

## A Northern Italian network of craftsmen and comakers



Goppion's display case for The Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Image courtesy of Goppion

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In 1952, chocolate spread maker Ferrero purchased hundreds of glass cases to merchandise confectionaries in bars and shops Italy-wide. These cases were all supplied by a single man, Nino Goppion, in a small workshop—now a garage—whose glass cases were all manufactured in that 20-square meter space in an unassuming building. In a neighborhood that has since transformed from a into a spirited hotspot of eateries and specialized galleries and that is home to one of Milan Design Week's key districts, the garage stands on the very same street and bears large brass signage—'GOPPION', but it is no longer where the cases are made. It is far too small for a company that currently supplies The British Museum, The Louvre and The Met, amongst hundreds of other major museums. The garage reverted to its actual purpose and currently houses the Goppions' bicycles and Tuscan wine.

When Nino's son, Alessandro, took over the company in the 1970's, he nichified his father's company by focalizing the business on the supply of a specific item: museum display cases. He had a considerable interest in history and philosophy and wanted to make a living out of it, looking to develop the five simple sides of a glass prism into more complex shapes and forms with advanced mechanical functions that account for airtightness, climate control, safety, and visitor engagement devices. His interest in preventative conservation piqued while working with the Opificio delle Pietre Dure and ICCROM's Gael De Guichen. Further out, Alessandro credits the Victoria and Albert Museum in spurring the company's transformation from Italian to International after major work on the largest display case in the world, opened with a lift mechanism.

Under Alessandro's management, Goppion were entrusted with the case for the Mona Lisa in the Louvre's *Salle des États*, the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London, Neil Armstrong's spacesuit at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C, and more in a portfolio that spans all imaginable major collections globally, ranging from jewelry, to musical instruments to fine arts. Whenever a high-value work or object is encased in a refined glass structure—freestanding, wall-standing, wall-mounted, or recessed—it is likely that Goppion is behind it. After moving out from the workshop in Tortona, the company did not stray too far and relocated to Milan's suburbs and into Trezzano sul Naviglio on a street aptly named Viale Thomas Edison. Northern Italy's long and rich craftsmanship legacy makes Trezzano an ideal destination for craftsmanship and Goppion's dedication to their city of birth in the north only seems natural and even strategic. Their current supplier network includes about 200 specialized professionals in mechanical and electrical engineering, precision mechanics, woodworking, glassworks, lighting and climate control. Goppion refer to these partners as "comakers" all who for the most part are located in Lombardy, a geographical configuration that is more than suitable. These

coworkers manufacture the many raw materials of each case while Goppion take charge of research and development, design and assembly in Trezzano's *laboratorio*.

Goppion claim that they have not been able to find an industrial canvas that can support them as much as their home base in Lombardy but acknowledge that they have occasionally considered a move. "Our location gives us a competitive advantage over the rest of the world. We don't need economies of scale, which inevitably push towards standardization and which limits museums in expressing their cultural identity," say Goppion. "We're headquartered in an area that allows us to rely on an 'Italian-district' economic model amongst a concentration of small and mid-sized businesses, all highly specialized and that work in complementary industries, permitting us to create an organization made up of qualified collaborators; suppliers for the different elements of each project we're commissioned."

"This Lombard network of comakers makes galleries like The Met possible because of their level of skill and flexibility. They're the reason why work like this is possible in this part of the world but not in Germany or the United States. The manufacturing parts of Italy—particularly Northwestern Italy—have remained at a small and medium level and that allows them to be flexible. If we need to create special pieces and only need fifty of them, our comakers have the capacity to make just that and not demand thousands of them. The Italian industrial system is of the horizontal type, made up of industrial districts wherein hundreds of companies are specialized in mechanics, jewelry, fashion, automotive, and so on and so forth. Lombardy is the largest mechanical district. This system allows more flexibility and quality than the vertical one—such as the German or Japanese one—where all the components are made within the same factory."

"The German industrial system, for one, is developed on a higher scale than the Italian one and has less flexibility for customization. A German competitor will likely encounter difficulty delivering a low quantity of customized display cases, will have a higher price, and would therefore be less competitive. The Italian luxury automobile industry is an example to follow. Maserati, Ferrari and Lamborghini lead the way in high-performance mechanics and reach a level of mechanical technology that is not matched anywhere else in the world; very much unlike brands like Volkswagen. While they do have factories, craftsmanship is still their calling and economies of scale are not in their lexicon."

All this success is not to say that Goppion can stand still and await commissions. While their services are in demand—craftsmanship is actively sought-out and endures in cultural and luxury industries—Goppion's suppliers' may not be, and Goppion is an assembly factory after all and not a manufacturing one. It is no secret that continuous industrial advancements that grant quicker production, lower costs and massive economies of scale are hurting Italy's artisans, whether in fashion, food, or furniture, or other. In response to this, third-generation successors (grandsons, for the most part) are taking on a responsibility in adapting their existing know-how to a quick-paced world that is so accustomed to maximum efficiency and receiving commissioned items at will call.

Bruno Goppion, Alessandro's son and Nino's grandson, joined the family business in 2018 at the age of twenty-five after working with The Cartier Collection and several Museums with the intent of facing the challenges that the future holds for the family company. Bruno's alleged vision is to evolve the comaker network into the 4.0 industry for a modern one; in order to become 4.0, the network would need to undergo a process of modernization with large tech suppliers. This evolution would be facilitated by Goppion's current projects such as that with IBM for the design and manufacturing of the display case that houses their first quantum computer, IBM Q.

"I fear that the Italian industrial system is burdened by state efficiency issues. Today, manufacturing is not something that is the first choice when picking a job. Unless the role gets modernized and made accessible and sustainable in some way or another, craftsmen will inevitably decline," explains Bruno. Nearby Milan in the Province of Monza and Brianza, the furniture design industry is flourishing and fetches billions each year in profit. Developed shortly after World War II, Brianza is currently home to over 2500 design-oriented businesses, including the likes of Molteni and Giorgetti, and in 2014, the district launched the 'Meet Brianza Expo' project placing attention on regional production potential during the Milan Expo with the purpose of sharing and exploiting all available resources, whether for development or communication, sharing the collaborative spirit of what Goppion has created with its comaker network.

Manufacturing networks thrive in conditions with economies of scale. Elsewhere they are at risk, and while the secret to sustaining these networks may remain unclear, Italy's craft-oriented businesses are playing an active role in acknowledging their massive roles in their success, and keeping them going. They have to, or otherwise learn to produce from A to Z.

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**Goppion. The Art of Case Design**