A full-page photograph of Roberto Levi Acobas, CEO of Printgraph, standing in a print shop. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is holding a large roll of paper with both hands. The background shows industrial printing equipment and a bright light source on the left, creating a lens flare effect. The text 'The MOSQUITO of the PRINT WORLD' is overlaid on the image in a large, white, serif font. The word 'MOSQUITO' is the largest, with 'The' and 'of the' in a smaller, italicized font. 'PRINT' and 'WORLD' are also in a large, white, serif font.

The
MOSQUITO
of the
PRINT
WORLD

Print books won't disappear, but many will be printed digitally, says Printgraph CEO Roberto Levi Acobas. And at the same time, publications such as art books and glossy high-end catalogs will continue to use offset printing to get the precision and quality demanded. In short, the world of print is here to stay.

TEXT CLAUDIA B. FLISI PHOTOS MAURIZIO CAMAGNA



framed quote from the Dalai Lama hangs in the office of Roberto Levi Acobas. It says, “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

“That is my company’s motto,” says Levi, CEO of the family business Printgraph. “We are always competing with the big multinationals, so we have to be aggressive, fast and smart. Then we can make a difference.”

Printgraph has been making a difference in the printing industry since 1961, when it was founded by his father, Elia Levi Acobas, in a Milan suburb. The company began as a reseller of printing products not available in Italy at the time.

The younger Levi’s first assignment when he joined the family business was an internship with Reeves, so he came to know its products well. This partnership was further consolidated when Trelleborg bought Reeves in 2006.

When Elia Levi died unexpectedly in 1999, Roberto Levi took over as CEO. He changed Printgraph’s commercial strategy by producing and

selling proprietary patent-protected items in addition to reselling. “I always wanted to create and produce directly,” he explains.

Then came the double whammy of 2008. The world economy tumbled into crisis in September, accelerating industry changes wrought by digital printing. Levi acknowledges that print is changing dramatically and drastically, but he insists it won’t disappear.

ON ONE HAND, small jobs like business cards and flyers that had been done by offset have gone digital. Many newspapers and magazines are going digital. The markets that are gone won’t come back, he says.

But on the other hand, packaging is booming, fueled in part by growth in the emerging markets of China, India and parts of Africa. Consumer goods such as food and cosmetics are enhanced by value-added packaging all over the world.

Print books won’t disappear, but many will be printed digitally. Art books, with their reliance on precision and quality, remain the domain of offset printers. So do catalogs, especially those enriched with gloss, laminates, embossing or whatever it takes to stand out. “Ask Armani, Tiffany, Bulgari – all say they will continue to rely on print,” Levi says.

After the crisis of 2008, Levi and other printers applied themselves seriously to the task ahead of them for the next four years and focused on their own companies, hoping the larger issues would go away.

ROBERTO LEVI ACOBAS

Lives: Milan, Italy

Education: Diploma in accounting

Profession: CEO of Printgraph, a creator and distributor of products for the printing industry.

Self-description: Entrepreneur, manager, inventor, visionary

Spare time: “I love all sports and have plenty of broken bones to show for it.”

Favorite colors: Blue and acid green

Favorite artist: Leonardo da Vinci. “He could do anything, and I love everything he did.”

Music: “I spend a lot of time traveling, and you will always find me with my earphones on, listening to music. Coldplay is my favorite group.”

Admired industrial object: “Boeing airplanes. The 777 is a perfect object.”

Family: Married Silvia in 1997, son Alessandro. Two Labradors, Giannino and Chica.

