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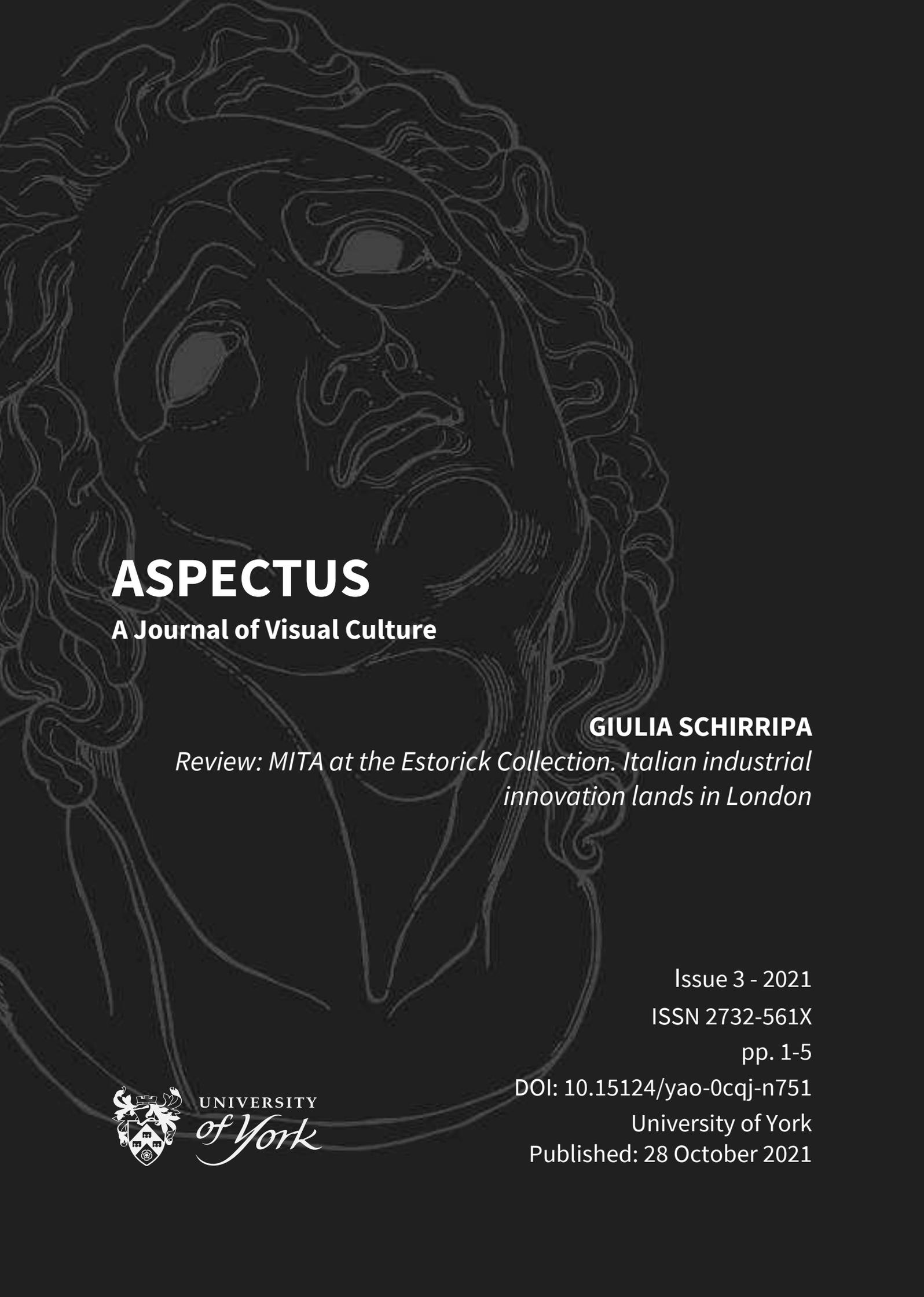
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MITA at the Estorick Collection; Italian industrial innovation lands in London

30 September to 20 June 2021

GIULIA SCHIRIPA

From the thirtieth of September 2020 to the twentieth of June 2021, the Estorick Collection, the only British museum which solely focuses on Italian modern art, hosted the show *Italian Threads: MITA Textile Design 1926-1979*. The exhibition showcased the work of the Italian textile firm Manifattura Italiana Tappeti Artistici (MITA) and their collaborations with some of the most interesting Italian artists of the twentieth century. Matteo Fachessati and Gianni Franzone from the Wolfsonian Museum in Genoa, a partner institution for this show and the holder of the MITA archives, curated the show.

Founded in Genoa in 1929 by Italian entrepreneur and innovator Mario Alberto Ponis, MITA was renowned for merging traditional textile making with “mechanical innovations”.¹ The company began by producing rugs following the Middle Eastern tradition, but quickly began collaborating with Italian contemporary artists, designers, and architects like Gio Ponti, Fortunato Depero, Ettore Sottsass and Bice Lazzari (Fig.1, 1954). It was Ponis himself who initiated these collaborations, recognizing the importance of following and fostering the development of Italian art in those years, from Futurism to Art Informel. The creative quality of MITA’s productions was widely recognized at the time and the company participated in various art and design exhibitions both nationally and internationally.

