

The Daily Heller: Bruno Munari's Playtime

by **Steven Heller**

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The late Bruno Munari is a legend. Not a fly-by-night one but a real pillar of Italian culture, and an artist of the world. I am certain you've seen at least one of his stunning books for children or his pocket-sized paperback lexicon of Italian hand gestures. I own a few books on Munari's books, and some of the books themselves. His oeuvre is vast; he dealt with so many themes and he's especially fond of books that take liberties with form and content.

For those who don't know a Munari when they see one, or those who want to see more of his archival work, visit the [Center for Italian Modern Art](#) in New York City, where the exhibit [Bruno Munari: The Child Within](#) is on view until Jan. 14. Guest curator [Steven Guarnaccia](#) has assembled various classics, and some lesser-known Munari books and objects—and here he offers a little narration on what to expect.



Bruno Munari. Patellani, Federico. Bruno Munari nella sua abitazione, Milano, 1950. Federico Patellani © Archivio Federico Patella-Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo.



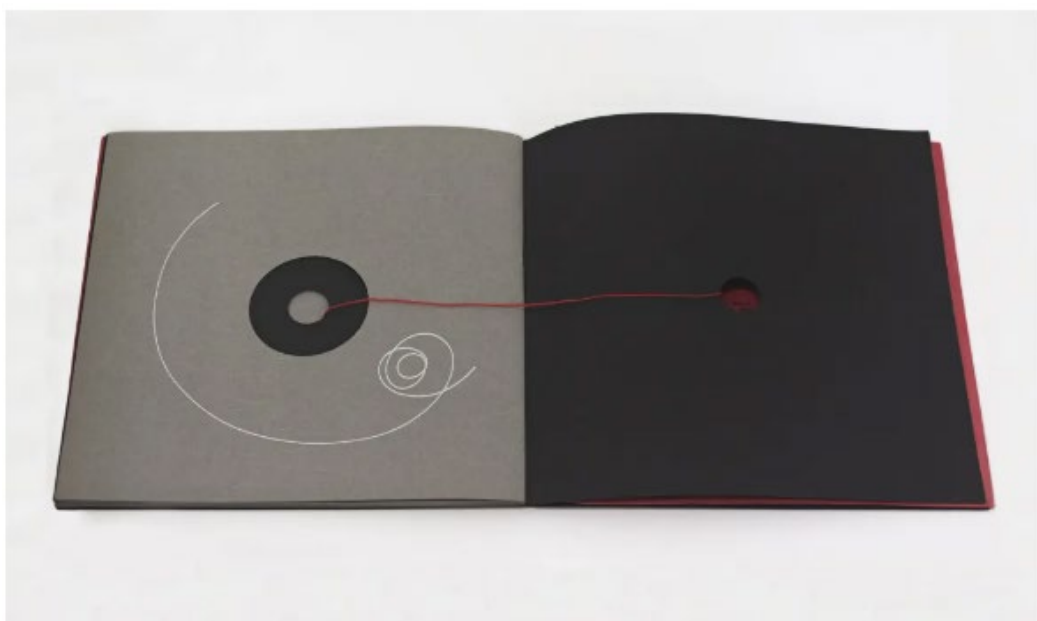
Ricostruzione teorica di un oggetto immaginario (Theoretical Reconstruction of an Imaginary Object), 1969. Courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; kaufmann repetto, New York / Milan, and Repetto Gallery, London.

How did you come to curate an exhibition on Bruno Munari?

I'm a long-time fan and collector of Munari's work. I always felt that he was undervalued in general as an artist and criminally under-known in the US. Plus I was asked to do it.

In fact, what do you hold as his prize work and your treasure?

I think that his companion books, *Nella Nebbia di Milano* (In the Fog of Milan) and *Nella Notte Buia* (in the Dark of the Night) epitomize what's great about Munari's work: totally unassuming but unerring draftsmanship and very smart and funny ideas, utterly and magically conveyed through a really astonishing use of a variety of paper stocks. I also have a soft spot for *Cappuccetto Bianco* (Little White Riding Hood) which is essentially a blank book; it all takes place in a snowstorm and the pages are nearly totally white.



