Carlo Jacono, a “Segretissimo” illustrator

Contributed by Gianni Brunoro
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Carlo Jacono, a “Segretissimo” illustrator by Gianni Brunoro* Translator: Andrea Hajek Anyone who’s into book illustrations may well know that some illustrators are inextricably linked to specific literary works or editorial initiatives. 19th century illustrations of Dante Alighieri’s Divina Commedia, for example, could hardly be separated from the name of Gustave Doré, while Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland is inconceivable without John Tenniel’s work. And what about Sidney Paget’s image of Sherlock Holmes, one of sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s inventions?
Carlo Jacono, a “Segretissimo” illustrator by Gianni Brunoro* Translator: Andrea Hajek Anyone who’s into book illustrations may well know that some illustrators are inextricably linked to specific literary works or editorial initiatives. 19th century illustrations of Dante Alighieri’s Divina Commedia, for example, could hardly be separated from the name of Gustave Doré, while Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland is inconceivable without John Tenniel’s work. And what about Sidney Paget’s image of Sherlock Holmes, one of sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s inventions? In the second half of the 20th century, Carlo Jacono had a similar success in Italy. Jacono is undoubtedly a great illustrator, but his fame relies mainly on his collaboration with two popular novel series, in particular the Giallo Mondadori, started in 1929, and which has the merit of having spread the detective novel in Italy. From the 1960s onwards, Jacono also got involved in Segretissimo, another famous series which launched the genre of the spy novel. This last series has now been honoured with an exclusive volume published by the Rossellini Foundation, a cultural society dedicated to the critical evaluation of “genre” literature: the western, the so-called "rosa" genre (romanticized female literature), comics, science fiction, but most of all the detective novel in all its nuances, from the mystery to the noir, hard-boiled and all its other - now widespread - variants. These include the spy novel: ever since its first appearance in the 1940s, at the hand of Eric Ambler, the Master of spy novels, this genre has grown in popularity with "heroes” such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond or Jean Bruce’s Hubert Bonisseur de la Bath OSS117, and many many more. Without wanting to, Carlo Jacono next became the visual symbol of these heroes. Born in Milan on March 17th 1929, Jacono obtained his degrees (Art School and subsequently the Accademy of Fine Arts of Brera) in his hometown, where he continued to work until he died, on June 7th 2000, after a highly artistic and well-travelled life. Travelling was in fact one of his passions, and probably also allowed him to absorb those precious impressions that would give veracity, credibility and inspsiration to the images that sprang forth from his magic hands, throughout his life. These come down to no less than 6000 plates, which any fan of genre literature will be familiar with, since Jacono also collaborated for a long time with Urania, produced fantasy images and plates for several westerns, and delivered a number of covers for comic books. Not to mention his work for women’s magazines like Grand Hotel, Confidenze or Grazia, newspaper supplements Domenica del Corriere and Sette, and other perhaps more unexpected editorial areas. Finally, Jacono created a large number of illustrations for various children’s books, both of the adventurous nature and fairy tale-like stories. After reaching a certain fame with the Giallo Mondadori series (from 1951 till 1986 Jacono delivered over 1500 covers for the series), the largest publishing house of popular literature gave him, in 1961, another commission: the covers of the Segretissimo series which would introduce the new born spy story in Italy. Jacono would make over 1990 covers for this second series. This powerful corpus is the object of the most recent publication by the Rossellini Foundation. It is a sumptuous and unique work, which includes the (outstanding) colour-reproductions of all the covers - in chronological order - designed for Segretissimo, and spaced out every now and then with reproductions of the original designs. One should not get the impression, however, that the volume is a simple picture album. Main editor, Franco Spiritelli, has provided an insight into Jacono’s features as an illustrator and a profound analysis of the series, its qualifications, and so forth. The volume also includes an accurate chronological overview of the entire series, at the hands of a remarkable expert, Roberto Pirani. Apart from all this, Jacono’s art, style and pleasantness have turned the volume into the most wonderful gallery of “little ladies” one could imagine, considering that the editorial board had always requested a femminine figure for the cover. And this is as far as "the eye" is concerned. For collectors and fans, however, the volume is also interesting because of the bibliographical apparatus and the in-depth “scientific” research on the series, its characters and the illustrator, who has popularized its image among the readers. AA.VV Segretissimo Jacono, Fondazione Rosellini ed. (Viale Bonopera 21, 600019 Senigallia, AN) 2008, 200 pp, colour f.to 24x30, paperback, Euro 30.00 *Gianni Brunoro (Capricorn, born on January 2nd 1936 in San Pietro Viminario, near Padova (Veneto), Italy, Planet Earth) is part of a small group of fans which, back in 1965, founded a previously inexistent discipine in Italy, the criticism of comic books. Following the lead of a sparse band of intellectuals and real “founding fathers” of this cultural field (Umberto Eco, Oreste del Buono, Ernesto g.Laua, Claudio Bertieri, Carlo della Corte and a few others), Brunoro developed - on top of his childhood fascination for the detective novel in all its forms (mystery, noir, hard-boiled..) - a real passion for illustrations. His “auto-education” is described, with a slightly ironic air, in an autobiographic article called “Guardando alle radici” (“Looking at the roots”), issued in October 1998 on the thriller magazine Delitti di carta. His passion has been furthermore harboured for years through various articles and an historical column on the magazine L’Eternauta (1980s), and more recently with texts for catalogues regarding the great Italian illustrator of crime novels, Carlo Jacono. He has furthermore edited a forthcoming essay by Pasquale Pede, I fiori del noir. (NB: the biography was written by the author himself).