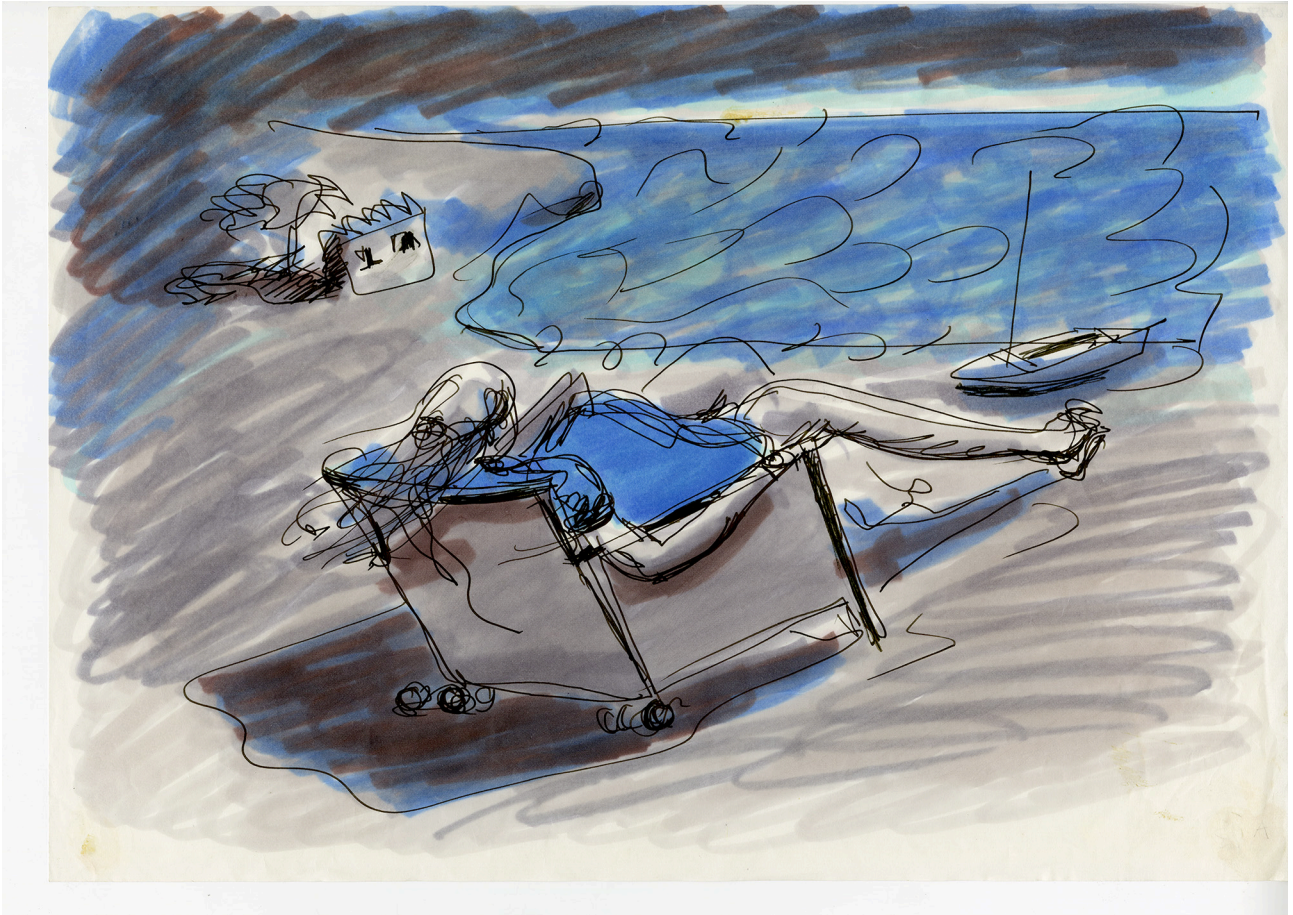


Fig. 8. Potona Vivette, 1988, sketch.



Fig. 9. Drawings for Girmi catalog, 1992.

It is certainly true that, especially through the work of Otl Aicher and Tomás Maldonado, with the Ulm School, design moved closer to the scientific disciplines and away from the realm of artistic knowledge. However, it would be a mistake not to recognise the role that art played in the formation of Ulm's designers. On closer inspection, an artistic residue remains in the *Grundlehre* (Fundamental Course), the first year of the course which –until 1961– all students had to attend before deciding on their specialisation.

