The black background in advertising posters: some examples from the early decades of the 20th century

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 20th century, an important innovation appeared in European advertising posters. Until then, the background of a poster appeared as a logical consequence of the scene depicted, reflecting its compositional and chromatic characteristics. This was the case, for example, in the posters of Jules Chéret, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Alfons Mucha, Adolf Hohenstein and others. Leonetto Cappiello, an artist from Livorno who had moved to Paris, created an advertisement for Swiss chocolate 'Klaus', in 1903, radically revolutionising the concept of product communication. The artist introduced so many new features that the Chocolat Klaus poster is considered a real turning point in his career, which he described as 'the second stage of my evolution'. Cappiello was the first to realise that advertising posters had to stand out from the monotonous greyness of the wall on which they were displayed, imposing themselves on their surroundings and creating a 'visual shock' for the observer. The advertising poster must have a basic design and simple graphic language; its bright colours ensure that the observer is not distracted in the few moments when their attention is focused on the poster they are looking at. In the following years, Leonetto created numerous commercial posters applying the same compositional principles: figures drawn with simple lines, bright and contrasting colours, characters with cheerful and smiling expressions, and minimal text, most often limited to the name of the product being advertised. Above all, everything stands out against a black background. Few artists sporadically used black backgrounds in their posters during those years, for example, Marcello Dudovich and Leopoldo Metlicovitz; this limited use of dark backgrounds continued until the second decade of the 20th century, when Leonetto Cappiello's posters, now well known, widespread and appreciated, became a model and source of inspiration for other artists. By now, the black background solution was being used by many other important poster artists, including, for example, Giuseppe Magagnoli, known as MAGA, Achille Luciano Mauzan, Plinio Codognato and Severo Pozzati, known as SEPO, in Italy, and Jean d'Ylen, Adolphe Mouron, better known as Cassandre, Charles Loupot and Paul Colin in France. In this short article, we aim to show how Leonetto Cappiello's innovations, particularly the use of a black background in advertising posters, were so successful that they were adopted by the most important poster artists of the early 20th century within a few decades.

KEYWORDS Posters, Advertising, Black background, Leonetto Cappiello

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1. Introduction

Around the mid-1800s, incredible advances were made in printing techniques; the invention of chromolithography made it possible to reproduce large-format colour images, imitating the colours of tempera or oil paintings [1]. At the same time, the commercial world became aware of how much massive advertising could spread awareness and enjoyment of a material product, an event or even a social or political idea. The 19th century was also the golden age of the wall poster; the visual arts, painting and engraving merged with mass publishing, revolutionising the traditional concept of 'art', which was now destined for street billboards or to enter homes in the form of posters, but above all to imprint itself in everyone's minds through iconic images. The streets of cities became a sizeable open-air museum [2], where street art, with posters affixed to walls as its protagonists, gave numerous artists, known as 'affiliates' in French, the opportunity to gain notoriety and fame. Fin de siècle Paris saw the emergence of artists such as Eugène Grasset, Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alfons Mucha and others. At the beginning of the 20th century, Leonetto Cappiello, a young artist from Livorno, debuted on the Parisian art scene. Within a few years, he managed to gain undisputed prominence.

