

### CULTURE IS ONE, “CULTURAL” IS PLURAL. VARIANCES IN CULTURAL HERITAGE SECTORS, KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES

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#### 1. The evaluation of research in the field of cultural heritage

This paper focuses on previous publications regarding the multifaceted topic of the holistic value of cultural heritage, providing a further in-depth contribution on the diversity of benefits deriving from study and research in the sector. Quality, relevance, originality, innovation, and internationalization: these are the five fundamental objectives outlined in the guidelines for evaluating research, drawn up several years ago by the Ministry of Education, University, and Research as part of a national research plan.

The existing issues regarding this topic are well known and stem from the limited research conducted in Italy, in both the public and private spheres, which primarily originates from niche areas and, therefore, presents significant limitations in research policy and its capacity to contribute systematically and scientifically to an international scenario. One aspect is integrating information and knowledge into the economy, since it is crucial for economic growth. In order to achieve this objective however, a strategic value must be assigned to public and private collaboration, emphasizing that research must be oriented towards economic and social applications. In the present situation, for Italy to realign itself, it needs to introduce objective and reliable criteria and evaluation methods that are able to improve institutional linkages between evaluation results, project selection and resource allocation. It must therefore involve the entire scientific community: universities, research institutions, the productive sector (i.e., businesses and territory). The discussion that emerges related to study and research in the field of cultural heritage is an interesting one. The uniqueness and peculiarity of this sector, both in Italy and internationally, are represented by the coexistence of experts from among faculty members holding academic courses, who not only come from the historical-humanistic world, but also from the technical-experimental field. The multiple sectors within the historical and experimental sciences require technicians and humanists - for whom it is essential to discuss and compare things - to pool their knowledge and expertise, but above all, to be humble and mutually understanding, essential qualities in achieving positive results for the "good of cultural heritage."

## 2. Disciplinary domains in research

It is therefore evident that assessing the state-of-the-art situation as regards interdisciplinary research, knowledge and conservation of cultural heritage is of the utmost importance. It must be emphasized however that such research can only be conducted in synergy with the different and specific disciplinary fields that characterize it.

Without delving into specific issues closely related to this research, what is essential to highlight is the point of contact, that subtle common thread that connects the historical-humanistic disciplines with technical fields such as restoration chemistry, conservation and treatment of materials, environmental chemistry, physics and biology, as well as architecture and engineering. In recent years, these disciplines have made significant progress in the conservation of cultural heritage.

The theory itself, which represents the ethical foundation upon which these disciplines rest, is sterile if it renounces the experimentation conducted by science. The term experimentation, however, should not lead to the misconception that cultural heritage should be regarded as a "testing ground for research." Being aware of the unnecessary and often harmful controversies that are easily triggered when addressing such topics, it is clear that "old themes" must be tackled from new perspectives, perspectives that must prove fruitful for heritage protection, understood primarily as the knowledge and respect for that specific reality which, as a unique and exceptional material testimony of cultural evolution, is always found in artwork.

The objective, consequently, is to provide new interpretative keys that do not replace the artwork but serve as tools—a means rather than an end—in the hands of research. This is the task to be undertaken, humbly acknowledging the indispensable contribution of the other disciplines involved in the aforementioned research.

## 3. Scientific knowledge in the field of cultural heritage

Scientific and technological knowledge constitute a fundamental basis in the field of heritage, both when creating cultural artefacts and, above all, when conserving them.

Mathematics, mechanics, and computer science, for example, have formed the necessary knowledge basis for the construction of monuments and temples and the realization of sumptuous architectural works. New artistic ideas and forms have been characterized by the use of new materials and the application of complex new processing techniques. Problems regarding the conservation of artistic heritage have existed since antiquity. Naturally, in ancient times, control and restoration were exclusively subjective and artisanal, making it an exaggeration to speak of technologies or sciences applied to cultural heritage in the same way it is done today. The first philological studies involving the field of cultural heritage date back to the last century when scientific and engineering research results began to be used to develop appropriate conservation techniques for each heritage asset. Today, numerous scientists and technicians from various scientific fields (chemists, physicists, engineers, architects, biologists, computer scientists) participate in research and apply specialized techniques and methodologies in the field of cultural heritage for both cognitive and conservation purposes.

