

The Drawing of Objects with a High Aesthetic Function. Bruno Munari's Travel Sculptures, a Restless Lexicon

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Abstract

The present contribution describes the research work to catalogue and study that system of objects, multiples and mass-produced, to which Munari gave the name Travel Sculptures, which he created from 1958 onwards in a constant and tireless search for a balance between form and meaning, between utility and aesthetic function, between art and design. In the taxonomic reading of the master's production and above all through the decoding operations performed by the drawing, the sculptures appear to be objects that revolutionise the way of looking at things: based on the 'co-presence of variants', what is observed is not a single subjective and definitive image, but a multitude of images in continuous variation; not a single form but a series of forms in movement. Through the operations of interpretation of the approximately 40 sculptures, traced through research in the multi-source literature, which shows their strong critical historical impact, they have been redesigned and decoded through an actual survey carried out on the images collected and catalogued according to chronological criteria, referring to material, size, etc. As will be seen, the design of the artefacts is crossed by the multiple dynamics of observation and use, by the relationship with space, by the action of opening and closing, by the discontinuity of the material, by light and shadows, by movement and stillness, restoring a particular language that is never monotonous, at times ambiguous and discordant, variegated, that in the graphic sign seeks its state of stillness.

Keywords: travel sculpture, survey, drawing, design, Munari

Introduction

In order to investigate the relationship, not always linear and evident, that is established between the Munari object, the design of its form and the communication of meaning, the approach to the themes of drawing as language, passes through the study of certain documents and events that, in addition to framing the master's production in the cultural context in which he worked, contain reflections on the genealogy of his ideas and all those components that made their explication possible.

Approaching the rich repertoire of artefacts that Bruno Munari created after his futurist experience meant entering a constantly expanding universe, populated

by dense objects and 'restless works', as Umberto Eco defines them in his essay presenting the exhibition *Arte programmata. Kinetic art, multiplied works, open work*, promoted by Munari and Giorgio Soavi and inaugurated on 15 May 1962 at the Olivetti shop in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan.

Eco's essay, entitled *La forma dell'ordine*, is an important passage to compose some characters of Munari's figure and trace the principles that supported his research expressed through the production of a multitude of objects 'in balance' between utility and aesthetic function, between art and design, between form and meaning.

Fig. 1. Travel sculptures, 1958. The photograph is accompanied by the text of Munari's presentation of the exhibition. The image is taken from <<https://corraini.com/it/codice-ovvio.html>> (accessed 12 June 2025).



Le sculture da viaggio sono oggetti a funzione estetica. Nella valigia normalmente mettiamo oggetti a funzione pratica, ci preoccupiamo di avere il necessario per la pulizia personale e gli indumenti di ricambio, mettiamo il sapone personale, il rasoio, camicie e mutande; mettiamo anche oggetti di collegamento col nostro mondo affettivo: le foto delle persone care. Qualcuno cura anche l'estetica degli indumenti, li sceglie secondo accordi di colore: questa cravatta o questa maglia con questi calzoncini. Ben pochi si preoccupano di mettere nella valigia qualcosa che mantenga il collegamento col proprio mondo culturale. Si sa, molti non hanno un mondo culturale, ad altri dà addirittura fastidio, qualcuno crede che sia un altro pianeta.

Le camere d'albergo hanno un aspetto piuttosto anonimo, non si può pretendere, d'altra parte, che abbiano un qualche sia pur minimo riferimento con una certa estetica. Possiamo dire che devono essere anonime proprio perché devono ospitare gente di ogni tipo. In queste camere non si sa veramente dove posare gli occhi nel momento in cui stiamo per spegnere la luce. Io guardo la finestra, Giovanni guarda San Giovanni, Maria guarda l'interruttore perché di solito prende in mano il pomolo della sedia per spegnere la luce.

Se ci fosse un oggetto, leggero e poco ingombrante, un oggetto da portare con sé, che avesse una funzione puramente estetica (visto che per le funzioni pratiche ci siamo già occupati), potrebbe fare da collegamento col nostro mondo estetico culturale moderno. Come a casa nostra.

S'intende che si parla qui di estetica dei nostri tempi, poiché pensiamo a un viaggiatore moderno che non va in diligenza ma in jet. Un viaggiatore giovane di fuori e anche di dentro. Un tipo che appartiene a una cultura internazionale, non un analfabeta culturale. E siccome una persona non è completa se non cura tutte le parti di se stessa, non solo l'apparenza ma anche la sostanza, ecco che nasce da un certo punto, quasi chiamato dalle esigenze vitali più complesse, la «scultura da viaggio».

