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MUSEO TATTILE STATALE OMERO

Promotes studies and research on sensorial perception and accessibility to the cultural heritage



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# IN EVERY SENSE

Roberto Cresti

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*Did you know me,  
hands? I took  
The forked way you pointed...*  
Paul Celan

Ancient humanism, with its fruitful uncertainty, dates from a passage in the Histories of Herodotus where Solon replies to Croesus's pressing demands to know which man should be considered the happiest with the famous phrase, "man is something undetermined" (πάν ἐστι ἄθροπος συμφορή). We can never tell who is the happiest, says Solon, nor, though someone were, how long he will re-main so: life is ongoing and there are no guarantees. As Croesus himself was about to learn to his cost when, after after a rapid rise, his fortunes suffer a catastrophic reversal.

This principle, a cornerstone of all that is finest in of our civilization, was taken up again in more recent times by Friedrich W. Schelling. In his Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom (1809), he writes: "Man is an undecided being" (Der Mensch ist [...] ein unentschiedenes Wesen), immediately adding that for this very reason "he can decide himself" (er selbst kann sich entscheiden).

Friedrich Nietzsche, another interpreter of an ancient humanism revived in modern times, puts a positive slant on the question of human essence, claiming in his Genealogy of Morality (1887) that the earth is "an ascetic star" (asketische Stern), i.e. the heavenly body inhabited by those who nurture their radical "non decision" with exercises which tend to transcend all limits, including the physical.

An idea, this, which has resulted in a number of events over the past two centuries – not all of them positive – but which, shorn of its negative aspects, continues to enjoy sufficient credit to serve as a standing invitation not to give up, and to banish the prejudice that something exists "by nature", but also that there is no such thing as "human nature" -

human nature which expresses itself in striving to be itself, i.e. by taking care of that indecision which is essential to our make up, but also to our motivation.

The important thing is to push back, in a general sense, the boundaries within which we “operate”, and this endeavour refers to consciousness in intellectual terms, but also to sensitivity, so that any extension can involve the two specific spheres, taking its starting point from how we received them. In thinking and in feeling, the protest against every form of prejudice, in particular over sexual identity (though there are signs that naturalism is on the rise again) has led to every limit becoming a starting point with its own characteristics, and this is all the more just when it is a question of a natural weakness or deficit which restricts and conditions the way we live and act.

One can, however, discover a “further” way of operating – concealed, as it were, beneath a limit - so that the exercise is not merely aimed at restoring what, in many cases, cannot be restored, but in extending that limit in a scale of experiences which aspire to have their own autonomous value: like an “intermediate” which becomes in itself a “totality”.

Furthermore: in this way, other intellectual and sensory dimensions can be revealed which may have been neglected, like those, for example, which Rudolf Steiner refers to in a series of conferences entitled Aspects of Ancient Mysteries in which - using his method founded on a reading of the Akashic Chronicle – he describes the ritual held in ancient Ireland (the Roman Hibernia) during which the neophyte was required to feel two statues: one, in which his fingers remained impressed; the other of a material which, once squeezed, immediately returned to its original shape.

In the first case he was touching something that was revealed to him as “art”, in the second “science”. One was without truth, the other without existence. His task was therefore to endow art with truth and science with life, combining them in his own id which acquired self-awareness through the performance of this very “exercise”. So, in the relation of touch with void (immersion in the material) and with solid (feeling the surface) there lay a “living-latent” dimension which needed to be “exercised”.

The same seems to emerge, through a different method of inquiry, in what Jacques Lacan claimed for the terracotta vase as the prototype of all creativity, in the sense that its fashioning on the potter's wheel, in the hands of the craftsman, represents the unresolved, the “undecided” synthesis of emptiness and fullness, with the discovery of a link between the one and the other beyond the morphologies found in nature. The vase is in fact typically human, reminding us perhaps of a uterus or a skull, but it is also the

archetype of a dwelling. For example, a vase made exactly like a tiny portable house exists from 3000 B.C.; and it represents an “undecided” object on which intelligence has been “exercised”.

These two examples appear immediately relevant to everything that has a bearing on the cognitive faculties of the blind because they lead us to identify their natural sensory deficit as the arena for developing exercises aimed not just at confronting the deficit itself but at offering – also to people not in the same condition – the opportunity to undergo, through touch, some surprising cognitive experiences.

