

# His origins, work and art: glass and freedom

*“You probably do not know me; well ask about me,  
and you will come to know that I am a young man of goodwill  
who for the past fifty years has been practising with all chastity  
the dual trade of glassmaker and poet.*

*Perhaps good spirits will not find too much analogy  
between a broken crystal and an eleven syllabic verse,  
but that does not matter.*

*Poetae nascuntur, said the proverb (I think)  
and if I was seduced by the attractions of the glassworks,  
I owe it to the corruption of society, which would rather pay  
for a replaced crystal, than an epithalamium at home, or a sonnet with a tail<sup>1</sup>*

Camurro Piantalafava, *Late Poet*  
Pontedera 15 March 1854

Giorgio Dal Canto was born on 8th February 1934 in Pontedera, a place that apparently doesn't deal in art, and despite being in Tuscany, the home of the Renaissance and much else, does not flaunt treasures in this field. In fact, artists of the calibre of Andrea da Pontedera, universally known as Andrea Pisano<sup>2</sup>, or Silvestro Mariotti, an extraordinary goldsmith who amazed everyone with his ingenuity, were born here.<sup>3</sup>

When Giorgio was born, Pontedera had only been a 'city' for four years. King Vittorio Emanuele III had conferred the honour on it, at the urging of Lando Ferretti<sup>4</sup>, a Pontedera native and influential man of the Regime. Here, Fascism had hit hard and the list of young lives it had taken away was conspicuous: Corrado Bellucci, Galliano Bertelli, and Vittorio Caciagli, Alvaro Fantozzi, Vasco Gronchi, Vasco Mazzinghi and Paris Profeti.

Many had to go across the border to escape violence and often death threats. Giorgio's father, **Libero**, true to his name, was one of them and had taken refuge in France during the war. For this, he had earned the nickname 'Mercì', a word he frequently used in his daily speech. Libero worked for Piaggio and had obtained a council house in Via dei Cappuccini in Pontede-



ra. His brother Ultimo, on the other hand, ran a delicatessen on the city's main street, a food business that was to become a jewel in Pontedera's crown and was to see his son Attilio take over, and today his nephew Francesco.

For the city, the Dal Cantos became a reference point for the art of cooking, and no Pontederan can pronounce that surname, even today, without thinking of extraordinary delicacies and smiling with complicit satisfaction. Giorgio's childhood was spent in difficult years. When he was six years old, Italy entered the war and on the eve of his tenth birthday, in January 1944, his town was severely bombed, causing enormous damage and hundreds of casualties. The people of Pontedera ran away from that horror and fled everywhere.

In his child eyes, those ruins lingered indelibly, along with the conviction that man can also become a beast.

After primary school, Giorgio attended the Scuola di Avviamento al Lavoro (vocational training school) in Via Dante and added two more years at the technical school.

At a very young age, he was employed as a decorator at the glassworks of **Astutillo** and **Alfio Pasquinucci**.



The surname Pasquinucci is well known in Pontedera not only for this activity but also for ceramics.<sup>5</sup> Dal Canto was not involved in that. Rather, he worked with the team that carried on the tradition of glassmaking. On the banks of the Era river, this dates back to 1777 when the Lucchesi brothers, Faustino and Andrea, set up a flask production activity in the place known as Carbonaia di Ripa d'Era.<sup>6</sup> This activity was later passed on to the Amedeo Roland & C<sup>7</sup>. company, which produced plate glass<sup>8</sup>. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> the factory of the Rossi brothers brought an extraordinary production to the area: *'white crystal works of all kinds (...) those adorned with various types of carvings and designs, which make them very elegant'*<sup>9</sup>.

Glass was now the prerogative of the Pasquinucci Company.

Thirty artisans went to work daily in Via Rossini and Giorgio, timidly but with much commitment, began to master the art of glassmaking in all its forms.