Codice ovvio

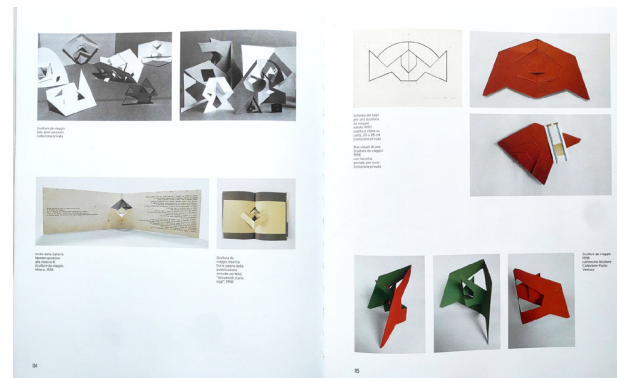
The essay was published in the 1962 *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani* [Eco 1961], which came out in November 1961 and was dedicated to "*Applicazioni dei calcolatori elettronici alle scienze morali e alla letteratura*". The volume, whose graphic design was conceived and edited by Munari himself, can be considered the first reflection dedicated to the aesthetic and artistic possibilities of the computer's organization of culture. The essays and illustrations in the volume attempt to develop a comprehensive discourse on the aesthetic and intellectual changes brought about by the advent of computers, addressing the ways in which they could transform developments in creativity. In his essay, Eco introduces the formula 'programmed art' and establishes terms and canons of this neo-avant-garde [Bartorelli 2017, p. 11]: a multiplicity of viewpoints and a diverse range of perceptual experiences, generated by a predetermined principle or operation.

The exhibition project has as its catalyst the complex figure of Bruno Munari and sees the involvement of personalities grouped in collectives [1], who were to become protagonists of Italian and international culture in the following decades. The exhibition makes it possible to trace an important moment in the relationship between art, culture and industry in 1960s Italy, as well as representing an exemplary case study of the virtuous union between artistic avant-garde and industrial research. The works on show are radically new experimental objects that, in their kinetic impulse and the materials chosen, embrace experimentation and go beyond established boundaries: they are no longer painting or sculpture, available for the enjoyment of all. They are 'hybrid' objects, born at the intersection of different disciplines, with an essentially aesthetic function, as Munari himself defines them, that revolutionise the way of looking at things. Like the 'cybernetic perturbation' that envelops the spectator and forces him to interact, to move, to change references and points of view. In this visual quest, Munari, like many figures alongside him, adopts a technical or conventional graphic language with a certain reluctance. Rather, the graphic sign decodes the gesture that sets the work in motion and the artistic experience that functions through the transmission of information that is as exact as possible [Munari 2009, p. 72], even if never unambiguous.

In the Munari landscape, one no longer finds the reassuring coordinates indicating above and below, left and right, orienting the observer; no longer one message, but the possibility of many co-present messages. This is what

Fig. 2. Photographs and drawings of travel sculptures [Meneguzzo, Roffi 2024, pp. 114-115].

Fig. 3. Photographs of travel sculptures [Meneguzzo, Roffi 2024, pp. 116-117].



happens when one enters this “finite and unlimited curved space. And now try to avert your gaze, to rest it on a single detail. You will no longer succeed. The observer of the Renaissance perspective was a good cyclops who rested his one eye on the slit of a magic box in which he saw the world from the only possible point of view. Munari’s man is forced to have a thousand eyes, on his nose, on the nape of his neck, on his shoulders, on his fingers, on his bottom. And he revolts restlessly in a world that storms him with stimuli that assail him from all sides. Through the programmatic wisdom of the exact sciences he discovers himself a restless inhabitant of an expanding universe. I am not saying it is a good story. It is history” [Eco 1961, pp. 186, 187].

Travel sculptures, instructions for use

It is complex to isolate the history of travel sculptures and to trace a genealogy of Munari’s ideas referring exclusively to these artefacts. This is emphasised by Dellapiana in the essay in the exhibition catalogue *Bruno Munari tutto* [Meneguzzo, Roffi 2024], in which he provides some insights into the master’s production through key words, or rather key objects, including travel sculptures, as a physical trace to unveil the paths Munari travelled. But “there are so many paths, each seemingly linear in its results, but the picture is almost impossible to compose, time is short, positioning in a complicated context: one would have to talk about all kinds of sophisticated experimentation, from painting to sculpture, music, literature, obviously graphics and design, and then psychology, cybernetics” [Dellapiana 2024, pp. 44, 45]. As well as his ‘fellow travellers... too many. Futurists, kinetics, concretists, Colombo, Eco, Soavi, Berio, Mari, Cage, Tinguely... how to reconcile this pinwheel of crowned heads from the best of the intellectual class with the repeated recommendations for simplicity?’ [Dellapiana 2024, pp. 44, 45]. For Munari, simplicity is realised by recalling the Cartesian method, but with continual reminders of a hermeneutic approach, through which his paths can be seen not as simple, nor linear, but rather as the outcome of contaminations, in some cases even counter-intuitive, but on the basis of simple design gestures.

