

TERESINA NEGRI: A SUCCESS STORY OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP BETWEEN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

de Paolis U

Independent Researcher, Italy

Abstract: This original research focuses upon the story of Teresina Negri (1879-1974), a woman, dancer, entrepreneur and fashion designer who was able to combine inventiveness and entrepreneurial skills to achieve socio-economic affirmation. The research methodology is divided into three phases: the first consists of an acknowledgement of the documentary, bibliographic and iconographic sources related to the case study found in archives, libraries and both private and family collections in France, Italy, UK and Monaco. Next, the data obtained is structured into a narrative highlighting the various personality traits of the subject. The third phase concludes the summation of this study. Born in Italy, at sixteen years old, Teresina ran away from home to devote herself to dance. In this way she was able to gain an independence that would not have been possible for a young woman in late 19th-century Italian society. She took charge of her life, never afraid to reinvent herself and possessing the audacity to turn difficulties into opportunities. She performed for a Lumière Brothers film and then became a successful dance étoile in Belle Époque Paris. In 1920 she became a fashion designer under the pseudonym Madame GRISINA; the invisible bra she invented and patented quickly spread across international fashion, anticipating modern styles and modes of use. Negri was a business executive, she never took second place to anyone; in both public and private life she enacted the tenets of emancipation and continuously sought recognition of her rights, demanding a premarital contract based on principles of social equality. She was also a family woman: while not seeking personal fulfillment in motherhood, she cared for her sister and for her nephews as if they were her own children, providing them with the opportunity for a better life. The discovery and research about the historical figure of Teresina Negri thus offer an original contribution to the role of women in design and business, as well as being emblematic of a spirit of female emancipation and creative fervor that over almost a century stands as a unicum in women's history.

Keywords: women's entrepreneurship, socio-economic affirmation, empowerment, women inventors, women designers, equal marriage

Introduction: Being a Woman in Late 19th Century Italy

Teresina Negri was born on 29 May 1879, in Turin, Italy at the end of the 19th century. Within a social context, therefore, deeply anchored to the rigid dictates of patriarchal culture and developing around the paradigm of the bourgeois family. The bourgeois model, which established itself in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century along with the new bourgeoisie, had as its reference point the cult of motherhood and childcare. This spread the common opinion that a woman is only a good woman if she is a good wife and mother. In this sense, during the 19th century, many scientific studies

and ecclesiastical texts were developed to prove the biological inferiority of women to men and their natural predisposition to fulfil the maternal role. These kinds of ideas corroborated the already “scant consideration shown by families towards female education” (Morandini in Ghizzoni, *et al.* Eds, 2008, p. 110), which was considered unnecessary, if not potentially dangerous to family harmony and thus to the “well-being of the entire social community” (Ascenzi in Ghizzoni, *et al.* Eds, 2008, p. 9). In fact, the few girls who were given an education, it was focused, right from primary school, on the fulfilment of domestic tasks; in short, women were not offered the opportunity to train for public office or important positions. Their education, where they studied and were therefore not sent as children to work as peasants, laundresses or labourers, was in any case aimed at professional training, focusing on what were called “female works” (Baricco, 1865, p. 61). That is, those school subjects necessary for the proper administration of the home, for preparing the linen and clothing the husband and children: for example, drawing to make patterns, embroidery and sewing. Thus, depending on social class, women could become perfect angels of the hearth or seamstresses, embroiderers, shirt-makers. This was the kind of education that Teresina Negri received.

