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MUSEO TATTILE STATALE OMERO

Promuove e diffonde studi e ricerche sulla percezione sensoriale e l'accessibilità ai beni culturali



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ACCESSIBILITY: EMPATHY AND INSPIRATION

Annalisa Trasatti interviews Antonio Espinosa, Director of Vilamuseu

- 1. Dr. Espinosa, could you tell me about your educational background and professional training and when it was that you became interested in the question of accessibility?**

When I studied archeology at university in the 1980s, I was a bit unusual: what appealed to me was not the excitement of excavating the cultures of the past but the thrill of bringing them to the attention of the public. Since 1995 I've been Director of Archeology and Vilajoiosa Museums, now Vilamuseu. In 1997 I was appointed associate professor at the University of Alicante where my teaching has centred on museums and tourism. I've also studied museology in depth: I didn't want to be like those archeologist-directors of Spanish museums, interested solely in their collections and their research, and hardly at all in the public.

- 2. The secret ingredient is empathy, but it's not enough on its own: you need inspiration, and sometimes it's nothing out of the ordinary. One day when we were sitting at table, my wife, Paula, came up with the suggestion, "why don't you make the museum accessible?"**

"Good idea," I replied, "I'll give it some thought". But I was none too convinced; I had enough on my plate as it was. But the very next day I rose to the challenge, and these last 25 years have been enormously rewarding. Which is why I always tell my students that when they have an idea – or someone suggests one – it doesn't matter how ambitious or difficult it may seem, they must never simply discard it out of hand. I urge them to think it through because there are times when those ideas can change your life and even help you to change the world around you.

- 3. How did you come to know the Museo Omero and what struck you about this Italian enterprise?**

Who doesn't know the Museo Omero? If you work in the field of museum accessibility, it's a leading light. I'm always harping on to colleagues about my stay

there in 2017, and just how good their tactile displays and online materials are. I'm honoured that the museum periodical, "Aisthesis", should have enlisted me in the cause.

My relations with the Museo Omero – and in particular with Aldo Grassini, Annalisa Trasatti and Andrea Socrati – are grounded in admiration, but they also allow for an exchange of notes. We call each other, we invite each other to events and we collaborate together on projects. Just recently we've taken part in a video conference on the question of touching museum exhibits in a time of Covid, and they made an extremely useful contribution to our Increased Mobility project which is in line for two international prizes.

I've been struck by the warmth and openness of the Museo Omero staff, as well as by their amazing empathy. Their displays, too, are striking: the ease with which tactile accessibility is the norm throughout. It's a museum with a soul. And nothing impresses me more.

- 4. For some years now, you have been on the Standing Committee of the Congreso Internacional de Educación y Accesibilidad en Museos y Patrimonio. What is this body and what are its aims and initiatives? I joined in 2016. At the moment I'm on the committee with Almudena Domínguez, Juan García-Sandoval e Jesús Pedro Lorente.**

It began in the Murcia Region in 2010. Every year it addresses a topical issue connected with [museum accessibility](#): social responsibility (Huesca, 2014), tourism (Alicante-Vilajoiosa, 2016), training (Lisbon-Batalha, 2017), planning and content (Barcellona, 2018) or social participation (San Paolo, 2019). In the coming years it will be held in other countries of the world so it can serve as a forum for different approaches and practices.

- 5. As well as being an expert on the subject you are, above all, the Director of a young museum, Vilamuseu, the Vilajoiosa Museum, planned and laid out so as to be completely accessible. Was it important to design it for everyone? Tell us how it went...**

It was founded in 1973 and transferred to a new location in 2017. We had just drawn up the Manual of Museum Accessibility and Inclusion and we had a Museum

Plan which was very demanding in terms of accessibility. The architect, Tomás Soriano, focused on usability. Vilamuseu has won international recognition as a model of inclusion from the Design For All Foundation and Ibermuseums. This has acted as a spur to strive for ever greater excellence. Our standard includes sign language, plain language, pictographs, subtitles and audio descriptions; accessible fittings and furnishing, and dozens of scale models, replicas and originals than can be touched. Every year we organize specific training courses.

6. What is the current situation as regards the accessibility of museums and art in Spain? Are there partners or particular research work worthy of notice?

Juan García Sandoval and I have just published [an article in the records of the 4th Congress](#) on the legislation, standardization and training as regards accessibility in Spanish museums. Considerable progress has been made over the past 30 years but the absence of recognized penalties means that application is left to the good will of the individual museum. I'd want to draw particular attention to the work carried out by the [Generalitat of Catalonia, by the Provincial Council and City of Barcellona](#), with networks like [Apropa. Culture or the Grup de Treball Museus i Accessibilitat](#). Also [museums](#) such as the Tiflológico de la ONCE, the Prado or the Thyssen in Madrid; the Marítim in Barcellona; the Lugo Provincial Museum Network; the Picasso Museum and others in Malaga; the MURAM of Cartagena and the Museo de Bellas Artes de Murcia; Vilamuseu e the Marq in Vilajoiosa and Alicante; or the Manacor History Museum, among others. In 2015 [the Ministry of Culture launched the Museums + Social Plan for the state owned museums](#). In 2019 the MUSACCES Consortium organized an international conference in Madrid, entitled "[Museums for all: art, accessibility and social inclusion](#)". The 20th [International Conference Galiziano-Portoghese MINOM-ICOM](#) (Lugo, 2020) was a valuable opportunity to reflect on the truth that inclusion isn't merely a question of disabilities; it's also a question of culture, gender, sexual diversity; a question, too, of age and sustainability.

