

Rosmarie Tissi (RT)

Vera Sacchetti (VS)

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VS You were born near Schaffhausen, to a family with an artistic inclination. Can you tell me a little about that, and about how you came to the School of Applied Arts [Kunstgewerbeschule] in Zurich to study?

RT Creativity runs in my family. My father painted in his free time; I had an uncle who was also a painter; I have architect cousins, and so on. My older sister was a graphic designer and although I didn't initially want to share her profession, I ended up choosing to be a graphic designer. After a year at the School of Applied Arts [Kunstgewerbeschule], I looked for an apprenticeship, and went to Winterthur to work at a quite renowned studio—but it was terrible.

VS Why?

RT I had to clean all the time, and I think they didn't have enough work. And the owner of this studio always had this big frown. He was a big, bulky man, who'd come stand next to me to see what I was doing. I was sketching and he'd say, "What should that be?" That was awful, just made me completely insecure. I was very unhappy, and didn't learn a thing; they didn't teach me, or give me instructions. Sometimes I brought Graphis or other magazines, and they would mock me, "Do you like to copy things?". It was a bad atmosphere, really depressing. And no enthusiasm for the profession, nothing. They only planned weekends to go skiing, to go walk in the mountains. After almost two years, I said to myself—I am not learning anything here. And then I went by myself, from studio to studio. I bought magazines to see who was doing good work, so I went to famous people, Müller Brockmann, Carl B. Graf, and then Sigi Odermatt, of course. And Sigi said, "Okay, you can start in my studio, but all the administrative procedures for the apprenticeship change you have to do them by yourself." After this I could start. And only then I told my parents that I had changed my apprenticeship. Otherwise, they would have insisted I stay in the first place and be tough. That was the behaviour in those days. But after starting to work with Sigi, I made, after

two years only, the second best apprenticeship examination.

VS In contrast with your previous studio, how was the atmosphere with Odermatt?

RT Sigi had enthusiasm for the profession. But at the beginning, it must have been hard for him to have someone else at the studio. He was not used to having people work with him. At the beginning he was very strict with me. But he had at that time good clients: a household goods wholesaler, a pharmacy, a steel construction firm. Sigi would not make strict deadlines; things had to be worked on until they were good. This didn't mean it would always take a lot of time; some things I did in one night. If I had time, I would put it away and look at it again. But I also can be very quick. This is still true today.

VS Those were the golden years of the so-called "Swiss Style", the grid, Helvetica, all these things which you could see everywhere.

RT I did not like it! Always Helvetica! I was never happy when my work was placed under the "Swiss Style" banner. But I'll give you an example of how it was to work with Sigi; one time I did a poster which had already had been accepted by the client, and then one morning I woke up and I thought, "Oh, I have another idea." Another boss would have said, "No, you have made it already, it's accepted, and now you need more time," you know? But instead, Sigi said, "It's much better, yes, let's call him." This was one of the reasons why I stayed.

VS And through time, you really developed a good working relationship. Did you work together? And how did things proceed from being an employee to being a partner?

RT No! It was never the case that we did something together. I did my work and he did his work. There are only a very few number of occasions in which we cannot say where my work ends and his begins. At first when I was an employee, the cli-

ents called and wanted to speak with the “boss”. Even when I told them that I did the work. After the phone call, Sigi had to tell me what the client wanted to change. This was a bad time, as a woman designer. Very often, I would do work that would then get published under his name. It was not his fault; things like that happened all the time. Once, we sent out a New Year’s card. I did it, but of course it had both our names. A photographer then called, and said, “Oh, thank you for the newest card, this was a typical Odermatt.” And I said, “No, I did it.” He retorted, “It’s anyway a typical Odermatt.”

VS Did the fact you were one of the few women in a very male-dominated scene shape your personality as a professional? Did you have to be and act a certain way, or you were just always lucky that you didn’t have to change who you were?

RT Of course, I did not change my behaviour. I just went my way and tried to do good work.

VS At the start of your career, did you have any idols, or people that you looked up to?

RT Yes! I liked Franco Grignani, his black-and-white, three-dimensional things. And there were some Americans I liked very much, such as Gene Federico, George Tscherny, Paul Rand. I visited Rand’s house; it was a nice house in a very beautiful landscape. He and his wife came to see me and Sigi in Zurich several times.

VS Did Sigi Odermatt have a method that he encouraged you to follow? Or he just gave you freedom to work as you wished?