Sampling, contouring, folding, splicing, these are the gestures that substantiate Munari’s work (the project) as the result of a unified thought, through which sculptures are reinterpreted by thinking of them as a system of objects and opportunities offered to experiment with simplicity.

The first travel sculptures were created in the early 1950s as foldable, transportable sculptures, made of cardboard and, as Munari says, given as gifts or sent as greeting cards. The presentation that Munari sketches on the occasion of the exhibition of his travel sculptures in 1958 is a narrative between art and poetry implemented through a discursive strategy that prepares the observer to accept the works as ‘urgent’ objects (fig. 1). Even from the choice of name, the ironic but never bitter acceptance of the transience of things is manifested, where the artefact becomes the symbol of the demythologisation of art. The materiality closely linked to the idea and image of a sculpture, the plasticity of form, the topological issues, the occupation of space, come into conflict, in a lively confrontation, with the lightness and provisionality of these objects. But it is precisely in the renunciation of the utilitarian dimension that the indispensable condition for the unfolding of the aesthetic fact arises.

“These travel sculptures have the function of creating in an anonymous hotel room or in an environment where one is hosted a reference point where the eye finds a link with the world of one’s own culture” [2]. In *Codice ovvio* edited by Fossati and reissued by Corraini in 2017, Munari’s texts are quoted which, on several occasions, appear to be real instructions for use, not mere descriptions in order to mediate the meaning or visual content of the object. “Travel sculptures are objects with an aesthetic function. In the suitcase we normally put objects with a practical function, we take care to have the necessities for personal cleanliness and spare clothing. [...] Very few bother to put something in the suitcase that maintains the connection with their cultural world. [...] If there was an object, light and unobtrusive, an object to carry with you, that had a purely aesthetic function, it could act as a link to our modern cultural aesthetic world. Like at home. It is understood that we speak here of the aesthetics of our times, as we think of a modern traveller who does not go by stagecoach but by jet. A guy who belongs to an international culture and not a cultural illiterate. And since a person is not complete if he does not take care of all parts of himself, not only the appearance but also the substance, here is where the travel sculpture was born from a certain point, almost called by the most complex vital needs” [Munari 2017, pp. 60, 61]. His instructions for use are true stories, short, light and, still, simple, capable of creating a special atmosphere, an emotional-perceptive state in which the sculptures appear as the only possible objects capable of satisfying the most

Fig. 4. Basic format of the cataloguing sheet containing the drawings of the sculpture n. 4: diagram of development on the plane, folded, orthogonal projections, axonometric view (drawing by the authors).