Technical-scientific attention is primarily directed towards the "material" aspect of cultural heritage, namely, the characterization of materials and construction techniques, which serve as a valid and sometimes determining factor when combined with

traditional methods of study and research in archaeological, architectural, art historical, and archival-library disciplines. Interest in cultural heritage, and its study, thus imply a range of knowledge spanning multiple sectors. This results in interdisciplinarity, considering that the application of different sciences extends not only to its characterization (heritage as an object of exchange) but also to its conservation and dissemination (cultural heritage as an economic asset with a market value).

If we consider cultural heritage as a commodity - albeit a highly particular one, since it cannot be classified strictly as an economic asset but rather as a unique and non-reproducible merit good - defining criteria for its technical-economic evaluation is essential. These criteria should provide useful information on the status of these assets, the possibility of their becoming objects of study and being used in educational contexts, of being instruments in cross-cultural and intercultural exchanges and, thus, not only of being a vehicle of learning but also a driver of economic development.

Cultural heritage holds fundamental importance not only from a humanistic and historical-artistic perspective but also in terms of economic returns: its valorisation and prudent management can lead to significant economic benefits not only within the sector itself but also in related areas, such as tourism.

In this regard, one fundamental principle must be underlined: the defence of cultural specificity, or cultural exceptionality. Cultural assets cannot be treated as mere commodities and should be exempted from general regulations because they inherently carry values of great significance for the consciousness of a people, and are linked to language, history, culture, and tradition.

However, a cultural policy based on protectionism would be misguided, as everything in the world evolves, and we must be open to these changes to preserve what truly matters. For cultural heritage, which is always part of the market, conditions must be created to ensure that cultural products, music, theatre, and cinema, can compete in market conditions, while maintaining their cultural integrity.

#### 4. The value chain of cultural heritage

Moving on, finally, to more recent times—indeed, to the present day—one observes—there has been a growing “metabolic” progression toward awareness and cultural development. This progression reflects the needs, scenarios, and objectives that have evolved over the years in a spatial dimension that is no longer confined solely to the international community but includes the individual as well, thereby encompassing a more intimate vision. Within this framework, as the economist Severino Salvemini notes, a new idea in the cultural asset value chain is emerging and asserting itself: “engaging in culture is directed not toward giving but toward having.”

Indeed, investing in art goes well beyond mere sponsorship or patronage: the benefits of cultural heritage are not focused on enhancing reputation or image, but stem from the conviction that, today, culture is a raw material in the value chain, imbuing it with economic significance.

The starting point is the notion that in an immaterial economy—where the use-value of a product or service is increasingly marginal—what truly matters is the symbolic and evocative power of goods and service experiences. A phenomenon that signals the replacement of industrial capitalism with cultural capitalism.

Operating across various product, and even credit, sectors alongside traditional economic and business theories aimed at productivity, profitability, and the practical performance of manufactured products, today's companies focus on the production and sale of the meanings the products embody – a situation in which the higher-value

elements of cultural production catalyse the "memory" of a product and foster "brand loyalty" in consumer behaviour.

In short, in the relationship between culture and economy, there has been a shift from the earlier model – in which residual economic and financial resources were allocated to cultural activities – to the present situation, in which cultural aspects, significance, objectives, and aims constitute the fabric and driving force in attaining comprehensive "well-being."

This implies that managers who are training in the sector should possess a cultural grounding. A tangible example is the "art advisor," an individual capable of synthesizing a passion for collecting, handling assets and possessing managerial skills in dealing with the art market. Such art consultants typically have a humanistic background complemented by financial and marketing skills, as well as technical-conservation and computer knowledge, alongside experience accrued in galleries and/or cultural institutions.

By offering independent opinions, these experts advise clients on how to enhance the value of their art works and navigate various investment opportunities, diversifying across periods and authors. Their role extends beyond simply acting as arbiters in selecting a particular painting or valuable object. It also involves assisting clients throughout negotiations, which may encompass a wide array of transactions—such as divesting part of one's holdings and expanding them, insuring artworks, registering them in archives or catalogues as needed, and preserving their value through appropriate conservation measures.

