

# THE LEGACY OF ALFONSO LEONI (1941-1980)

Category: Review article

**Abstract:** Alfonso Leoni was an Italian artist, a great talent who unfortunately died very early, at age 39. His life was entirely dedicated to his art production and to his teaching at the School of Ceramics in Faenza.

His research was innovative and multidisciplinary for his time: he experienced not just ceramics, but also painting, sculpture, installation, performances, design. He was able to deepen the social issues present in Italy and Europe during the 1960s/1970s in his works. He looked at art as a means of reaching and developing new practices that have been taken as references, especially in the artistic practices of the artists born in the 1970s. I am not wrong when I say that he is the “father” of all the artists born in the 1970s, because that generation was able to improve his message of creativity, of liberation from the traditional concepts linked to ceramics, evolving in a more artistic way. His great performance at the Faenza Prize in 1976 is still written in the annals of Italian history of ceramics.

The analysis of the documents from his archive, in a long study that took 5 years of work, enabled me to study his personality as a protagonist within the Italian artistic system and the international ceramic system of relationships and competitions. Leoni was not just an Italy-based artist. He had the opportunity to exhibit abroad (Japan many times, Canada, Poland, former USSR, UK) with important achievements well-recognized by the organizers (some of his works belong to important public collections). We may say that his work is more international than ever before.

In some way, we can say that he was a pioneer of the ceramic artistic sculpture.

**Key words:** ceramic sculpture, Italian ceramic art, international ceramic competitions, artistic ceramic performances, innovation, design

Telling the story of the artistic career of Alfonso Leoni (1941-1980), means describing the vitality of the artistic Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, and of the artistic Faenza of the time, characterised by important masters such as Angelo Biancini and Carlo Zauli. An environment that hosted important internationally recognised artists, such as Nanni Valentini and Albert Diato, students of the same Ceramic School where Leoni began his training. It is also necessary to face an important critical approach: thanks to Leoni, people understood that ceramics is a language of sculpture and contemporary art. He fought for this key concept on the eve of a critical review of the work of ceramic artists that began in the 1970s, owing to important scholars such as Enrico Crispolti.

Leoni showed his talent for arts at an early age. It was the ceramics school (then the Istituto Statale d'Arte, now the Liceo Torricelli-Ballardini) that refined his practice



1. *Works on paper*, different sizes, ink, watercolours, collages, tempera (1964–67). Image of the setting, exhibition MIC Faenza, 2020  
 1. *Радови на папиру*, различите величине, туш, акварели, колажи, темпера (1964–67). Слика поставке, изложба Међународног музеја керамике, Фаенца, 2020.

and provided him with the foundations for approaching the world of art. Leoni started school in the 1955/56 academic year, and his teachers were Uberto Zannoni for decoration and Angelo Biancini for sculpture, an established artist with an important and significant career behind him. At the beginning, he embraced the pictorial trend that was in vogue at the time (the so-called Picasso style). At the same time, he developed passion for research and topicality that would remain characteristic elements of his (brief) artistic career.

Leoni loved ceramics and understood its dual soul, the one linked to the object of use and the more contemporary one, linked to sculpture. This was the question that marked his life and some of his critical choices in relation to competitions such as the Faenza Prize. As the well-known art historian Andrea Emiliani wrote on this subject: “*traditional ceramics and (apparently) creative ceramics oscillated like a pendulum between extremes, flying however over intermediate places, everyday objects and series, unique pieces and innovative products, tableware of historical elegance and ‘pieces’ with an intention of autonomous signification: often sculptures, monoliths, kiln exercises boasting a muscular and casual materiality (...)*”<sup>1</sup>.

These two souls make up the essence of Leoni, who was able to move on to designing the “pieces” of absolute

uniqueness and everyday “products” of design, functional and traditional, more agile owing to the new materials and new technologies that the industry was preparing, and in the preparation of which the Ceramic School was involved and which it supported. It is no coincidence that his dissertation, entitled *Terrazza sul mare*, was a furnishing project for a dancing room, with a ceramic frieze partly based on the concept of wall coverings, and with a futuristic ceramic chandelier: a combination of sculpture, painting and design. A “reading” of his career reveals the uniqueness of a poly-material and poly-technical story that is extraordinary, since, in just a few years of activity (less than twenty), he managed to face current artistic themes and poetics with maturity and completeness. Not only did Leoni provide a reflection on ceramic sculpture, but he also explored the practices of contemporary art through installations and performances, which had previously rarely been considered by critics and by the artists themselves who gravitated to the world of ceramics. With absolute conscious provocation, he overcame aristocratic ideological limits and showed a possible way for ceramics and this material within the contemporary art system. His legacy, which is largely exploited *posthumously* by his contemporaries, is admired in the work of the new generations in the last twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and, above all, in the generation of those born in Italy in the 1970s (Nero, Polloniato, Salvatori, to name a few). His

<sup>1</sup> A. Emiliani, Agosto 9, 1993. *Memoria per Alfonso Leoni*, in *Alfonso Leoni. La progettualità del casuale*, exhibition catalogue by A. Emiliani, Faenza Bologna, 1993, p. 24.