Just as the psychiatric exercises devised to rehabilitate the wounded in World War I gradually came to be practised by everyone (Pilates is an example), tactile exploitation of artistic forms, mainly plastic, as practised at the Museo Omero in Ancona, can increase and refine sensitivity even among the normally sighted. It was an exercise also favoured by great twentieth century sculptors like Arturo Martini who notes: “By excluding the sense of sight, exhausted and littered with all the preferences and incrustations of ancient works, I felt the promise of renewal”. And again: “Touch has its own sight, I thought, and it will guide me in a world of primordial possibilities. Passing from a decrepit island to one that is brand new, my restlessness will find what I have always been looking for”.

Martini adumbrates a modern infra-sensory odyssey which other great sculptors like Auguste Rodin and Wilhelm Lehmbruck had undertaken before him, with works in which form has the “undecidedness” of a representation of the human being in a state of continual flux. Joseph Beuys identified in this the premises for “social sculpture”. And it is precisely this “exercise” - at once civil, creative and cognitive – of which we have need today: it reminds us that, indeed, “man is something undetermined”, in every sense.

# EXPLORING THE SENSE OF WONDER: EMBRACING BEAUTY AND BUILDING PEACE

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"I call upon the dear children, who are able to do all things, to unite with me in building peace in mankind and in the world."

Why start with Maria Montessori's epitaph? Because it is an uplifting message: it concerns humanity, and through the child it reaches out across space and time to every one of us. It rouses all generations to bring their development to completion, to realize their full potential and shared humanity.

It is an invitation to give meaning and direction to our educational and existential design through a clear and conscious exercise which allows each of us to feel responsibility and pleasure in making sense of our lives. Living means expending energies: being aware of them, directing them to ends which are wise and harmonious. This can be done by accessing that indissoluble unity of body, mind and heart which enables our interaction with the world, and what we learn through the world, to constitute a rich aesthetic experience. From the Greek for feeling, αἰσθάνομαι, the watchword is to encourage the combined development of sensitivity and discernment, motor intelligence, emotional literacy, and abstract-imaginative thinking. It is clear that sensoriality is of vital importance in learning to know ourselves and the world, as well as in developing a healthy, stable personality. Knowledge is greater and deeper when acquired through the senses; it is the senses that dignify the body as a source of knowledge and expression on a par with the intellectual faculties and emotional-affective skills. The aesthetic exploration of the world ensures that our perceptions remain alert and responsive; it nurtures a spirit of exploration charged with amazement and wonder because attentive to details, to passing moments which are never the same: every occurrence is new, always happening for the first time and hence deserving of amazement, attention, exploration, appreciation. Surprise and

wonder are energetic dispositions but at the same time subtle, intent on kindling interest, joy and love in meeting and knowing. Wonder is the gaze that takes nothing for granted, that is intrinsic to knowledge – not in terms of mere assimilation, but through revealing the unknown. In pedagogical terms, wonder obliges us to acknowledge the aesthetic dimension as crucial – as much in recognizing the complexity of the person in terms of an overall integrity of body, emotional-affective life, multiplicity of expressive needs and languages, as in legitimizing a design tending to the fullest flowering of the person, starting by accessing his or her inner potential.

Wonder is ever on its guard against the encroachment of the predictable and trivializing; we are nurtured by encountering beauty, touching it, but also by allowing ourselves to be touched by it. Beauty is an inner disposition with the power to generate the nobler human qualities. Wonder is indicative of an existential attitude which is bent on inquiry, inquiry fostered by love, love of knowledge, not in the sense of hoarding notions, but revealed as gaze, gesture, listening which savours, and therefore experiences, reflects, feels.

Where the word knowledge is concerned, it is important to bear in mind its etymological root in the Latin for know and savour, which points to an interaction between the self and its environment in an aesthetic dimension, exploiting to the full our sensory apprehensions as a resource and a language of intelligence and sensitivity, in which our bodily experience is endorsed as a means of access to pleasantness. The aesthetic dimension thus enables us to explore the subtle, profound interconnection of body-mind/heart-spirit - dimensions which in Chinese and Japanese are expressed by a single ideogram, 一心shin, by way of indicating that they are not susceptible of duality. Educating through action enhances this sensitivity. Conceptualization and abstractions need to be mediated by perceptions and manual dexterity. “In early infancy, the hand aids the development of intelligence, and in the mature man it is the instrument which controls his destiny on earth” (Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*). The hand effects the dynamic bonding of mind and creativity, senses and mobility, human being and environment. Beauty and peace imply relationship (such as proportion-relation, encounter-action) between the individual and the environment; when the gaze is charged with wonder, we home in on beauty and we promote peace in the world and in the cosmos: cosmos from the Greek κόσμοςorder, meaning proportion, harmony.