From these considerations it is evident that scientific expertise needs to be channelled so that heritage asset management and protection - extremely significant from both a socio-educational and economic perspective - are the result of carefully planned initiatives, grounded in meticulous study and research. Of particular importance are safeguarding and restoration interventions, as well as reclamation work, which is essential for protecting the environment, a natural heritage asset par excellence.

The need to hold onto our knowledge of the past is manifested not only in conserving a work of art as testimony to a given period, but also in safeguarding the built environment where one can rediscover a natural context for the works themselves, namely buildings, historic centres, and geographic areas, all of which must likewise be regarded as cultural assets. This perspective leads us to seeing "the environment" in its most general definition, as a cultural asset.

Environmental degradation, whether it be from natural causes—sometimes unavoidable—or from human activity - often foreseeable, yet, in practice, inevitable - not only undermines our quality of life but also gradually destroys the very heritage of which we are the custodians.

## **5. The culture of architectural heritage conservation and the corresponding value of modern architectural works**

In the contemporary debate on the conservation of architectural heritage, updating the concept of value applied to architectural works has become an increasingly pressing matter, particularly when it comes to modern production. While historical heritage has been codified through decades of research, well-established methodologies, and broadly shared intervention practices, twentieth century and later architectural heritage occupies a more elusive, less formalized, and often more vulnerable space. Although this heritage is significant in quantitative terms, its excellences are either barely

acknowledged and frequently neglected or perceived as a disposable asset to be replaced rather than a resource to be protected and enhanced. The situation calls for an interdisciplinary approach that combines the polytechnical with the humanistic dimension, recognizing that conservation is not merely a technical practice but also an epistemological inquiry into the concept of value itself.

If indeed recognizing value is a prerequisite for heritage protection, one must ask what criteria should be adopted to identify, understand, and convey the value of modern architectural works. Unlike historical architecture, which benefits from a lengthy process of historicization, by its very nature modern heritage challenges the conventional categories of protection. The Industrial Revolution and the ensuing urban growth of the twentieth century generated a vast inventory of buildings—in part the result of design cultures oriented towards quality, in part the result of more anonymous and speculative serial construction. Yet within this stock of buildings lie numerous examples of remarkable value, often unrecognized or overlooked, that warrant a critical reassessment of existing conservation policies. In this sense, the guidelines advanced by the New European Bauhaus underscore the significance of existing heritage as a resource for the future, both in terms of environmental sustainability and as a vehicle for cultural and social renewal.

A noteworthy reflection along these lines recently emerged at the Docomomo International Conference 2024 in Santiago, Chile, which reiterated the need for interdisciplinary methods and strategies to raise community awareness regarding the value of modern architectural heritage. Great emphasis was given to the potential of adaptive reuse to repurpose buildings from a contemporary perspective, while simultaneously preserving their identity and original characteristics. Such strategies present themselves as an alternative to indiscriminately demolishing this heritage and fit into a broader vision of a circular economy, in which transforming existing buildings becomes a mechanism to meet new social, environmental, and economic needs. From this vantage point, the value of modern architecture is no longer restricted to its historical or aesthetic dimensions, it also acquires a dynamic quality linked to its capacity to adapt to and address the evolving needs of the present day.

While direct protection of a property is essential to ensure its safeguarding, it often proves insufficient for triggering effective enhancement and revitalization processes. Too frequently, the imposition of formal restrictions without a parallel strategy of management and reuse leads to a “crystallization” of the asset, preventing its evolution and integration into contemporary processes. In the case of modern heritage, such rigidity often fosters negative perceptions among the public, who tend to see these buildings not as resources but as obstacles to new forms of urban development. To prevent conservation from becoming a hindrance instead of an opportunity, it will be necessary to complement regulatory frameworks with innovative governance models in order to encourage sustainable investment, public-private partnerships, and co-design processes that involve local communities. Only by striking a balance between protection and transformation can the full vibrancy of modern heritage be preserved, enabling it to play an active role in shaping more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities.

