

PAOLA CARRARA LOMBROSO AND PICTURE POSTCARDS AS EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTS: A WAY TO EDUCATE YOUNG READERS AND CITIZENS OF TOMORROW*

Paola Carrara Lombroso y postales como productos educativos: una forma de educar a los jóvenes lectores y ciudadanos del mañana

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Abstract. In Italy picture postcards were disseminated during the Giolitti era and throughout the Great War, thus becoming a concrete medium with a pervasive potential. Postcards influenced mass culture by constructing a collective imagination, they promoted the education of adults as well as of young people. As postcards reflected the shape of cultural industry by reproducing large scale images, they stemmed from a complex productive process that became a language of its own, starting from the artistic originality of the image to the printed form, reaching a wider audience both in terms of visual education and as swift communicative tool.

In 1909 in *Corriere dei Piccoli* (1908-1995), the most prominent magazine for children in Italy at the time, Paola Carrara Lombroso (1871-1954) began the project for *Bibliotechine per le scuole rurali* (Libraries for rural schools), destined to a success until halfway through the Twentieth century. The young readers of the magazine took part with initiative by colouring and selling postcards created by Italian artists. The sum raised was used to donate books to rural schools.

This research wishes to analyse a sample of postcards illustrated by well-known artists such as Mussino, Golia, Altara, Bologna and Gugù in order to shed light on the way childhood was represented. Toys, books, expressions and clothes are visual evidence of the multiple perspectives that

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adults adopted to reach children through entertainment. The artist's gaze met child readers as they became protagonists and at the same time owning that message by modelling their thought and imagination.

Keywords: Picture postcards; Corriere dei Piccoli; Children's literature; Italy.

Resumen. *En Italia, las postales se difundieron en gran medida durante la era Giolitti y durante la Gran Guerra, convirtiéndose así en un extraordinario medio concreto de comunicación con un potencial generalizado. Las postales influyeron en la cultura de masas, promovieron la educación de los adultos, así como de los jóvenes.*

Las postales reflejaban la forma de la industria cultural mediante la reproducción de imágenes a gran escala: eran el resultado de un complejo proceso de producción que se convertía en un lenguaje propio, en el que la originalidad artística de la imagen se traducía en forma impresa. De este modo, llegaron a un público más amplio, tanto en términos de educación visual como de herramienta de comunicación rápida.

En 1909, en el Corriere dei Piccoli (1908-1995), la revista infantil más importante de Italia, Paola Carrara Lombroso (1871-1954) inició el proyecto de Bibliotechine per le scuole rurali (Bibliotecas para escuelas rurales), destinado a un éxito duradero hasta la mitad del siglo XX.

La presente investigación pretende analizar una muestra de postales ilustradas por reconocidos artistas italianos como Mussino, Golia, Altara, Bologna y Gugù para arrojar luz sobre el modo en que se representó la infancia. Juguetes, libros, expresiones y ropa son evidencia visual de las múltiples perspectivas que los adultos adoptaron para llegar a los niños a través del entretenimiento. En tales ilustraciones, la mirada del artista se encontró con los lectores infantiles, que se convirtieron en protagonistas y, al mismo tiempo, adquirieron ese mensaje modelando su pensamiento y su imaginación.

Palabras clave: Postales; Corriere dei Piccoli; Literatura infantil; Italia.

INTRODUCTION

The pioneering contribution of Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962)¹ opened new avenues in the history of education for current historiographic research in the representation and the education of children, especially with regard to the use of iconographic sources.

¹ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life Centuries of childhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).

Nevertheless, crucial changes were introduced by critical debate in the first decade of the twenty first century. To this end, the special issue in the *Paedagogica historica* journal entitled “The Challenge of the visual in the history of education² offers a comparison among images representing childhood (not specifically in a traditional school context) immersed in the everyday life of the past. That past is framed in images that are not simply a tangible historical document, but also a metaphorical object showing how adult culture used such materials to model the growing process of real children. These could easily identify themselves with paper children, experiencing their same emotions in a sort of imitation game. Therefore, the methodology adopted to analyse visual sources not only does it observe the quantitative and physical dissemination of images, but above all studies the qualitative impact of those images, on their metaphorical, persuasive potential able to construct new meanings from the transformative processes in education that they can set in motion. Within such premises built in a new historical and educational framework, an interesting research niche is represented by picture postcards.

