

AISTHESIS

DISCOVERING ART WITH ALL THE SENSES

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Design, multisensoriality, inclusion

Aldo Grassini - President, Museo Tattile Statale Omero

Twenty-eight years since its foundation, the Museo Omero is opening a new section dedicated to Italian design.

The founding law (n. 452, 1999), in laying out the aims of the new institution, specifies a commitment “to fostering the growth and cultural integration of the visually impaired and to propagating among them the consciousness of reality” (Art. 2). So the Museo Omero was not conceived exclusively as an art museum, even though it has mainly operated in this area up to now. With this in mind, it was practically incumbent on us to extend that area from the realm of art, as conventionally understood, to embrace design.

Art is beauty produced by man. There is a strong tradition which holds that art is indissolubly linked to uniqueness, one that would appear to clash with the very concept of industrial art which is necessarily linked to serial production. But there is a tendency today for culture to contest these demarcations and to inhabit a sphere free of rigid ideological boundaries which are, in any case, based more on tradition than sound theoretical inquiry. If the artist's task is to produce things of beauty, to discuss the material used becomes a secondary consideration. Besides, design, too, springs from the mind of a creator, while serial production meets the need for the product to be widely available. After all, the art of engraving has always attempted to reconcile the twin claims of originality and propagation. But as well as creating aesthetically valid products, design plays a more intense role in our daily lives, combining beauty with utility, accompanying our every action, even the most boring and repetitive, with the gratification inherent in objects which give pleasure and, on occasions, the admiration inspired by sheer brilliance. In a word, design contributes to improving our lives!

Another aspect of design which is of central interest to us is its intrinsic multisensoriality: because an object in common use is made to be handled, touched unapologetically. The absurd taboo against touching which still holds sway in almost all museums (in line with the ancient prejudice that art is essentially visual) simply collapses in the face of design. Hence the dawning recognition – unobtrusive, almost surreptitious – that it is possible to take pleasure in something beautiful by simply using it and enjoying the sensations and emotions which it arouses.

As we have said time and time again, the Museo Omero was founded, certainly, to enable

the visually impaired to enjoy art, but in addressing everyone it is a model of inclusion. Multisensoriality is the most democratic experience available because it excludes nobody. And the Museo Omero's Design Collection brilliantly achieves this aim by presenting its artefacts for what they are: objects in everyday use that we can look at, touch, listen to, as well as understand their origin and social function within the context which produced them. This is interesting for everyone and it often means retrieving a part of our lives with all the associated emotions which memory rekindles. But it is even more interesting for those who, like the visually impaired, have had less opportunity to know the things which everyone talks about or draw on memories of them. For the youngest it means broadening their knowledge of a reality which here goes beyond the limits of the verbal and enters the sphere of the concrete; for those further advanced along the road of experience it can make possible a leap backwards into the past which – with the miraculous aid of memory, enabling us to relive the feelings and images which are part of ourselves - can also help us to a better understanding of all that the flux of life has deposited in the subsoil of our consciousness.

Museo Omero: Design collection

Fabio Fornasari – Architect and Museologist

Two Simple Things

My present task is to accompany the reader in getting to know the Design Collection which the Museo Omero has accommodated within its premises so that it can be observed and explored.

A simple operation. Collecting is a propensity which distinguishes us as human beings. But as practised by the Museo Omero it is a propensity which always exhibits particular features. The Museo Omero does not just collect, organise and display its contents within a given space; it has set itself the task of “reading with the hands” or deciphering through touch. But the items can also be looked at – sight is not precluded. These are the first simple rules for approaching any project involving the Museo Omero. For regular readers of this review they are self evident. But this is a useful starting point for me to say something equally simple for those who know the museum.

I deliberately said that the items are there to be touched but that they can also be viewed, putting it that way round. The reversal of priorities is fundamental because it shows us, in a nutshell, that this approach reminds us of the democratic principle on which the Museo Omero is founded: everybody has the right to construe by using their own faculties. Exploration through touch is a deliberate challenge to the established order.

Touching, looking and listening are the three main gateways of perception and they underlie any dialogue between the Museo Omero and its multiple publics. It is this that might be called the Museum’s “added value” and which Aldo Grassini and Daniela Bottegoni continue to show us in their work today as in the past.

Awareness

It may not seem very helpful to recount how the Design Collection was conceived and developed, but in the words of Enzo Mari, “everything we do is political; the difference is whether we are aware of it or not”.

Enzo Mari was one of the most important Italian designers. More than anyone else, he took on the role of the person who was fully conscious, fully aware that Industrial Design was not merely about producing goods but a project for democratizing society.

From the post-war period onwards, the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society has changed Italy and the Italians. Today we can say that the outcome is not yet perfect; we live in an Italy which still has much to do, much to correct. This was clear to those very designers who were the first to militate for a multisensory society, one that could break away from tradition and custom and accommodate the new needs which were beginning to emerge.

But if we find ourselves today talking about a Design Collection in a museum where the original works can be touched, it is a sign that a change has taken place. And it is not the only evolution of its kind in Italy. Precisely because of Covid we have become conscious of how much care we all need. The museums have had time to develop a new awareness conducive to reconnecting with those publics which in the meantime had been kept at a distance. And this has stimulated attention.