The Estorick exhibition was installed in the two showrooms on the ground floor of the historical Georgian building that houses the collection. The show contains not only the beautiful rugs, tapestries, and fabric samples that the firm produced, but also archival material ranging from letters to preparatory drawings which help to outline MITA’s collaboration with various artists (Fig. 2-3, 2020).

¹ Matteo Fachessati and Gianni Franzone, *MITA Italian Threads 1929-1976*, (London: Estorick Collection, 2020), 13.

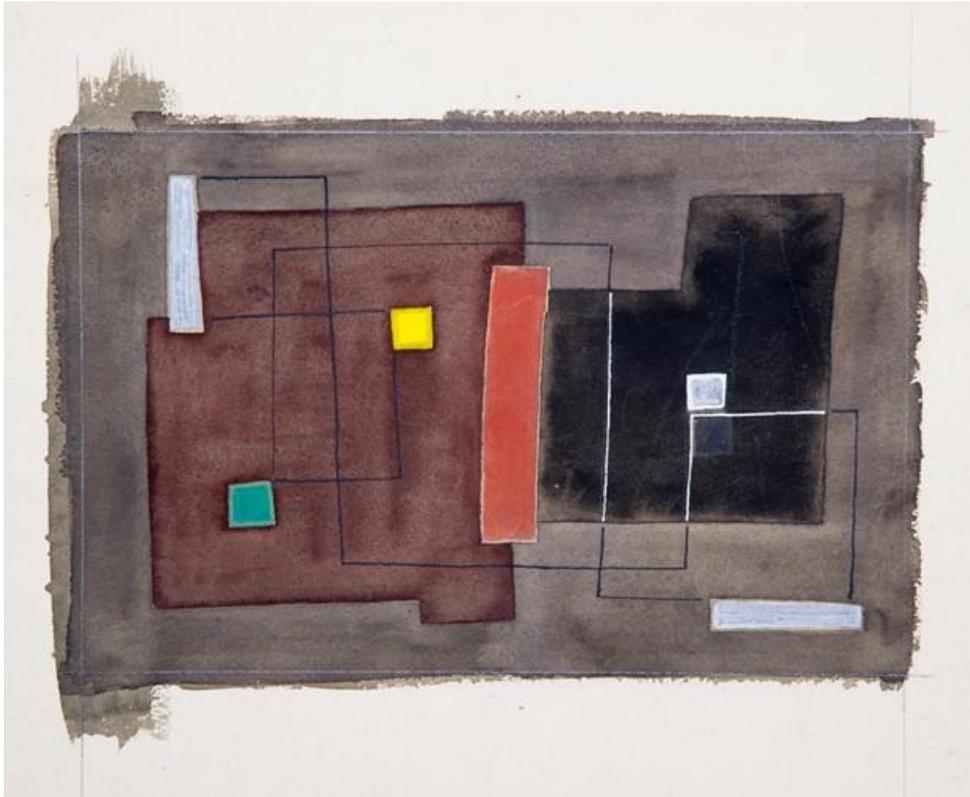


Fig 1. Lazzari, Bice, Rug design for the ENAPI exhibition at the X triennale, 1954, tempera and watercolour on paperboard, 30.7 x 39.7 cm. Genoa, MITA Archive on loan

The materials are curated so that the display constantly varies and envelops the audience in the narrative of the exhibition: depicting MITA as a twentieth century creative incubator and exploring the role Ponis had in creating a professional and personal relationship with the artists. Though the rugs and tapestries are striking for their composition and manufacturing, it is the archival material that keeps the curatorial narrative of the exhibition together. The cases contain hand painted calendars, product drafts, and photos and letters exchanged between Ponis and various collaborators. These materials offer a vibrant context for the textiles on display. The importance of the archival material is exemplified by the curatorial decisions regarding Gio Ponti's chair rug (Fig. 4, 1935). Not only was the rug on display, but the exhibition also presented Ponti's preparatory drawings and fabric studies for it, providing the viewer with both an aesthetic engagement with the final product and an understanding of the various steps in the process of its creation.

This exhibition places itself within a growing art historical interest in the role of private industries in the development of Italian twentieth-century art. Ponis was part of an increasing number of industrialists that opened their factory doors to artists, offering them the chance to utilize and explore technological advances within their practices. The curatorial argument of this show intellectually, visually, and materially debunks the binary between industrial and artistic production. Moving away from this binary is necessary when talking about twentieth-century Italian art as many



Fig 2. Zanardi, Claudia, MITA Textile Design 1929-1976 installation shot, 2020, photograph. London, Estorick Collection. Courtesy Estorick Collection.



