

There was a time when Giulio Natta would come up to Montevecchia *to experiment with Moplen*

By Michele Mauri

This year, the firm Abbiati&Fabbri celebrates 90 years in business. The company, which since its founding in 1927 has specialized in working with plastic materials, has for decades been a leader in packaging for decorative cosmetics.

Arnaldo Abbiati and his brother-in-law, Giuseppe Fabbri, in 1927 started up a company dedicated to the production of thermosetting plastic parts. This was a highly innovative line of activity for that time, considering that Bakelite, which was regarded as the world's first synthetic plastic material, had been invented just 20 years earlier and that, at least in Italy, the potential uses to which Bakelite might be put were yet to be fully explored.

Nowadays it is normal to look back on those years with nostalgia, but it was in fact a dynamic time that was full of change. Already in the 1930s, the Abbiati&Fabbri works turned out parts that were used in the Balilla, the legendary Fiat motorcar that spurred the first burst of car-driving in our country. "The flap of the glove compartment, the knob of the gear shift, or the ignition key was made from our plastics," explains Leonardo Cattani. Born in 1947, Cattani is a grandson of one of the two founders of the factory, which was located in Montevecchia, opposite the cemetery.

Although for some time the company's core business has been in cosmetics, in the beginning the greatest opportunities were to be found in the motorcycle market. "We even made nylon gear boxes for motorcycle camshafts, gear boxes that were used for the first time by Gilera," recalls Cattani.

Containers for rouge and make-up came right after the war: lipstick cases, jars for cream, and tins for talcum

powder. These items have become part of the collective imagination, and many of them were patented at Montecatini.

The idea of creating a business to work with plastic materials was certainly an intelligent one, but in those years it was not without risk. Arnaldo Abbati thought out the idea during the Great War, when, employed in a machine shop at a barracks in Turin, he had the opportunity to come face to face with the first objects made from Bakelite. Years later, he would find the right way to make his idea a reality when he met up with Giuseppe Fabbri, who had married his sister.

During World War II, Abbati&Fabbri was involved in the war effort, manufacturing a fuse — made of plastic — for explosive ordnance. In that period, the factory fed and employed a large proportion of the families in Montecatini. “In fact, it seems that that line of products never did get delivered to the client,” explains Leonardo, “because both my grandfather and my uncle were fervent communists, belonging to the Communist Party since all the way back in 1921, so they were fiercely opposed to the regime and were against the war.”

The war years were followed inevitably by a period of difficulty, but post-war reconstruction soon offered some stimulating opportunities. In the 50s and 60s, the company had almost 100 employees, many of whom would go on to start small businesses of their own in the plastics industry, putting to good use the skills they had learned at Abbati&Fabbri.

It was during this time that the history of the company crossed paths with an Italian legend, Giulio Natta. In 1954, this Italian researcher had discovered isotactic polypropylene: from a gas of petroleum was born a new material that was malleable, light, and very tough. Isotactic polypropylene, which could be used for any purpose at all, would change the lives of all of us forever. On December 10, 1963, Natta received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, and the whole world set out towards a new era. Part of this extraordinary achievement has ties to Montecatini. “Prof. Natta came to our factory a number of times,” recalls Cattani, “in order to experiment with applications for polypropylene.” This chapter in the company’s history is little known, yet jealously preserved by the families of the company’s founders and by elderly residents of the town who still recall the comings and goings at the large plant.

The arrival of thermoplastics on the scene forced a profound change in industrial policy. “We applied ourselves to making the most of the new opportunities, and in fact we ended up producing items that were the envy of the multinational companies,” Cattani recalls with pride. He himself joined the family company in 1972, and was in charge of the firm up until 2012.

In those years, the company concentrated on cutting-edge machinery, on innovation, and on insight. The majority of the company’s production consisted of cosmetic items, and gradually all the leading companies in the cosmetics industry began to turn to Montecatini when they wanted to buy the packaging for their products.

Being a model of Italian excellence in the field of packaging for decorative cosmetics is quite an achievement, one which requires paying constant attention to the countless details that the industry demands.

“In the area of materials, we have always been a breed apart,” explains Giuseppe Mattavelli, who was born in 1967, became an employee at the company in 1987, and became a shareholder in 1993. He goes on to add: “But no less important was our ability to make the most of the latest developments in production techniques. We were among the first to develop and put to use double-injection technology, which not only ensures higher quality in the finished product and a considerable reduction in cost, but also permits production time to be cut substantially. Before, a product consisting of two different colors or materials would be hand-assembled from two pieces, but with this technique the product can be made in a single step, without any assembly.”

However, the company’s research and continuous improvement could not remain competitive and on the cutting edge unless they faced up to the invasion of products that were coming from the Chinese market. So, at that point the company had to reexamine its pricing policy and reorganize itself. Yet Abbati&Fabbri did not give up, and in 2006 the firm abandoned its time-honored location in Montecatini and moved to Merate, to new premises that

were more spacious and functional.

In the meantime, though, globalization was hitting the company hard. To meet the challenges of the market, the firm needed to rationalize more and more its production processes and become extremely flexible.

Three years ago the company reached a turning point, deciding to outsource a large part of its manufacturing. Its products are now manufactured by contractors, using designs and dies created by the company, and then completed at Cernusco Lombardone, where the company has since moved its factory. To its clients, Abbiati&Fabbri provides a guarantee that its products are entirely made in Italy. “The company continues to be one of the key players in its industry, both in Italy and abroad, and continues its pursuit of excellence,” notes Mattavelli. He adds: “The products are still ours, just as they were before, and by retaining in-house the final stage of the decoration, we continue to exercise control over the finished product.” © *All rights reserved.*

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[Giuseppe Mattavelli and Leonardo Cattani](#)

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[In the foreground, Arnaldo Abbiati and Giuseppe Fabbri in a Diatto motorcar](#)

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