2. The background of the posters: from exuberance to synthesis

At the end of the 19th century, the Parisian artistic scene was a melting pot of ideas, innovations and experiences. In the field of poster design, new graphic solutions were being experimented with to give greater prominence to the message to be communicated. Several salient elements began to emerge that would make up the poster: the main image, designed to strike and attract the viewer; the background, against which the subject stands out; the logo or brand, which identifies the product; any slogan, which should entice the customer to purchase and consume; and, lastly, helpful information, such as the address, location and place of sale. Although the central part of the poster is the focal point of the viewer's attention, the background against which the scene stands out is no less important. While retaining its identity and graphic characteristics, the poster's background must complement the central image, which plays the leading role and is essential for enhancing, emphasising or creating contrast with the main subject. The great French affiliates interpret and combine the components of the poster with imagination and diversity. In Eugène Grasset's sober Art Nouveau style, the backgrounds are sometimes monochrome, sometimes streaked with colour or covered with tree branches or floral compositions. Jules Chéret creates backgrounds with varied nuances in a multiplicity of chromatic transitions of shades of colour ranging from deep blue to light blue, then dissolving into the white of the paper. For Alfons Mucha, the background is almost as important as the subject of the poster, a riot of colours, combinations created with elaborate mosaics, very fine pieces, studied down to the smallest detail (Scalzo 2022a, pp. 884 ff.); or he invents precious phytomorphic compositions rendered in great detail. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec sought graphic synthesis, the essentiality offered by a monochrome background, whether blue, yellow, ochre or marked by a few hints of settings, most often theatrical backdrops. In 1896, Jules Chéret was among the first to propose a dark background for posters; he created two posters for Loïe Fuller, in these cases, however, the black background is not a chromatic choice but a representation of reality: the show takes place in the darkness of the theatre, where the dancer twirls in the darkness of the stage in a dress made of coloured and fluorescent veils, illuminated by narrow beams of light.



Fig. 1 - Jules Chéret, Redoute Etudiants, 1894.
Fig. 2 - Alfons Mucha, La Plume, 1897 ca.



Fig. 3 - Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, May Milton, 1895.
Fig. 4 - Jules Chéret, La Loïe Fuller, 1896.

3. Leonetto Cappiello: his Parisian debut, innovation

In 1898, a young artist from Livorno arrived in the French capital: Leonetto Cappiello. His Parisian debut saw him produce a series of caricatures of famous people; unexpected success propelled him into the world of advertising, where he made a name for himself in just a few years. Following in the footsteps of Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec, whom he greatly admired [3], he introduced a modern, incisive and concise language with essential graphics to the world of 'affichés', which was decidedly detached from the, albeit appreciated, but excessive 'decorative ornamentation' that characterised contemporary posters (Scalzo, 2022b, pp. 884 ff.); Cappiello's style was almost an 'expressionist trend far removed from the Art Nouveau style' (Wlassikoff, 2008, p. 32). The Livorno artist's first posters are enlarged caricatures in which he already shows his mastery of layout by applying one of his fundamental principles: a simple, monochrome background against which the central character stands out easily; 'he initially used various styles, particularly influenced by Lautrec and Chéret, from whom he adopted the use of a solid-colour background' (Hollis, 2005, p.13). This concern for the legibility of the poster sets him apart from most of his contemporary poster artists, who seem more interested in details than in efficient and concise communication. Other fundamental principles of Cappiello are legibility and attribution; to be legible, the poster must be simple: clear elements and characters on a dark background, or vice versa; the poster is designed to be placed on the street, in whole light, seen quickly and from a distance [4]. It should never be in harmony with its surroundings; on the contrary, it should stand out in total opposition. It should also create a kind of surprise effect, an essential condition for any advertising that is to be effective. The colours used should be those that make the most significant impression on the retina, 'but what makes a good poster above all is a line, what he calls the arabesque, a synthesis of the idea: it is the line that we must seek and give secondary importance to colour and details, which should only highlight and embellish. To be effective, the passer-by must immediately associate the poster with a brand: it is, therefore, necessary to invent a character, a grotesque animal or something else that, through its repetition, will be inextricably linked to the product' (Weill, 1984, p. 126).

4. Leonetto Cappiello's breakthrough: the black background

Although Cappiello had already created some advertising posters (the first for the magazine Frou-Frou was in 1899), 1903 was the year of his breakthrough. One night, posters for Chocolat Klaus appeared on the walls of Paris: a woman dressed in green was riding a red horse; the words at the bottom, in large letters, were yellow, the slogan was blue, and everything was on a black background.



Fig. 5 - L. Cappiello, Chocolat Klaus, 1903.
Fig. 6 - L. Cappiello, Katabexine, 1903.