Fig. 3. Zanardi, Claudia, MITA Textile Design 1929-1976 installation shot, 2020, photograph. London, Estorick Collection. Courtesy Estorick Collection.

aspects of it are based on the interconnection between man-made and industrial materials, from as early as the Futurist movement to the clear examples of *Arte Povera*. The interest in materiality and technological innovations of twentieth-century Italian artistic movements were partially due to the late industrialisation of the country, which belatedly took place during the twentieth century. Companies like MITA, with its technological innovation within traditional artistic fields, were part of this industrial revolution. In an artistic environment where so many were interested in keeping up with industrial change, collaboration between artists and industrialists was not only common but welcomed.

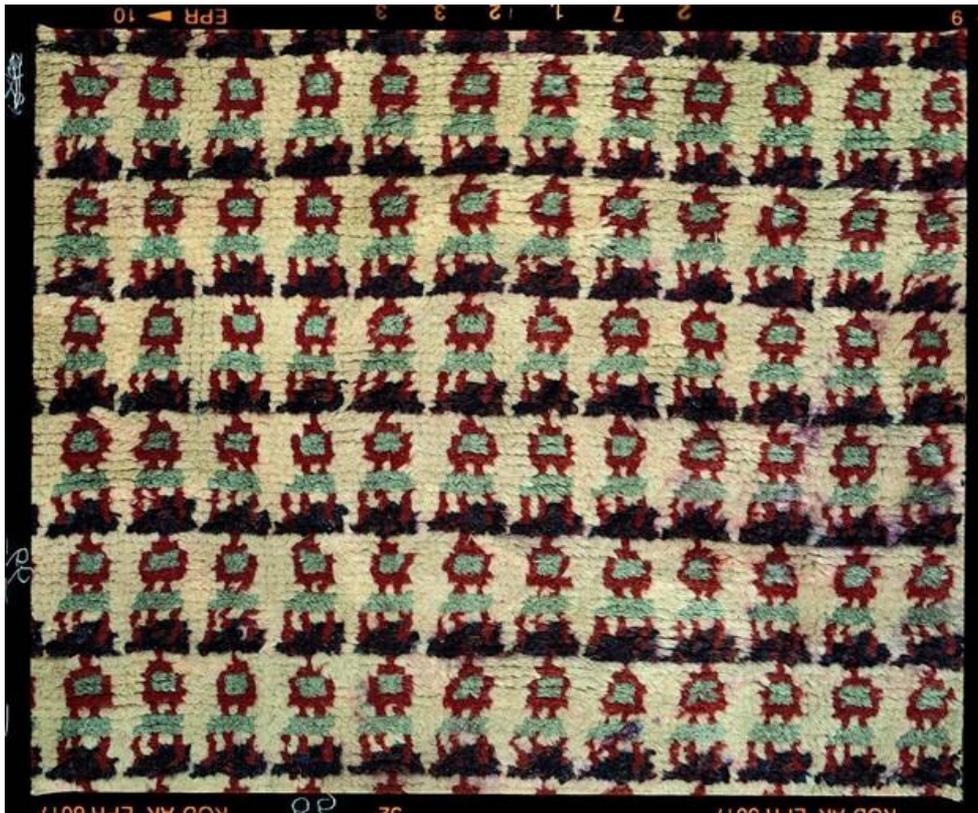


Fig. 4. Gio Ponti, *Chairs Rug*, 1935, Knotted Wool, 195 x 88 cm. Genoa, MITA Archive on loan to Wolfsoniana. Courtesy Estorick Collection.

Throughout this show, industrially produced objects are contextualised within the various steps of their artistic creative process, exploring the ways in which each item can be the creation of a single artist's mind while also being industrially made. While the exhibition does a great job at presenting the intertwined nature of the artistic and industrial worlds, there is still something that remains unnamed and unseen within this collaborative process: the factory's workers, the actual makers of the industrial product² While each artist is mentioned and credited, the absence of the identities of the workers misses an opportunity to provide a real face to the industrial phase of this creative process. While it is clear that Ponti has played an essential role in bridging the industrial and creative processes within MITA, it is the workers that carry out the final and essential action of production, bringing life to both Ponti's innovative ideas and the artist's intentions. Idolizing the single creative mind instead of the workforce executing the vision is not something limited to a specific field or a specific

² The catalogue contains some archival photographs of the workers, mostly of women, in the MITA factory.

historical moment: a prime example of it today is the anonymity of Amazon workers compared to the spotlight given to every action of the company's founder, Jeff Bezos.

Overall, the exhibition successfully appealed to various audiences, both specialised and general, maintaining a well-structured, relevant but accessible art historical argument. The show closed earlier this summer, but for those who are interested the catalogue can still be found on the Estorick Collection website and their museum shop.

***Italian Threads* was on display at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art from 30 September to 20 June 2021. Organised in collaboration with MITA Archive, Nervi on loan to Wolfsoniana - Palazzo Ducale Fondazione per la Cultura, Genoa.**