7. NEUROSCIENCES AND THE FULL EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE: THE EMPATHY OF ANCIENT AND MODERN SPACES

by Maria José Luongo

In 1972, 55 cities were constructed and destined to crystallize in a dimension beyond time and space. There are no bricks: branches, leaves, forks in the roads, glimpses of sky and clouds are the brainchild of the writer, Italo Calvino, who imagines an intense, unbroken dialogue between Marco Polo and the Mongol emperor, Kublai Khan. The cities described by the Venetian traveller are those that can be seen not only with one's eyes but through memory, desires, dreams, signs, interchange. They are sensory as well as architectural metaphors. Calvino calls them "Invisible Cities", and yet, besides being inhabited, they inhabit us. Far from being mental abstractions, Calvino's cities are "real things", tactile impressions, landscapes, passions, atmosphere, bodies, water, light, sound.

Back in 300 B.C., Marco Polo would only have been able to visit cities perceptible to the eye: it was around that time that Aristotle described sight as the noblest of the senses because it is the nearest possible approximation to the workings of the mind, given the immaterial nature of the kind of knowledge that guarantees. The eye as the centre of the perceptual world exemplifies the disembodied vision of Cartesian man whose solipsism separates mind from body, subject from object, I from you. But if we were purely optical beings, aesthetic judgement would be precluded. And it is this which gives rise to Mallgrave and Pallasmaa's criticism of contemporary architecture on the grounds that it is incapable of designing buildings on a human scale because of the excessive predominance of formal and "pure visibility" criteria. Rather, architecture needs to be placed in a multidisciplinary context which brings together anthropology, history, philosophy, aesthetics, biology and neurosciences.

In this way it is finally possible to arrive at an empirical answer to the query raised by Wofflin in 1886 as to why we feel emotion in the presence of a Greek temple. Can the sense of wonder and sublimity arising from the contemplation of a Doric temple be

explained in purely visual terms? Can our aesthetic sense be divorced from our everyday motor and tactile experience of reality? Recent laboratory studies have demonstrated that these different aspects coexist and cannot be separated in that we are beings endowed with a body which teaches us what weight is, what contraction is, what strength is. In constructing their temples, the Greeks did not consider just the visual impact; they created "empathetic" buildings which involve all the senses of the visitor. Which is why a Greek temple is a place accessible to everybody, because multisensory. This biocultural approach was given a considerable boost as a result of the discovery of mirror neurons which has provided us with a new notion of intersubjectivity which is neurobiologically founded and connotes what might be called "inter-embodiment". The cognitive neurosciences have proved that some areas of the brain involved in the subjective experience of sensations and emotions are also active when those sensations and emotions are recognized in others: in this case we talk about "embodied simulation".

The aesthetic experience itself is believed to be a multi-level process which transcends a purely visual analysis of the work of art: thanks to mirror neurons and "embodied simulation", we empathize (albeit at a precognitive stage) with the suffering and happiness of others, we read the emotional states of other individuals through their smallest gestures, we simulate their actions and the intentions that lie behind those actions, we animate the physical environments with which we come into contact. Purely visual projects ignore the fact that our initial experience of a building is through our emotions, and the neurological traces of those emotions can be detected through visualization technologies. Gabriella Bartoli, Anna Maria Giannini and Paolo Bonaiuto have shown that while the attainment of a particular motivation is an experience of pleasure or usefulness (food, clothing, social recognition), it is only the concomitant fulfilment of multiple needs that equates to the aesthetic experience. This is the sensation which Dante describes after listening to Manfredi in *Purgatorio*: "When we hear or see something which binds the soul strongly to it, time passes and we are unaware of it", and which Goethe's Faust acknowledges, "Beautiful moment, do not pass away!"

The Doric temple, too, according to Wolfflin, can be seen as an empathetic space which generates a universal aesthetic experience: a column, for example, does not merely support the weight placed upon it; rather, it suggests an opposing force, aspiring upwards and life-affirming. The architects who built the temple – but this is true of any building –

also anticipated the intentions of the people moving about inside it: if I see some steps, I want to climb them, but an alcove will kindle a wish to sit down. The implicit invitation to action typical of many architectural settings is one of the great discoveries which Kublai Khan makes while he plays chess with Marco Polo: we move in cities because cities move in us. If we design a building without taking into account the nature of those who will live it, we are ignoring our social responsibilities. Many civic environments are expressive of the lack of human values or, indeed, of any recognition of the need for spaces to be more and more empathetic and inclusive. And that also goes for the cities which our imaginations are constantly searching for, cities erased from memory because no account was ever given of them to an emperor by a traveller, or cities which are surfacing now, even as we describe them.