1. Childhood in Poverty and Desire for Emancipation

Teresina Negri was born into a poor family. Her parents belonged to the working class and the family lived in an area of Turin that was “stubbornly destined for blue-collar or low-level work” (Balocco, 2009, p. 29). Teresina and her one-year-old younger sister, Margherita, received a vocational education, common to many girls of the same social class, towards tailoring. But the destiny prescribed by the society of her time did not suit Teresina. Indeed, as her niece recounts, she soon decided to use the “school money to pay for dance lessons”.¹ And she did so “in secret from her parents”,² who were against such a prospect. The choice of plotting a secret plan to use the money that, no doubt with great sacrifice, a poor family like hers reserved for studies, testifies to a great spirit of enterprise. Her desire for emancipation was stronger than any fear and she defied the risk of heavy and potentially violent repercussions. In fact, the profession of dancer would have inevitably forced her into nomadism and the consequent exclusion from the home: it was precisely this condition that condemned ballerinas, throughout the 19th century and even later, to the stigma of prostitutes. Teresina does not care about this nor about her parents’ adverse will: her desire to become a dancer and escape from a future that her times have written for her is stronger. And it also overcomes the pain of separation from her family and her only sister. In about 1895, Teresina ran away from home, at the age of sixteen.

2. The Beginning of the Career as a Dancer and the Encounter with Lumière Cinema

Teresina Negri’s career began in Rome. Here, around 1897, she was chosen as the protagonist of a short film, which was later included in the Lumière catalogue. The film sees her perform the legendary *danse serpentine* (Lista, 2006, p. 366). (Figure 1)

¹ Words reported by Teresina Negri herself to her niece, Margherita Aiassa (1944), around the summer of 1951.

²*Ibidem.*



Figure 1: Teresina Negri in *Danse serpentine* [II] (Cat.Lumière N°765-I), 1897. Source: centrepompidou.fr.

The serpentine dance was invented by the American Loïe Fuller in 1891. It consisted of swirling the broad veils of the costume to create, with the help of coloured lanterns, a unique kaleidoscope of light and colour. Fuller, who was a powerful figure of female emancipation, revolutionised dance. The completely new forms of expression she created earned her international acclaim. Indeed, there were hundreds of imitators all over the world who tried to ride this success; among them was Teresina Negri.

After her experience in Rome, the dancer performed in Naples and then left Italy to enter the opera houses as a classical dancer. She first danced at the Nice Opera House (1899-1904) and, from 1905 to 1908, at the Grand-Théâtre de Monte Carlo, wearing the role of *coryphée*: a dancer whos normally occupys secondary roles, but is sometimes given solo parts.

3. First Signs of Entrepreneurship: the Rise to Success

From around 1909 to 1911, Negri created and directed a small troupe of dancers, with whom she performed at parties in the salons of the Parisian aristocracy (Garafola, 2005, p. 89). That of Parisian high society was a cultural and cosmopolitan dimension that allowed Teresina to establish a dense network of acquaintances and public relations, which she was able to exploit to the full. In fact, in June 1911, she returned to the stage in grand style at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris, where she demonstrated her skill in Isadora Duncan's dances. Duncan, a free and emancipated woman, was the initiator of modern dance. She unhinged

“The very idea of dancing, recalling its most ancient and authentic impetus, re-establishing the distance from virtuosity as an end in itself, demanding for this art a noble role on a par with others. His message and his mission were based precisely on woman, no longer enslaved to a spectacular genre of escapism, but priestess of a thought that can only be embodied in dance” (Veroli, 2001, p. 122).

When Negri moved to Paris, this new form of expression was the success of the moment. And it also became Teresina's success. In fact, after her new debut at the Théâtre des Arts, she was engaged as prima ballerina at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique, the second most important theatre in

France after the Paris Opera and one of the biggest in Europe. This engagement consecrated her to international success. (Figure 2)