The *Grundlehre* that Luca Meda attended in 1958 was a complex and layered course, which had already undergone the historic reform of Maldonado, the department head at the time. It was divided into four areas of work: *introduction to vision* (or visual introduction), *instruments of representation*, *laboratory*, *cultural integration* (History of 20th century culture, Methodology, Sociology, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Theory of Science). If the laboratory hours, consisting of work in the workshops, are not taken into account, the *introduction to vision* alone occupied more than half of the lessons taught to the new students. This discipline was a development of the teaching of *basic design* proposed by Josef Albers. From Albers, it drew first and foremost its objective and didactic mode: students were given exercises on syntactic questions, which, once completed, were then subjected to collective criticism. The objective, made explicit on more than one occasion by Albers himself, remained that of training the relation-



Fig. 10. Untitled, s.d., sketch.

ship between hand and eye. The introduction to vision was thus to all intents and purposes an aesthetic education, a visual grammar, whose founding didactic principle was the need for exploration and formal experimentation. It is on this education in sensitivity and the relationship between the hand and the eye that we can recognise the common, but undoubtedly differentiated, ground between the two pedagogical experiences that formed Luca Meda and that allowed him to find in 'design drawing' a unique tool for explicating the different but dialoguing natures of objects.

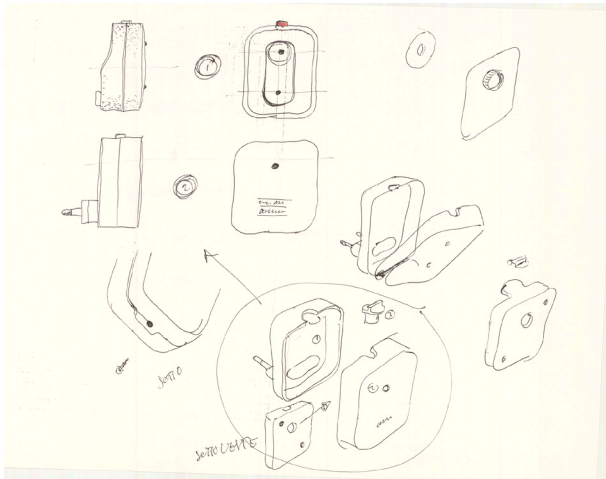


Fig. 11. Emergency light LC10, Lucetta, 1982, study sketch.

Conclusions

The felicitous visual restitution of certain projects and the ability to integrate two forms of knowledge, the technical and the artistic, often wrongly considered antagonistic, that characterises Luca Meda's design production invites reflection on the role of aesthetic education in contemporary design studies.

Luca Meda's entire design production can be considered as a repertoire of *objets à réaction poétique* [Empoli 2013], or as Meda defines it "reworking of customary forms" [Mantica 2021, p. 58], understood in a rather broad sense to embrace both traditional, everyday objects and those that belong to a collective imagination, the result of a leap of abstraction and synthetic restitution of an idea. The translation of this universe of objects through drawing is coeval with the contemporary way of designing, following an increasingly present (and not without problems) custom of designing directly in 3D, avoiding the passage of the two-dimensional description of the object. However, as has been attempted to demonstrate, Meda's ability to do this derives from a rigorous, even lacunar, aesthetic education. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether or not the elimination of an essential design phase –the two-dimensional description– unsupported by a precise aesthetic education is

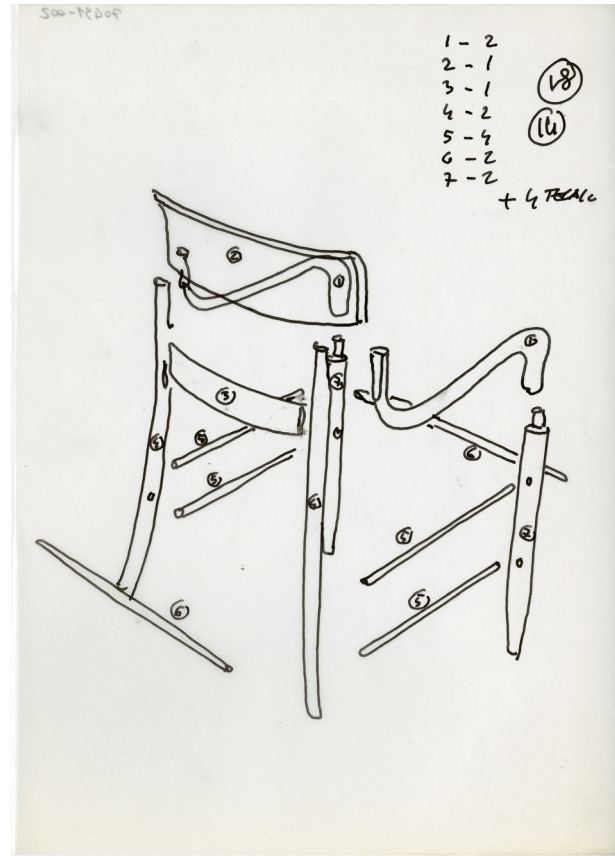


Fig. 12. Study for chair, s.d.

an achievement in the pedagogical approach of current educational models in the field of design. In other words, does the use of CAD (Computer Aided Design) systems from the earliest approaches to design disciplines bring an advantage or a disadvantage to the practice of designing objects?