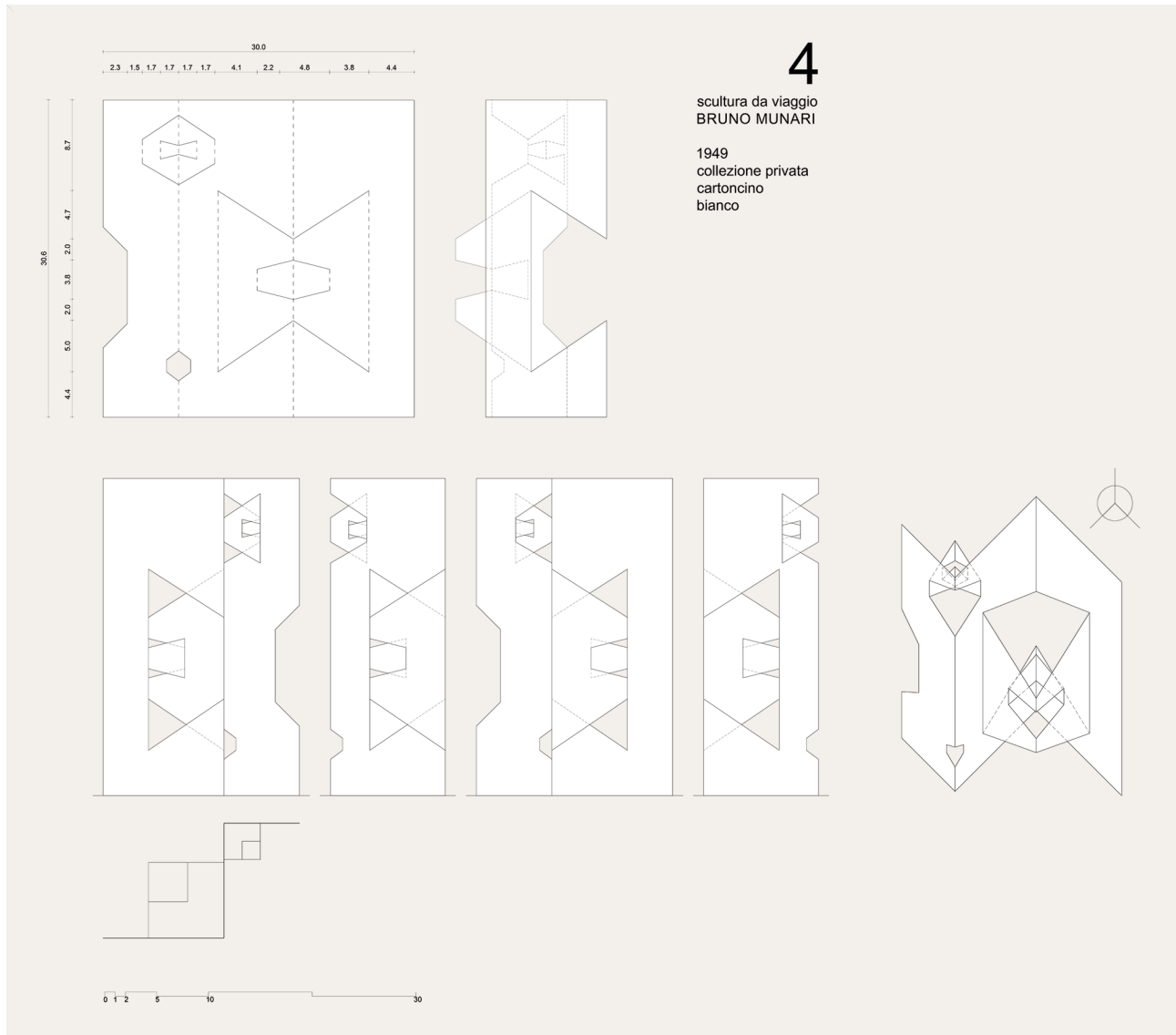
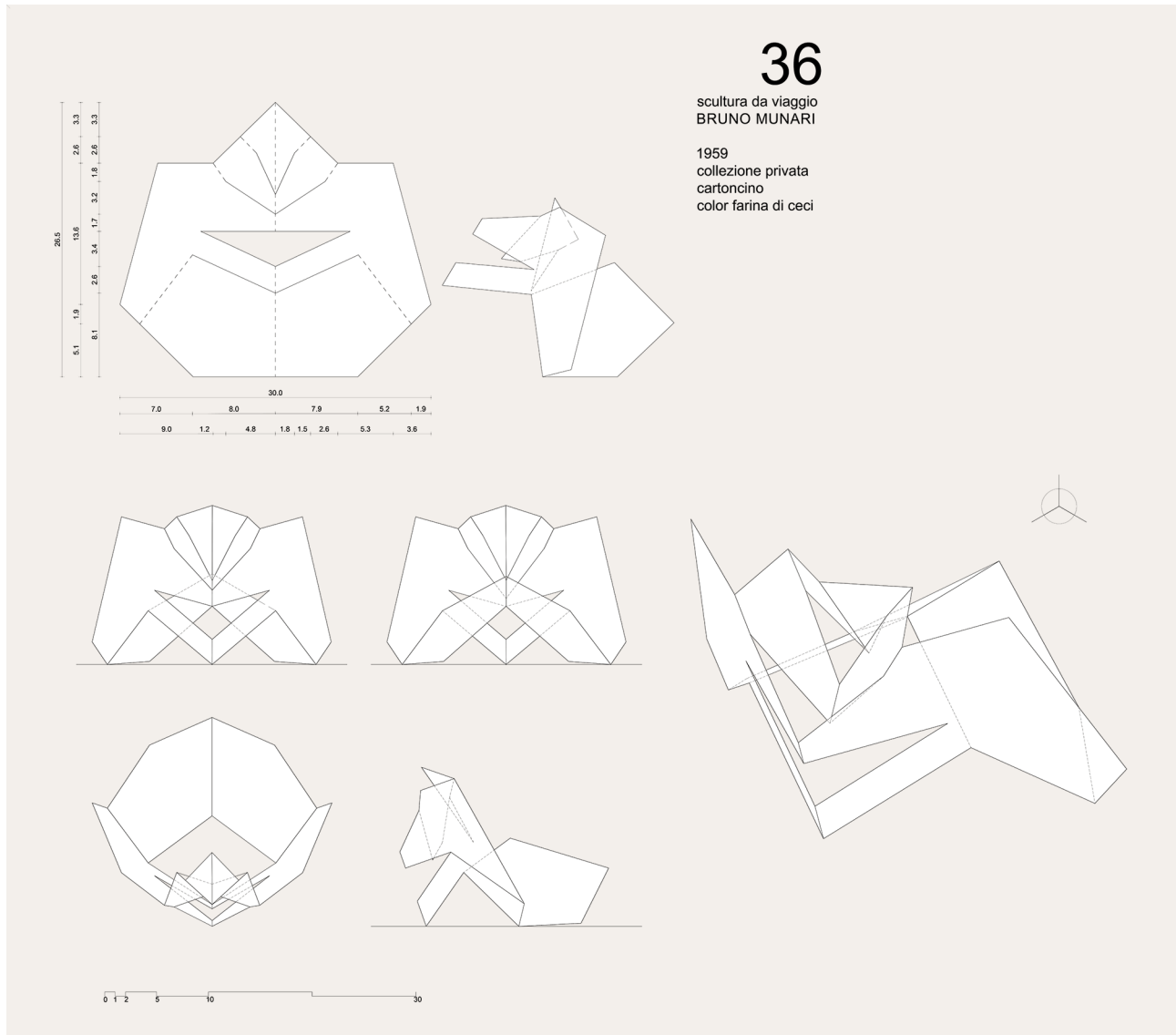