There were two masters at Pasquinucci: Dal Canto and Mario Donati, later a teacher at the Art Institute in Pisa. Among the techniques in which Dal Canto excelled and innovated was that of marbled glass. This involved giving the effect of marble to glass with a simple procedure, but which also required a certain knowledge and skill to achieve a good result.

The customers were mainly furniture makers who made marbled glass tops for kitchens and furniture.

The industry developed further, people liked this particular material, and they seemed to ask for nothing more.

With this technique, Dal Canto also produced artistic mirrors of considerable value. With the

Pasquinucci brothers and in particular with Astutillo, he had a special relationship, so much so that his employer regarded him as a son. The boy had won him over. A hard worker, a 'special' character, uncompromising and talented. Seeing him at work was like watching a small play where the protagonist was constantly stepping out of the part.

Dal Canto's free spirit manifested itself in excesses when he felt oppressed or misunderstood, like the time when he had put 'too much of himself' into a work that had been assigned to him and, because of this behaviour, had been reprimanded. Leaving his work tools behind and dismissing Astutillo with a broad gesture, he disappeared from the glassworks, leaving everyone stunned and returning to his workplace only after three days and numerous peace ambassadors.

Giorgio was like that, take it or leave it!

Fabrizio Pasquinucci, son of one of the two founders, also had such a deep friendship with Giorgio that they 'understood each other at first glance' and allowed Dal Canto to make Pindaric flights of fancy, as in the case of his dream of building the Torre del Mangia that towers in Piazza del Campo in Siena entirely out of glass. The object was created and much was the astonishment of colleagues and those who had the good fortune to see it.

Dal Canto had started from a vision of his own and, not listening to anyone, had designed the opera for his personal enjoyment and that of the people who would see it. A bit of a boast, a bit of a showman... definitely an artist, and a real one.

He also produced many drawings and artistic stained-glass windows to decorate furniture in Cascina and Ponsacco and lent his art also for

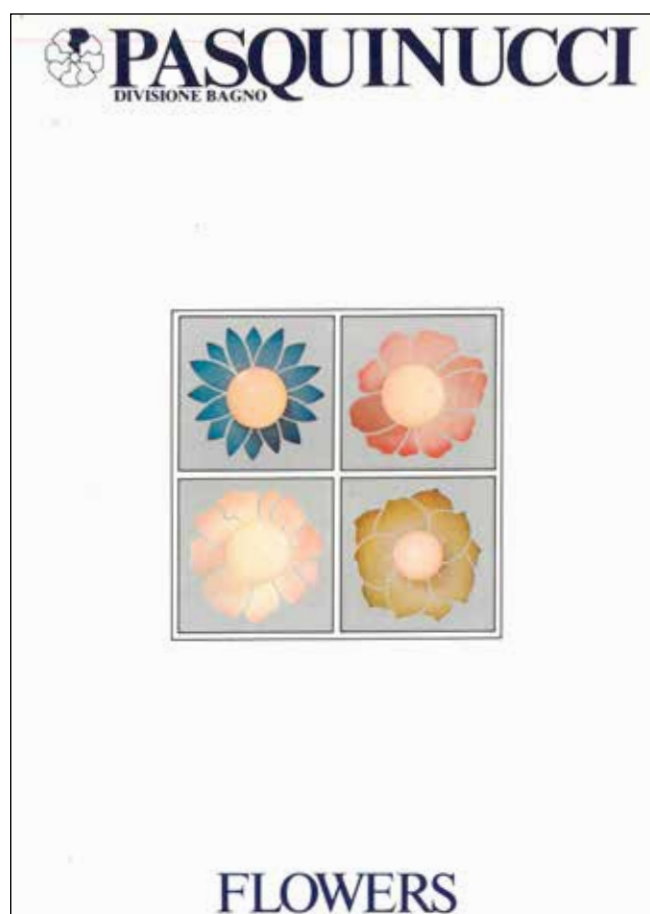
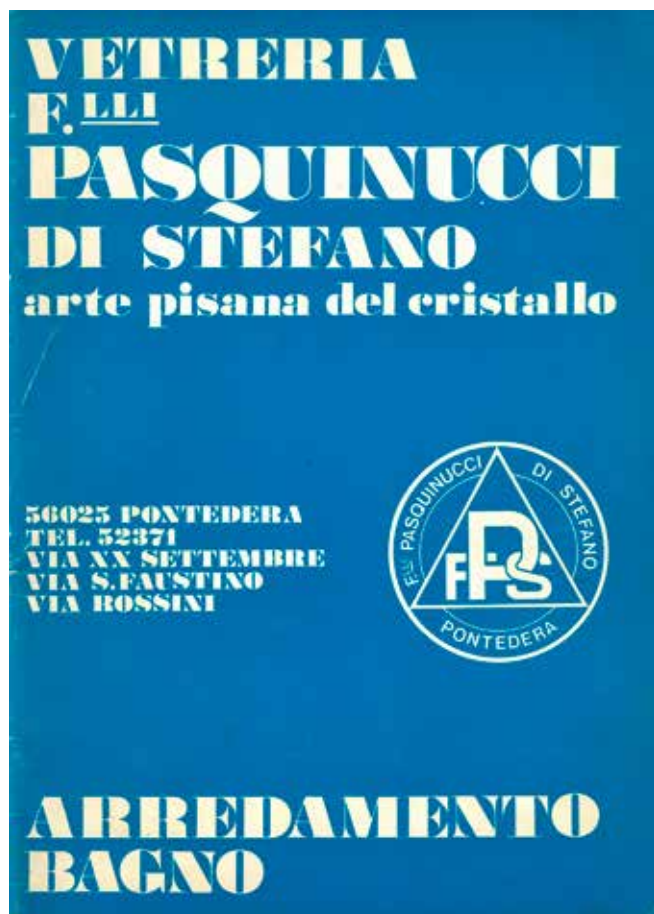
Catalogs of the Pasquinucci company  
(Riccardo Pasquinucci)