RT He let me do as I wish. One time they asked me what was the difference between us two, and I said, “When Sigi had an idea, he did it. Of course he would change the design, but he stuck to the idea.” Me, on the other hand, had many ideas, and sometimes I’d ask him for help to choose the way to move forward. He was very decided, which was quite good sometimes. Now that I am alone [Sigi Odermatt passed away in 2017], I have no more difficulty in choosing the right direction.

VS And how did you divide the work? A commission arrived and you decided which one of you would work on it?

RT Yes, sometimes the client came and we discussed the commission. We had a very long table in the middle of the studio for client meetings,

and after that first meeting it was already quite clear which one of us would do the work. Perhaps I would have asked more questions, or I’d say, “I have no idea, would you like to do it?”. Sometimes we both worked a bit on the same thing, and then choose who’d continue. It was never a fight. We were keen on designing school books, and after the first meeting with the Lehrmittelverlag, the publisher, it was clear I would do this chemistry textbook.

VS The chemistry textbook project, in 1988/89, is such an incredible accomplishment.

RT You see, at some point during my school years I had had the desire to be a chemist and study chemistry, and that’s why all this content made sense to me. I understood it. For this book, I went around, looking for pictures, striking a good deal with the image agency for the pictures. My design was based on the combination of photographs and illustrations, for example, to demonstrate the causes of acid rain, or the origin of mineral oil.

VS It’s quite a challenging and complex commission with all the different elements.

RT I had a very good relationship with the author, as well as with the publisher. One of the problems was that I could not be generous with the space. A textbook had to have a certain number of pages.

VS But you’ve also designed typefaces. For example, Sinaloa and Sonora, in 1972, or Mindanao, in 1975.

RT Yes! And then I found it in Australia, in a hairdresser in Brisbane. I also found it in a t-shirt in Vanuatu, which at the time was called New Hebrides, they used my font and I was quite proud. I still see it in the world, there’s a whole bus company in Manila that uses it.

VS You’ve just mentioned all these remote destinations, and your fonts are also named after places in the world you’ve visited. You’ve travelled a lot—was it something you always did?

RT It actually started when I was very young and had a really strong flu one time; I remember it was February and I thought, “Oh no, I have to die and I didn’t see the world.” [laughs] After that I started to travel often. I don’t just go for a week or

two, I go for longer periods of time. And I always travel alone. It is something that gives me perspective, I come back sometimes with a different way of thinking.

VS Nevertheless, you were also traveling for professional reasons.

RT Yes, I was asked take part in juries, or was invited to conferences. At that time it was interesting to meet other good, interesting designers from other parts of the world. I used to combine work travel with leisure.

VS In 1971 you changed your office location within Zurich. Was it always fine for you to stay in Zurich?

RT In the end, it happened. Sometimes I feel a bit sorry that I did not go to another place, in another country, but I compensate with traveling. And to be honest, at one point I was in Milan and thinking of working there; I visited a studio to get an impression, and it was just a very long table with many people sitting there and working, and when I came in nobody looked up! I immediately thought I wouldn't want to be there; it was just the same under pressure atmosphere as in Winterthur!

VS Did you ever have to look for work? Or did commissions always come your way?

RT I think only once, we didn't have much to do and so we did some brochures to send to possible clients. But I believe there was just a general difficulty in these years. Most of our clients were Swiss, too.

VS Much of your work shows a strong love and appreciation of type. I think, for example, of the folders for printing firm Anton Schöb, or "Lichtsatz" and "Offset" from 1982.

RT I really like letters. They are like pictures. For example, in the poster for the Odermatt & Tissi exhibition at the Ginza Graphic Gallery in Tokyo, 1998, where the Roman and Japanese script just stand for themselves.

VS The work you developed for Kieler Woche 1990 is also quite interesting. Very graphical, and also a very interesting transition from the black-and-white version to the colour one. It was quite a commission at this time, no?

RT It was always a competition among three invited designers. The winner was chosen by the design of the poster. There was such a variety of applications that the identity had to be simple, not with a photograph or an illustration. That's one of the difficulties, when you have to make things like a poster, a scarf, stamps, advertisements and so on. The design has to be simple, but has to convey a certain atmosphere.

VS When did you start teaching?

RT I don't really teach, I mostly do workshops with the students. I believe the first time was in Yale; I also went to Canada and Spain. For several years, students from Virginia Tech would come to Zurich, and I would do workshops with them. And I always do something with letters, because I feel students really have to learn more about typography. And when I teach I give all my enthusiasm. I am always the first to arrive and the last to leave. But I could not teach a year or so. It's ok to do for a shorter span of time.