The sense of wonder accompanies our discovery of the nature of beauty and peace, our encounter with it and contact with it, and by engaging our sensory apprehension it attunes itself to time dilation: the time of listening, feeling, touching with a view to expanding and refining intelligence and sensitivity. There is one sensory experience which we can say is universal and of major significance: exercising silence, both of gesture and word. We can consider it a matrix experience which enables us to enter into harmony with beauty and peace, to generate them within ourselves so that we can recognize them without. The exercise of silence nurtures attention and sensitivity, concentration and delicacy, giving us access to the meaningfulness of the meditative experience, restoring the body to composure, attention to vigilance, emotion to calmness. Meditation teaches us to listen and hear ourselves, to keep and hold to a position: we experience the body as made up of universal elements, our breathing as an inner voice which speaks both of itself and the universe. We learn the unity of body, breath and mind, we experience the pleasantness of beauty and peace. We learn to discipline the mind so as to be able to observe our own thought, not in its contents, but in its forms and movement – from a stable, firm point of observation. It is a meaningful experience which breeds confidence in our potential to know and to be transformed; it develops a concrete form of intelligence, bound to reality and to our bodily experience; it cultivates an understanding of the world which is penetrating, selective and homogeneous; it fosters a sensibility sustained at once by a principle of order and harmony and by a shared awareness of peace. Self-knowledge is aesthetical in that it questions us not so much about who we are (crystallizing a self-image) as about how we are (what we do with who we have become).

# TRAINING TO IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY TO THE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A SHARED COMMITMENT

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Our cultural heritage is a dynamic system reflecting values in continual evolution. Identifying material and immaterial content to be handed on to future generations is therefore not just the responsibility of cultural institutions but involves all citizens who, either individually or comunally, are fully entitled to express interest in specific aspects of their cultural heritage and to wish to interact personally and creatively with it.

It is an active role which goes beyond mere cognitive action and which today, with the progressive democratization of culture, is starting to adopt broader approaches, allowing individuals and communities to participate directly, actively, and sometimes on equal terms, in discovering their own heritage. Skills and expertise therefore need to be enhanced, but we must also work together to raise awareness of the social responsibilities we share in protecting and drawing on our cultural and natural heritage.

This is a premise which leads back to the idea of a heritage as a means of promoting the personal growth and social wellbeing of the individual, a shared space in which to exercise our right to cultural participation and public commitment.

Hence the need to extend what we mean by accessibility to cultural places and to what they contain, to move in the direction advocated by the bottom-up and recommended in current national and Community policies on the subject, such as those outlined in the Council of Europe's recent *European Heritage Strategy for the XXI Century*. This document recommends tackling the challenges of the future by actively involving the public, as witnessed by the strategic actions suggested, particularly as regards the "social component".

*The European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage* - drawn up by the European Commission in 2019 to build on the achievements *The European Year of Cultural Heritage* – moves in the same direction. It defines five main principles, the first of which hinges on the idea of cultural heritage for an inclusive Europe, giving priority to participation and access for all. And yet accessibility is not always guaranteed despite being clearly provided for in documents such as *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, ratified by Italy in 2009, and - albeit in more general terms - in the Italian Constitution (Art. 3) and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Art. 27), both adopted in 1948.

On the other hand, complete accessibility is not easily achievable in every place. It often requires major financial investments, planning decisions which may encounter obstacles in certain historical contexts, and museological and museographic approaches in possible conflict with the very principles of protection and conservation.

Nonetheless, all too often, action to increase the accessibility of cultural places and their contents is not carried out, even where conditions would allow it. In these cases we need to think long and hard about what the real barriers are and take action to remove them; we need to recognise bad practices and promote awareness that everyone benefits from our cultural heritage being more widely available.

Leaving aside for the moment the key area of school and university education, the first step is to take appropriate action to raise awareness among those who work in the cultural heritage sector, from managerial level to reception, whether in a museum, an archive or a library.

Next, it is essential to provide targeted training, involving all the different professional figures directly concerned with improving conditions of access and enjoyment of our heritage, from curators to communications staff, and from computer technicians to architects, so that all their innovations and activities are informed by a determination to improve accessibility to cultural places and contents.

It is a challenge increasingly central to the interests of both *The Italian Ministry of Culture* (*Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il Turismo*) and *The Directorate General for Education and Research* (*Direzione Generale Educazione e Ricerca*). The latter is responsible for education and training, which involves drawing up three-year training plans

and annual implementational training plans and for developing (in association with *The Cultural and Landscape Heritage Board*) a national cultural heritage education plan, based also this year on the three all-embracing principles of accessibility, participation and communication.

