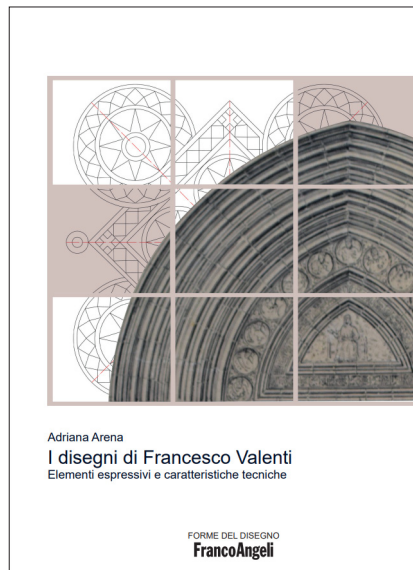


Reviews

Adriana Arena

I disegni di Francesco Valenti. Elementi espressivi e caratteristiche tecniche

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The book *I disegni di Francesco Valenti. Elementi espressivi e caratteristiche tecniche* (Drawings by Francesco Valenti. Expressive Elements and Technical Characteristics), edited by Adriana Arena and scheduled for publication in 2024 as part of FrancoAngeli's *Forme del Disegno* series, offers an in-depth study of the graphic works of architect and engineer Francesco Valenti, who was active from the late 19th century into the early 20th century. The research examines the technical and expressive dimensions of his drawings and places them within the broader context of architectural representation of that era. His work reflects a sustained interest in surveying and graphic practice, shaped through his extensive restoration efforts on Arab-Norman monuments and medieval architecture. The study is noteworthy for its philological approach. It forms part of the Arena's ongoing research, which aims to explore the intricate relationship between designers and graphic language, viewed as a medium for new semantic codes shaped by the cultural context of the time. As Francesca Fatta mentions in the preface, drawing effectively becomes a medium, an actual language, a "series of phases through which the entire system of subsequent formal inventions passes; each method

has its own 'symbolic form'". From this perspective, Adriana Arena employs drawing to explore the technical aspects highlighted by Valenti and serve as a critical lens for understanding the transformative dynamics of contemporary society.

Organized into three primary sections, the volume begins with a hermeneutic analysis of the architect's study notes, preparatory sketches, and technical drawings, some of which lack autographs. The documents provide the author with crucial insights, approached holistically across various levels of depth. The initial investigation focuses on the theme of authorship, uncovering how non-autographed representations serve as a collective design model. This paradigm, rooted in the operational traditions of Renaissance workshops, positions the designer as the pivotal figure steering the collaborative process in a clear direction while preserving its critical and expressive value. A further interpretative insight comes from the classification of preparatory sketches, which fall into a crucial transition between academic expressive drawing and the rigorous rationalist codification introduced by the technical regulations of the 1920s. The high quality of the graphic mark, often elaborate, stands in stark contrast to the period's

emphasis on technical simplicity. In this context, the author identifies a strong connection between the historical and cultural environment and the designer's unique characteristics, suggesting that Valenti's distinct style can be traced back to his educational background, which was at the *Regia Scuola di Applicazione per Ingegneri di Roma* (Royal School of Application for Engineers in Rome). However, the refinement of his strokes and meticulous attention to detail more closely reflect the Sicilian academic environment and highlight his fascination with medieval architecture, which was the primary focus of his studies. Analyzing the executive drawings, Arena declares the urgent need to preserve this rich figurative heritage. This necessity has multiple dimensions: it holds significant documentary value, uncovers the deep connections between representation, design processes, and construction practices, and emphasizes its inherent narrative quality. Within the narrative framework, the author explores the intense tension between conservation and technological innovation that defined the era, a dynamic that Valenti effectively illustrates by depicting the transformation of artifacts over time.

The volume's second section provides a comprehensive examination of the narrative structure that supports the designer's works, focusing on his contributions to architectural surveying, especially regarding the Cathedral of Messina and the Church of SS. Annunziata dei Catalani. The research uncovers a dialectical, idealistic, and operational graphic system deeply rooted in the epistemological and methodological

principles of architectural restoration. Using precise conventions, his drawings go beyond the purely illustrative or aesthetic purposes typical of 19th-century surveys; they adopt a technical-analytical and communicative function that anticipates the surveying methodologies characteristic of 20th-century restoration practices. His innovative approach is marked by direct observation, graphic representation, and thoughtful design proposals. The plates, created with a sense of plastic mastery, promote dialogue with artisans to ensure the accurate execution of restoration interventions. Arena's linguistic analysis of Valenti's survey representations highlights a significant transformation in the role of drawing. This role evolves from simple objective transcription to a more critical interpretive process that recreates a coherent and idealized image of the building. The section concludes with a comparison to the surveys conducted by European travellers in the 19th century.

The volume's third section examines the designer's graphic portfolio, a significant portion of which remains unpublished and is housed in the specialized collection at the Palermo Municipal Library (*Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo*). The drawings, often created as preparatory studies, underscore the vital role of graphic documentation in comprehending and reconstructing historical buildings, particularly as they pertain to the concept of 'fabric' especially in restoration contexts following armed conflicts. The selection features projects from notable monuments in Palermo and Messina, except the Mother Church of Naro, located in the

province of Agrigento. This study robustly advocates for the enhancement of technical-engineering iconographic repertoires. The author highlights their significance by analyzing the designer's graphic corpus, which, while displaying technical precision, also unveils a remarkable expressive quality. This component is essential for grasping the designer's identity and cultural choices. Consequently, these works are invaluable for exploring restoration culture and architectural representation during the early 20th century.

Adriana Arena's research is based on a thorough and firsthand understanding of Francesco Valenti's graphic work. The volume features approximately seventy detailed executive and analytical drawings, organized in a narrative structure that elevates drawing from a mere technical tool to a critical historical and architectural interpretation method and a guide for the design process. The book, titled *I disegni di Francesco Valenti. Elementi espressivi e caratteristiche tecniche*, makes a significant and methodologically rigorous contribution to the study of representation history, architectural surveys, and the complex relationship between graphic expression, cognitive processes, and restoration. Arena's careful and systematic analysis of figurative processes and extensive cataloguing of graphic documents enhance the recognition of the cultural value of architectural and engineering archives. These archives serve as places for preserving memory and act as generative spaces that can stimulate critical reinterpretations, in-depth studies, and new perspectives within design culture.

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