

Women and the Railways: The History of the Uniform Design

Roberta Ena

Abstract

As part of a research project, in collaboration with the Fondazione FS Italiane, issues relating to the development of the visual identity of Ferrovie dello Stato (FS) are being addressed for the first time. Among the company's representative elements is the FS uniform, an expression of railway culture, whose design intertwines and connects stories and contexts of a cultural, social, fashion and corporate nature. Moving away from the military-style uniform, the early 1970s saw the launch of the 'new uniform' initiative, which introduced new styles, a new colour –powder blue– and marked the arrival of female railway workers. This contribution initiates an early reconstruction, from a historical, iconographic and design perspective, drawing on primary and unpublished sources, of the FS uniform project, highlighting its social and cultural function. It is a pivotal element in comprehending the spirit of the era, aiding in the delineation of a collective identity, not solely of the railway but of the nation as a whole, and unveiling a past that remains unfinished to the present day, yet serves as a compass for the future.

Keywords: Ferrovie dello Stato, uniform design, project, female personnel, corporation.

Introduction

The history of the Italian railway network, which originated in the 1830s, has played a decisive role in the country's cultural, social and economic transformation. Following its nationalisation in 1905, the three primary networks –the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Sicilian networks– were consolidated into a unified system. The original autonomous administration established its image through a variety of tools relating to architecture, product design and visual communication. Corporate identity is manifested through its image, which is the result of various elements that are often difficult to manage and control. These elements include external and internal opinions, all messages issued, and all actions taken [Anceschi et al. 1993]. A corporation is configured, in the

words of designers Frederick Henri Kay Henrion and Alan Parkin, as an “artificial person” [Henrion, Parkin 1967, p. 7], endowed with a personality and character capable of generating a reputation. The visual heritage of Ferrovie dello Stato (FS) has played a significant role in shaping the company's identity and, consequently, the national identity of Italy, due to its pervasive presence throughout the country.

The historiography of visual elements has not yet been addressed in a systematic and comprehensive manner [1]. The creation of an image is the result of the work of technical departments, a network of specialists, and anonymous contributors within a highly unified context, in which the individual's contribution was subsumed

by the collective endeavour. Historical reconstruction therefore requires a multidisciplinary approach, attentive to the various crafts, and an investigation contextualised in cultural, social, economic and political terms, which allows us to outline what the art historian George Kubler defines as the 'history of things', meaning "to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of 'visual forms': the term includes both artifacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions-in short all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence. From all these things a shape in time emerges. A visible portrait of the collective identity, whether tribe, class, or nation, comes into being" [Kubler 1976, p. 17]. The uniform, a defining element of an organisation's identity, assumes varied roles and meanings. It serves not only as a representation of the company, but also as a delineator of employment roles and internal hierarchies. Drawing on a range of primary and unpublished sources, this research undertakes a historiographical and iconographical reconstruction of the design of the railway uniform. The study explores how the uniform design touched upon social issues, constituted an early element of gender equality within a traditionally male-dominated context, and was shaped by the evolution of clothing production, triggering a synapse of novel connections yet to be explored.

The uniform as a symbol of identity at the origins of ready-to-wear clothing

Clothing has always held social significance, serving both as a means of individual self-promotion and as a tool of control employed by public and private organisations [Mora 2004, p.93]. Fashion, as a "social phenomenon consisting in the establishment [...] of aesthetic and behavioural models, and in their spread as groups, large or small, conform to them, for whom such models constitute, at the same time, an element of internal cohesion and of distinguishability from other groups" [2], plays a prominent role in reflections on "the concept of identity, personifying it in the features of an imagined body, desired and therefore designed" [Ciammaichella 2019, p.1139].

The uniform has historically demonstrated its communicative power, defining values, order and hierarchy, for example in the military sphere; as a tool of identification and

belonging, this is the case of the fascist squads' uniform, which involved children and young people, later including the *Piccole* and *Giovani Italiane*, for whom the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) adopted the military model as an educational formula [Lupano, Vaccari 2009, p. 200].

The origins of ready-to-wear clothing, understood as clothing that is ready to wear, as opposed to made-to-measure, bespoke and handcrafted garments, can be traced back to the 13th century, even before the advent of the first sewing machines between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The production of military, ecclesiastical, prison and school uniforms led to the spread of ready-made garments, particularly in the 18th century across the European and Italian markets. This development required the organisation of workshops and labour for 'mass' production, and became a testing ground for standardisation within a sizing system [Paris 2006, pp. 25-27].

