

The Dabbene Silversmiths in Largo Treves



Shop windows on Via Balzan



The witness of the Dabbene silversmiths' history is Roberto Dabbene: together with his brother Armando he is the present owner of the silverware shop situated in Largo Treves in Milan on the corner with Via Montebello. The history of this silverware shop is actually longer than the history of the Dabbene family business: the shop has been run since the earliest years of the XXth century by the Ronchi family, changed into Ronchi & Soldati and then only Soldati.

In 1938 Marco Dabbene, father of Roberto and Armando bought the activity from Soldati and gave it his own name. Marco was an ex-Martinitt (Martinitt originally was the name given to orphans from the war who were hosted in an orphanage near the San Martino's Church in Milan. This institute has a story of more than 500 years and has become a historical school); he was born in 1909 and he learnt the art of the chisel at the schools of the Humanitary Society, working for other people until

he decided to jump into business by himself. As soon as Marco bought the shop, his wife Angela Menta got involved in the business and helped him in running the shop using her creativity to improve the activity's business. Bride and groom perfectly fitted in together and the wedding, says Roberto, has been fundamental for the shop as well. His mother paid a lot of attention to novelties and started to sell porcelains and gifts: because of this the shop's customers increased; on the contrary the father's education would have limited the selling to a small amount of silver items.



Marco Dabbene as a little “Martinitt” (Tollini photos, 1920)

The years after the war and the period of the economic boom were “wonderful years, even if dominated by bad taste”, there was the desire of deleting the past sufferings through showing off how rich people were. It was the time when the desire of turning the page caused the disappearance of worthy products from the market: precious manufactured goods made in the “art-deco” manner were replaced by objects in the “empire style”. This is one of the most important sides of this kind of business: the value of the original material makes the transformation and destruction of the past artistic experience easier; the same wouldn't be possible using more precious materials.

The 50s and 60s were Roberto's childhood years; these years have been very important for his education and he vividly remembers them. Roberto's life used to pass among home, shop and friends.

He used to play ball with friends in the tiny spaces next to the shop. His father particularly cared about getting his sons into the business, that's why to go and play with his friends, Roberto had to circumvent the shop and pass through Via Rivoli to reach the playground.

Despite of this, calling those times to their mind, both Armando and Roberto express regret and gratitude to their father's strictness. Those were also the years when their father instructed and trained them conveying them his love for the job through the apprenticeship in the shop. From the whole tale one can feel that the shop is for Roberto not only a trading concern but above all it is the system through which non-codified knowledge is passed on helped by the observance of roles and hierarchies.



Marco Dabbene and his wife Angela Menta (ca. 1945)

The shop is the work shop - in the accepted meaning of the professional and instructive place - where professional ability is concerned as a personal heritage to be handed on or jealously kept secret.

Favouring exchange and mixture the shop made the apprentice strive to achieve the expert workers' level in manufacturing silver goods; this environment also created a positive competitive spirit among all the craftsmen.

The welding of metals for example, was one of the most difficult abilities to achieve: if the flame is too strong, metal melts before one starts to do the metal-working, that's why observing the colour of the heated metal is fundamental for the outcome of the process.

Only a long apprenticeship with expert workers allowed to acquire this empirical knowledge.

There were also pastes to polish silver products which were created by the cleaners after a whole life of experiments : their composition was kept as a secret and not shared with anyone.

Some compounds were really close to alchemy and made it possible to make almost every material to stick on materials that usually didn't tolerate a silver plating.

Even instruments arose from the silversmiths job's secrets. Every engraver had his own personal instruments (about 500 pieces)realized in the course of a whole working life: they seemed to be a prosthesis of the workers' skill. In the workshop there were no hammers with two handles the same, cause every shape depended on the worker's hand.

Hearing the sound of the hammer on the metal one could have understood how efficient it was. " Sometimes - says Roberto - watching my father

working I saw the hammer-stroke hitting really strong, getting on the iron and smoothing it, so as to flatten the surface. Every stroke has its own peculiarity, its reason to be.

In the shop there was a worker whose job was to be a hammer-shooter which was a very hard job: one had to hold the piece to work with a hand while with the other hand had to shape it by using the hammer whose hits bounced back to the arm and hurt it.

Well, what the worker realised to solve this problem was a pulley system which was connected to a pedal that reduced the limb's exhaustion. At night, at the end of the working day, the worker used to dismantle the machine and to bring it back home because he was jealous of his invention. Lots of secrets in this job used to be owned by the workers who took them away when they left the silversmiths' workshops for another job, including their pitch that they used and warmed up in peculiar small pots.