VS I read somewhere that sometimes your approach was to respect the client's wishes, and other times to go ahead with your wishes. For example, for your very renowned Mettler logo.

RT The Mettler owner wanted to see a horse, because he was a passionate rider. Of course, I thought a horse was not appropriate for a textile company. But I did it! He wanted to see a stylized horse, so he got one. But at the same time, I designed another logo, and when I showed it to the owner's son, he was so happy. He said, "I would like this, and I have to convince my father." Later in 1971, he wanted to have a calendar, and when I got the commission I thought, "Oh, hopefully I made twelve stripes in the logo." Turns out I had. I gave every month a different colour. My favourite month of that calendar is July. And then, after that month, all the colours get colder and colder, as we get to the winter. There's a funny story about the Mettler logo. Once I was sitting in the airport in Jakarta, and I saw a man with a plastic bag with exactly the same logo.

VS But it wasn't Mettler?

RT No! It was the bag for a department store in Jakarta. I went up to him and asked if he could exchange that bag for another one. And he was so friendly, and said yes! I still have that bag. It has a yellow background and a red logo, but it

was exactly the same. I guess they copied it from a magazine.

VS Do you feel that being copied is the highest form of a compliment?

RT Hmm. I was a bit angry. But I guess the people from the department store thought, “She is so far away, she will never come to Jakarta.”

VS Graphic design techniques and technology changed radically from your early works to this day. When did you start using the computer?

RT I started in 2002, I guess. I like to work with the computer. But I first sketch a bit, or cut out paper and put it together, and then I go into the computer, where I can play around a little bit more. I’m quite glad I didn’t have it from the beginning; I am glad I had to do things by hand. I see what happens when students start with the computer when I give my workshops: I give the brief to the students, tell them what is the task. After a while I see only a lot of weird typography. You have to have an idea first; you cannot just make it up in the screen! You have to think what do I have to tell the people, or what is the essence of what you are trying to say. So I ask them to sketch a bit, then I can help them. But many of them cannot sketch!

VS Your career is incredibly diverse: you’ve worked on so many different fields.

RT I must say, every field nearly which is possible. From posters to advertisements, letterheads to banknotes I didn’t realize it before. Once I was at the 2nd International Design Conference in Acapulco, Mexico, and there I had to do a lecture. I titled it “Como Simplificar y Como Enriquecer” [“How to Simplify and How to Enrich”], because I did banknotes and posters—posters have to be simple and banknotes have to be complex. After the lecture I was surrounded by many of the female students and designers and had to give autographs and answer questions. I was moved. I hope I have encouraged them.

VS Many of your works got prizes. Not only posters, but also folders, books.

RT Sometimes I got prizes, but I don’t remember. I didn’t send work to all the competitions, only a few times. But I will tell you this: I think that

today, so many graphic designers do posters just for these exhibitions, where they can earn prizes. I never thought of that. I do the poster for the client, and then, if it was a nice poster, sometimes I would send it in for a competition or a prize. I was never ambitious, I think I just wanted to do good work, and the rest I didn’t care about.

VS Do you think that the status of a woman graphic designer has changed between your early career and now?

RT Yes, of course. But still I have a higher reputation in foreign countries than in Switzerland. I remember a remark of a colleague, who came back after a stay in France and a stay of many years in the USA; he said, nowhere he did observe so much jealousy like in Switzerland.

VS And now you are distinguished with the Swiss Grand Award for Design. How do you feel about it?

RT I was very happy, yes.

VS Now that you have won it, what comes next? What are your next projects?

RT I’ve recently concluded a book that collects a lot of my work. I designed it also because I cannot keep all the examples of what I’ve done. And this was a way to organize everything, from all the different fields. It’s the first time that I’ve collected my work in one book. There are books with the work of Odermatt & Tissi, but just Rosmarie Tissi, none. I started working on it two years ago. Last year I finished the bulk of it, but did another year of refinements, some changes. I have tried to make it accessible; that’s also good for the students. And right now, I’m doing a poster for the Pratt Institute. It’s an exhibition with Anni Albers, Elaine Lustig Cohen, alongside my work. And so I have to do the poster. I still have ten days—they’ve asked me for “a real Tissi”.

VS What do they mean by that?

RT I think they want it designed with my style. But it is quite a challenge, Anni Albers, and Elaine Lustig Cohen I have decided to make it with typography, so I took a letter for each of us ... And then, if I like it, I will add it, in another spread, in the “posters” chapter of my book.