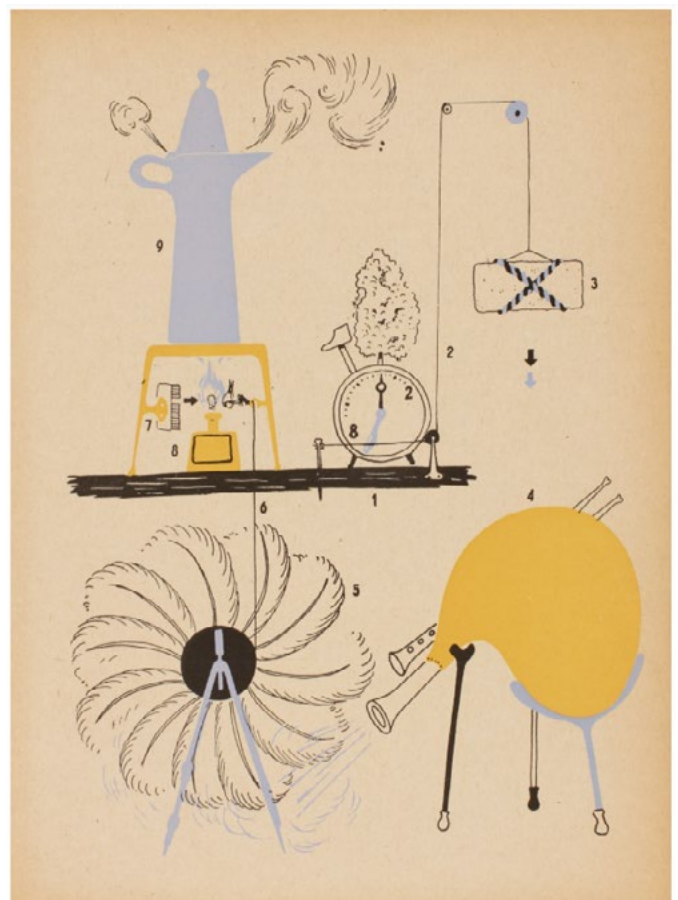
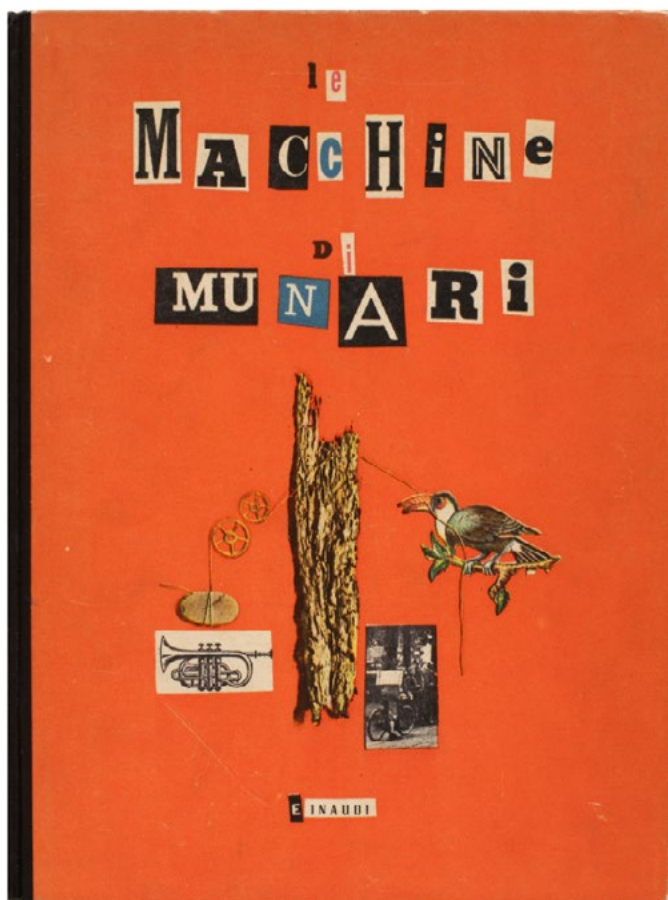
Libro illeggibile N.Y.1 (Unreadable book N.Y.1). Courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; kaufmann repetto, New York / Milan, and Repetto Gallery, London

I have a number of examples of his late Futurist/Fascist work. Should he be held accountable for his youthful exuberance?

I'll let Nicola Lucchi, a design historian and CIMA Director, answer this one:

Lucchi: Working in the field of editorial work and the press under a totalitarian regime inevitably forced Munari to contend with the Fascist regime's censorship bureau and with the pressures that came from the regime. This inevitably generated some work that is certainly questionable from a political perspective. At the same time, Munari was never a card-carrying member of the Fascist Party, and some of his politically-tinted work, such as the *Almanacco Antiletterario Bompiani* from 1936, includes subtle elements of satire that pushed the boundaries of what could be said and illustrated under a totalitarian regime.

As for his Futurist work, Munari's interest in aeropittura, his ironic, jarring photocollages, and his early sculptures present from the very beginning a playful and inventive character that will become all the more apparent in his post-WW2 work. One could say it is an excellent example of the "constructive" part of Futurism, that of the "ricostruzione futurista dell'universo" advocated by Balla and Depero, rather than a retrenchment into the more destructive exaltations of violence and war that were frequently at the center of Marinetti's early manifestos.



Cover and interior spread: *Le macchine di Munari* (Munari's Machines). "Libri per l'infanzia e la gioventù" series. Turin: Einaudi, 1942. Merrill C. Berman Collection



Fossile del 2000 (Fossil from 2000), 1959-79 Thermostatic valves, methacrylate, metal. Courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; kaufmann repetto, New York / Milan, and Repetto Gallery, London

What do you think distinguishes him as a designer, illustrator, and author?

First of all, he was endlessly inventive, and he never met a medium he didn't like, and that he didn't excel at: photocopy, pen and ink drawing, collage, paper construction. He also was extremely sensitive to the appropriate use of materials and he deployed a seemingly endless variety of materials to do his creative bidding.

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Il venditore di animali (Animals for Sale). "I Libri Munari" series n.6. Verona: Mondadori. 1st edition, 1945. Merrill C. Berman Collection



Has Editions Corraini, who owns reproduction rights to Munari, republished everything or are there more surprises to come?

Corraini has done a remarkable job of keeping much of Munari's work in print. There are some things, such as Gilet Portalibri, a vest with pockets specially designed to hold a wide selection of Munari's books, and LibroLetto, a book as child's bed, that I'm looking forward to seeing come into production.

What, as artist and author, have you learned in doing this?

I've been fortunate to spend time with and get close to the full range and depth of one artist's career, and I've come to appreciate what a creative life fully lived really means.