The last few decades of the nineteenth century saw the birth and the successful rise of picture postcards, thanks to the industrial development, which invested both production processes as well as communication as a whole. On the one hand, postcards could be reproduced in large quantity; on the other hand the innovations introduced by postal communicative systems in several European countries helped picture postcards to become a convenient and effective communication means.³ Unlike the traditional format of the letter, which required a structured linguistic competence accessible to the few, especially in Italy where compulsory schooling after the unification of Italy did not go hand in hand with literacy in the adult population.⁴ The postcard, coming in small size, lent itself to a swift, precise and concise communication from a linguistic and structural point of view. It could gather the attention of less educated people, who recognized the potential of the postcard to convey a communicative urgency also through stereotyped expressions.

² Mate Depaeppe and Bregt Henkens “The Challenge of the Visual in the History of Education”, *Paedagogica Historica* 36 no.1 (2000):10-17.

³ Frank Staff, *The picture postcard and its origins* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966).

⁴ Ester De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo nell'Italia del '900* (Bononia: Il Mulino,1995).

The illustrated postcard came shortly after the introduction of the plain postcard, and it usually came by with art images or pictures of landscapes. The expressive modality of the drawing generally represents moments and emblems of everyday life and of childhood. Its polysemic graphic traits conjure hidden meanings and offer an interesting persuasive potential able to focus the attention of a public differentiated by social status, education and age. From such social and cultural premises the dissemination of illustrated postcards, internationally recognized in 1897 during the 5th Congress of the Universal Postal Union, further expanded in Italy during the Giolitti era and throughout the Great War, thus becoming an extraordinary concrete medium with pervasive potential.⁵ Not surprisingly, scholars believe that from the beginning of the 20th century the circulation of illustrated postcards was going through its golden age, reaching its heights during the Great War. Over this time span, as Antonio Gibelli suggests, the illustrated postcard “detached itself [...] from the label of élite product, also moving away from the marks of its modernity”.⁶ It seems that such modernity lies in the postcard being a transversal phenomenon able to travel between high and low culture, to mix refined and popular linguistic registers thanks to the use of irony, caricature images and its potential to condense references to the newborn movie language as well as the innovative expressive slant of comics. Over the course of the Giolitti era, the picture postcard gradually changed from being an original art experiment carried out by a large number of artists who seized the opportunity to try new expressive art forms, to a mass culture product reproduced in large quantities over the Great War. For these reasons, according to Gibelli’s studies, picture postcards can be considered “as one of the largest repositories of collective imagination in the pre-television era”.⁷ Although there are no systematic studies that can help in detecting the actual number of samples printed, research can focus on: the overall growth of postal circulation for letters and postcards, calculated around four billion over the Great War period alone; the quantity of illustrators in the sector; the commitment

⁵ Paola Callegari and Enrico Sturani (eds), *L'Italia in posa: cento anni di cartoline illustrate* (Naples: Electa, 1997).

⁶ Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 119.

⁷ Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino*, 118.

of publishing houses such as Elzeviriana from Turin and Arti Grafiche di Sampierdarena in Genoa. It can be estimated that postcards were a large-scale product widely disseminated, which generated a democratization process thanks to discounted postal charges and for the simplification of the language required by the reduced space available on the postcard, as well as for the typology of swift communication needed.