A few considerations are necessary: First, the advertised product does not appear in the poster; furthermore, the deliberate contrast of pure colours spread evenly across the surface highlights the dissonance of the colour planes; the most significant innovation is the use of a black background. As a result, the painted image emerges powerfully from the dark background, standing out clearly to the observer; the letters of the words' Chocolat Klaus', in a dazzling chrome yellow, light up against the dark background. Cappiello opts for a female figure as a testimonial, 'the woman is first and foremost seductive, taking on the features of famous actresses who seem to have stepped out of a music hall: corset at the waist, low neckline and smiling' (AA.VV., 2020, p. 14), the girl portrayed has synthetic features, a legacy of his debut as a caricaturist, the woman and the red horse are something crazy, halfway between a dream and a fairy-tale setting and, above all, they have no logical connection with the product being advertised; 'the image is dissonant and illogical (...) with its movement it accompanies the passer-by and seems to jump out to chase him, call him, force him to turn around' (Monti-Matucci, 1985, p. 18). The artist should not give a scrupulous representation of the product, but rather "the idea": 'With Chocolat Klaus, Cappiello has virtually defined a new concept in poster design: a bold approach that breaks through the barriers of traditional Victorian moderation and penetrates directly into the viewer's subconscious to evoke images that remain indelibly associated with the advertised product' (Rennert, 2004, p. 16). In his compositions, Cappiello pays particular attention to the search for what he calls 'arabesque', a

word to which the artist attributes a special meaning: 'arabesque' is a harmonious organism, the essential structure of the composition, 'in a sense its backbone' (Viénot, 1946, p. 57), the decorative element that connects the different components, design and colour, to give them 'form', reason and concreteness. Also, in 1903, Cappiello created other posters using a black background: Amidon au Chat - Hoffmann and the effervescent tablets Katabexine. Here, too, the advertised product is almost invisible, the entire poster is occupied by the elegant, sinuous figure of a woman in a brightly coloured dress: red and fuchsia, with a green hat, all surmounted by yellow lettering.





Fig. 7 - L. Cappiello, E.&A. Mele, 1903.
Fig. 8 - L. Cappiello, Cri-staux Iodes Proot, 1905.

The poster Leonetto Cappiello created for the Italian market for the important fashion store Mele in Naples dates from 1903. This time, however, the image depicted is not unrelated to the type of product being advertised: an elegantly dressed couple stands out against a dark grey background, creating a slight colour contrast with the black evening suit worn by the man. The woman's dress stands out even more: a riot of colours, a red dress, a yellow hat with green feathers, a beige ostrich feather boa, and yellow lettering stand out against everything. The path was now clear, and in the following years, Cappiello produced numerous posters, some with a black background, becoming a leading figure in the art of communication through images; his innovative ideas for advertising graphics began to influence the creations of numerous contemporary poster artists and subsequent generations. 'Black, a colour previously little used in poster design, gained a place of honour (...) and Cappiello never abandoned it completely' (AA.VV., 1981, p. 17); in the years that followed, one of the artist's most iconic posters was the one for Cristaux Iodés Proot in 1905, where Cappiello associated the slogan 'to live a long life' with a hundred-year-old man with a long white beard, wearing a tight-fitting yellow suit, standing on a ladder. He also worked for Spanish companies. In the poster for 'Coñac del Caballo Verde', also from 1905, Cappiello repeated, as he had done for Chocolat Klaus, a highly imaginative pairing: a red-haired Amazon in a yellow costume riding an unlikely green steed, all against a black background with yellow lettering, a lively composition that remains etched in the mind of the observer.





Fig. 9 - L. Cappiello, Coñac Caballo Verde, 1905.
Fig. 10 - L. Cappiello, Maurin Quina, 1906.

In 1906, Leonetto Cappiello created a poster printed by Vercasson 6] for 'Maurin Quina Le Puy' [7]; affectionately known as 'Il Diavolo Verde' (The Green Devil), it is a surprising image that combines something sinister and ironic, managing to be both fascinating and compelling. Histrionic and sly, the green devil, highlighted by purple shades, is depicted in the act of uncorking a red bottle. It is no surprise that this poster is one of the most memorable icons of Cappiello's visual legacy.