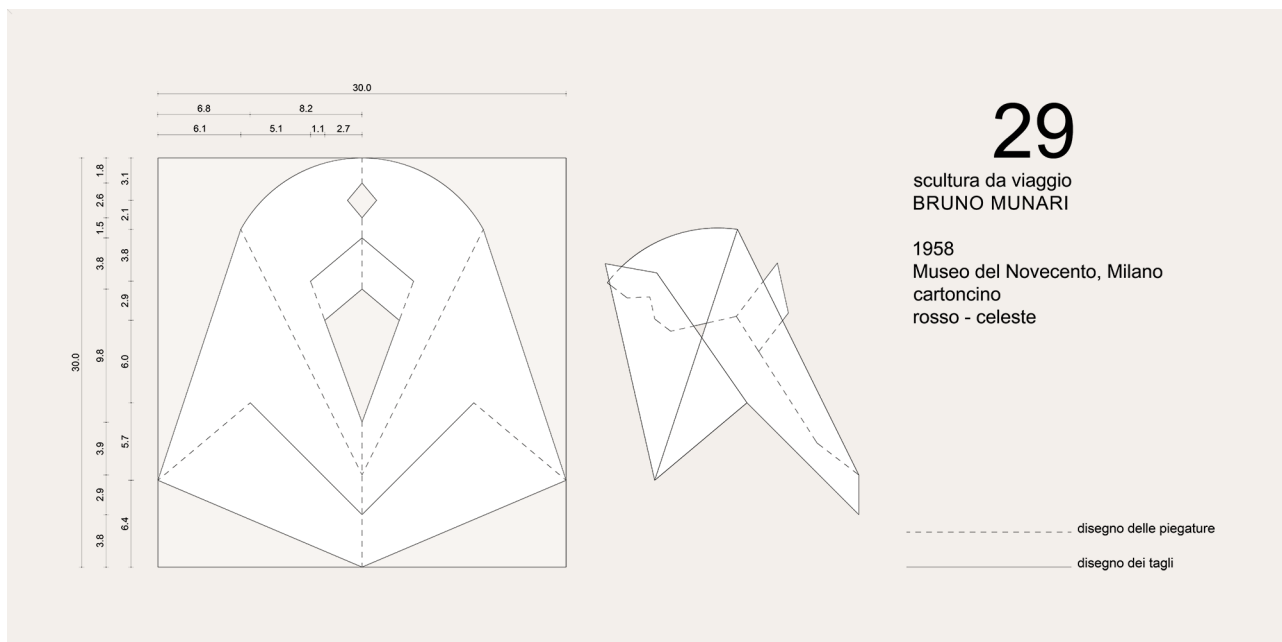