YOUNG READERS PROMOTING PICTURE POSTCARDS

At the beginning of the 20th century, such a promising cultural scenario open to new possibilities welcomed the pioneering, and incredibly successful enterprise promoted by Paola Carrara Lombroso.⁸ In 1909, with the pseudonym Zia Mariù, while writing for the children's magazine *Corriere dei Piccoli* launched the project called *Bibliotechine per le scuole rurali* (libraries for rural schools).⁹ The idea behind it was to ensure that even the poorest Italian students had access to high-quality literary works, beyond the schoolbooks they already used to learn how to read and write. It was a self-help, philanthropic initiative¹⁰ which involved the young readers of the well-known magazine, all belonging to Italian middle class families, who autonomously organized the fund raising for the money necessary to buy the ten volumes that composed each *bibliotechina*. Since the funds needed could not possibly come from charity only, the fund raising had to come out from self-initiative, time, work and responsibility of the children involved, who put forward several fundraising options such as charity draws, raffles, theatre performances.¹¹ But they eventually chose the illustrated postcard as the optimal and long-lasting fundraising option. The idea came to Gina Fano, a young girl from Bologna with a flair for drawing, who wrote to Paola Lombroso:

⁸ Delfina Dolza, *Essere figlie di Lombroso. Due donne intellettuali tra '800 e '900* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990); Juri Meda, "Paola Marzola Carrara Lombroso", in *Dizionario biografico dell'educazione* eds. Giorgio Chiosso and Roberto Sani, vol. 2 (Milan: Editrice Bibliografica, 2013), 46-47.

⁹ Sabrina Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento. I bambini di Paola Carrara Lombroso sui giornali per ragazzi* (Turin: Sei, 2015).

¹⁰ Samuel Smiles, *Self-help* (London: J. Murray, 1859).

¹¹ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 162-174.

I am well versed in pyrography and drawing and I would like to create postcards. You should publish an announcement to see if readers wish to buy the postcards I would make with illustrations of flowers or children. You should set the price for each postcard based on the sample I would send you. Whoever purchases my postcards should then send me the sum in stamps, all the money will be spent on the *bibliotechine*. I really do hope to raise a lot of money for your poor readers; what do you say, Zia Mariù?¹²

The proposal was immediately welcomed for its originality, although the hand-made nature of the material provided by young Gina could only ensure the production of few postcard samples. This would push the objective of building a thousand *bibliotechine* further away. In fact, the rough number of poor schools around Italy drew nearer to a thousand. The critical point of the whole initiative as suggested by Gina revolved around the realization process, not the idea itself. Soon enough the generative thought introduced by children found a safe harbour in the generous professional support of artists such as Countess Augusta Rasponi Del Sale, well-known for her artistic endeavours under the pseudonym Gugù,¹³ who gifted Zia Mariù with some of her drawings. Thus, the initiative took shape with printed reproductions of the original drawings donated; within a couple of years, Gugù created for the *bibliotechine* project a total of 7000 picture postcards that Zia Mariù distributed in folders of 100 samples to her little helpers, who coloured them using the technique they deemed most suitable, and then sold to their acquaintances for 20 *centesimi* each. Each *bibliotechina* was worth about 25 Lire, therefore 250 postcards were to be sold in order to reach the objective of the ten books that made up one *bibliotechina*.¹⁴ The project rapidly grew thanks to the involvement of numerous illustrators who, free of charge, invented dedicated drawings; moreover the availability of the Levi family, who owned the

¹² Zia Mariù, "Corrispondenza", *Corriere dei Piccoli* 2, no. 40 (1909): 15.

¹³ Desideria Pasolini Dall' Onda, "Augusta Rasponi del Sale, la Benefattrice" in *Le Romagnole* (Forlì: Litotipografia Forlivese 1981); Paola Pallottino, *Le figure per dirlo: storia delle illustratrici italiane* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana Treccani, 2019), 37-38.

¹⁴ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 162-174.