2. *Series of dwarfs*, printed metal sheets (1967–69), different sizes. Image of the setting, exhibition MIC Faenza, 2020  
 2. *Серија опшљака*, штампани лимови (1967–69), различите величине. Слика поставке, изложба Међународног музеја керамике, Фаенца, 2020.

motto “Look at ceramics with different eyes”<sup>2</sup> fully expresses his visionary character and his indomitable nature, his curiosity and his research. Leoni was chosen by Biancini as his personal assistant to follow the large public orders he was carrying out in those years, and at the same time, he became “teacher in charge” of Sculpture in the Magistero courses from 1961, a year after graduating. While Zauli, an established teacher, represented the didactic tradition and a teaching style that was undoubtedly valid, but not very empathetic, Leoni was the voice outside the choir, in his teaching methods and approach to research. He encouraged his students to have different visions, to participate in the awards, he suggested possible solutions and went to exhibitions with them, a young man among his young students. He encouraged them to read foreign art magazines in order to understand the major themes of contemporary art that were leading to great revolutions at the time. The curiosity that animated Leoni is present in his production, especially in the 1960s. Painted, scratched and carved paper to create optical reliefs (fig. 1); wood, plastic and Plexiglas (fig. 2) to experiment with new forms, volumes and dynamism in works that were then produced in ceramics; scrap metal, waste from the mechanical industry that became small dynamic sculptures (fig. 3). The practice of reusing and recycling materials is still very much in vogue

today, but at the time, it was viewed with diffidence and suspicion because the materials of Art with a capital “A” had to be “valuable”. Leoni experimented with his “erasures” on paper, a very pop work: starting with pages of glossy fashion magazines, he outlined compositions by erasing the elements that did not interest him, using acetone. In this way, objects and figures belonging to the tastes of the moment, to lifestyle (fashion, food, cosmetics, cars, etc.) emerged. And then, there is ceramics, as much loved and revered as detested due to its critical conceptual limits. The large bowls called “ciotoloni” (fig. 4) with their internal gears, or the “pierced” pieces, are the first works that provided the young Leoni with a certain fame, sculptures that recall the lightness of Fausto Melotti’s works, but also the themes of the machine typical of the work of Arman or Jean Tinguely.

Among Leoni’s writings, skilfully arranged by “Archivio Leoni”, there are several notes, among which is the following dated December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1972:

*Research. I think that we can summarize in this word my whole way of making ceramics. One of the causes that pushed me in this sense away from the tradition, made of beautiful pot-bellied vases dripping with precious enamels and delightful statuettes, was the awareness of the preciousness of the matter, a preciousness that fascinates and makes us fall in love with it. Yes, this is the right word, to the point of stupefying those who work. All this – I know – seems*

2 A. Leoni, Radio Alto Canavese interview, 25 September 1976.



3. Series *Cancellations*, pages of bleached magazines (1969). Image of the setting, exhibition MIC Faenza, 2020

3. Серија *Поништења*, избелене странице часописа (1969). Слика поставке, изложба Међународног музеја керамике, Фаенца, 2020.



4. Series *Ciotoloni*, majolica, different sizes. Image of the setting, exhibition MIC Faenza, 2020

4. Серија *Чиније*, мајолика, различите величине. Слика поставке, изложба Међународног музеја керамике, Фаенца, 2020.

*absurd but it is instead a precise observation. Therefore, you should not be enchanted by its brilliance and the pleasantness it emanates, but use it, use its intrinsic possibilities and try new expressiveness, also and above all with the help of new techniques. In this sense, I have articulated all my work up till testing the objective limits of this material in order to try and dissect every possibility*<sup>3</sup>.

