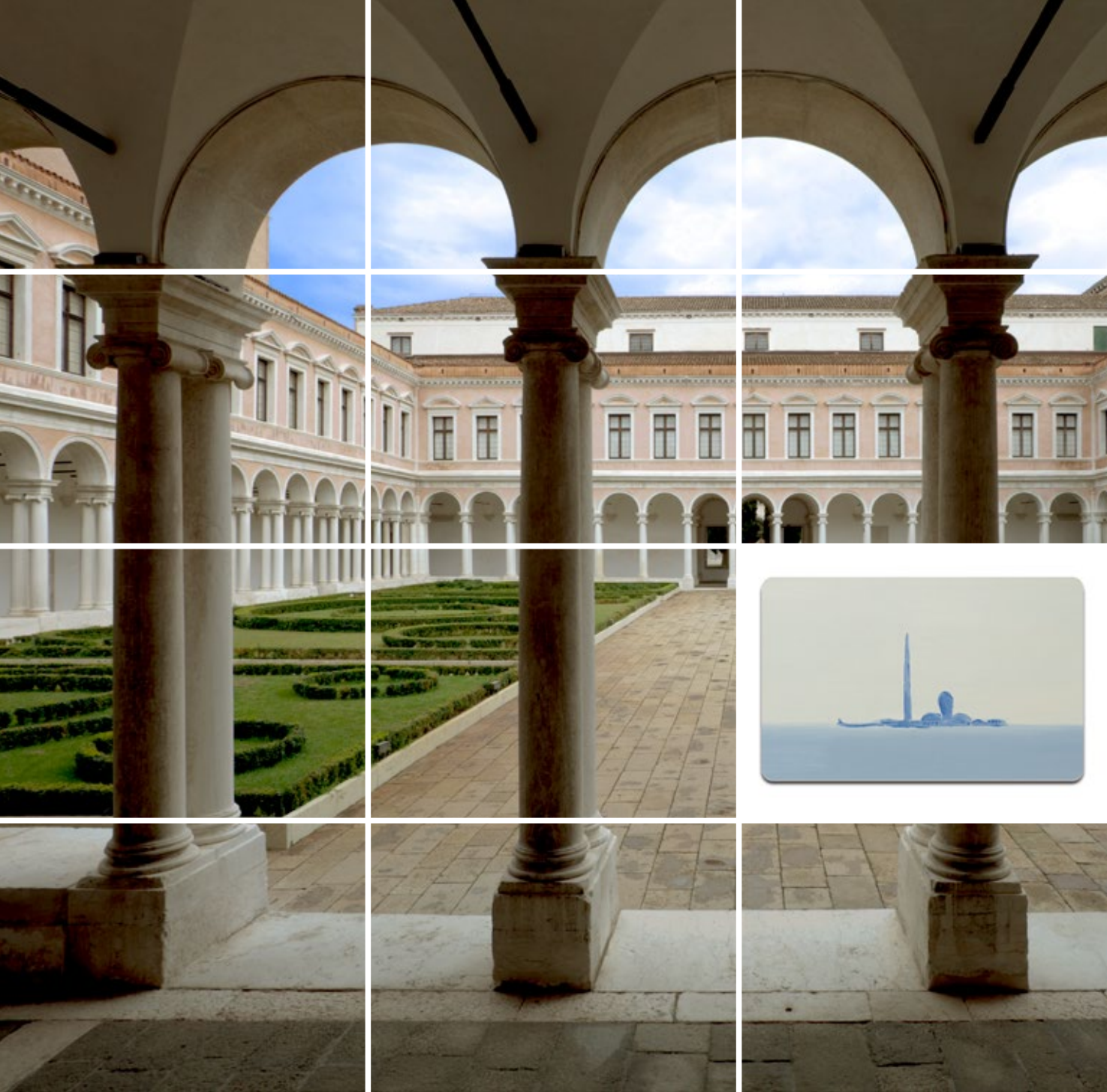




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COLLECTIONS

Ugo Zovetti and Book Decoration. A New Acquisition for the Fondazione Giorgio Cini Drawings and Prints Cabinet

The most recent acquisitions of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini graphic art collections include a valuable group of works by Ugo Zovetti Senior (Curzola, Dalmatia, 1879 - Milan, 1974). As well as highlighting the Institute of Art History's primary interests in the graphic arts, which has grown considerably in recent years as far as 20th-century drawings and artists' books are concerned, the latest acquisition arouses fresh interest in a greatly esteemed book decorator and underscores the fertile interdisciplinary exchanges between graphic art and decoration. Zovetti's works were added to the collections of the Drawings and Prints Cabinet in 2018, thanks to a donation from the artist's heirs and the Ugo Zovetti Senior Archive. The group consists of thirty-five items, emblematic of the wide-ranging interests of this leading 20th-century Italian artist. Zovetti's cosmopolitan studies resulted in a diversified, high-quality production, including designs for textiles and furnishing fabrics, and sheets with illustrations and studies for interior decorations, wallpapers, tapestries, carpets, typefaces and bindings.