Tipografia Elzeviriana,¹⁵ often printed the postcards for free and also made them immediately recognizable through the writing “Pro Bibliotechine rurali Zia Mariù” [made for Zia Mariù’s Bibliotechine rurali project]. The average print run for each sample was close to 1000 to 1500 prints. After about three years from the project launch, the one-thousand objective of *bibliotechine* was reached and on this occasion a large party was thrown in Turin where the children who contributed to the project success had the chance to meet in person, often consolidating friendships that were cultivated on the pages of *Corriere dei Piccoli*.¹⁶ From a quantitative point of view, it seems that at least 250,000 postcards for the project had already been circulating since 1913, and that at least the same number was produced throughout the Great War, when the project deployed the same organizational structure this time not for *bibliotechine* but to support war orphans. The postcards bore the caption “To support children in times of war” and related to the philanthropic action promoted by Zia Mariù in Turin who opened four nurseries to welcome children who would otherwise be left on their own. In this case, selling picture postcards produced by ten children served to support one child at nursery school. The motto was “Ten for one”, thus keeping alive the sense of solidarity among middle-class and lower-class children more likely to be abandoned and without resources.¹⁷ At the end of the Great War the project for *bibliotechine* for rural schools went back on track, together with the production and sale of picture postcards. It went on until the end of the 1920s when the introduction of Testo Unico di Stato (the state single textbook in 1929) and the strict control on literary works to be included in school libraries obliterated any private and personal initiative, such as Paola Carrara Lombroso’s project created together with children and young adults. When the project was resuscitated in the aftermath of World War II until the death of Paola Lombroso in 1954, picture postcards were not the primary source for funding. Other institutional fundraising channels were used.

¹⁵ Zia Mariù, *Bollettino delle Bibliotechine rurali* 2, no.10 (1913):10.

¹⁶ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 233-248.

¹⁷ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 221-226.

DEPICTING CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON PICTURE POSTCARDS

In Paola Carrara Lombroso's educational projects, picture postcards were characterised by several development stages. The first experimenting stage began in 1909 with the first attempts to illustrations by child readers, which presented rather static, stereotyped compositions and a flat use of colour. Some samples of these attempts are preserved at the Musli museum in Turin,¹⁸ and they witness the commitment and resourcefulness of children towards the project. Clara Neri from Bologna shows the graphic ability of an adolescent in the illustration of a pretty child sitting under a tree and relishing a fallen fruit. On the back of the postcard, Clara Neri writes:

Dear Zia Mariù, thank you so so much for your kind postcard. Please forgive my late reply. I was waiting to get your address from Dedè. I am doing what I can for the *bibliotechine*. I am so committed because they are meant for children and I love children! I have already done good business here in Bologna and I hope to do more. I made this postcard and it is sold for 15 cents. Each. Is that all right? Dear Zia Mariù, thank you again and [I wish to] send you a kiss from Clara Neri.¹⁹

Image 1. Album, doc. 31-32, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI, <https://www.fondazionetancredidibarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu> (accessed on 10.10.2022)



¹⁸ From now on referred to as Zia Mariù collection, School and Children's Book Museum (MUSLI) Foundation Tancredi di Barolo-Turin.

¹⁹ Album, doc. 31-32, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI (Image 1).

Clara Neri was friend with Dedè Dore²⁰ and was part of the high school girls who read *Corriere dei Piccoli*. They assisted Zia Mariù and they involved their network of friends to promote the project from the beginning. It is heartbreaking to read in the “Letters” section of the magazine that two years later Clara Neri died and Zia Mariù dedicated to her a library, describing her as “a flower of beauty and kindness, dead at sixteen”.²¹ The thought goes to teenagers of the time: lively, full of ideals and projects for the future, torn out too early from their youth without even accomplishing any of their hopes and dreams.

Image 2. Album, doc. 34-35, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI, <https://www.fondazionetancredidibarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu> (accessed on 10.10.2022)



In June 1909 also Pietro Loreta from Bologna sent his illustration attempt coloured with tempera paint, but – apart from his resourcefulness – the result is still a bit naïve in style and in the use of colour.²²

²⁰ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 221-222; Monica Pacini, *Da casa Pintor. Un'eccezionale normalità borghese: lettere familiari, 1908-1968* (Rome: Viella, 2011).

²¹ Zia Mariù, “Corrispondenza”, *Corriere dei piccoli*, 4, no.12 (1911): 15.

²² Album, doc. 31-32, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI (Image 1).