In another brief, undated piece of writing, he attempts to address his origins, his intellectual and artistic references, citing his illustrious “fathers”, great Italian authors who are protagonists in the history of art precisely because of their provocative and unconventional character:

*One of the contemporary artists, who died a few years ago, who used ceramics in an attractive new way, exploiting some properties for unusual purposes, completely ignoring any pre-existing tradition is Lucio Fontana, who is usually quoted for spatialism and for the scandals that never died down, caused by his holes and cuts. I would say that we should appreciate him first of all for the natural candid research and measure, that certainty of spontaneously stopping at the right time, which is the clear awareness of the relationship between him and the qualities of the material that most attract and therefore underline. Leoncillo Leonardi is another contemporary artist who has also recently passed away and used the qualities of ceramics for a new expressiveness. The quality and defects of the material are in his latest works the means which the artist uses in equal measure to express tragedy and violence above all through*

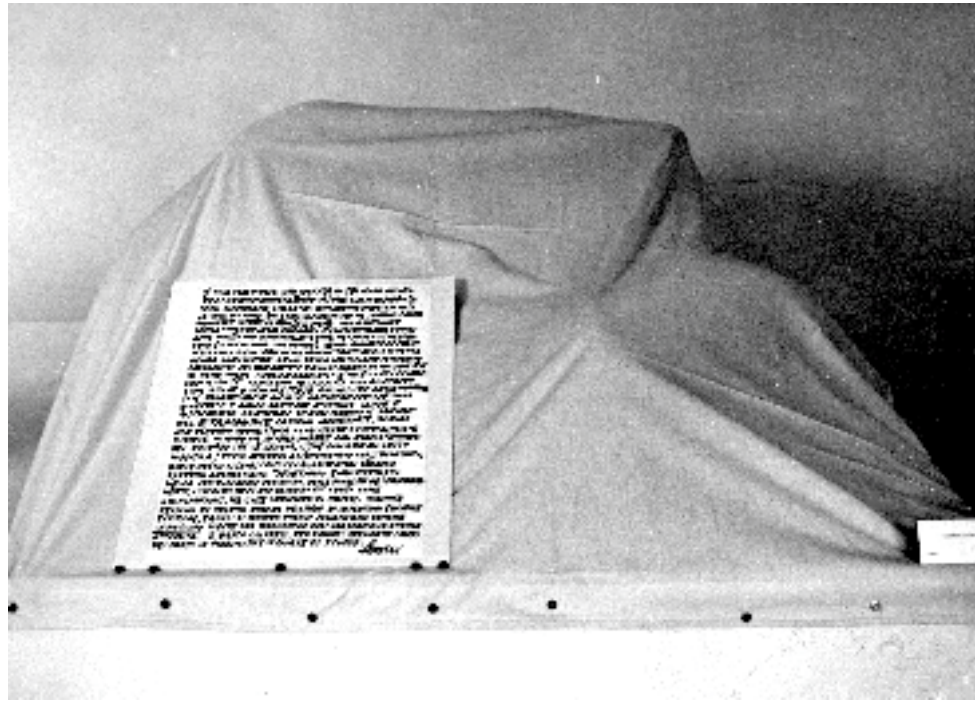
*gesture. Arturo Martini, an important protagonist of Italian art a few decades ago, uses poor materials for his works (earthenware, stone, wood). The immediacy and lashing force of these as well as the relationship between material and work, are for this artist a peremptory and decisive fact.*

The “fluxes” (fig. 5) made through the extrusion technique, represent an icon of his work, and are perhaps the most famous pieces, made in the 1970s, even before Nino Caruso and Alessio Tasca made this technique the leitmotif of their artistic career. Another innovation: adapting a technique adopted in industrial practice to artistic research. Leoni is a child of his times, he is the guerrilla artist promulgated by Germano Celant in 1967, with the manifesto published in the magazine “Flash Art” in the same year, where he praised the intellectual revolution of the artist against the consuming system: “First comes man, then the system, in the past it was like that. Today it is society that produces and man that consumes.”. Man, then as now, loses his centrality and becomes a mere consumer, an inert user. Leoni was more interested in the gesture than the product. Gesture and action were the final goal of his research, because for that generation of artists, at that time, action was the real field of interest, the space for intervention, the final artistic result. The two key years that represent Leoni's turning point were 1974 and 1976, marked with the protest actions and the events organised on the occasion of the two editions of the International Competition – Faenza Prize. Leoni highly valued the Faenza Competition, that ceramic Oscar every ceramic artist in the world aspires to receive, organised ever since 1938. He was extremely critical of the Faenza Competition, because he wanted the Faenza Prize to have the appeal and

<sup>3</sup> The manuscript is in capital letters and has no punctuation, almost as if it were a proclamation.