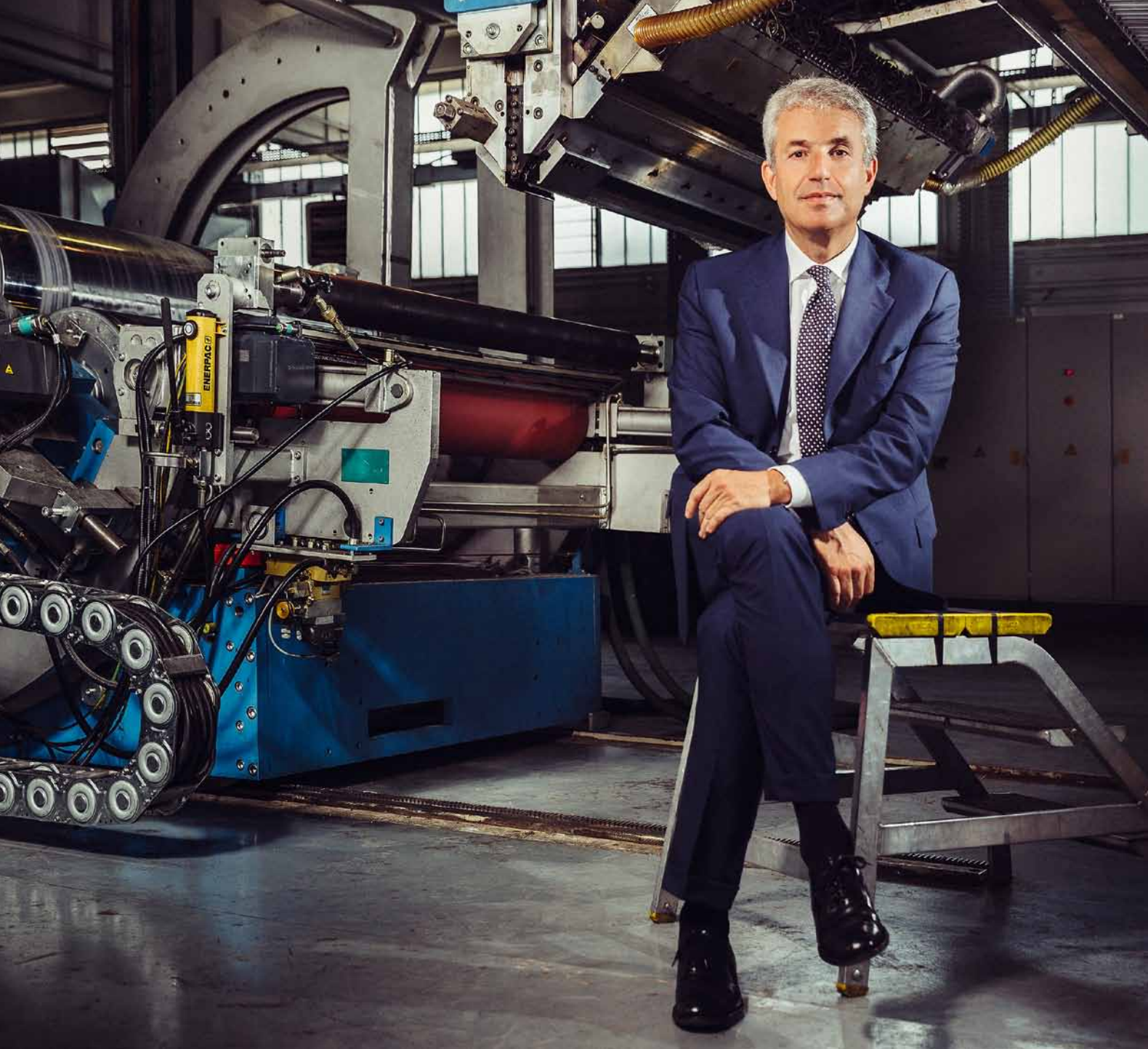
They didn’t, and Levi decided that the solution lay in working together. He turned to ARGI (Associazione Rappresentanti Grafici Italia).

ARGI was founded in 1983 by five companies distributing printing equipment in Italy. Printgraph joined in 2004, and by 2012 ARGI had grown to 35 companies, most of them large multinationals, some of them (like Printgraph) producers as well as resellers. The crisis had fostered an “every company for itself” mentality; Levi called every member, saying, “We have to get together to discuss our common problems.”

Thirty of them agreed, and they met in February 2013 at a school of graphics. The venue was significant:



“Ask Armani, Tiffany, Bulgari – all say they will continue to rely on print.”



Levi told his colleagues that if they continued their cutthroat marketing, neither they nor the students would have a future. Since 2008, Italy's 34 graphic schools had been largely abandoned by industry. Lacking the funds for consumables, students were learning theory without any practical experience.

IN LEVI'S VIEW, one priority for ARGI was to revitalize these schools. Another was to draft and promulgate

a formal code of conduct for all members. Adherence to such behavior "means not destroying the market for everyone," Levi says.

Levi's activities with ARGI led to his appointment as president of the association in 2014. As the first president who does not come from a large multinational, he points out that the perspective of a corporate manager and that of a small company entrepreneur are quite different.

One thing everyone agrees on:

Print is changing and no one knows exactly where it is going, Levi included. But he insists that print is not dead.

"There is a future for traditional printing," he says, "but we have to adjust to it. You have to believe in what you do and you have to understand where your market is moving."

Otherwise, it's like trying to swat a mosquito in the bedroom without turning the lights on. ■