Fig. 11 - L. Cappiello, Thermogene, 1909.
Fig. 12 - L. Cappiello, Isolabella, 1910 ca.

Leonetto is defined as the inventor of the 'poster brand' (Villari, 2008, p. 23) because he manages to create a strong connection between the brand and the image created, so much so that the company Thermogène specifies: 'Ask for the fire-breathing Pierrot' (AA.VV., 1981, p. 17), and not 'Ask for Thermogène', as the image created by Cappiello wins with the power of conviction and definitively imposes itself on the consumer. The Pierrot of Thermogène becomes an iconic and long-lasting advertisement, never going out of fashion as a classic, which will last from 1909 for over 50 years. The choice of an iconic mask from the Italian commedia dell'arte, Arlecchino, to advertise the products of the Isolabella company between 1909 and 1910 was perhaps suggested by the Italian nature of the product being advertised. However, here, too, Cappiello surprises and amazes: the subject is an 'arlecchina' (a female Harlequin), a slender female figure with red hair and vermilion lips, dancing sinuously among the bottles, an irrational image on a conscious level, but one that remains unmistakable on an emotional and unconscious level. In an era of fast-paced rhythms, passers-by no longer have time to stop and look at advertising posters and, therefore, no longer read the text. Cappiello's posters offer us images without superfluous embellishments, which, in their synthesis and essentiality, manage to strike, surprise and attract attention at all costs.

5. The spread of the black background on Italian posters

After 1903, Leonetto Cappiello became a leading figure in the art of communication through images; his innovative ideas for advertising graphics began to influence the work of numerous contemporary poster artists and subsequent generations.

The dark background, previously little used in poster design, gained a place of honour, especially after around 1910. Cappiello never completely abandoned it 8]: 'The background of many of his posters is solid black, which isolates them from the other posters on the fence, and there are many foil strips that highlight the violent colours...' (AA.VV., 1981, p. 17). The dark background solution began to spread among poster artists, especially Italian ones, who sensed its graphic potential. At the beginning of the 20th century, Plinio Codognato from Verona created a poster for 'Vermut Bianco Cattarozzi', but the black background seems to be more due to the setting of the scene, which appears to take place at night under the light of a street lamp, than to any real intention on the part of the author to use a dark background. Some time ago, there was a dispute over who was the first to use a black background in posters: 'The search for synthesis led Codognato to use a black background for numerous posters. The attribution of temporal primacy between the Veronese artist and Leonetto Cappiello is disputed' (Martinelli, 2011, p. 110); but looking closely at the chronology and style of the works, we can only assign primacy to the Livorno artist. In the poster for 'Rabarbaro Cillario Roma' from around 1915, Codognato presents a scene with a black background set among the ruins of the capital, between the Colosseum and the three columns of the temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum: a bottle of liqueur dressed as a charioteer drives a chariot pulled by two rearing horses, red like the chariot. These colours are decidedly unusual but destined to remain in the viewer's memory. This is the so-called 'Rosso Codognato' (Martinelli, 2011, p. 112), which the artist would use in many of his posters.



Fig. 13 - P. Codognato, Catarozzi, 1900 ca.
Fig. 14 - P. Codognato, Cillario, 1915 ca.



Fig. 15 - P. Codognato, Motocicli Douglas, 1915.
Fig. 16 - L. Metlicovitz, Marmellate Fede, 1927.

A highly evocative poster by the Veronese artist is the 'Motocicli Douglas' (Douglas Motorcycles) from 1915: against a black starry sky, like a flaming comet, stands out the centaur riding a motorcycle rendered in shades ranging from yellow to intense red; at the bottom are the logo and lettering in bright green. Cappiello was the first to draw a fantasy subject to advertise an article, creating a sort of synonym for the product itself (e.g. Thermogène ointment) or drawing inspiration from history by associating the product with a famous person, a deity, a mythological subject or a king. Leopoldo Metlicovitz drew on Italian literature, adopting perhaps one of the most representative icons of Italian tradition for the 'Marmellate Fede' poster: Pinocchio. A fine and refined poster artist, historical graphic designer for the Ricordi company in Milan and creator of famous posters for plays and films, Metlicovitz gracefully and humorously depicts the puppet in his characteristic red and white outfit, eating jam from a jar with a spoon, while a small dog of the same colours licks the drops of jam that have fallen on the floor (Panzeri, 2014, p. 76).