Lisetta Pedrini from Secondigliano, in July 1910 sent a postcard where she imitated a stamp created with the pointillism technique, which represents children working in a field. In comparison, the illustration with the text underneath shows an evident gap between the girl's imagination, related to low-class social reality, and her inner desire to change nurtured by education. "The best quality of a girl is the love for study. If you study, you can become as good as Zia Mariù".²³

At the end of 1909 a second development stage began for picture postcards, when Countess Augusta Rasponi Del Sale, best known as Gugù, gifted Zia Mariù for Christmas with some sketches showing babies wrapped in swaddling clothes illustrated with delicate traits and colours and accessorized with trinkets and ribbons. The image represents a protected world and a vision of childhood characterised by welfare and health. Drawings inspired by Pre-Raphaelites, comparable to those by Kate Greenaway,²⁴ symbolized a lively, delicate childhood that benefited from the socio-cultural progress offered by neopositivism and new directions in the care and education of children. Apart from being an artist, Gugù was also an active philanthropist and in 1904 wrote *Rosee pagine di Gugù*,²⁵ a small book offering childcare advice, to ensure that children received adequate care and avoided the dangers of illness and death caused by practices born from ignorance and superstition. Also in 1914 *La mia statistica. Piccolo studio sull'allevamento dei bambini* [My statistics. A small-scale study on child rearing]²⁶ book wished to inform mothers, especially those from low classes, on the best hygienic practices.²⁷ Both works were finely illustrated by Gugù herself, who showed an interest towards childhood that brought together an aesthetic-artistic view with a paedagogical view. On the occasion of the party at Valentino for the creation of the one thousand *bibliotechina*, Gugù drew a

²³ Album, doc. 31-32, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI (Image 1).

²⁴ Pallottino, *Le figure per dirlo: storia delle illustratrici italiane*, 37.

²⁵ Augusta Rasponi Del Sale, *Rosee pagine di Gugù* (Rome: Danesi, 1904).

²⁶ Augusta Rasponi Del Sale, *La mia statistica. Piccolo studio sull'allevamento dei bambini con 62 illustrazioni* (Bologna: Stabilimento Poligrafico Emiliano, 1914).

²⁷ Marcella Terrusi, "Constellation of early childhood, Gugù's firmament. A portrait of Augusta Rasponi del Sale (Ravenna 1864-1942), author of picture book", *Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica* 2 (2017): 71-88.

celebrative postcard to recall the participation of Princess Jolanda di Savoia in the project, who was only twelve at the time. The interest to the project shown by Queen Elena was testified by Alina Cavaliere, a young girl from Rome whose family was close to the Savoia, who joined in the project by making the Queen the protagonist of a group of *bibliotechine* destined to the area of Agro Pontino. This initiative led to the idea of involving her first born Jolanda, a much welcome involvement because it meant that Zia Mariù's project was worthy of attention. The joyful atmosphere is well represented on the postcard, where the young Princess resembles a messenger of the gods who metaphorically brings good books to children from rural schools. It is a celebration of joyful and colourful low-class childhood who, with its working clothes, headscarves and checkered shirts, is amazed in welcoming such unexpected gift.

Image 3. Album, doc. 52, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI,
<https://www.fondazioneTancrediBarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu>
 (accessed on 10.10.2022)



Zia Mariù insisted that her little helpers coloured “with utmost care” the folders of 100 postcards each that they could find in the hands of local referents distributed in different cities around Italy, which were also the distribution network of postcards themselves. Little helpers

could even get postcard samples already coloured to draw inspiration from.²⁸

Image 4. Album, doc. 67, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI,
<https://www.fondazioneancredidibarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu>
(accessed on 10.10.2022)



During the following months, Zia Mariù focused the attention on the need to have new drawings to be distributed to children, so as to make sure the project could carry on. With great satisfaction, she declared she was supported by Golia (Eugenio Colmo) and by Attilio (Attilio Mussino), both from Turin, whom she herself introduced to the realm of journalism for a young public with *Corriere dei Piccoli*. Golia, lawyer by day and illustrator by passion, inherited this pseudonym from his friend

²⁸ Zia Mariù, "Una cartolina di Gugù", *Bollettino delle bibliotechine rurali* 2, no. 11 (1913): VI-VII.