Value, therefore, cannot be regarded as a static concept but must be rethought in light of contemporary societal needs. The notion of value increasingly converges with that of a resource, prompting a reflection on the interplay between conservation, adaptation, and transformation. This is not about preserving the past in a frozen state, but rather about ensuring that the architectural legacy of the twentieth century is recognized as an integral part of our present, capable of meeting demands for sustainability, inclusiveness, and quality of life. Such a perspective calls for a renewed critical

approach, one that goes beyond mere typological or stylistic classification to capture a work's value in its relationship to context, its technological and constructional dimensions, and its ability to address community needs. Moving in this direction requires a concerted effort among scholars, institutions, and communities, ensuring that modern architectural heritage is no longer viewed as a marginal concern but rather as a central component of the culture of conservation.

## 6. Conclusion

Studying historical-artistic artifacts and their conservation environment often requires an appropriate blend of historical, artistic, humanistic, philological, as well as technical, diagnostic, material, and conservation-related elements. The knowledge derived from the humanities and experimental sciences must be channelled towards advancing the collective understanding of the research community, rather than serving the individual alone.

This is why there is a need for deeper analysis and investigation of scientific reviewing and assessment, because even though scientific papers and historical-technical journals bear witness to a mutual need for each other, for cooperation, for experience and expertise, which combine to achieve a common result and objective, this kind of publication is relatively rare at an international level.

Yet while culture is singular, "cultural" is plural. Culture is a quality, an identity that unifies and elevates. "Cultural" by contrast, disperses, scatters, degrades, and disqualifies, it plunges us once more into the world of numbers, into quantitative measures: cultural heritages, cultural activities, cultural actors, cultural engineers, cultural deposits, cultural industries. This is an observation by the French writer Jean Clair, one of the most renowned international exhibition curators. Hence the importance not only of verifying whether the critique of a work of art and the scientific evaluation of a research project adhere to objective criteria and indicators but also of ascertaining whether they fulfill the requirements of culture and embody quality and identity. This helps to illustrate a few aspects of how the principle of meritocracy can be implemented.

In seeking to define the kind of merit one wishes to reward, Michael Young, an English sociologist and politician, used the formula "IQ + effort = merit" - that is, merit is the sum of talent and effort - claiming that it is the effort that allows the talent to express itself that must be rewarded. However, putting meritocracy into practice requires satisfying conditions that are not always, empirically, easy to verify.

As the economist Daniele Checchi points out, if effort and talent were evident enough, then it would be quite straightforward to apply the meritocratic principle to the element of effort although extensive debate might emerge about whether being gifted (i.e. possessing talent) should also be rewarded.

Yet when these two factors come together, social choices become uncertain. For this reason, the prerequisite for introducing meritocratic principles that garner broad approval lies in expanding efforts to measure results and trying to identify the constituent parts that have led to said results. In our context, alongside objective criteria and indicators, it refers to the findings from the scientific, historical, and technical aspects employed in the appropriate methodological approach to a specific issue which, in turn, align with the notion of "culture", in which science and the humanities converge. Only by doing so can one be persuaded to move from current egalitarian policies to a situation that opens new avenues for qualified young professionals—seen as the product of quality and identity, and thus of culture.

It is with regard to these final considerations that one can rightly conclude that a work of art is characterized by a set of values involving different fields of investigation: aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, authenticity-related, and also economic, even though the latter may create complications, it remains indisputable, seeing as art relies on an economic foundation to evolve in a positive way. Despite the inherent complexity, the interaction between art and the economy seems unavoidable in both the public and private spheres—especially in a country such as Italy, which is entrusted with managing a heritage that is both extraordinarily prestigious and monumental in scale.

An analogous viewpoint may be applied to the intrinsic—both material and immaterial—value of modern architectural heritage.

Among the aforementioned values, it is, moreover, equally important to add that of ethics, whose meaning embraces all the aforementioned values. Indeed, when referring to a work of art reproduced in digital format, one naturally wonders: Where has the principle of uniqueness gone? What about its unrepeatability? And what of its high market value? In fact, they are all issues that have recently been examined and debated from multiple perspectives in various publications of the Journal, “Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage”.