Fig. 17 - M. Dudovich, Stufa Weinhagen, 1906.
Fig. 18 - M. Dudovich, Inchiostri Rapid, 1906.

Another example of 'Art Nouveau style' is the poster, from around 1906, by Marcello Dudovich for the 'Weinhagen Stove'; the scene, against a dark background, shows an elegantly dressed young woman sitting to warm herself and an elderly, distinguished gentleman (dressed in black, so that he blends into the background) who reveals her bare shoulder, evidently because of the intense heat. These small, almost imperceptible gestures perfectly convey the scene depicted. In Dudovich's posters, 'the images portrayed are almost always those of elegant, wealthy women... and authoritarian, self-assured gentlemen belonging to the ruling class' (AA.VV., 1985, p. 43). For 'Inchiostri Rapid', Dudovich created a poster, dated 1906, which is highly synthetic: the black background, reminiscent of the product being advertised, becomes the protagonist, from which a few elements emerge, the face, hands and red hair of a woman intent on writing on some sheets of paper; the poster is completed at the bottom by the logo and explanatory text. One of Dudovich's most iconic posters is undoubtedly the one for 'Vermouth Bianco' from 1920, a successful combination of the black background and the elegant white dress of the girl, which widens towards the bottom to include the brand name 'Martini & Rossi - Torino'. Jean d'Ylen took over from Vercasson as artistic director when Cappiello, with whom he had collaborated, terminated the 'restrictive contract' (Forni, 2008, p. 79) that bound him to the Parisian printer [9]. Jean d'Ylen inherited his master's style, numerous sketches and notes that Leonetto had left at Vercasson; in fact, the poster for 'Gran Vin Blanc' clearly shows the master's established stylistic features: against a black background, a ruddy Bacchus happily rides a bunch of white grapes.



Fig. 19 - M. Dudovich, Vermouth Martini, 1920.
Fig. 20 - Jean d'Ylen, Gran Vin Blanc, 1920.

Already the representative in Italy of the publisher Vercasson, Giuseppe Magagnoli founded MAGA, which quickly became the most important advertising agency in Italy; he collaborated with some of the most famous poster artists, such as Luciano Mauzan, Severo Pozzati and Marcello Nizzoli. In Magagnoli's 1921 poster 'Cordial Campari', the protagonist is a Pierrot greedily drinking the liqueur; yellow (the colour of the advertised product) predominates in the lettering, and the light comes from below as if the scene were taking place in theatre stage. Maga established a long and fruitful professional partnership with Achille Luciano Mauzan. In his 1921 advertisement for 'Anisetto Alberti', the author drew a strange medieval knight in unlikely green armour, depicted crouching down to open a bottle with the tip of his sword. Severo Pozzati, known as Sepo, created a poster for Maga in 1920 for 'Sciampagnino Villa', featuring a funny character in a strange white suit, a huge red umbrella,

pockets and a basket overflowing with bottles which, together with the orange and yellow lettering, stand out prominently against the black background. Giorgio Muggiani, graphic designer, advertiser, caricaturist, sports manager and football referee, introduced an important innovation in graphic composition in his 1923 poster for Olio Diana: the product can, and the handle of the pan protrude from the white border that frames the poster, giving the impression that the scene depicted continues beyond the physical limits of the poster.



Fig. 21 - MAGA, Cordial Campari, 1921.
Fig. 22 - A.L. Mauzan, Anisetto Alberti, 1921.



Fig. 23 - Sepo, Sciampa-gnino Villa, 1920.
Fig. 24 - G. Muggiani, Olio Diana, 1923.