The most very impressive thing about the silversmiths' shops was the particular smell through which everyone could recognize the particular activity from the outside.

Half mechanic, half chemist, the worker-craftsman was a good designer as well.

Those people didn't study at the "Brera Arts Academy" but knew exactly how to design products.

Once people used to go to the silversmith to tell him how they exactly wanted a certain object and explained everything about all the characteristics of the desired item, then the craftsman designed a project straight away which had to be signed for acceptance by the customer. After that, the work could be started.

It has been recently necessary to restore the shop's basement : on this occasion more than 300-400 projects were found ; using them an exhibition for customers and friends was held in the shop.

Besides the work in the shop the Dabbene Silversmiths accepted orders from privates who wanted their ordered items to be delivered from the shop to their homes. Roberto remembers when his father stopped him on the way to the playground to send him delivering the manufactured items for those customers. Every time a customer asked Roberto whether he was the son of the owner he used to deny it in order to get the tip reserved to the shop-boys. In particularly lively times (" When I was particularly daring"), his father usually lost his patience and Roberto was sent to other workshops where, even if unconsciously, he learnt about all the aspects of the corporative tradition of the job.

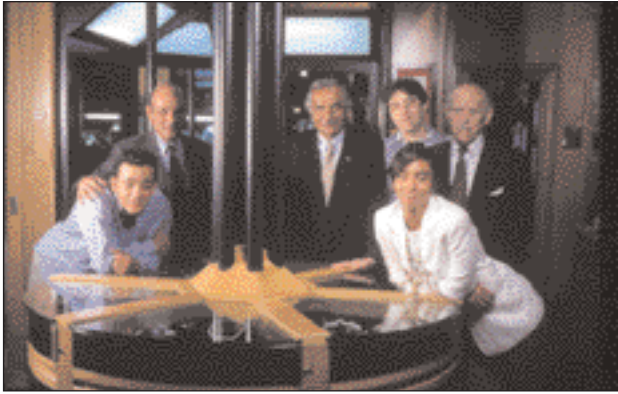


Marco Dabbene and his son Roberto in via Balzan(ex Montebello) in front of the shop. (ca.1940)



Roberto (above) and Armando Dabbene as little children (about 1940)





The Dabbene family in their shop.
From the left : Marco with his father Armando, Roberto with his son Armando and his daughter Cristiana. The last on the right is Marco Dabbene.

As an alternative he might be sent to a foundry in Corso S. Gottardo a kind of precious metals' bank - to deliver retails and powders from the workshop and to check the casting processes which allow to recycle silver. From the tale comes out that the treatment and rules reserved to the eldest son were stricter than the ones reserved to the youngest, but this is how things had to be and on the other hand this attitude was due to the worries of his father who wanted to cultivate Roberto's sense of responsibility. In any case both for Roberto and Armando, the shop has been the heart of their education. The hard studies which brought both of them to a diploma represented a less important aspect of the real educational training done directly by the father in the workshop.

The 60s were the years when the Dabbene family decided to enlarge the shop. With a little courage their father bought part of the building (a luxury for those years) which now allows the silverware shop to keep both the shop (trading area) and the workshop (productive area) together bringing great advantage to the wide range of services offered to the customers. By the end of the 60s when he was almost 60 years old, Marco Dabbene put himself by (even if mumbling and supervising) in favour of his sons who gave birth to a LTD Company.



Repairs laboratory

Leading an activity means to find an effective equilibrium between tradition and originality. What differentiates Roberto's leadership from the one of the father is the relationship with the workers : once everything was based on a hierarchical relationship, today motivation and involvement represent the basis to build a relationship of mutual trust with the workers. As for the rest, the activity received from their father as a heritage was solidly built, that's why the business resisted the enlargement of the later period. It wasn't easy in the beginning: the end of the 70s have been years of social and economic crisis and it wasn't easy to increase the market's development. The 80s economic recovery on the contrary was reflected on an increment of consumptions, Today the situation is not excessively positive: richness has increased, but at the same time new ways of spending money came in (just think of the good outcome of the exotic resorts).