Guido Gozzano, since he was very tall and at the beginning of the 20th century was an eclectic intellectual that led the way in the field of humorous-satirical journalism.²⁹ Attilio Mussino was the author of the famous comic *Bilbolbul* for *Corriere dei Piccoli* and was a constant presence as illustrator of this weekly magazine. While he produced new drawings for the cause of *bibliotechine* he was illustrating *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, for which his fame spread among young readers.³⁰ The postcards produced over the years preceding the Great War revolved around childhood games with a touch of irony. Such is the character of some of Attilio's postcards depicting girls dressing in fluffy elegant dresses, but with short and irreverent hair. They seem perfectly at ease as they pretend to take part in a dancing lesson with a doll, or in the subversive act of tearing a page out of a book that is not even their book, but mom's. Mussino destined to the cause of *bibliotechine* also monthly calendars where child clothes and expressions present the same sense of initiative and joyfulness in playing.

Golia dedicated to *bibliotechine* a series of very interesting postcards because they offer a metaliterary interpretation. They are connected by the topic of reading and the book. For example, a picture that shows great realism is the one where a middle-class girl offers a ten-book *bibliotechina* to a boy from a rural school. The girl is dressed in elegant clothes and wears a pair of fashionable boots that unequivocally mark her social status. On the contrary, the boy wears a pair of clogs without socks, he is covered with a scarf and a warm hat and is wearing a winter jacket that suggests he lives in rough conditions usually exposed to bad weather. The message conveyed by the image seems quite conservative as it suggests a philanthropic idea of the middle-class individual lending a hand to the less fortunate, a charitable message that was in fact contradicted by Zia Mariù's project which promoted solidarity over charity. Consequential to this postcard is the one depicting an unmistakably low-class girl carrying the ten books of the *bibliotechina* in a wooden wheelbarrow as if to suggest that she is now responsible for it. Particularly interesting are also the postcards featuring Pinocchio next to the

²⁹ Paola Pallottino, *Storia dell'illustrazione italiana* (Florence-Lucca: VoLo, 2020), 313-314.

³⁰ Carlo Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, illustrated by Attilio Mussino (Florence: Bemporad, 1911). Paola Pallottino, *Storia dell'illustrazione italiana*, 228, 273.

book narrating his adventures. *The Adventures of Pinocchio* was one of the main volumes in the constitution of each *bibliotechina* both for its modern way of representing childhood and, for its linguistic quality and vitality, could be considered an educational model for children in rural schools.³¹ The picture postcards by Golia show finely dressed middle-class girls carrying under their arms the book about Pinocchio's adventures, metaphorically supported by the puppet himself who follows them like a shadow.³² There is even a variation that shows the consequence of that shadowing: a boy dressed in working class fashion, with a hat, abundant clothes beyond his size and wearing the well-known clogs, completely immersed in the reading of Pinocchio's adventures in the light of the moon. Behind him, like a shadow, Pinocchio's silhouette pointing to the book, as if to suggest that reading is the only way to improve oneself.³³ In yet another set of postcards there are children with open books on their laps that gather the attention of geese, silly animals by definition, but still attracted by the children reading aloud.

Image 5. Album, doc. 42, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI,
<https://www.fondazioneTancrediBarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu>
(accessed on 10.10.2022)



³¹ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 178.

³² Album, doc. 42, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI (Image 5).

³³ Album, doc. 42, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI (Image 5).