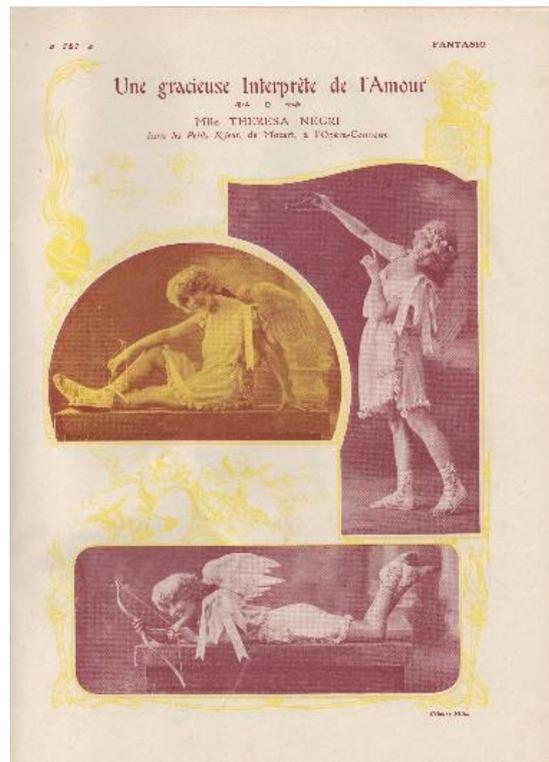


Figure 2: A full-page magazine dedicated to Teresina Negri, 1912. Source: private collection.

Articles and photos about her were published in the major newspapers and magazines in France, then taken up in England, Austria, Portugal, the United States, Argentina and Brazil. Since then, Teresina Negri's name stands out in performances, conferences and social events in the main Parisian theatres (Marigny, Renaissance, Femina, Apollo, Ba-Ta-Clan, Châtelet), together with artists and intellectuals such as Paul Frank, Mata Hari, Georges Wague, La Bella Otero, André de Fouquières, Christine Kerf. In 1915, with the advent of the First World War, Teresina Negri left the stage and found refuge in Monaco. 1895, Teresina ran away from home, at the age of sixteen.

4. From Dance to Fashion Design

In 1920, Teresina Negri channeled the knowledge acquired as a dancer and her sartorial skills into an entrepreneurial project in fashion design. In fact, the constant shifting between classical ballet and revolutionary expression inevitably confronted Negri with the fullest awareness of the demands that female body lines suggested. Needs that clashed with the stylistic norms and their social implications imposed by the fashion of the time, and whose maximum manifestation was found in the corset. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: A French corset advertisement in 1899. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

Fashion imposed on every worldly woman the chiselling of the corset to obtain the S-shape prescribed at the time. Thus the classical ballet. While the new dances of both Fuller and Duncan rejected it to leave the female body free to express itself.

During the First World War, with men engaged at the front, women became protagonists of the social scene. Every clothing obstacle was therefore banished: what greater obstacle than the corset? Faced with the need for adequate bust support, on the way to freeing the female body from the corset, Teresina Negri invented and patented her own bra in 1920.

So, together with her sister, she set up a home-based fashion workshop where she put into production what she called the Grisina Invisible Bra. The business was an immediate success in the international fashion scene. (Figure 4)



Figure 4: A Grisina bra at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The model has two elastic straps intended to be crossed at the back and fastened at the front, allowing the deep necklines in the back, typical of dresses of the time, to be left free, c. 1925. Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.15665>

Thanks to the extraordinary modernity of the bra, which anticipated styles and modes of use, the business was an immediate success on the international fashion scene. Grisina lingerie was patented and exported throughout France, Italy, Algeria, the USA, Cuba, Brazil, Vietnam etc. The Grisina bra was even copied and counterfeited for over 30 years.

5. Madame Grisina: Woman Inventor and Entrepreneur

The GRISINA trade mark, registered with the brassiere in 1920, originated from the acronym composed of one syllable of the surname Ne-GRI and two of the name Tere-SINA. This strong identity imprint therefore not only identified a product, but a person, Madame Grisina, the creator. In fact, Teresina Negri created a veritable alter ego for herself, which acquires fame and success in parallel with her design products. Madame Grisina, however, was not only the creator and designer of her fashion house. She was at the same time the owner of the business and, once converted into a company, in 1939, also the CEO and president until its closure, in 1962. The research made it possible to recover the Grisina's turnovers for 1937 and 1938, as shown in the figures below. These figures have been converted from Francs into Euros using the official converter of the Institut de la statistique et des études économiques de France.