In any case people still spend money for silver products or precious gifts, but tends to transform itself with an unexpected speed according to those people who have worked since long time on this market. It is almost a problem of rapidity : today one has to recognize the fast evolution of products never giving up traditional products that always represent a reference point for everyone. That's why the replacement of the old leadership with the new generation is a very important matter: it enables to make people who are more tuned-in to the changes of the tastes or needs of customers to become responsible for the production. Recently the third generation is replacing the older one: Cristiana Dabbene (1967), Roberto's nephew Marco (1964) and his son Armando (1978). They are assigned to different roles and this allow



Polishing area

them to find their own space in the management of the shop. Cristiana has worked for 6 years at Sotheby's London; the fact that Marco has become an expert in informatics makes it possible for the customers to have an electronic engraving system at their disposal. Armando, the youngest, just entered the company as an apprentice and he has recently joined a professional course sponsored by the Lombardy Region. Roberto is trying to teach them a complete knowledge about the administration of the whole business in order to let them achieve an overall view about the job. Their educational career hasn't been as brilliant as the professional one. As it was for their parents, the shop is their "gym", the place where they did their educational training and the place to let them start taking their first decisions, knowing that taking the risk and making mistakes is the only way to effectively grow.



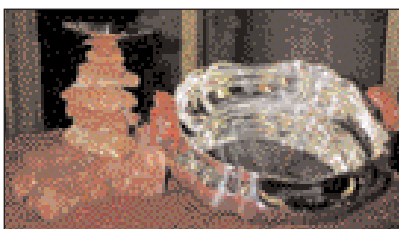
Antique objects in the shop



Inside of the shop



Following the new trends



A silver pot and the recipe book published by the Dabbene Silversmiths

As soon as the two brothers Roberto and Armando will leave the company's leadership to their sons and nephews, it will be necessary to review the equilibrium of the society.

Actually what they are trying to teach to the young generation through this apprenticeship in the company is the awareness that the shop, considered as a unitary system, is their richness; this is a message which was kept being sent from the grandfather who loved to use this proverb from Milan: "Remember risotto comes from here".

For the future Roberto Dabbene and his brother Armando are a little bit concerned about the difference between the turnover and the dimensions of their family: they are afraid there might be a lack of equilibrium. They plan to resist the temptation of a further enlargement, because lots of their colleagues have already been in trouble when they decided to enlarge their company. It is more important to keep in mind what the available energy is, realizing that the enlargement brings with itself the fact that some energy must come from the outside of the family and that the external members often don't share the same interest in the company as family members do: this means that the original activity would turn into something different: where the control on the work increases a decrease of the immediate output is expected. On the contrary an expansion could be assured following other directions: for example increasing the quantity of items offered to the customers who would have the chance to get exactly what they look for in a shorter time.

That's why all the items are showed on the website (www.argenteriadabbene.com); the website is addressed to the young generations that use and consider the internet as the main resource for their knowledge.

At the same time the advice and survey service, repair and restore service available in the shop offer a completeness which represent a competitive value. Here, the decision of keeping a workshop in the centre of the town allows to respond as fast as possible and with full knowledge of the facts to the needs of customers who know

that in the shop they do not only find a shop - assistant but the silversmith's direct experience, too. In the end, enlargement can be guaranteed by a bigger interest in communication in order to keep a permanent relationship with the customer. A professional agency is now in charge of the shop's image promotion and of the development of the public relations of the Dabbene Silversmiths. Besides, Roberto Dabbene believes it is necessary to open the shop to the outer world through the organization of small exhibitions and other cultural events (as for example the exhibition on the chisel and on the embossed work).

The most effective and powerful action is the one that develops from the owner's enthusiasm through his own personality, transmitting to everybody his attitude towards the business he leads.

That's the reason why our witness cooperates with public and private structures as well as with non-profit organizations helping organizing professional courses, keeping his knowledge and his many acquaintances at the disposal of all those who are interested in the topic. He wrote publications about the silver working processes and about

antiques. Speaking about his commitment in the corporative work still is to be included in his enthusiasm for the job. The association is a particularly important instrument through which innovative ideas and behaviours can spread in such a powerful way that the individual action can't compare.

Anyway it is not easy to achieve an equilibrium between individuality and sociability in business: it means that sometimes you need to cooperate with people who are your direct competitors (even your closest friends), knowing that every individualism would be understood as an attempt of competing with the others. At the same time caring about the association means there's less time available for one's own shop and not to pay enough attention would mean affecting the business in the end.

Today both Roberto and Armando maintain key roles in the company but Roberto prefers to let the young people get important roles as well; they can do their apprenticeship inside the association in order to learn how to deal with this kind of matters, too.

Giuseppe Paletta

(Interview made in collaboration with Andrea Strambio)