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Woolmark (1964)
 Francesco Saroglia

In 1963, the International Wool Secretariat, now called Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) announced a global design competition to create a graphic identity for wool “which would hold consumer confidence and represent quality standards”, to be used internationally. The resultant logo sits proudly at number one in our Top 20.

Seemingly inspired by a skein of wool, the winning design, known as the Woolmark, was launched in 1964 in Britain, US, Japan, Germany, Holland and Belgium, and is now recognised the world over. But who designed it?

Officially the Woolmark is credited to an Italian designer hailing from Milan called Francesco Saroglia. He won the competition, a fact documented by numerous sources. But we don’t know anything else about the man. There are no books

Below: Italian designer Franco Grignani created over 150 press and poster advertisements for Alfieri & Lacroix, a Milan-based typo-lithographers, from 1952 through to the 70s. Many displayed a graphic approach similar to that of the Woolmark logo attributed to Francesco Saroglia.

Right: The Woolmark makes for an eye-catching graphic in this huge neon advertising display in London’s Piccadilly Circus in the early 70s

featuring his work (at least none we have been able to find), no record of any exhibitions, not even any web pages featuring any other work by Saroglia or, indeed, anything about him at all. How could the designer of one of the most famous logos of all time have left no trace of his wider practice?

Was it, in fact, his work at all? On its website, the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI) attributes the logo’s design to another Italian designer, Franco Grignani (1908–1999), suggesting that he entered the competition using a pseudonym because he was actually on the jury to choose the winning design. This version of events also appears in Dutch designer and author Ben Bos’s 2007 book, *AGI: Graphic Design since 1950*. “Grignani was a member of the jury but he couldn’t resist the temptation of taking part himself, the subject being ideal for his design approach,” writes Bos. “He played it





correctly and won. He entered under the alias of Francesco Seraglio [sic].”

Via email Bos says that he simply didn’t believe that Saroglia existed on account of there being no other work attributed to him, hence coming up with what he admits is his pseudonym ‘theory’. He also suggests that another AGI member, Leonardo Sonnoli, might be able to reveal more. When emailed, Sonnoli promptly dismisses Bos’s pseudonym theory and instead proffers a version of events he had gleaned from one of Grignani’s daughters, Daniela.

“I don’t know exactly how the IWS organised the competition, but at a certain point there was a man in Milan called Spiriti, probably the owner of an advertising agency, who approached designers he knew to create a logo for the contest and submit them to him so he could collate and enter them all,” recalls Sonnoli. “Grignani was asked and so gave him the sketches of several possible solutions.

“IF SAROGLIA EXISTED, HIS NAME WOULD BE ASSOCIATED TO OTHER WORKS IN A SIMILAR LANGUAGE. NO WORKS, NO PERSON”

Shortly afterwards, Grignani was asked to join the jury in London that would select the winning work.

“When he was there, with great astonishment, he saw the work he’d submitted to Spiriti months before, not entered under his name but signed off as by an unknown designer called Saroglia. He was embarrassed – he thought his work had been stolen by Saroglia, and also because he wanted to conceal that the submitted logo was actually by him. When all the jurors agreed about that particular logo he actually tried to fight against it, but at the end it was chosen because it was definitely the best solution. At first he didn’t say anything and so wasn’t awarded the prize. But after a few years he was sad to not be recognised as the author, so he started to tell people that it was by him. He never got a penny for it.”

Grignani didn’t just tell people he was responsible. In 1995, at an exhibition on his work, curated by Mario Piazza at the Aiap Gallery in Milan,



Clockwise from top left: Various international ads featuring the Woolmark. Here it is in Paris; Tokyo; in a Japanese press ad from 1979; a 1974 French ad (art director: Bruno Suter of Agence FCA. Photographer: Daniel Aron); a Dutch ad; a German ad; a Spanish ad from 1988; how the Woolmark looks today; a US ad from 1967; AWI believes this is Saroglia at work on the logo and (next image) his hand painting it. Below far left: A page from Franco Grignani’s diary with Woolmark ideas pasted in

Grignani displayed a page from a diary onto which had been pasted the nine possible solutions that he had entered to the IWS logo competition.

The idea that Grignani was responsible for the Woolmark makes some sense. He wasn’t just a graphic designer but an architect, painter and photographer with a great interest in Op Art. Grignani’s pre-1963 posters for Alfieri & Lacroix show clearly that he was playing with curved arrangements of black and white stripes in his work at that time, while for a feature in Graphis magazine issue #108, published in 1963, Grignani showcased a series of black and white “graphic experiments”.

We put the idea to the great Italian-born designer Massimo Vignelli. “I have no doubts in attributing the Woolmark logo to Grignani,” he tells us. “It is typical of his visual language. I never heard of any other work by Saroglia, and the fact that Grignani was on the jury justifies that he had no offi-

cial entry in that competition. Saroglia may very well be a pseudonym, or just a body, but not a real designer. If he really existed, his name would be associated to other outstanding works in a similar language. No works, no person...”

“Grignani was one of the very few masters of graphic design in the 50s and 60s, and his work is very recognisable, most of it in the Woolmark mode. He was a nice gentleman, respected by the small design community of that time, rather reserved although present in every manifestation of design.”

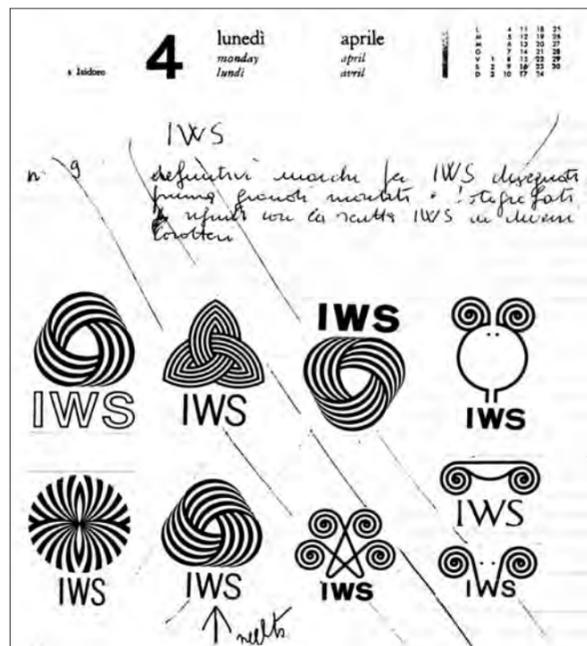
Sergio Polano and Pierpaolo Vetta’s book, ABC of 20th Century Graphics (Electa, 2002), credits Grignani as the designer of the Woolmark, describing it as a “paradigmatic example of his approach to the design of a symbol that becomes at once signifier and signified”. Elsewhere, he is credited as having designed the logo together with Saroglia.

Did the two perhaps have similar ideas and work

up the final design in collaboration? Pier Giorgio Minazio, a staff member at the AWI office in Biella, Italy, recalls a story told to him by his old boss about the creation of the Woolmark in which a Mr Saroglia drew the first sketch of the logo at a dinner one evening by using the prongs of a fork. “I was told that Mr Saroglia had the idea in this way and with his design studio in Milano, probably, after many attempts came out with the proposal of the logo that won the prize,” says Minazio.

Sadly, Grignani and many of those involved in the competition are now deceased. The AWI credits Saroglia as the logo’s author and there is no suggestion of wrongdoing by them, but we may never know the whole truth. One thing is certain, however. The creator of the Woolmark not only left behind a cracking logo, but also a great graphic mystery.

With thanks to Tony Brook for his help researching this piece



Images courtesy AWI