THE ROYAL PALACE OF CASERTA – GREEN MUSEUM: AN HISTORICAL, ARTISTIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY

by Tiziana Maffei

DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL PALACE OF CASERTA

The Royal Palace of Caserta and its grounds are evidence of Charles of Bourbon's determination to create the first monarchy in Italy with a truly European spirit, a newly founded court in Campania Felix, between Vesuvius and the River Volturno, not far from the capital of the Kingdom of Naples. The cultured King Charles, son of Philip V and Elisabetta Farnese, commissioned the famous architect, Luigi Vanvitelli, who was as well known for his learning and compositional rigour as for his brilliance and architectural pragmatism.

Although the property is no longer as extensive as it used to be, the Royal Palace of Caserta remains an enormous complex comprising the Palace itself, with a surface area of over 61,000 m², the Park of 123 hectares, the Wood of San Silvestro, covering 60 hectares, and the Caroline Aqueduct which runs for 38 km, collecting waters from the Fizzo springs and channeling them back to the Palace, with minimal variations of gradient and majestic infrastructures including the bridges spanning the Maddaloni Valley.

The Caserta estate as a whole, with its enormous number of rooms, its supplies, costs, workforce and its long-established agro-industrial ventures, is a social and economic resource for the entire area. A Unesco World Heritage site since 1997, this magnificent structure, together with the Enlightenment village of San Leucio, is central to the network of royal residences – each a garden of delights and a working, productive estate - which typified the Kingdom of the Bourbons.

Recognition of this cultural landscape as a first-tier state museum, together with the Commissarial Plan of 2014 - which ensured that the whole complex would be used exclusively for educational, training and museum purposes - has sanctioned Caserta's unquestioned potential as a site for developing a museum intended to be at the service of society and conducive to its sustainable development.

These are the premises which underlie the management's vision of a Green Museum: a unique complex, a key component of which is the Park with its fragile ecosystems to protect and enhance, in keeping with the Agenda 2030 targets to be achieved through the sustainable management of the site in recognition of its cultural and socio-economic role in the community.

The task, however, is arduous given the urgent need to foster awareness of the museum's contemporary role, both in-house and among the wider community which is now accustomed to the idea of the Palace as a repository and the Park as a substitute for the open spaces sacrificed to urban development.

The elements of the Green Museum are all integral to its totality. Its living principle is water, enabling the spectacular series of fountains and, most importantly, the ingenious hydro-system built so as to: ensure supplies of water for the various purposes required by the court; irrigate the land and render it suitable for agro-industrial ventures such as farming and the numerous mills and silk factories of San Leucio; introduce cascades to aerate the deep ponds where the various species of fish were bred for the king's table and the surplus marketed, using the Royal House trademark. Later on, water would also be used to irrigate the English Garden. This is a landscaped garden, commissioned by Ferdinand and Caroline in the fashionable style introduced by the English ambassador, Sir William Hamilton, and laid out by the German-born gardener, John Andrew Graefer. There is an area of woodland to the east for pleasant walks among botanical rarities, picturesque views and romantic ruins; to the west is the area under cultivation, more utilitarian, given over to nursery production, display and acclimatization, and recognized at once as the ideal setting for developing botany as a modern science. The study and reproduction of plant species for the numerous royal estates and aristocratic residences of the Kingdom of Naples soon proved a commercial venture besides fostering scientific research through contacts with other botanical gardens in Europe.

To recognize the values which inspired the creators of the Royal Palace and grounds, and to incorporate them in our own mission, is to restore the identity of the complex for today's visitors.

The five main functions of the museum are therefore extended and take the form of courses of action to be pursued over the coming years. Acquisition: both material and non-material, a fund of interdisciplinary knowledge about collections whose complex system of relations cannot be expressed in terms of a single disciplinary sector. Display: items exhibited both physically and digitally. Conservation: under art. 29 of the 2004 legislative decrees, the protection and upkeep of the heritage is the joint responsibility of the institution and the target community. Communication: a circular activity, based on participation, which can foster skills and increase the existential awareness of the individual. Research: aimed at the future recovery of an indivisible scientific and humanistic vision. Applied, experimental, innovative research as an essential support in developing this formidable cultural attraction, not least in terms of productivity and within a framework of healthy public-private partnership. The ambition of the Royal Palace of Caserta today is to recover its real value as a cultural landscape, part of the heritage of mankind, as a source of inspiration, direct and indirect, for the growth of every individual within the community.

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Editorial and direction office:

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Master recording: Matteo Schiaroli.

Voice: Luca Violini.