The Italian ready-to-wear clothing industry first began to develop in the 1870s, with Milan and Turin serving as its driving forces for economic and social reasons [Paris 2006, p. 42].

The foundations for this industrial transformation and the development of mass-produced clothing in the post-war period can be traced back to the interwar years [Paris 2006, p. 44; Frisa, Monti, Tonchi, 2018, p. 246], thanks to companies such as Caesar in Turin (1934), Tescosa (1937), Abital (1938) and, even earlier in 1932, the launch of the Facis (*Fabbrica abiti confezionati in serie*), dedicated to the mass production of clothing by the Turin-based Gruppo Finanziario Tessile (GFT, 1930), which arose from the merger of the Biella-based Lanificio Rivetti with the raincoat manufacturer Donato Levi & Figli (1884), which produced men's suits and workwear.

In 1954, the Rivetti family divested their shares in the old wool mills in order to invest in full ownership of the Group, thereby making a decisive contribution to the development of ready-to-wear clothing in Italy. A seminal innovation was the 'size revolution'. The system functioned as a multiplier, commencing from three heights –short, regular, tall– and five body types –slim, normal, medium-strong, strong, pot-bellied– and developing into a total of forty sizes, thereby establishing the '120-size system' [3]. These were not theoretical measurements, but the result of the company's first anthropometric studies carried out on a sample of 25,000 customers across the country [Paris 2006, p. 28].

The innovation introduced by GFT, which rather than moving towards greater standardisation was characterised

In Italy, the garment that characterised the uniform, from the Naples-Portici line (1839) to the Second World War, was the frock coat, the *stiffelius*, which particularly distinguished the figure of the station master, with its double-breasted cut, black silk lapels and gold-embroidered monograms on the collar, conferring upon the wearer a solemn and austere air.

The hat, an item which, being less expensive than jackets and overcoats, has historically served to signal social status whilst blurring and eroding traditional class boundaries [Mora 2004, p. 110], was adorned with emblems and badges, making it the most communicative element of the uniform.



Women in the railways and the first uniform

Women appeared among the ranks of railway workers as 'temporary staff'—a category not provided for in the Staff Regulations— or as 'contract workers' in the offices. Women's work was reduced to filling the gaps created by the war [Buzzoli 1973, p. 4]. Every form of employment was designed to thwart any possible future legal claims. Women, in the overused image of the angel of the hearth, were left out in the cold in the immediate post-war period as railway workers returned from the front, but began to gain some recognition in the second post-war period. First and foremost, they appeared in law with Decree-Law No. 667 of 1947, which established the permanent employment of 'contract workers'. However, the railway feared the possibility of committing to a stable employment relationship with female staff, employing them on a piecework basis as typists from outside the company.

With the approval of the new legal status of FS employees (Law No. 425 of 1958), women were granted access to public competitive examinations, but only for clerical and executive roles within the offices. Following Law No. 66 of 1963, which put an end to restrictions on positions and roles, including in the judiciary, the FS adapted by allowing access to management careers and operational roles, leading in 1967

(Law No. 668 of 1967) to the recruitment of women into the roles of station manager and station master. Provisions were adopted to facilitate the role of a figure whose human capital was no longer automatically assumed to be devoted to domestic duties, leading to some social gains, albeit far from the actual equality of the two sexes, through the introduction of *crèches* or paid maternity leave.

However, the path was rife with difficulties, particularly due to the prevailing view that women were, without justification, considered to be particularly emotional and, consequently, less responsive and physically inferior to men [Buzzoli 1973]. In any case, in 1973, out of a total workforce of over 213,000 railway workers, the number of female staff was less than 6,000 [Ufficio Relazioni Aziendali FS 1973, p.96; Buzzoli 1973, p.5]. Female personnel were provided with their first uniform under the 1968 Uniform Dress Regulations. The design, as stated in the minutes of the Board of Directors (BoD) meeting of 18 January 1966, "was chosen after consulting other major organisations (the Ministry of the Interior and Alitalia) which employ female staff required to wear a uniform" [Ministero dei Trasporti e dell'Aviazione Civile. Ferrovie dello Stato 1966, 2, p. 64].