An original, multifaceted artist, Zovetti is particularly valued for his works on paper, and especially the outstanding, highly refined deco-

rated papers. Intimately connected to the culture of books, decorated papers were introduced into 16th-century bookbinding for covers and endpapers and became very popular in the 19th and 20th centuries as one of the most fascinating examples of decorative art. Augusto Calabi described the qualities of Zovetti's decorated papers: "absolute artistic value, unique items, the possibility of matching drawings and colours with the character of the book or series, potential to vary their application in conjunction with, or separately from, other materials according to personal taste, solidity and practicality, relatively low price because the best paper and colours always cost less than the basest leather or canvas, and because the work of the artist, who has the ability to make an inert sheet of paper 'beautiful and alive' with a few colours is traditionally paid no more than the hours of a worker. All such aspects make these precious papers useful in solving the 'notorious' issue of bindings by 'amateurs.'"¹

The artistic value of Zovetti's works is confirmed by their presence in major collections including, for example, the library of the Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, the Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, the archives of the Staatsdruckerei and the Secession, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Achille Bertarelli Collection, Milan.

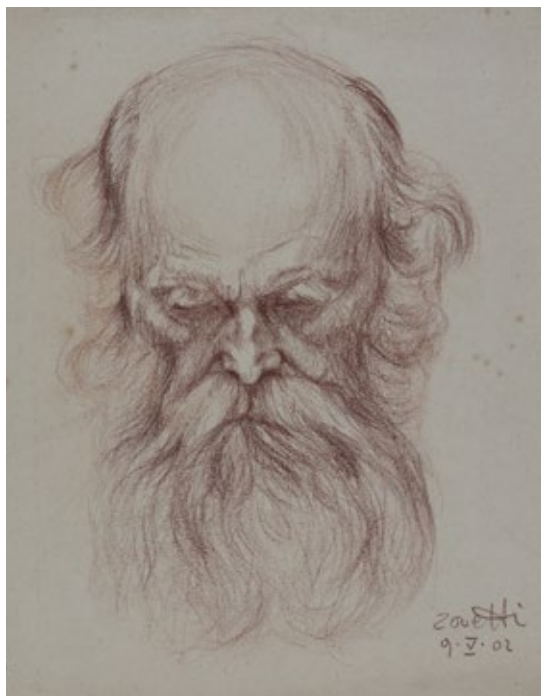


FIG. 1 Ugo Zovetti, *Portrait of an Old Man with a Beard*, 1902, drawing on paper, 424 × 325 mm

1. *Le carte per rilegatura di libro di Ugo Zovetti*, edited by Amatori del libro, Milan, 1926, pp. 18-20.



FIG. 2 Ugo Zovetti, *Study for wallpaper with Large Flower*, before 1917, mixed media, 287,5 × 246 mm



FIG. 3 Ugo Zovetti, *Marbled Paper. Tissue Pattern between Two Bands*, before 1917, aquatipo, 280 × 237 mm

Ugo Zovetti Senior, so called to distinguish him from his photographer son of the same name, was a great master of decoration and also distinguished himself in other fields, such as mural painting, advertising painting and engraving. To form a clearer idea of the man and the artist, it is worth briefly sketching his cultural background and his strong vocation for the unity of the arts found throughout his artistic career, which began in the lively cultural climate of the Viennese Secession and ended with his prolific teaching at the Monza Istituto superiore per le industrie artistiche (ISIA).