5. *Triple Flux*, 1972, wire-drawn majolica, 70 cm, 27 cm in diameter, Private Collection  
 5. *Троструки флуks*, 1972, патинирана мајолика, 70 cm, 27 cm у пречнику, приватна колекција



6. XXXII Faenza Prize Competition, 1974, sculptures covered with a sheet as a "protest intervention" against the Jury  
 6. XXXII Такмичење за награду Фаенце, 1974, скулптуре прекривене чаршавом као „протестна интервенција” против жирија

popularity of the Venetian Biennale, as its counterpart in ceramics.

In 1974, he covered the works selected for the Faenza Competition with a sheet (fig. 6), because the Jury had excluded two of them, not understanding the uniqueness of the installation presented. On September 24, 1976 (fig. 7), Leoni seated the public on the steps leading to the Faenza Museum, gave them raw clay to hold in their hands “so that they could feel its sweet softness (*something forgotten*) and plasticity”, while he hammered away at his works created in the last ten years. At the end, he mixed clay and fragments into a large sphere on the grounds, saying “after all, we live on this sphere, on the waste of past civilisations (...). *Life and death... we live everything and we don't really live anything in a discomfort that divides us... this material holds our hands and let us feel the most small and sincerest events, at the end of all our history*”. The lively, protesting, critical 1970s are presented in a note in his writings, after he had read Jurgen Claus: “he relaxed and calmed me down and freed and cleaned me up”. He was ready to start again with new projects, also for the industry, always with different eyes. This was his real strength. He was involved in both art and ceramic industry. Starting from 1973, with Maioliche Faentine, he had re-interpreted a well-known classic Renaissance floor in Bologna (the Vaselli floor in the Cathedral of San Petronio in Bologna), and in 1976 with Villeroy&Boch, with whom he collaborated on the creation of the “Prestige” line, three

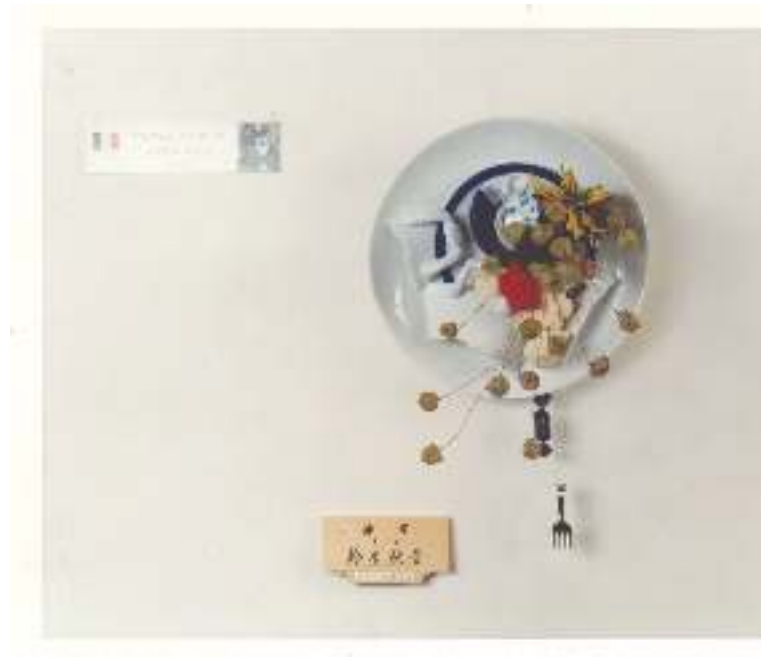
series, which were a real “best seller” at the time. Leoni not only designed wall coverings, but also bathroom fittings with an ironic and artistic eye. In Germany, he began his reflections on “counter design”, planning objects that take up the legacy of design, but seen through the eyes of contemporary art, elevating themselves from industrial mass production. Assemblages, fragments, mental short-circuits: his pieces go against the idea of functional design made for the purpose of production and use. Leoni took the production pieces and composed extravagant sculptures (fig. 8), according to a practice taken up in recent years by famous designers such as Andrea Anastasio.

Leoni was also an international artist: despite his young age, he exhibited in Canada, Poland, London, several times in Japan (where his works were acquired by public and private collections) and in Russia. His connection to Japan was important and recognised by many persons, critics and artists, with whom he presented various projects, including the very successful ‘Ikebana’ series. In 1976, together with the well-known critic Yoshiaki Inui, he planned a solo exhibition in Kyoto, which unfortunately did not take place.