The uniform for female station masters involved a single-breasted jacket made of heavy dark blue or light grey fabric, with two lower side pockets and metal FS

Fig. 2. Uniform for female personnel in 1972. Biblioteca della Fondazione FS Italiane (Ministero dei Trasporti e dell'Aviazione Civile. Ferrovie dello Stato 1972, panels 1/F, 2/F, 3/F, 4/F).



monograms on the lapel, and a skirt of the same material as the jacket, no longer than knee-length, worn with tan tights and flat shoes with a low heel. The outfit was completed by a double-breasted dark blue cloth overcoat and the same soft cap worn by male staff (fig. 1). In the 1960s, against a backdrop of general modernisation of the network following post-war reconstruction, first with a five-year plan in 1958, then with a ten-year plan in 1962 [Maggi 2003, p. 222], a renewal was also initiated in terms of image, redesigning one of the company's most representative elements in its relationship with the public: the railway uniform, the design of which incorporated recent changes in staffing.

The design of the new uniform and the GFT system

In 1971, an article published in the company magazine *Voci della rotaia* announced the launch of the 'new uniform' initiative, which would introduce the company's new style across the network [Zanev 1971, p. 6]. The following stipulation is made in Resolution No. 23 of 8 June 1971: "The new uniforms, which have already been manufactured, are supplied to eligible staff in accordance with the Uniform Dress Regulations, at the Company's full expense. This provision applies to the following new types of garments or items of clothing: caps, in both winter and summer versions; uniforms (consisting of a jacket and two pairs of trousers), with badge, or trousers only, in both winter and summer versions; coats complete with badge; uniforms (consisting of a jacket and two skirts), coats, complete with badge, and hats for female personnel" [Ministero dei Trasporti e dell'Aviazione Civile. Ferrovie dello Stato 1971, p. 677].

This was a revolution in many respects: in addition to the adoption of a uniform designed specifically for women, a novel system of management, production and supply was implemented, encompassing garment manufacturers throughout the nation.

The FS uniform, as well as enabling staff to carry out their varied duties, was intended to represent the company in its dealings with the public, whilst also helping to foster a sense of belonging to the close-knit community of railway workers, distinct from other uniformed professions. In the era of iron-grey, a new colour emerged: powder blue. This shade, derived from the traditional blue tint of the paper used to wrap precious items such as sugar, had already appeared in the national transport sector. Specifically, it had been used in

the uniforms of Alitalia hostesses from 1964 to 1966. These uniforms were designed by Delia Biagiotti [Falessi, Lazzeri 2000, pp. 31, 32].

The fabric for the new uniforms, manufactured by GFT, was produced at the Marlane factories in Maratea, in different colours and weights for the summer and winter versions. The men's uniforms were characterised by a single-breasted jacket, featuring two horizontal front pockets and a breast pocket, above which was sewn a badge featuring the 'television' logo, which had appeared on rolling stock and in print media towards the end of the 1960s, creating a cohesive visual identity. For the first time, the emblem became non-removable, a requirement arising from the need for the uniform to be worn only whilst on duty and to prevent the frequent occurrence of officers forgetting to reattach it [4]. The trousers had two side pockets, two back pockets and a watch pocket, without a cuff for safety reasons.

The uniform was completed by a coat produced by the Arezzo-based firm Lebole and a cap made from the same fabric as the uniform, except for those worn by the station master, which were red. The women's uniform was initially provided free of charge, like the men's, and consisted of the uniform – a double-breasted suit jacket in the winter version and a single-breasted one in the summer version, two skirts, two light blue blouses, a burgundy tie and a coat complete with the FS emblem.

Resolution No. 1 of 18 January 1972 introduced the trouser skirt and reinstated the practice of staff having their own uniforms made to measure, with the company providing fabric, badges and accessories free of charge. The attached table to the resolution contained the designs and descriptions of the style (fig. 2). Train crew were issued with a balloon hat, whilst station crew were issued with a cap, as were male staff, in red or powder blue depending on their role, with corresponding emblems and badges indicating rank: from the highest in gold for the position of superintendent and senior, down to the lowest for auxiliary staff with a red badge (fig. 3).