From 1901 to 1909 Zovetti trained at the Kunstgewerbeschule des k. k. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna. “The School of Applied Arts of the Imperial Royal Austrian Museum for Art and Industry” boasted some outstanding students, such as Gustav Klimt, and was inspired by the London model of the Victoria and Albert. In this context, Zovetti took part in the Viennese Secession: he shared their rejection of the dominant academicism in favour of the unity of the arts. His studies at the Kunstgewerbeschule also brought him into close contact with the founders of the Vienna Secession, Josef Hoffmann (Pirnitz, 1870 - Vienna, 1956) and Koloman Moser (Vienna, 1868-1918). Another important contact was Rudolf von Larisch (Verona, 1856 - Vienna 1934), promoter of the revival of ornamental calligraphy and a high-profile exponent of book decoration. In 1911, Zovetti was an assistant to Moser, the professor of decorative painting and it was then that he began his collaboration with the Wiener Werkstätte. The Viennese workshops aimed at integrating art and design, inspired by the work of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Zovetti thus experimented with the art of books and fabric design and stood out for his elegant, innovative production, featuring the stylised representation of motifs taken from the world of nature or geometry. The interweaving of these influences, distinct but sharing the same notable experimentalism and a special interest in book decoration, is reflected in his multidisciplinary approach, which produced significant results, well documented by the items now in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini.

The early 20th century was an extremely fruitful time not only in terms of Zovetti’s training with authoritative teachers, but also as regards his production and exhibition activities. In addition to collaborating with several firms, such as the Tipografia di Stato, the Josef Böck Wiener Porzellanmanufaktur and Lichteck, Zovetti joined the Austrian Werkbund in 1912 and took part in many exhibitions and events, such as the

Kunstschau, the Ausstellung Sonderkurs Keramik-Email, the Winterausstellung of the Museum für Kunst un Industrie and the Werkbundaustellung.

His earliest works date to the beginning of the 20th century and consist of a series of portraits, self-portraits, Viennese views and nude studies. Works from his Vienna days now in the Fondazione Cini Drawings and Prints Cabinet are the *Portrait of an Old Man with a Beard* (inv. 38939)



FIG. 4 Ugo Zovetti, *Pattern with Ramages*, about 1917-1926, Indian ink, 222 × 224 mm



FIG. 5 Ugo Zovetti, *Decorative Design (Parrot in Foliage) in a Roundel*, about 1917-1926, Indian ink and watercolour, 321 × 293 mm

[fig. 1], dated “9 V 1902”, and the *Study of a Head of a Sleeping Man* (inv. 38937), executed before 1917. These pencil drawings on paper, which focus on rendering male faces with a few rapid strokes, anticipate his use of stylisation in the following years. Also interesting in this sense is a later *Head of Christ* (inv. 38938), printed on paste paper using a linoleum block, comparable to an example from the same time, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in which the details of the beard and the crown of thorns show his usual stylised forms.

The sheets now in the Fondazione Cini attributable to the Viennese cultural climate include a *Decorative Design with Leaf and Calyx* (inv. 38924). Made in Vienna before 1917 or in Italy before 1926, and previously published by Alessandro Martoni, this precious Indian ink drawing on tracing paper can be associated with the Wiener Werkstätte style and shows a refined ornamental motif worked up in a rhythmic composition of blacks and whites, and solids and voids, similar to the designs of Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo.

The *Study for Wallpaper with Large Flowers* (inv. 38923) [fig. 2], a mixed media with bright colours created in Vienna before 1917, is part of the production started around 1913 dedicated to floral patterns for silk fabrics. This area of Zovetti’s production was connected to the equally fertile explorations of plant or organic motifs, and patterns with candelabrum trees and *ramages* (foliage), developed during the First World War, when he used a microscope to draw reproductions of histological preparations for the Science Cabinets of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army. As far as the textiles in Zovetti’s production are concerned, it’s worth mentioning at least the silk blouse printed with the “Mikado” pattern from 1914, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. It was produced in the workshops of the Wiener Werkstätte directed by Eduard Wimmer. Zovetti had a skilful assistant in his daughter Aminta, subsequently the founder of a practical school of handweaving in Milan, whose patterns for fabrics and upholstery have been preserved in public and private collections. Another two works made in Vienna before 1917, the marbled papers *Tissue Pattern between Two Bands* (inv. 38927) [fig. 3] and *Mineral Pattern* (inv. 38948), document an important field of activity for Zovetti, who in 1974 published

his reflections and technical-analytical descriptions of decorated papers in *L’Arte del marmorizzare. Cenni storici e avviamento tecnico* (The Art of Marbling. Historical Notes and Technical Introduction). Evidence of his predilection for floral motifs in highly sophisticated compositions expressing a unique taste, somewhere between Jugendstil and Art Deco, can be found in other works made in Vienna before 1917 or in Italy before 1926, such as the Indian ink drawing *Pattern with Ramages* (inv. 38925) [fig. 4] and the Indian ink and wash drawing *Decorative Design (Parrot in Foliage) in a Roundel* (inv. 38936) [fig. 5].