Without a doubt, computer-aided design is an indispensable technique [9]. Without it, it would be impossible to design the objects of high structural complexity that populate contemporary society. According to Charles Lang, a pioneer of CAD systems, these would allow any object to be produced "more reliably and efficiently, with



Fig. 13. Tadolino Poggio, 1988, study sketch.

less development time and greater functionality" [Marsh 2014, p. 39]. In addition, the most advanced software allows us to predict the behaviour of the individual components of objects and their degree of deterioration: this is why Marsh speaks of designers conquering a fourth dimension in addition to the three spatial dimensions, namely time.

Despite the great potential of CAD systems, in his famous *L'uomo artigiano*, Richard Sennett warns against their blind and fideistic use. Especially with regard to the education of the designer and the early stages of design, Sennett's concerns can be shared. The problem of using machines to design is referred to by Sennett as the 'closed system problem', which arises whenever we think of a practice as a means to a given end: "Intelligent machines offer the human being the possibility of decoupling intellectual understanding from repetitive, instruction-following, hand-held learning. This happens at the expense of human conceptual faculties" [Sennett 2008, p. 45].

By entrusting all phases of design to CAD systems, and thus renouncing the manual act of drawing, i.e. accepting a design practice divorced from corporeality, we lose the opportunity to access three peculiar characteristics of physical experience: the tactile, the relational and the

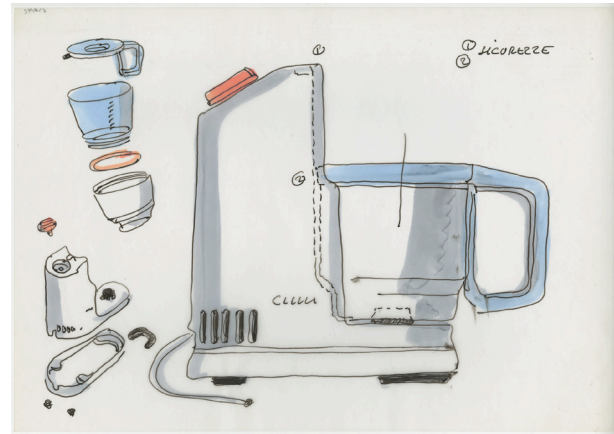


Fig. 14. Kitchen robot, 1996, study sketch.

incomplete. Corresponding to this threefold loss are three dangers of using CAD systems: the disconnection between simulation and reality, arising from the possibility that the simulation does not adhere perfectly to reality; the renunciation of relational intelligence, which stems from the great capacity of CAD systems to conceal or completely remove certain design difficulties; and overdetermination, i.e. the risk that an overly rigid determination of the various parts of a project does not allow for modification during the course of the project. These three dangers contribute to the risk of devolving the process of learning and refining the product from manual drawing to machines. Sennett summarises this by saying that "the abuses of CAD illustrate how, when the head and the hand become divorced, it is the head that suffers" [Sennett 2008, p. 50].

Meda's design experience and Sennett's reflection show that, even if we had perfect technological tools for designing, drawing – that is, the manual expression of an aesthetic education – would remain an indispensable tool for design pedagogy and for certain stages of design. Because if it is true that to design is to decide, it is also true that to decide is to be able to see, that is, to have a vision that is the fruit of design imagination. Drawing, in this sense, plays an indispensable mediating role.

Notes

[1] This link was investigated with acuity in Proverbio, Riccini 2016.

[2] On the relationship between technical and sociological imagination, cfr: Breton 2006, Grais 1992, Maldonado 2022, Wright Mills 1961.

[3] Reference is made here to the concept of 'things' expressed in Bodei 2009.

[4] Also worth mentioning is the use of imaginary figures such as the mad king or the 'balancing' woman. Cfr: iconography of Braghieri [Braghieri, Carbone, Maffioletti 2021, pp. 188, 189].

[5] See in particular Riccini 2015, Ciammaichella 2015.

[6] The term design is understood here in its functional sense.

[7] Reference is made here to Meda's schooling at the Ulm School but also to later collaborations with professional studios such as that of Marco Zanuso.

[8] See the biographical contribution by Nicola Braghieri [Braghieri, Carbone, Maffioletti 2021, p. 36].

[9] To learn more about the potential and use of CAD in the production of objects, cfr: Marsh [2014, pp. 37-43].

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