Leoni died on 5 July 1980, after sixteen months of illness that deprived him of the frenzy of travel, trips, meetings and exhibitions to which he had become accustomed. He was aware of the seriousness of his illness, which at the time was rarely curable, but his indomitable nature never accepted the disease and, until the very end,



7. Leoni during the performance at Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, September 1976  
 7. Леони у току перформанса у Међународном музеју керамике, Фаенца, септембар, 1976.



8. Antitraditional porcelain piece, Ikebana exhibition, Japan 1979  
 8. Антитрадиционални порцелански комади, изложба Икебана, Јапан, 1979.

he continued to design and work, almost as if to exorcise an inevitable destiny. It is worth remembering that in the spring he had made working agreements with the German manufacturer Rosenthal for industrial projects that unfortunately were never realised, and in June he was appointed lecturer at the Istituto Universitario del Design di Faenza (ISIA).

What was Leoni's legacy? He was able to place ceramics at the centre of reflection, as a provocation, as a song that went beyond the chorus, a metaphor for intellectual change above all. He started again from ceramics, reconsidering it from a conceptual point of view as a material of contemporary art. As he wrote, he did not want to "get caught up in the quicksand of this traditional world". He had understood that ceramics was a material that was as ancient as it was contemporary. He was able to take up the challenges of particularly active moments, those of the 1960s and 1970s, which, for a lively mind, were an extraordinary source of inspiration, bringing together ideals, protests, ideology, pop art, optical art, minimalism and a great deal of gestural expressiveness, which certainly marked a conceptual division not only in the world of ceramics. Leoni started from the work itself, from the object realized for a varied public and arrived at making the work alive through the participation of the public.

He showed how the suburbs and the province could express (and still express today) innovative ideas

allowing epoch-making changes, especially in those areas where tradition has centuries of roots, as in Faenza.

Leoni carried on his 'battle for culture' to the end, as he claimed, winning it in his own way, as he left an important legacy that was collected by many persons who were able to appreciate the temerity and impetuous strength of an audacious young man, managing to find the link with the spirit of his own time.

The exhibition organised at the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza in the autumn of 2020 (and still ongoing) aimed to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the artist's death with a major anthological exhibition of over 200 pieces and a rich monograph published by Silvana Editoriale presenting over 600 works. For the Faenza Museum, celebrating this extraordinary artist has meant recalling significant years in the validation of contemporary ceramic language, with the inevitable reflections on the role of contemporary criticism in relation to ceramic artists<sup>4</sup>. Leoni brought with him that necessary and disenchanted vision of the material that today, 40 years later, we appreciate with different eyes because ceramics is an internationally accepted language of contemporary art.

<sup>4</sup> In parallel with the exhibition, a video-documentary has been realized and visible on YouTube of MIC di Faenza.

## Резиме

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# НАСЛЕЂЕ АЛФОНСА ЛЕОНИЈА (1941–1980)

Алфонсо Леони је био италијански уметник, велики таленат који је, нажалост, преминуо веома рано, у 39. години. Његов живот је у потпуности био посвећен уметничком стваралаштву и предавању у Школи керамике у Фаенци.

Његово истраживање је било иновативно и мултидисциплинарно за своје време: имао је искуства не само у керамици, већ и у сликарству, скулптури, инсталацији, перформансима, дизајну. Својим радовима је умео да продуби друштвена питања актуелна у Италији и Европи током 1960-их/70-их година. На уметност је гледао као на средство за достизање и развој нових пракси које су узимане као референце, посебно у уметничким праксама уметника рођених 1970-их. Не грешим када кажем да је он „отац” свих уметника рођених 1970-их, јер је та генерација била у стању да унапреди његову поруку креативности, ослобађања од традиционалних концепата који су се везивали за керамику, развијајући се на више уметнички начин. Уметников сјајан наступ на Награди Фаенце 1976. године и даље стоји записан у аналима италијанске историје керамике.

Анализа докумената из његове архиве, у дугој студији која је обухватила 5 година рада, омогућила ми је да проучавам његову личност као протагонисте у оквиру италијанског уметничког система и међународног керамичког система односа и конкурса. Леони није био само уметник из Италије. Имао је прилику да излаже у иностранству (више пута у Јапану, Канади, Пољској, бившем СССР-у, Уједињеном Краљевству) са значајним остварењима која су организатори знали да препознају (неки од његових радова припадају важним јавним збиркама). Можемо рећи да је његов рад интернационалнији него икада раније.

На неки начин можемо рећи и да је био пионир керамичке уметничке скулптуре.

Превод: Драгана Рашић Вуковић