1937: 1,034,125.60 Fr. (discounted figure ca. 654,019.88 €);

1938: 1,257,355.18 Fr. (discounted figure ca. 715,678.79 €).

Figures that demonstrate both Negri's entrepreneurial ability and the evident growth of the business. They can be considered surprising when put in relation to a single production unit of handcrafted and almost exclusively made-to-measure garments.

During her career as an entrepreneur, she opened several boutiques: one near Place Vendôme in Paris, one in Cannes, on the Croisette, and one in Milan, near Piazza del Duomo. Negri also demonstrated entrepreneurial skills by making successful real estate investments in Paris, Saint-Tropez and Monaco. (Figure 5)



Figure 5 Teresina Negri's Villa Sinfonia Bouillabaisse, Bouillabaisse Beach, Saint-Tropez (1935).

Source: private collection.

6. Equal Marriage

Teresina was a very emancipated and open-minded woman also in terms of personal affections. In fact, she cohabited 15 years (1923-1939) with the French baritone and bibliophile Henri Espirac (1890-1950): the cohabitation was considered very disreputable at the time, especially for an Italian woman. Moreover, Espirac was eleven years younger and was already divorced. Negri only decided to marry him in 1939, at the age of 60. But first she had a pre-nuptial contract to guarantee herself total independence in the management of her assets, in a regime of separation of property, and full freedom of choice. Teresina's niece says that she married so late only because she wanted to obtain French citizenship by marriage to preserve her wealth in anticipation of the war: this equal marriage can also be seen as an entrepreneurial choice.

7. What was Teresina like as a person?

But what was this woman, so modern and out of the ordinary for her time, like as a person? Those who knew her describe her as a strict woman with a penchant for leadership. She built an empire from nothing and felt herself its absolute leader, second to none. But she was also a person dedicated to charity and very close to his family. In fact, although she never sought fulfilment in motherhood, she raised her two nephews as if they were her own children.

When her sister Margherita fell ill with tuberculosis, Teresina provided the most complete education for them: at a time when it was not at all common to study, she made them attend important schools in France and the UK. Later, she hired them to work at the Grisina Company, providing for their welfare throughout their lives. (Figure 6)



Figure 6 Teresina Negri with her nephew François Aiassa (c. 1951). Source: Aiassa-Negri Family Archives.

8. Teresina Negri's Last Years

After a multi-disciplinary career as a dancer, entrepreneur and designer lasting more than 66 years, Teresina Negri closed the Grisina in 1962 and retired to Monaco. Here, in 1974, at the age of almost 95, she died.

She rests in the Cap d'Ail cemetery.

9. Materials and Methods

The present research is entirely original and largely unpublished. Thus, the methodology was structured according to three articulated phases, the first step of which was precisely the acknowledgement of the documentary, bibliographic and iconographic sources. The material was traced and analysed at public and private institutions, such as archives, libraries and research centres, in France, Monaco, Italy, the UK and the USA. In conjunction with this, research was conducted to recover as much as possible of the oral tradition handed down by Teresina Negri's family, especially her last living niece, and the people who knew her, after having been traced and contacted. Secondly, the data obtained was structured into a narrative highlighting the various personality traits of the subject. The third phase concludes the summation of this study.

10. Conclusion

This research allows to show how much this unjustly forgotten woman describes in a new way the role of women in innovative design creations and in the history of entrepreneurship. Teresina Negri is emblematic of an existence characterised by the expression of different forms of creativity and ingenuity, through achieving success in every field in which she worked. Therefore, and most of all, because of her achievements despite the limitations imposed on her as a woman by the society of her time, she offers an original contribution to the history of women's emancipation and empowerment.

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