On the even of the Great War, some interesting pictures by very young, yet to be famous female illustrators that with their graphic art verging on experimentation provide the *bibliotechine* project with a series of subjects for postcards. For example, the sixteen-year-old Titina Rota offers a model in line with technological progress: long-distance communication to say “I have sold many Zia Mariù’s postcards” happens through a modern wall telephone that the children cannot reach unless they stand on their toes on top of a stool, as if to suggest that children have grown-up issues to deal with and should be respected for this. Adelina Zandrino, twenty years old, dedicated to the project a postcard featuring tiny girls wobbling on their feet, joyous as they walk together holding a balloon each. Titina Rota and Adelina Zandrino began their artistic career illustrating postcards, but soon their names gained the spotlight. Titina Rota became well known especially in the field of fashion journalism as well as costume designer in theatre.³⁴ Adelina Zandrino succeeded in becoming a renowned ceramist and decorator, as well as illustrator.³⁵ Paola Bologna at thirteen was still a student at the Maffei Institute in Turin when the school principal, Valentina Cavandoli, invited her to illustrate some postcards for Zia Mariù.³⁶ The first drawings date back to 1911-12 and show carefree girls surrounded by chirping birds, their dresses and hair fluttering in the wind. Paola Bologna’s figurative art,³⁷ together with Mussino’s, help to gain an insight into the ongoing changes in illustrations during the Great War. The spontaneity and ingenuity of childhood become tools for propaganda to ensure that people supported the war effort, and psychologically support frontline soldiers. The war period marks the third development stage of picture postcards, when they reached the peak of dissemination. They marked a shift from solidarity for *bibliotechine* to supporting children in times of War. The postcards created by Paola Bologna mainly depict war play and the domestication of war in child’s play. Nothing changes in terms of design or composition, the child’s play is transformed and instead of dolls, balloons and outdoor carefree play, there are toy bayonets, toy

³⁴ Pallottino, *Le figure per dirlo: storia delle illustratrici italiane*, 40-44.

³⁵ Pallottino, *Storia dell’illustrazione italiana*, 271, 295; Pallottino, *Le figure per dirlo: storia delle illustratrici italiane*, 77-78.

³⁶ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 190, 225.

³⁷ Pallottino, *Le figure per dirlo: storia delle illustratrici italiane*, 86-91.

soldiers and blades, and more generally war tools on the shoulders of improbable child soldiers, flags waved triumphantly by children that seem very self-confident, smiling and domineering. The child wearing an elegant uniform, running towards the War field, the soldier marching and rolling the drum, the little sailor that sets sails to Pola with a background of triumphal banners (as indicated in the caption) all show bravery and juvenile recklessness. Such was the key message that normalized the War in the eye of the people living their everyday lives in support of those who fought on the front line. These are still gender-based stereotypes. While boys play at war, girls wait on their own or play the role of nurses taking care of injured puppies, thus transforming the Red Cross into a more comforting Blue Cross. During the War period, Mussino's postcards show a distinctive humorous trait that minimizes unsettling situations like arresting a little child as war prisoner; Easter greetings shaped like eggs that resemble harmless bombs as a boy drops them from an airplane. In other postcards, apart from the sad goodbye that leaves a bittersweet feeling behind, it is possible to capture the ambiguous meaning of the herald playing the trumpet that may either salute the leaving or the return of somebody, since there are no descriptive elements suggesting a sad event. On the contrary, each element is brimming with energy and well detailed.

Image 6. Album, doc. 67, Zia Mariù collection, MUSLI
<https://www.fondazionetancredidibarolo.com/bibliotechine-di-zia-mariu>
 (accessed on 10.10.2022)



Close to the end of the War, the repository of picture postcards is further enriched by the artistic ability of Edina Altara, a very young girl from Sassari who was introduced to Zia Mariù by her trustworthy right hand Paola Levi.³⁸ During her stay in Sardinia, Paola Levi had the chance to weigh the extraordinary ability of Edina in creating paper dolls and puppets.³⁹ When Edina participated in 1917 in the Mostra Campionaria di Giocattoli (Toys Exhibition) in Milan, she was singled out by Leonardo Bistolfi, and there she began illustrating four series of postcards that focused on the relationship between children and animals.⁴⁰ The subjects of these postcards are considerably different from those previously mentioned on war propaganda, but also from those explicitly destined to promote reading and education as main subject. The illustrations of girls dressed in fluffy clothes light as clouds seem to describe a childhood untouched by recent events, almost as if it travelled back to an ancestral relationship with nature. The focus on the female child world is emphasized by the presence of a circle that surrounds the scene and stands out from the white background of the postcard. Is this wishful thinking for peace? Or maybe hope to run towards an enchanted world other than reality?

CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out so far shows the layers of meaning behind picture postcards. It is precisely their pluriprosperspective nature that makes their study so enticing. As tools to promote small libraries for rural schools, they became the crossroads between hand-made and industrial artistic production as characteristic of the Italian cultural industry. Their large-scale production and dissemination constituted the basis for the communication of a pervasive artistic and educational message. The use of picture postcards in Zia Mariù's project proved to be a repository of unique elements ranging from the materiality of the postcard object to the symbolic meaning of the cultural and educational message. This paper considered different layers of analysis for this experience: on the one

³⁸ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 289-294.

³⁹ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 292.

⁴⁰ Pompeo Vagliani, "Edina Forbicicchia nell'azienducola di Zia Mariù 1917-1930", in *Vittorio Accornero. Edina Altara* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2021), 30-49.

hand the picture postcard as mediator for the educational relation between adults and children, on the other hand the potential development of an independent and creative activity initiated by children as they were responsible for choosing colouring techniques but also took care of selling and promoting the project on their own. Resourcefulness, commitment, and responsibility for the task at hand are the values that characterised the children who responded to Zia Mariù's call. The same characteristics consolidated through time in the identity of the participants in this project who recognized the value of reading as means for collective emancipation, accessible to all, a form of active participation to the social and civil life of Italy.⁴¹ A diachronic comparison shows a range of drawings characterised by high artistic quality reflecting art movements of the time. For example, the graphic trait and harmonious compositions recalling the Pre-Raphaelite style, or a deliberate reference to Art Nouveau in outlines, even elements close to Futurism insert children of that period –as they passed on to each other Zia Mariù's postcards– in the most advanced cultural context. They could feed their souls with the extraordinary wealth of imagination depicted in postcards. The image lays an implied and polysemic narration in the hands of childhood. On the one hand, the drawings could express the idea of an enchanted, carefree childhood; on the other hand, they opened the door to armed conflict, passing on an even stronger message through postcards. That paper childhood does not wipe its smile off its face, but through an evidently distorted message it helps war enter seamlessly into everyday life. The metaphor of “playing games”⁴² allows for a non-traumatic acceptance of the conflict and, with a communicative means that appears harmless only superficially, the childhood depicted sends a message to adults so that they can accept events and most of the times show a brave and interventionist spirit.

In the stratification of layers for the project of *bibliotechine* by Zia Mariù, postcards became an extraordinary springboard for female artists to dive into the world of illustration. Paola Bologna, Edina Altara, Titina Rota and Adelina Zandrino started to try their hand by illustrating a series of postcards for free. Their artistic talent and the charitable

⁴¹ Fava, *Piccoli lettori del Novecento*, 283-303.

⁴² Walter Fochesato, *Il gioco della guerra* (Novara: Interlinea, 2015).

purpose pushed them to donate their drawings, and eventually discover their professional vocation. Moreover, the literary and artistic background of the time moved on the same tracks: the educational projects by Paola Lombroso bear the merit of being innovative as they pulled avant-garde culture and communicative modernity closer to the childhood of the beginning of the 1900s. The postcards managed to establish an extraordinarily dynamic process in the cultural industry of that period, also consolidating the educational ideals of Paola Lombroso in making childhood the focal point of the educational relationship, in opening the door to independent initiative, to responsibility and solidarity among children, especially to the benefit of less fortunate ones. Propaganda was certainly not in Paola Lombroso's plans, and she did not share this initiative. Nevertheless, the postcard as messenger showed its polysemic nature that slipped through the cracks of rigid classification systems, revealing its pervasive potential to communicate messages beyond an explicit educational intention, showing traits of a long-lasting entertainment culture that escaped the control of the educating adult.

Note on the authora

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