*The Directorate General for Education and Research* and of *The Centre for Educational Services* operate in association with the other ministerial institutes, just as they assist in shaping joint action by working closely with the various national training agencies and regional cultural entities which contribute, in various ways, to enlarging the scope for informed participation in our cultural heritage.

This is the context in which a number of initiatives have featured, including the training course *Ways and Means of Making Museums and Places of Culture Accessible to Visually Impaired People*, held between November 2018 and September 2019.

The course, promoted by the *Parco Archeologico del Colosseo* in association with *The Directorate General for Education and Research*, was organized by the *Museo Tattile Statale Omero* of Ancona in a spirit of mutuality and collaboration, with the *Parco Archeologico del Colosseo* opening it up to the other MiBACT museums in the Lazio region.

The 100-hour course was structured in 15 modules and aimed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills needed to plan and carry out educational programmes and activities for people with visual impairments. It had recourse to methodologies for deciding on possible design paths to be implemented within the framework of the activities organized by the educational services of the different institutes. Thanks to the highly experienced teachers, with their aptitude for listening and inviting debate, and their thorough knowledge of the issues gained through long experience in the field, the quality of each of the training sessions was such as to produce excellent results in terms of skills acquired by the course participants. The communicative ability, interpersonal skills, and human qualities of those working under the guidance of Aldo Grassini, President of the *Museo Omero*, ensured an atmosphere in which participation in the training programme was enthusiastic, conscientious and creative. The results were wholly positive, not least in bonding those who attended the sessions into an active

network – a further achievement, of immediate and future benefit, to the credit of a training programme which must certainly be numbered amongst the sector's recent *best practices*.

The *Museo Tattile Statale Omero* has confirmed its importance both as a benchmark training institution and an invaluable resource through its constructive championship of the ideal – no longer utopian – of full accessibility to our cultural heritage.

# TOUCHING BEAUTY: THROUGH LEARNING AND LIVING

## Alessandra Delli Poggi

An exhibition is usually to be looked at, an occasion when the eye normally reigns supreme. After all, what would you expect an art exhibition to offer if not a predominantly visual experience? But sometimes scenarios change and roles are reversed.

And it is this that happens at the Mole Vanvitelliana in Ancona which houses the truly remarkable Museo Omero, a tactile museum, and the only one of its kind in Italy. The exhibition *Toccare la bellezza* (Touching Beauty) foregrounds touch as a new sensory experience. The rediscovery of touch – so often neglected – allows us to perceive in a wholly different way thanks to sensory and neuronal stimuli which are entirely distinct from the canonical process of sight.

The exhibition is ambitious, its intentions revolutionary. The very title places the focus on beauty. It is a measure of the originality of the enterprise that it is prepared to re-engage with a category as ancient and much debated as the beautiful which, as we all know, changes chameleonlike as age succeeds to age and taste to taste. And yet there is no doubt that the aesthetic category of the beautiful, along with its personification beauty, are in their element here. Beauty lies in designing a project which is inclusive, which kindles fresh interest and leads to lively debate through dialogue and a genuine desire to discover. Beauty lies in getting us to think about matters which hardly impinge on most of us because they relate to conditions different in some ways from our own. A difference which enriches us because it is endowed with rare wisdom.

*Toccare la Bellezza* (Touching Beauty) is an exhibition which draws on the legacy of two major figures and the importance they both attach to the sense of touch: Bruno Munari, a multifaceted genius of the twentieth century, a true Renaissance man, and Maria Montessori who is central to Italian cultural history.

We all know how to draw a sun or a tree, but in drawing them it was Bruno Munari who taught us to give the right value to creativity, just as it was Maria Montessori who taught us to learn by trial and error. Maria Montessori was the first to insist on the usefulness of teaching through play, grounded on order and method, and to devote her life and work to

championing children's rights and learning methodologies. And it was Bruno Munari who continued, even as an adult, to play and to get others to play, other adults as well as children. As he moved from a project to a piece of writing and then a critical analysis, he came to understand simply – with the simplicity and elasticity of a curious mind – the human needs which underlie the principles of art, creativity and development.

But it should be clear that the emphasis is not on Maria Montessori and Bruno Munari, but on their methods. Not an exhibition about Montessori and Munari, but with them. And from both a practical and conceptual point of view it makes perfect sense to organise an exhibition which contemplates methodologies, means, agencies - the how something is achieved – in relation to the main theme which is touch.

