

# “WHAT IS CONVENIENT” OR ART BETWEEN ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

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## 1. Techniques and signs: towards a historical science of the arts and images

The second cycle degree course in “History and Conservation of Works of Art”, to be merged into the new two-year second cycle degree course in “History, Preservation and Enhancement of Artistic and Archaeological Heritage and Landscape”, symbolically reflects the key aspects that characterize the new Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Bologna. This means historical-humanistic perspectives and technical-scientific perspectives will converge in order to complement and enhance each other. The former are to be understood primarily as critical thinking skills, reflection on the method, the “way” (*hodós*), in other words, the requirements and conditions for knowledge, its consequences and effects on the individual, the community, and the environment. In each case, critical knowledge questions the assumptions it makes, distancing itself from the cultural conditioning of the observer with regard to the field of objects it studies, historicizing the very objects it deals with and the languages it uses to define and comprehend them. Therefore, art is not an absolute, a reality that exists separately from the environment and the society that produces and defines it, it is also a product of history, since it is a means of knowledge and a rich source of experiences and meanings, of objects and gestures that circumscribe its possible scope. It concerns, in fact, history and conservation, the guarantee of an education which integrates the different technical-scientific sectors dedicated to the analysis, diagnostics, restoration and preservation of works of art. This is why it is even more important to sharpen awareness regarding the importance of the iconic sign: art, like all languages is first and foremost a matter of signs and meanings. Communicative signs provide the necessary support for meanings, and no meaning can be given without a semiotic carrier, a sign to transmit it. There is no real division between material culture and spiritual culture: theology too, is embodied in institutions and in its power over bodies and spaces, and each artifact represents the outcome of ideas and conceptions which may even be extremely abstract and complex. Human language and imagery have evolved, together with gestures, the body and the environment, in a complex relationship made of reciprocal influences that cannot be separated from each other. The

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first natural images, together with early works of art, were actually both the real and reproduced tracks left by animal extremities, the material and, at the same time, the metaphysical trace of a presence, a meaning which goes beyond what is perceived by the senses<sup>1</sup> [1]. Moreover, since art is technical production and concurrently a set of signs, supports and meanings, it is one of the most important, perhaps the most important modality of trans-figuration in the world<sup>2</sup> [2].

Art, therefore, has a political function, a critical vocation, it does not simply reproduce reality, it calls it into question. Art is the ability to make plans and take action using reality. Since ancient times, great political revolutions have always been accompanied by iconoclastic movements and, at the same time, have favored the creation of a new imagery, a renewed repertoire of images, new styles and new meanings.

Art has always been closely linked to the environment and landscape: the landscape itself is a cultural and historic element, and Italy, from this point of view, is a vast open-air museum, with its cities and countryside, coasts and valleys, all deeply marked by the diverse techniques and forms of human activity. The subjects and themes of the figurative arts (not only in landscape paintings), and likewise their constituent materials (from pigments to marbles), have been profoundly affected by environmental and territorial factors, and as a result have also been influenced politically and economically. Hence the importance of knowing about the techniques, materials, routes of exchange and communication, in short, everything that has given shape and substance to artistic production, together with its diffusion, perception, degradation and conservation through time.

## 2. Heritage and art or the new professional gospel of the ephemeral

When it comes to the career opportunities of our graduates it is necessary to move away from the rhetoric of professionalization regarding training courses. Ours is not an introductory course for restoration professionals and neither is it a school of pure theory on image; its ambition is to provide the basic knowledge, the prerequisite, for many occupations, from art criticism to museology, from research to teaching, from the senior management and coordination of agencies tasked with protection (the Italian superintendencies) to specialized publishing, from the management and coordination of restoration work and preservation to cataloguing using state of the art computer systems.