In 1974, in a letter published in *Voci della rotaia*, a group of female train drivers from the Deposito Personale Viaggiante of Alessandria [Ferraris 1974], highlighted the unsuitability of skirts and skirt-trouser for their duties, which involved frequently getting on and off locomotives in all weather conditions, calling for the introduction of trousers, which took place in 1975 under Resolution No. 2 of 21 May. Further changes were formalised in the 1985

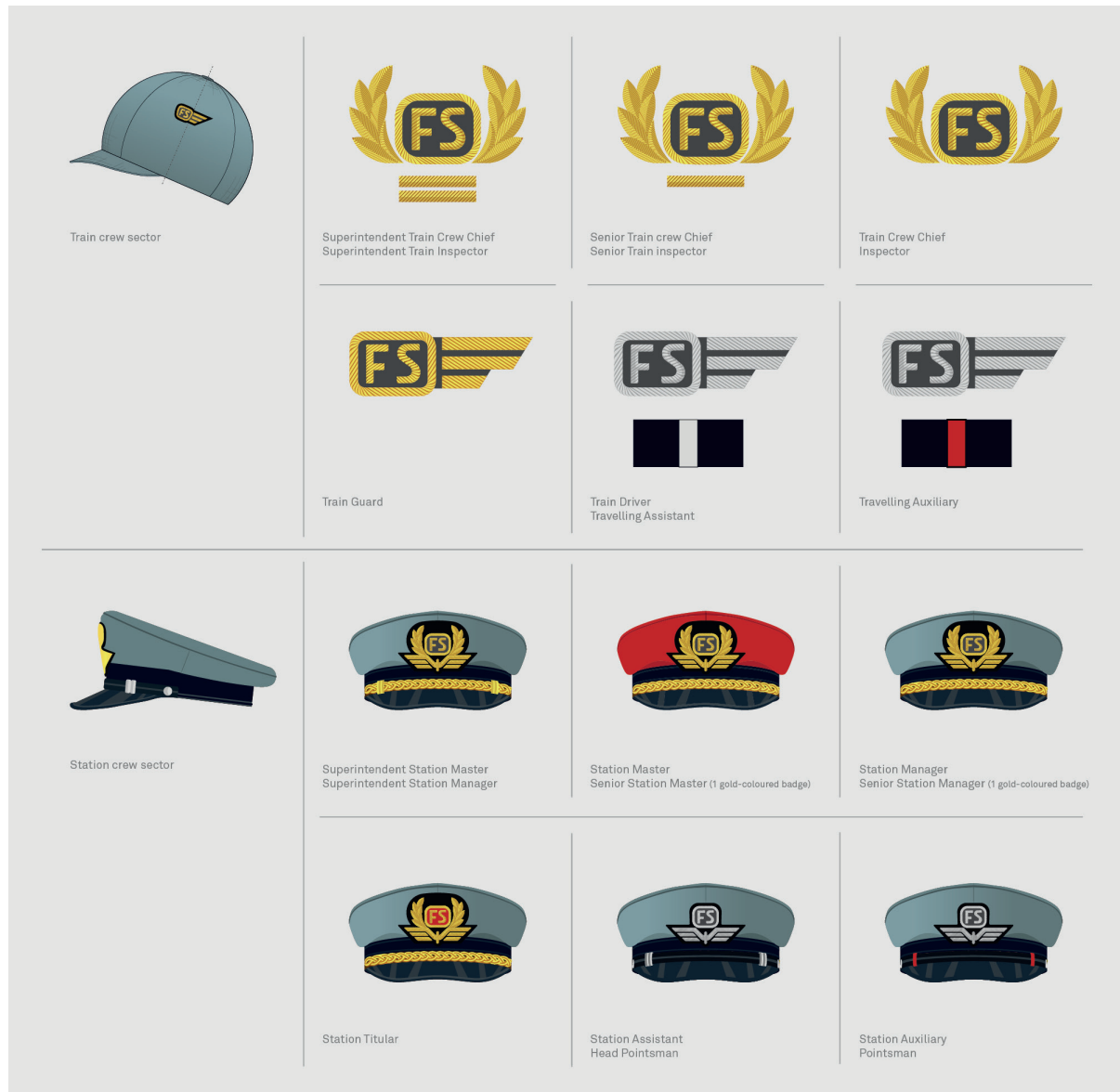


Fig. 3. Overview of the types of hats with badges and railway caps worn by female personnel, based on the 1985 Uniform Regulations (graphic elaboration by the author).