Fig. 5. Basic format of the cataloguing sheet containing the drawings of the sculpture n. 36: development diagram on the plane, folded, orthogonal projections, axonometric view (drawing by the authors).





29

scultura da viaggio
BRUNO MUNARI1958
Museo del Novecento, Milano
cartoncino
rosso - celeste----- disegno delle piegature
———— disegno dei tagli

Fig. 6. Graphic nomenclature and detail of the development drawing on the plane of the sculpture n. 29 (drawing by the authors).

intimate needs of the user, whom Munari skilfully guides through his gestures.

“The sculpture is presented folded in an envelope. You open the envelope and take out the sculpture. To open the sculpture, you simply take the left side with your left hand and the right side with your right hand (the left side is usually on the left and the right is on the right, otherwise you mean that you are holding the sculpture upside down, i.e. the right is on the left and the left is on the other side. If you take the right side with your left hand and the left with your right hand, you will be embarrassed to open the object although this is not that complicated). Sit down and don't worry. Open the window. Turn on the light as evening has now come. By chance your eye falls on the illustration that is together with the sculpture. Suddenly everything is clear: Place the sculpture on a horizontal plane (on inclined planes it slides) and before you switch off the light, observe how it illuminates the various projecting or recessed parts, the solid and the hollow parts, turn it a little by lightly

pushing the right side with the middle finger of your left hand, there, that's better. Turn it the other way, it changes its appearance, your thoughts from practical will slowly become aesthetic (the speed depends on you), you will no longer wonder 'cusa l'è chel rob ki' and you will fall asleep happily. Good night” [Munari 2017, pp. 60-65].

Workflow

The process of gathering the material from which to formulate project hypotheses for the cataloguing of the works brought to light certain difficulties linked not so much to the retrieval of resources, information and data, nor of the sources, which were in fact numerous and rich. They were confronted with a real need: to redesign and reproduce them. Of the sculptures, the iconographic material consists mainly of photographs; the photograph, i.e. a perspective view, is the only visual format on which to

make design hypotheses. Munari's drawings for the rarely present sculptures are essential representations, drawn in pen and pencil on paper where the grid that quantifies and measures proportions, alignments and configuration possibilities shines through. They are construction diagrams in which the remarkable points of the figure that regulate the movement of and between the parts are highlighted (fig. 2). They are drawings that contain directions to do something and, like all the devices Munari designs, to learn how to do something, while using, studying, observing, contemplating.

And as one investigates the rules of construction, one notices the work ethic of the master; the absolute lack of waste of material as well as energy, everything is of disarming simplicity.

Therefore, one of the objectives of the research was to construct the graphic apparatus, visual codes and language to decode the structure of the individual works. A space where they can be placed side by side, compared, matched, without this proximity altering the uniqueness and meanings of each one, but rather favouring the reading. A work recalculated and adapted case by case so as not to break that delicate balance between presence and absence that is generated when drawing [3] [Purini 2007, pp. 34, 35]. A space where the different methods of representation through which this precious heritage can be read can be compared.

With the aim of reconstructing the travel sculptures and interpreting the repertoire of forms and languages of Munari's work, the first operation was to detect

Fig. 7. Narrative-descriptive space of the archive of Munari's travel sculptures. Extract of the graphic table comparing the different methods of representation (drawing by the authors).

Fig. 8. A possible taxonomy of language from the top views of travel sculptures (drawing by the authors).



proportions, measurements, possible configurations from the available photographic images and documents. An initial analysis and cataloguing phase made it possible to define a nomenclature referring to the individual artefacts and the operations connected to spatial configuration, construction, as well as to hypothesise the geometric forms of the composition on the plane. The survey from the image, a kind of visual redrawing of the object, is connected to the interpretative study of the method Munari applies to conceive and construct sculptures. The survey of the artefact and the drawing are developed in the light of the study of the process of conception, design and construction of the artefacts starting precisely from Munari's intentions, apparently spontaneous and improvised, but rather planned in every aspect.

By internalising the questions of method [4] [Munari 2009, p. 359], the design sequences, the instructions that Munari himself establishes in the verification drawing of the artefact (fig. 3), he favoured that complex of technical-practical activities and critical interpretation of the survey of (and from) the images. A system of interpretative graphic representations is thus generated, sketches that, like elementary writings (level I eidotypes), outline the spatial arrangement of the sculptures in different ways.

What emerges is the geography of the cuts and curves, the projections and recesses, the relative directions and proportions, the angles between the surfaces and with the support plane and the hierarchy of the structure in general. The direct comparison with some models of travel

sculptures in Carter's pop-up book [Carter 2019] guided the first operations of restitution of the basic format from which Munari presumably started to construct the artefacts. Access to this material was a preliminary phase of fundamental importance. There are approximately ten models reconstructed in the book, each belonging to different moments of Munari's production and reconstructed by Carter on a reduced scale. The measurements and surveys, both of the development on the plane and in space, were possible thanks to the reading device of the Carter volume cited, published not by chance by Corraini. The book, which has educational purposes, in addition to celebrating the art of the master, allows to establish the nomenclature that supports the construction of cardboard models. On the basis of these models, the apparatus of graphic instructions, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, for the creation of the individual sculptures is defined. At this point the workflow develops through a second phase of survey of the constructed artifact that 'fixes' its spatial configuration and allows a graphic restitution of the data that reaches the codified system of the drawing.