But we should not delude ourselves: today jobs and professions have to be invented; even professional openings in teaching are subject to profound revision and paradigm shifts. The important thing is not to give in to the siren-song of the economists, who want to persuade you of the immediate usability, profitability and direct exploitation of cultural heritage for commercial purposes and for profit. This, in Italy, has led to the devastation of the environment and territory, to the ruin, then, rather than the preservation of its heritage, and is fueling the destructive and unconstitutional idea of the transferability of public assets<sup>3</sup> [3]. Public assets are a guarantee, among other things – as Salvatore Settis has reminded us in an article which appeared in *La Repubblica*<sup>4</sup> [4] – of the State's exercising (i.e. everyone together seen as an organized collective) its primary functions: not only the function of promoting the culture and education of its citizens, therefore, but also their assistance and protection, the promotion of the core values of freedom and labor; in short, the protection of the fundamental rights of democratic citizenship, including those relating to the conservation and valorization of

artistic and environmental heritage. A humiliating point has been reached with remaining funds from the national lotteries being used to finance cultural heritage when the usual support channels have dried up.

Mass media, workers in the sector, managerial rampancy and public mismanagement are currently transmitting an extremely hazardous message: that of transforming institutions for preservation and conservation, museums and art galleries, into agencies at the permanent service of the ephemeral. Art and culture are not sophisticated kinds of entertainment, an “anesthetic for the masses” or a “high-class escort” to hide the ugliness and violence of reality<sup>5</sup> [5]. Art and culture have a very high ethical and civil function, they are the basis of progress. It means studying the past, using all the latest means and research techniques available, to plan the future, and thus contribute to the overall advancement of society. Our graduates, however, should not aspire to become entertainers that fill the leisure time of those travelers who today have become serial tourists. Their course of study aims, first of all, to provide them with the prerequisites for putting into practice the fruition of our artistic and environmental heritage with greater awareness of the rights and duties underlying its conservation and critical knowledge. Only in this way, will they become the protagonists and creators of innovative projects, of new professional skills related to art, of ideas and techniques that can, indeed trans-figure the world in order to make it better because it is more beautiful, and therefore more fair and more true.

The data regarding public (and private) financing of cultural activities in Italy are well known, also because they are a sore point, hence it is needless to go into detail here. It is nevertheless, the only sore point that would be really worth the government’s while to remedy once and for all, because by doing so, the whole sick body of the country would be cured. There must be a turning point: a massive investment, both cultural and financial, to raise awareness of the public nature and civil function that the preservation and valorization of cultural heritage have. Since the Renaissance, in Italy, the discussion on art has always been first and foremost a discussion about the public interest and civil function of art, and not a discussion about personal entertainment<sup>6</sup> [6]. The fruition and preservation of cultural heritage are not guaranteed by transforming museums and landscapes into a Disneyland where you can spend your free time and have fun. It is not a matter of denying the right to leisure, of course, but to give substance to Article 9 of the Italian Constitution, that bases the principle of the preservation and promotion of the landscape and cultural heritage on public interest and therefore on knowledge of the past and on planning for the future of the community. This is what the civil and moral function of the study of history and the history of art is all about. I am therefore convinced that good “events”, are those that are able to leave a lasting impression in our minds and, in turn, may even impact positively on community funds and resources. They are events that in the first place, consider it important to teach the language and the meaning of testimonies, that come to us from the past, to future generations. You can conserve and valorize at best only what you know. The rest is tourism and entertainment hidden under the ‘fig leaf’ of culture. The university, I believe, has more important duties: without sacrificing the need, which is now pressing, and rightly so, to rethink and to create new professional profiles that are more integrated with the new technologies and the new demands of society. It must not and can not give up its specific mission – that of higher education –, in other words, of critical thinking and social criticism, and consequently that of designing new research methods and new scenarios for public and private intervention<sup>7</sup> [7]. “Events” with a capital E are those rooted in this awareness, an awareness of the strategic value of culture as a key resource for a community’s moral

and civil growth, and as a consequence, its economic growth. It is impossible to have a good cultural policy or a good economic policy, I would even say that it is a very bad policy *tout court*, when valorization is practically reduced to the selling off of cultural heritage and its lucrative commodification, as has happened in the past and continues to do so. As Martha Nussbaum has shown, the economic impact of good cultural policies is achieved only when there is no need to aim for immediate profit, and if projects and strategies regarding financial statements are not coerced into adapting to criteria and ways of acting within a tight deadline<sup>8</sup> [8]. When critical sense grows dull, sooner or later financing channels are occluded. It is evident for all to see, I believe.