We cannot deny Giuseppe Cappadonia's remarkable sense of humour; in his 1920 poster for 'Touring Oil', against a dark starry sky, he depicts a flaming red car hurtling through space at full speed, about to hit a perplexed and pained yellow-moon. Mario Bazzi's humorous and sarcastic streak is evident in the 'Concentrato 5 Oxid' poster, where an almost immaterial figure, formed by a white shirt, underpants and socks, wanders around the black background holding up a bottle of the product with green and yellow lettering ensures its visibility. Federico Seneca, Perugina's long-standing graphic designer, in his 1928 poster for 'Pastina glutinata Buitoni' (both brands were part of the same holding company), depicts a highly stylised nun of St. Vincent [10] bringing a plate of pasta and hot broth to the sick. Note the colours chosen for the lettering, yellow, red, and orange, which clearly reference egg yolk. Finally, Leonetto Cappiello's 1929 poster for 'Nitrolian' features a black background cut diagonally by a ladder that a painter paints red while a woman descends the steps without leaving any marks on the freshly painted treads. The slogan reads: 'dries as soon as it is painted'.



Fig. 25 - G. Cappadonia, Touring Oils, 1920.
Fig. 26 - M. Bazzi, 5 Oxid, 1922.



Fig. 27 - F. Seneca, Pastina Buitoni, 1928.
Fig. 28 - L. Cappiello, Nitrolian, 1929.

6. Conclusions

'The raw materials available to Cappiello to convey his idea are essentially colour and movement' (Cappiello,

1981, p. 17); this sentence is symptomatic of how the artist managed to innovate and radically change advertising posters worldwide through the use of a few basic elements, making the communicative language of commercial posters simple and effective. His innovation lies not only in the introduction of dark backgrounds but more generally in the use of a monochrome background, whether green, red, blue or brown; this renewal makes the main image more recognisable and iconic, which, combined with the use of complementary colours for the figures and lettering, creates contrast and emphasises the composition. Between 1903 and 1920, Cappiello produced numerous dark-coloured posters, spreading their use among contemporary poster artists for over a decade. A large group of European artists followed in his footsteps, adopting black backgrounds in commercial posters, demonstrating the validity and quality of the innovative and revolutionary ideas of the great Leonetto Cappiello.

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9. Short biography of the author(s)

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Notes

[1] Hollis R. (2005), Graphic Design, Thames & Hudson, London, p. 11.

[2] Meggs P.B., Purvis. A.W., (2006), History of Graphic Design, Wiley & Sons, New Jersey, p. 195.

[3] Viénot J. (1946), L. Cappiello - sa vie et son Œuvre, Edition de Clermont, Paris: 'The two artists had the same admiration for each other. When they first met, Lautrec came to Cappiello and said bluntly: "We were like two dogs for each other, we had to meet."' p. 74.

[4] Posters produced using the lithographic technique varied in size but were standard: the most common were 70x100 cm, 100x140 cm and 140x200 cm, reaching approximately 200x300 cm. The master plates usually measured 80x110, so larger posters were obtained by placing individual sheets side by side. Smaller sizes were also produced, including 25x35 cm and 50x60 cm posters, as well as postcard formats.

[5] Bargiel-Harry R., Esthétique de l'affiche chez Cappiello, in AA.VV. (1981), Cappiello 1875-1942, Ed. Réunion M.N., Paris, p.16.

[6] On the relationship between Cappielli and the printer Vercasson, see: AA.VV. 1981, pp. 113 ff., and Scalzo 2022b. pp. 124-125.

[7] Maurin Quina is an 'aperitif', a white wine flavoured with wild cherries, quinine, bitter almonds and cherries. 'Il Diavolo Verde' (The Green Devil) in particular evokes the 'fée verte' (the green fairy), the nickname given to absinthe, a cheap and highly alcoholic drink that was very popular during the Belle Epoque.

[8] Cappiello produced a vast number of commercial posters with a black background; for the sake of brevity, we have limited ourselves to describing just a few examples from the first decade of the 20th century.

[9] On this story, see: Forni D., Forni R., (2008), Sepo - settant'anni con l'arte, Pendragon, Bologna, p. 79.

[10] The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul were dedicated to caring for orphans and assisting the sick in hospitals.

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