Fig. 4. GFT, sketches of the women's uniform sourced from the *Relazione tecnica per fornitura di vestiario per il personale di FS*, 1979, pp. 167-172 (ASTo, Corte, Archivi industriali e di società, Gruppo Finanziario Tessile (GFT), bundle 1721, fascicolo 2).

Fig. 5. GFT, photographic documentation of the models proposed in the *Relazione tecnica per fornitura di vestiario per il personale di FS*, 1979, pp. 195-197 (ASTo, Corte, Archivi industriali e di società, Gruppo Finanziario Tessile (GFT), bundle I 72 I, fascicolo 2).



Uniform Regulations, which provided for a single-breasted suit jacket with two pockets and three variations: skirt, skirt-trousers and trousers. The visual appearance of these variations can be observed in the sketches and photographs included in the technical report drawn up by the GFT for the new contract in 1979 (figs. 4, 5).

The requirements to be met concerned some 70,000 railway workers with specific anthropometric measurements that called for a system halfway between bespoke tailoring and a mechanised, industrial approach: one that would reduce production times, cope with manufacturing for a large workforce, and guarantee quality in both cut and fabrics.

A document drawn up by GFT, for the design of a new uniform for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications [5], describes the supply project for the Ferrovie dello Stato, which made use of a network of, mobile and fixed, Centri Rilevamento Taglie (CRT) across the country. Each employee would go to their local CRT with special forms for taking

measurements, which were sent to GFT for the production of the clothing. The garments were then dispatched to the CRT, which invited the FS employee for a fitting to make any necessary alterations. Following the establishment of the joint-stock company in 1992, requirements changed, leading both to a reduction in the use of badges and visual symbols, and to the discontinuation of the powder blue uniforms in anticipation of the new corporate identity designed by the London-based firm Xmpr International.

Conclusion

The image of a railway administration is the result of coordination between departments, staff, and partnerships with external companies, drawing on expertise across various disciplines: architecture, design, engineering, fashion, and much more. Every element of

Ferrovie dello Stato's visual identity is the outcome of a network of knowledge and expertise closely linked to the historical, social, and economic context in which it is situated. The evolution of the uniform design intersects with a multitude of stories, recording collective identities and social and cultural changes, and triggering a network of new connections to be further explored and developed, with the aim of gaining a deeper historical awareness that can serve as a guiding and mentoring portrait for the future.

This research proposes to undertake a historiographical and iconographical reconstruction of the design of the FS uniform, which served as an indispensable tool, a standardised element and a guide for its manufacture –first by tailors and later on an industrial scale– and which, in the 1960s and 1970s, marked the entry of female personnel, revealing latent social identities undergoing slow

transformation and the acquisition of rights within a rigid and hostile context such as that of the railways. This contribution is part of a broader framework of research into the history of the visual identity design of the Ferrovie dello Stato, a history which is yet to be written and explored in depth. A comprehensive design process requiring an approach attentive to diverse expertise, utilising the specific tools of historical research based on sources [Bassi 2018, p. 120] which, in a corporate context spread across the territory, are scattered and heterogeneous: artefacts, information reported in company magazines, Official Bulletins, numerous regulations, minutes of Board of Directors' meetings and much more.

The interpretation of the 'form of time' that characterises FS reflects social, cultural and economic contexts, offering a snapshot that helps to reveal a portrait of collective identity, not only of the railway but also of the country.

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Notes

[1] An initial overview of visual communication tools is provided in the volume *Rassegna. Ferrovie dello Stato 1900/1940* [Anselmi, 1980]

[2] Definition taken from the Treccani Online Encyclopaedic Dictionary. <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/moda/>> (accessed 26 April 2026).

[3] ASTo, *Archivi industriali e di società Gruppo Finanziario Tessile (GFT)*,

bundle 1518, fasc. 1.

[4] As recorded in the minutes of the Board of Directors' 18th meeting of 1969 and in the technical report drawn up by the GFT in 1979 [ASTo, bundle 1721, fasc. 2].

[5] ASTo, *Archivi industriali e di società Gruppo Finanziario Tessile (GFT)*, bundle 1715, fasc. 1.

Authors

Roberta Ena, Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Department of Architecture and Industrial Design,, roberta.ena@unicampania.it

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