“Children discover all too early that the world is full of things they mustn't touch,” claimed Rudolf Arnheim – a reality we have all had to come to terms with. But there are no restrictions of this kind at the exhibition *Toccare la bellezza* (Touching Beauty) where you can and, indeed, must touch. Cognitive processes are rooted in the connections made by our brain, which are the more active if they stem from a process of exploration and discovery. When we perform actions and interact purposefully with our environment, we exercise the plasticity of the nervous system. Education and learning result from an ability to relate to objects, and to people, through play, experimentation, wonder and amazement.

Maria Montessori and Bruno Munari accompany us on this journey of discovery; we feel their presence in the importance given to touch, participation, method and, not least, play. And everything works, not just for the children but also for the adults who, though more timid, are no less enthusiastic as they set themselves to experiment and explore the mysteries of a darkened room. The Museo Omero teaches us that impairment is not restrictive but allows access to other ways of knowing, other routes forward: a tactile route is clearly marked out. It starts with what we mean by knowing - in other words approaching, touching, holding an object and experimenting with it, acting with the environment and in the environment. Knowledge starts from experience and is nurtured by experience. And we alter with every new situation, in a process in which everything is interconnected. It is a course which takes us from the realm of experience into that of the psyche.

Bruno Munari and Maria Montessori were well aware of this. Maybe that genius for experimentation - manifest in the hands and eyes of children - never deserted them, and

has now come down to us. Just as their teaching matters today more than ever, so, we would argue, do exhibitions like this matter today more than ever.

Through learning and living we can still experience beauty, and reach out a hand to touch it.

# "TOCCARE LA BELLEZZA" ("TOUCHING BEAUTY"): AN APPRAISAL

Aldo Grassini

PRESIDENT OF MUSEO OMERO

The exhibition "Toccare la bellezza" ("Touching Beauty") closed at the Museo Tattile Statale Omero in Ancona on 8 March only to reopen at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome on 28 March. Now that we have seen it through we can take a little pride in saying that we met the challenge. Why was it a challenge? Bruno Munari and Maria Montessori lived at different times - though there was some overlap - and they never met. Neither, for that matter, had they ever been brought together in a single exhibition. This was managed for the first by the Museo Omero and it was no easy operation. Both were major figures in twentieth century culture but they moved in different spheres: the one a scientist (physician/educator), the other essentially an artist.

But this exhibition succeeded in highlighting important affinities: a tendency to break the mould and overcome certain cultural taboos; a regard for, or rather, a love of the world of childhood; an interest in the extraordinary resources of all the senses – not just the visual sense – and an appreciation of their specific qualities in enhancing mental development; and lastly an admiration for the aesthetic potential which each of the senses, especially touch, is capable of expressing.

The visitors, numerous and enthusiastic, quickly realized that the intention was not to introduce two towering figures who certainly have no need of an introduction, but to rediscover tactility under their guidance.

If someone were to say that the exhibition was an attempt by the Museo Omero to enlist Munari and Montessori under its banner, they would not be altogether wrong! This is the cultural battle that the museum has been waging for several years now: to contest the monopoly in the arts of the visual sense and to endow the sense of touch with the nobility and regard which our cultural tradition has denied it.

Touch is a unique way of knowing. Without it, we can have no perception of certain material qualities: weight, temperature, texture, and their manifold causes, are empty words when divorced from a sense of touch. And the exhibition on Munari and Montessori

bears out this truth in a thousand ways. The beauty of touch, of entering into an affective relationship with things, the pleasure of contact with different materials are all instantly kindled when exposed to that myriad of small objects with their endlessly varied shapes and fashionings, in venturing to the limits of normal perception, in the joy of discovering sensory nuances, possible uses, possible combinations.

All this is beautiful: a beauty you can touch, a beauty which overturns all the canons of a purely visual approach to art in the quest for a new and yet primordial relationship with nature which is not made up entirely of visual images and needs to recover its physicality, refined and ennobled by an intimate relation with the concept which sheds light on it while drawing substance from it. This is a new aesthetic which marks a fresh chapter in the history of art and opens the way for an art which is multisensory and for new approaches to appreciating it, radically transforming our way of organizing and managing museums.

The Ancona exhibition was intended to be something entirely different from the traditional art exhibition. This time it is not enough to look: you enter into dialogue with the artists and the objects, touching them, using them, playing with them, trying to grasp the conceptual mechanism which relates them to each other, trying to reproduce it, correct it.

A visit can even be quite lengthy and offers an experience which is rewarding in numerous ways, including the genuinely aesthetic.

A final consideration, but certainly not the least important: this was to be an accessible exhibition. Exploiting all the senses means allowing everyone access, even those who have to get by with some form of sensory deficit. No one is excluded from touching beauty. A single exhibition has achieved a unified goal: for art and for democracy.

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