### 3. Convenience, civic decorum and public interest

Is it convenient therefore, to invest in culture and in cultural activities? One can better grasp the spirit and meaning of the question if for a moment, one reflects on the ancient Latin and humanistic meaning of *convenience*. Today, in all fields, what is "convenient" refers to what is useful, in the sense that it provides immediate gain. In Latin, *convenientia*, from the verb *convenire*, has a figurative sense that is very close to that of the verb *decet*, which for us has been minimized in the moralistic sense of 'decency'. In both classical and Christian, and medieval and humanistic culture too, *decet* does indeed have a more complex meaning, a meaning, that is at the root of the idea of public good, even though modern constitutions have obliterated or better, perhaps, internalized this acceptance without ever clarifying it. Therefore, *decet* is what is convenient, in the sense of what is more suitable, more appropriate, more fitting, on account of the beauty and preciousness of the materials, on account of the weight of the intellectual and temporal material resources expended for its realization, to valorize, indeed, to honor and glorify what beauty relates to. And beauty is suited to higher things, the gods and the city, that is to say, the public good *par excellence*, according to the ancients. This idea of beauty, *mutatis mutandis*, also applies to Christian civilization. The monumental and ornamental *decor*, which somewhat reductively, we have taken to calling Art (with a capital A), since the sixteenth century, has been, what is most fitting, what is most convenient, for higher things: which is why Cassiodorus, in Theodoric's Ravenna fifteen hundred years ago, linked the *decor* of the city and its preservation to the *decus* of the urban and intellectual élites, making it one of the essential tasks of the governors. And *decus* – with the same root, from the verb *decet* – is moral and intellectual beauty, which indeed should not be separated from *decor*, in other words, ornamental and monumental beauty.

It would be a great step forward in our social conscience, and I believe, in our ability to plan and in the economic benefits that might even ensue, if we learned to reclaim the profound meaning of the ancient correspondence between territorial and urban decorum, and the political and social importance of the *cives*. The *cives* are such, since, as a qualifying element of their *dignitas*, they put caring for art and the landscape before all else. A future of peace and prosperity has its roots in the intelligent, critical and innovative (not nostalgic, therefore) recovery of our past. So, I think, in the name of the ancient and precious meaning of "convenience", the planning of a big "event" such as Ravenna European Capital of Culture should be declined. It is only in this way, I believe, that the key to the civil, moral, and economic growth we all hope for, will open the door to new perspectives.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For this topic, please refer to my book *Impronte di gloria. Effigie e ornamento nell'Europa cristiana*, Roma, Carocci, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> In this regard see A. Dal Lago, S. Giordano, *Fuori cornice. L'arte oltre l'arte*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> *Costituzione della Repubblica italiana*, art. 9: «La Repubblica promuove lo sviluppo della cultura e la ricerca scientifica e tecnica. Tutela il paesaggio e il patrimonio storico e artistico della Nazione».
- <sup>4</sup> S. Settis, *Musei, direttori a orologeria*, in «La Repubblica», 22 giugno 2013, p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> Expressions are borrowed from the penetrating pamphlet by T. Montanari, *Le pietre e il popolo. Restituire ai cittadini l'arte e la storia delle città italiane*, Roma, Minimum fax, 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> See T. Montanari, *A cosa serve Michelangelo?*, Torino, Einaudi, 2011, pp. vii-viii.
- <sup>7</sup> I fully identify myself with the disenchanting reflections made in this regard by C. Giunta, *L'assedio del presente. Sulla rivoluzione culturale in corso*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> M. C. Nussbaum, *Non per profitto. Perché le democrazie hanno bisogno della cultura umanistica*, Italian trans. Bologna, il Mulino, 2011 (*Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, Princeton U. P., 2010).

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- [8] SETTIS S., 2010, *Paesaggio, costituzione, cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile*, Torino, Einaudi

### Biographical notes

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