Following Augusto Osimo’s invitation to become one of the first teachers at the Scuola del libro della Società Umanitaria in Milan, from 1919 onwards, Zovetti’s works were not only particu-



FIG. 6 Ugo Zovetti, *Multicentred Rippled Mineral Pattern*, about 1920, acquatipo, 296 × 234 mm

larly interesting from a qualitative point of view but also in terms of his role in spreading the Secessionist culture in Italy. From 1922, Zovetti taught at the Università di Arte Decorative, Monza, known since 1929 as the Istituto Superiore di Industrie Artistiche (ISIA), an institution devoted to training professionals in the field of arts and crafts applied to industry. Zovetti had the chair of decoration but was also involved in mural painting and advertising graphics and, consequently, influenced many students, including Mario Sturani and Fioravante Martelli.

The 1920s were a particularly fertile decade for Zovetti in terms of his writings on special techniques and for the creation of his *acquatipi* (patterns made from ink dissolved in water), now in major international collections, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Acquatipi* that have entered the Fondazione Giorgio Cini include a *Multicentric Wavy Mineral Pattern* (inv. 38931) [fig. 6] and a *Mixed Pattern with Reserves (Radio-larians)* (inv. 38934). In the 1920s and 1930s, Zovetti also engaged in intense exhibition activities and, as an exponent of Art Deco, took part in various editions of the Milan Triennial, the Monza Biennial and the Monza Triennial. At the exhibition *Disegni Déco dal 1920 al 1930 di Ugo Zovetti* (Ugo Zovetti's Deco Designs, 1920-1930), held at the Galleria Bianca Pilat in Milan (1985), Rossana Bossaglia described him as “an artist characterised by Deco taste, who delighted in neo-Rococo coquetties and flamboyant orientalism, and translated them into his own clear, aseptic graphic style”²

A graphic and chromatic profusion is the hallmark of several fine decorated papers with floral motifs: *Floral, Fan and Comb Pattern with Rippled Ground* (inv. 38922) [fig. 7], in which the ornamental Art Nouveau motif of the peacock tail still features prominently; *Frames and Small Leaf Pattern* (inv. 38928); *Three Flowers and Comb Pattern with Wavy Ground* (cat. 38930); *Floral Pattern with Vertical Brush-strokes in the Ground* (cat. 38932); and *Chequered and Foliage Pattern* (cat. 38941), which has a recurrent motif in Zovetti's repertoire, namely the stylisation of plant elements, starting from life studies. In other paste papers, such as the pair *Endpaper: Comb Pattern* (inv. 38943-38945) and *Collage: Rhomb Pattern* (inv. 38946) or *Endpaper: Cross Pattern* (cat. 38949), he resorted to geometry with more rigid patterns, but always characterised by a striking formal elegance. As Alberto Crespi points out, “during the years of his training, Zovetti mainly used geometric patterns with squares in keeping with Secession aesthetics. However, from the analysis of his overall work, and going beyond the general features of his compositions, it can be argued that he was fondest of the sinuous brush stroke before 1900 and then returned to it in the 1910s, when it was often attenuated and enclosed in the order of a grid. Brush stroke and compositional type were therefore elegantly dimensioned and characteristically discrete, as was the chromaticism, tending more often to monochrome or modulated in carefully balanced combinations, and always free from excesses of any kind, even when extended to wider ranges.”³

2. Ugo Zovetti 1879-1974. *La donazione al Comune di Monza: una raccolta di 70 carte decorate dalla Secessione viennese all'ISIA*, exhibition catalogue, edited by A. Crespi, Monza 2000, p. 118.
3. Ugo Zovetti 1879-1974, pp. 18-19.



FIG. 7 Ugo Zovetti, *Floral, Fan and Comb Pattern with Rippled Ground*, about 1927-1942, paste paper, 290 × 213 mm

By studying the works now in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini Drawings and Prints Cabinet, we can reconstruct the main stages of Ugo Zovetti Senior's career, from the Wiener Werkstätte to his teaching commitments at the ISIA, and so provide a fresh approach to his captivating, multifaceted art. The Fondazione Cini group of works on paper provides particularly significant insights for the study of the overall production of an artist who was fond of crossing cross over various artistic fields in highly original ways and stood out for his accomplishments in the world of international book decoration.

Cristina Costanzo

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