

VIA MARGUTTA: THE FIRST INNOVATIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIO IN ROME

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The story begins in Via Margutta 54, at the photographic studio that my father, Johnny Moncada, had recently equipped with all the most cutting edge technology. My mother, Joan Whelan, an American model, was arriving in Rome from New York, thanks to the help of photographer Ted Croner¹, after a long journey by ship accompanied by trunkfuls of camera equipment, lights and large rolls of paper for the backdrops, which were to be hung from the 6-metre-high studio ceiling. In 1956, Johnny Moncada married Joan Whelan in a romantic and professional union that was to last their whole lives. His studio was the first innovative photographic studio in Rome, located in Studi Patrizi, a place that had, for centuries, been the haunt of artists from all over the world. It was against this impressive historic setting that he began his collaboration with Luisa Spagnoli, granddaughter and namesake of the famous fashion house founder, writer and art collector.

While the first catalogues featured neutral backdrops, from 1958 onwards Moncada took advantage of the help of his friends Gastone Novelli and Achille Perilli, who worked in the field of staging photographic sets, including design elements, lamps and chairs, and on the artwork layout for the Spagnoli catalogues. Their association was to last for nine years, during which different ideas mingled together in a bright array of shapes and colours and in the creative ability to play with the most avant-garde languages, improvising during the photo sessions. "We had such amazing fun! Then we would all go to a trattoria and enjoy ourselves until late into the night," remembers model Iris Bianchi. The artists assembled and disassembled, drawing inspiration from the great international art movements, from the French surrealists to Marcel Duchamp's readymades, as in some of the arrangements in which bicycle wheels were hung in the space surrounding the models. The newspaper cuttings, letters, words, targets and comic strips on the backdrops reveal how Novelli and Perilli had absorbed

all the signs of the advent of the new languages of Pop, redeveloping them under their own personal interpretation, and show the impact these had on their own artistic research, as in Novelli's study of the alphabet² or Perilli's work with signs.³ The themes of the collections were also inspired by daily news events, from the Rome Olympics in 1960 to the first incredible journey by man into space in 1961, an epoch-making event in human history, and the first steps towards landing on the moon, with backdrops featuring space suits, gleaming spaceships and astronomical graphics suspended in the unexplored universe.

All this happened in Via Margutta, where Cy Twombly joined them in 1957, exhibiting with Novelli and Perilli⁴ two years later at Plinio de Martiis' legendary Tartaruga Gallery, founded with funding from Baron Giorgio Franchetti and often visited by Luisa Spagnoli, as Achille Bonito Oliva remembers. It was a time of great cultural ferment in Rome, with a visit by the famous gallery owner Leo Castelli to Salvatore Scarpitta's studio, just a short distance from Moncada's photographic studio.⁵ From 1962 onwards, Novelli also had his workshop in the historic courtyard at no. 54, which was regularly visited by artists and the famous film director Federico Fellini, who were all neighbours. In the meantime, Moncada was working around the world and in 1965, when the Spagnoli adventure came to an end, he continued to create artistic backdrops by himself, defining a unique style in the world of fashion photography.

This collaboration has only come to light now, 50 years later, thanks to the Archivio Johnny Moncada foundation. The long process of research has uncovered about 600 photographs and now, thanks to the support of the Nando Peretti Foundation, the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, AltaRoma, the Archivio Gastone Novelli and artist Achille Perilli, the collaboration has been restored to its place in the history of fashion, photography and the city of Rome.

¹ Ted Croner was the husband of model Theo Graham, to whom AltaRoma dedicated an exhibition, *Theo by Richard Avedon*, in 2009, which I curated, held at the Musei Capitolini and the Accademia di Francia, Rome.

² For example, *A,B,C*, (1960), which the artist later donated to Johnny Moncada.

³ For example *Avanzo dell'incendio di Troia* (1957).

⁴ Scarpitta and Vandercam took part in the 1959 exhibition as well. *Gastone Novelli, Catalogo generale, 1. Pittura e scultura*, edited by P. Bonani, M. Rinaldi, A. Tiddia, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2011.

⁵ V. Moncada, *Novocento a via Margutta: avanguardie, bohème e dolce vita*, in V. Moncada (ed.), *Atelier a via Margutta. Cinque secoli di cultura internazionale a Roma*, Umberto Allemandi & C., Turin 2012, pp. 96-104