This drawing has a prescriptive character [Anceschi 1992, p. 70] and questions, through traditional representation devices, how many and which images to produce. Drawing, as a practice that fulfills the role of decoding and restitution of forms, measurements and meanings, finds itself, especially in this cultural context, obliged to respect, in the graphic language adopted for this purpose, the principles that generated the work; in particular to illustrate its variability, its complexity, adopting a language capable of expressing the movement and the tension towards a new possible configuration.

In the interaction between sculpture, space and the user, the aesthetic function of the artifact itself is determined: observing, moving around, lifting, opening and closing, folding, transporting, placing, playing, illuminating, framing etc. When the observation point or ways of using it change, the work is transfigured, while always remaining the same, in a continuous and reciprocal exchange of information, solicitations and stimuli. In constructing the iconographic apparatus of the travel sculptures, the objective of the research, it was therefore necessary to change the research paradigm, accommodate the movements, the variations, recalculate the observation distance from the object, vary the spatial coordinates of the point of view of the representation and finally generate a visualisation space for the artifacts. This system of objects was



Fig. 9. A (incomplete) taxonomy that compares the coexistence of variations in the design and composition actions of travel sculptures (drawing by authors).

subsequently transferred to a virtual space [Maldonado 2007, p. 78] built ad hoc (a kind of database) which, starting from the single card, is divided into different categories of analysis, interpretation and representation. The taxonomic organization of sculpture materials follows the different interests and aims of research moving from one format to another, from one model to another, from one point of view to an infinite place.

The visualization in taxonomies, as well as being a necessity for study, represents a challenge, that is the possibility of submitting these objects, which Munari wants free to move in space, to be communicated in a static mode and through the graphic sign. With the risk of disrupting the system of meanings and languages, the risk of altering the balance between one sculpture and another in subtle differences and the measure of complexity.

Layout and taxonomy of graphic production

The cataloging of the works and the true reading of the morphological and morphometric data are organized on the basis of the file format defined by the free schema structure of the archive that collects and systematizes the materials on the sculptures. The basic format of the sheet contains, in addition to information on the dating of the work, its placement in collections, material, reference bibliography, photographic images and (possible) written notes of the author, the development drawing on the plane with indications of cuts and folds (figs. 4, 5). This is a drawing that defines the layout of the project, i.e. the main device that displays and in order the instructions for the work of building the artifact. The cutting and bending operations are defined by a coded graphic language that, through the sign, declares its function within the project. In the card, the design of the artifact in its development on the plane, in order to interpret the author's intentions regarding the possibilities of use of the sculpture, that is to be closed on itself, is flanked by another design that sees the sculpture folded (fig. 6).

To draw the sculpture of travel in its spatial configuration defined by the operations of survey, it was necessary to rethink a visual format suitable for showing the complexity of the work and those values and meanings that interpret the intentionality of Munari's project. A space –narrative-descriptive– of the project capable of incorporating the variability of form and ways of use, as well as the lightness,

Fig. 10. Basic format of the cataloguing sheet containing the three-dimensional model built in cad environment of the sculpture n. 36 (drawing of the authors).

Fig. 11. Basic format of the cataloguing sheet containing the three-dimensional model built in cad environment of the sculpture n. 4 (drawing of the authors).

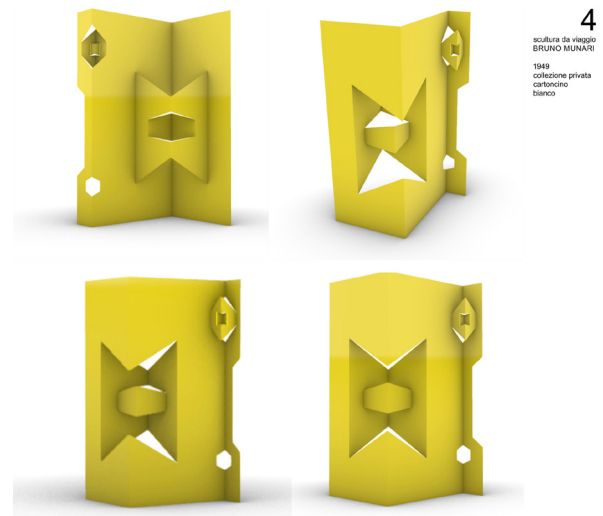
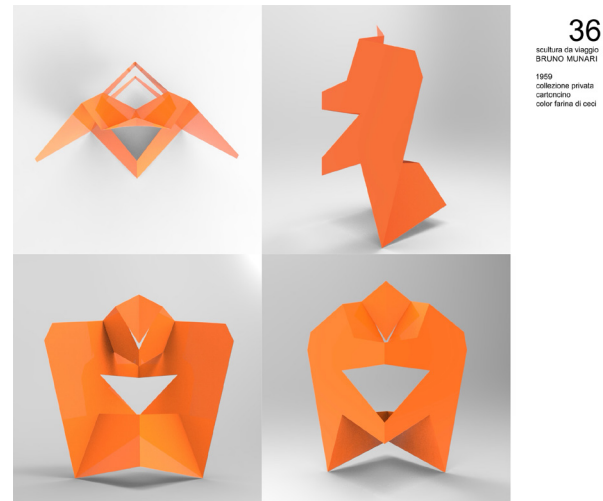


Fig. 12. Photograph of the models/prototypes in coloured cardboard according to the original indications (photo by the authors).



continuity and integrity of the development surface, the instability and fragility of the material.

