

MIFED's "Dottor" Franci: Gone But Not Forgotten

Dom Serafini (November 19, 2008)



The English summary of the three-part series on Milan's Fair former president, Michele Guido Franci, I posted on i-italy (in Italian).



I called the Milan Fair press office and the Milan Fair Foundation to get some information about Michele Guido Franci, the Fair's president from 1978 until 1984. The information was needed for an article I was writing for Italian TV trade magazine, *Millecanali* (subsequently published in Italian by *i-italy.org*).

Some readers might remember "Dottor" Franci as the secretary general of MIFED, the world's first audiovisual market and, for many years, the leading film trade show, which he created in 1960.

To my absolute astonishment, the Fair did not have anything on Franci except for the report that he was its third post-war president. That was it!

A Google search also produced little information, like the fact that he had been president of Italy's Culinary Academy from 1962 to 1983, and that he wrote the book "Christianity in Postal Stamps."

How could it be that such a prominent leader, one that was an innovator and headed one of Italy's largest enterprises, could be so totally forgotten?

At that point, totally dumbfounded, I resolved to write a biography of Franci myself. Unfortunately, his publishing house did not have any information on file, while the Culinary Academy was only able to send me an *Eco della Stampa* newspaper clip from 1983, where Franci revealed a few tidbits about himself; and a clip of his obituary in Italy's main daily, *Il Corriere della Sera* following his death in 1991 at the age of 87, headlined: "The Father of Milan Fair Has Died."

But Michele Guido Franci wasn't just the father and president of Milan Fair, he was a trendsetter. Looking through old copies of *Television/Radio Age International*, a trade magazine where I served as editor, and, later, early issues of my current publication, *VideoAge*, a picture of Franci emerged as an eccentric, fastidious, demanding and severe man; but also as someone who was ahead of his time and who got things done without fanfare.

After creating MIFED, in 1977 he added to the trade show a festival called "The Child in Our Time," the first event to bring awareness to the plight of children in third-world countries. For his efforts, he received an award from United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim.

In 1983, a year after the word "Internet" was coined, Franci announced, "soon trade shows will no longer need large stands, especially for heavy equipment, because all transactions will be done through computers connected via satellite."

In 1984, before becoming "honorary president" of the Fair, at 80 years of age, Franci sent to the office of *VideoAge* in New York a cast-iron medal by sculptor Tommaso Gismondi, made to commemorate Franci's 1979 Milan Fair Energy Saving Plan. In terms of renewable energy, Franci was ahead of former U.S. vice president Al Gore by about a quarter of a century.

Even MIFED was created with the innovative concept of "suites" instead of stands. This concept was later adopted by other TV trade shows, such as NATPE and the AFM in the U.S. and the Monte Carlo



TV Market and, recently, DISCOP, internationally.

MIFED also set the business model for other audiovisual trade shows, such as MIP-TV and MIPCOM, with two yearly appointments: in the spring and in the fall.

In addition, Franci was appreciated for his high standards: Restaurants at the MIFED building had to be no less than Michelin Guide-approved, with a maitre d' and gloved waiters. "Meeting points" and bar areas were also Franci's obsessions.

Not too open to criticism, Franci always, nevertheless, had an ear for my comments, both in the form of articles and those I made in person. Famous were his calls over MIFED's PA system as soon he'd spot me on the monitors of his closed-circuit TV cameras walking in the corridors: "Serafini, to me." Of course I learned soon enough what "to me" meant!

He then would say, pointing to a page of VideoAge with a few lines highlighted by a yellow marker: "Serafini, you're like a son to me, why do you write such things?"

Routinely I'd explain that VideoAge was like a mirror reflecting what the industry was projecting. "We cannot distort the news," I'd say, "because those who give the news to us are the same people who advertise with us!"

How times don't change, though! Even today, we often get into trouble with NATPE, AFM and other markets' organizers because they object to VideoAge's straightforward reporting. Indeed, in this respect, Franci was the precursor of all other market organizers, who got upset with VideoAge, but admired our honesty, incisiveness and thoroughness. One such person was MIP-TV's Bernard Chevy, who, contrary to Franci, would find ways to punish VideoAge for its reporting, even though those bursts of anger were short-lived.

Even though Franci controlled a vast enterprise (Milan Fair, a large walled area, had its own representatives from various countries, its own customs offices and a police force), he lived modestly. He was a resident of Rome, where he'd go on weekends. In Milan, he rented a room at a hotel near the fairgrounds.

He stayed on as MIFED's secretary general until his retirement in 1986. The following year film producer Alfredo Bini was called upon to run MIFED. Soon after, all traces of Michele Guido Franci were lost, to the point where the new staff wasn't even aware of who he was.

Franci loved the audiovisual industry with a passion, which turned into a virtue with the creation of MIFED, a market, that, after Franci, even MBAs from the best universities weren't able to keep alive.



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