*On the following pages*

Giorgio Dal Canto on guitar  
Giorgio in 1954 with a friend

the creation of some valuable shop signs, such as that of the Bellincioni sisters in Pontedera. The artist followed the transfer of the heart of the glassworks from Pontedera to Fornacette and continued his activity until his retirement in the 1990s. After leaving Pasquinucci, he created a large canvas in memory of his working life and the company that had welcomed him as a boy and made him grow artistically. Throughout this experience, Dal Canto had been a generous and punctual worker, maintaining a shy, but always straightforward attitude.

An anarchist, he did not take part in trade union meetings, he always spoke his mind without worrying about being disliked by his interlocutor; as transparent and impermeable as the glass he worked with, Dal Canto went his own way, and those who disagreed had better back off or change their ways. Everyone knew him by his first name, Giorgio, but in his family, he was already Babb, from a word game his brother had invented, and soon that would become his trademark.







<sup>1</sup> *The author continues: 'Having said that, I will now move on to the conclusion. In my idle moments, I have abandoned myself in the arms of the muses, and written a drama in five acts, with incest, murder, a dungeon, a final coup de grâce, and similar tirades. As for poetry, I can assure you that in one thousand nine hundred and sixty-six verses, there is not one waning. It seems impossible; but truth above all. In the first act, I have inserted two romances, two little things that I wrote 15 years ago when I was studying at the Abbachino, and which I now thought it best to include in the drama, with French guitar accompaniment. The effect is sure. As for the action, you will find plenty of it: it is a continuous movement, a real perpetual motion. I can assure you that all my characters have quicksilver on them, and they do not stand still for a minute. The characters are well led, or so it seems to me. There is a naughty husband, a treacherous friend, an impudent wife, an imbecile stepson, and a foolish servant. The subject matter is moral. Vice triumphs for five acts in a row, but in the last scene, it falls to the ground from a gunshot. Vice is represented by the scoundrel father; virtue is personified in the imbecile son. In fact, it is the son who, in the last scene, kills his father with a pistol shot, and then comes into the limelight to give the audience one of those little speeches that would move even the stalls'. Letter to the director, *Lo Scaramuccia, giornale-omnibus*, year 1 no. 40, 17 March 1854*