And if the drawings in orthogonal projection (fig. 7) can appear as a result of a very precise (visual) choice which blocks the sculpture in a given spatial configuration, they really offer a starting point for a more complex, deeper analysis. From these (conventional) drawings, the path is traced for subsequent drawings, for more advanced representations (from orthogonal projections to isometric axonometry and perspective) and for constructing transverse images, visual compositions that can compare the individual artifacts with each other in different projective modes, in a landscape of forms, figures, minimal signs that graphically translate the direct experience of the system of objects (fig. 8).

The process of constructing the three-dimensional digital model of the sculptures represented a very important phase of study because, besides enriching the iconographic apparatus with an instrument of knowledge and production of images, it also addressed a question of method. The realization of the three-dimensional model starts from the placement, in a cad environment, of the geometrical entities engaged by Munari: mainly surfaces, and then lines and points. The 3D model is developed by reproducing the significant design actions, from the cutout on the surfaces to the folds, varying parameters and values to entities, in order to facilitate the possibility of assuming different configurations, even slightly.

And this is how the drawing of the same object expands into multiple drawings through minute differences: angles, distances, decentralizations, combinations in accordance with the rules of topology and Euclidean geometry in order to rediscover the expressive possibilities of continuous movement (figs. 9-11).

Conclusions

Munari's research on travel sculptures, which is not considered to be concluded at all, is part of a broader project of knowledge considering the circularity of the discipline of drawing that questions the communicative dynamics of a coded language. The study of the system of defined objects with an aesthetic function and the problem of representation opens up new models. Parallel to the cataloging of Munari's sculptures, an experiment was started on another set of objects, profoundly different and born in

a different historical-cultural context, the Morphemes by Michele Reginaldi. This group of more than 100 works was also submitted to the morphological interpretation, often the result of a spontaneous gesture, through the relief from the image and the construction of the graphic apparatus.

Credits

Introduction was written by A.C. Maiorano; *Travel sculptures, instructions for use* was written by V. Castagnolo; *Workflow* was written by A.C. Maiorano;

On the project model for cataloguing travel sculptures, an alternative visual format has been developed for these new objects, which nevertheless offers a taxonomic reading of the system and allows to visualize the expressive possibilities of the graphic language adopted.

Layout and taxonomy of graphic production was written by A.C. Maiorano; *Conclusions* was written by V. Castagnolo and A.C. Maiorano.

Notes

[1] As Group N explains in a letter to Munari of 12 January 1962: "We consider the title 'programmed art' the most appropriate to define our experiments. For most of our works it will be necessary to specify that the programmer of the work is the same viewer who chooses a vision rather than another or determines indeterminate variations by capturing the object in the movement of his view». Group T also understood its work in a similar way, emphasizing the freedom of interaction and interpretation that these works give to the viewer; «the interaction between two dynamic processes, that of the work and that of the perception of the spectator, could increase the communicative potential of visual art; and in a way more consistent with the concept of a reality that is not fixed and immutable, but in continuous mutation" [Meloni, 2006, p. 23]. (Alicata, M. (2022). Olivetti ispira i giovani. Le ragioni della mostra Arte Programmata. Arte cinetica, opere moltiplicate, opera aperta, Milano 1962. Piano B. *Arti E Culture Visive*, 7(2), 1-21. <<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2531-9876/16340>> (accessed 9 May 2025).

[2] Bruno Munari, text for the invitation to the exhibition *Travel Sculptures* at the Galleria Montenapoleone, Milano 17-30 giugno 1958.

[3] The absolute priority of the thought-form of design, however, does not seem to consist so much in the possibility that it offers of anticipating the outcome of a constructive undertaking, as much in its being a propitiatory and dedicatory event centered on the ambiguity of the image. The simulacrum of a future building is, in fact, both an absence and a presence. is an absence because it testifies to the remoteness and diversity of the real object of which it is a virtual projection; it is a presence because it itself is a real object that refers back to itself [Purini 2008, p. 34].

[4] see chapter under title *Un metodo di progettazione* present in the volume *Design e comunicazione visiva* in which Munari, through a graphic schematization from the enunciation of the problem to the prototype, addresses the delicate process of design of the designer.

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