<sup>2</sup> For Andrea da Pontedera see: Ilaria Toesca, *Andrea e Nino Pisani*, Sansoni, Firenze 1950; Andrea Pisano edited by Enrico Castelnuovo, Fabbri, Milano 1966; *Andrea, Nino e Tommaso scultori pisani* edited by Mariagiulia Buresi with a historical profile on Pisan art of the Trecento by Antonino Caleca, photographs by Aurelio Amendola, Electa, Milano 1983 and *Per Andrea da Pontedera: anthology of writings and chronicles dedicated to the great sculptor and architect on the occasion of the inauguration of his monument in Pontedera on 27 September 1908* edited by Michele Quirici, Paolo Gori, Edizioni L'Ancoira - CLD libri, Fornacette (Calcinaia) 2002

<sup>3</sup> For Silvestro Mariotti see: Emilio Francini, *Della vita e delle opere di Silvestro Mariotti*, tipografia di F. Bencini, Florence 1857 and Roma Merli Francolini, Mario Lupi, Silvestro Mariotti orafo, Bandecchi&Vivaldi, Pontedera 2010

<sup>4</sup> For Lando Ferretti: Fausto Pettinelli, Giampaolo Grassi, *Lando Ferretti, Mussolini's journalist*, Bandecchi&Vivaldi, Pontedera 2005

<sup>5</sup> See The "Arturo Pasquinucci" by Ilaria and Lisa Bisori, *La città delle ciminiere. Archeologie industriali a Pontedera*, edited by Cristiana Torti and Michele Quirici, Tagete Edizioni, Pontedera 2006 p. 93. Stefano Pasquinucci, father of Astutillo and Alfio, set up a flask factory in Piazza Cavour in Pontedera. The business started its production at least as early as the beginning of the 20th century, was later expanded to become a real glassworks and was transferred to the building that occupied the block at the intersection of Via Rossini and Via XX Settembre.

<sup>6</sup> "The Via Carbonaja or delle Carbonaje corresponded to the section of today's Via Rossini that runs from Via Saffi to Via XX Settembre", *Pontedera, Archeologia, Storia ed Arte* edited by Paolo Morelli, Pacini Editore, Pisa 1994, p.

177. The Lucchesini business was instead located 'at the edge of the piazzone' where the Morini weaving mill would later be built. Today, Villa Crastan stands where the factory used to be, and the elegant family palace designed by the architect Luigi Bellincioni, recently restored, remains as a testimony to that time.

<sup>7</sup> "However, this glassworks was closed in the first quarter of the 19th century and moved to Colle, due to the summer shortage of water in Pontedera" *Pontedera, Archeologia, Storia ed Arte*, op. cit., p. 177

<sup>8</sup> See Mario Montorzi, *Appunti per una storia del commercio e delle manifatture di Pontedera agli inizi dell'età contemporanea* in *Bollettino Storico Pisano*, v. 50, 1981, p. 183.

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the meetings held by the third class of the Accademia delle Belle Arti and of the refinements of manufacturing in Tuscany by Doctor Antonio Targioni Tozzetti Professor of Chemistry at the aforementioned Accademia*, press Guglielmo Piatti, Florence 1818 p. 38







**La bottega di orologiaio di Via Roma**  
 (The watchmaker's workshop in Via Roma)  
 hand-coloured graphic, copy 5/10

*Behind the counter, Adriano Volpi. At the back of the room from the left: Gambaccini, Siro Lupi, Vladimiro Mori, Lido Donati. In the foreground Flario Puccioni, Sergio Castellani, Sergio Vivaldi. Behind him Francesco Vivaldi. With cigarette Giorgio Dal Canto*