Design as Procedure

The opening of the Design Collection demonstrates the continuity of the Museo Omero's policy which now has the endorsement of museological studies.

For the writer it has also been an opportunity to show what it means to plan a museum experience following a rationale which starts from the tactile and expands to involve all the senses – a way to show what the designer reflects on, to show how he acts and what he acts upon when he passes from abstract thought to producing an artefact which is sensible matter.

It is not enough by itself to say “It is forbidden not to touch”, even though it is a legitimate provocation. Giving pre-eminence to the experience of exploring the object with one's hands overturns the proprieties, the grammars and writing codes of an exhibition. It affects layout and itinerary. It is a proceeding which revamps the interactions between things and us.

The entire exhibition area works to enable this possibility, this priority, and for the museum-goer it is a necessity. It is the rule which determines the design of the display, the interaction with space, the relations between people.

The Term Design

The term design refers to the activity of devising objects, products or tools, whether for domestic or work purposes, which can be produced either artisanally or industrially, where technical features coexist with aesthetic ones (design = project).

This is an opening passage by Andrea Branzi published on the Treccani website. It is the first part of a text which goes on to show us much of the thought that revolves around design, understood not only as the production of objects but as objects in relation to society. Discussing, showing things in relation to their interactions with society is necessary if we are to understand society.

It is interesting to note the reference to the aesthetic dimension. In common parlance, design is usually seen as a world of things apart. Not the totality of things, but certain things: those that make it a rule to combine expressiveness (aesthetics) with technique (production process).

The collection which we exhibit proceeds from a recognition of this bond. There are museums without a collection, museums which display processes, use the potentialities of the public, their emotional input placed in a certain spatial relationship, in order to generate the experience which becomes an exhibition, for themselves and others. These are the relational museums which operate through that immaterial dimension which is linked to Experience Design, to Relational Design, and which involves the individual embedded in society. But our collection is in the sphere of product design. This is an important distinction because design is an umbrella word which covers a wealth of meanings. Our collection is in fact based on solid principles which identify design with that array of artefacts which used to constitute everything that “Made in Italy” stands for and which gets its fullest recognition in the Compasso d’Oro Award.

Compasso d’Oro

The Compasso d’Oro is not just an award; first and foremost it is an acknowledgment which allows the Associazione per il Disegno Industriale-ADI to promote Italian design research. ADI was founded in Milan in 1956 and includes among its members companies, designers, journalists, scholars and, more generally, anyone involved in design. It is considered to be the most important recognition of all.

This is why we turn to it as a beacon in searching, among the wealth of objects produced over time, for those we believe to be most useful, those which reveal the aesthetic dimension alongside the technical. The Compasso d’Oro award is the Oscar of the design world. It turns the spotlight on the entire output of the winning firm or designer. So, not all the artefacts displayed are themselves prize winners but they are, as it were, illuminated by the same beacon. Our purpose is inseparable from what was outlined before: it is imperative for us to add tactile values to the selection criteria. If the essential is invisible to

the eye, then the essential article - the one to include in the collection, to exhibit and to explore - must first of all be chosen by touch of hand.

Iconic

This is a word which is used a lot when talking about design - a word, like one or two others, which is not always beloved because overused and misapplied. But for us it is a sign of the attention received by a particular object among all the others. It is the hallmark of that object.

The iconic dimension of an artefact is therefore not only visual; it is the whole rhetoric surrounding its history which makes it important to us.

The Design Collection assembles objects illuminated directly or indirectly by the light of the Compasso d'Oro award and which the critical literature on design describes as iconic, major landmarks.

32 Variations

These were the criteria for selecting the artefacts and shaping the collection.

The number of exhibits is limited to 32, an apparently arbitrary number but one which prompts a musical digression with conceptual implications. In music two major composers - Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven – produced two works which, had they been design products would be called iconic. Both works are a set of 32 variations. Put very succinctly, Bach's Goldberg Variations express a response to the idea that time, filled with sounds, generates rhythms, solids and voids which compose architectural structures in sound. In Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, it is the more emotional dimension, linked to the feelings explored in the pianism, which speaks to us of the variation as a basic dimension for holding ourselves together, for ensuring our inclusion, not amid oppositions but amid continuous modifications.

In a similar way to the two sets of variations, the Design Collection seeks to display the "gradations" by which we inhabit the world through our use of things. All the artefacts exhibited are small "architectures" made up of rhythms, solids and voids, but they also testify to emotions and feelings. How many chairs do we know or have we tried? The collection puts on show varieties, or "variations": variations on a seat – in the form of a glass wave, a sack, a mouth, a dog, a rocking horse. All are variations, in terms not just of

technology but attitudes to life. The Design Collection is this: a response to our way of occupying space, of using it with things, over time.

The Box

All the objects that we acquire are contained, sold, transported in boxes. These containers are not only there to protect the product during transportation; they are also a vehicle of communication, conveying information, narratives, stories about the thing inside. They contextualize it on the product market and in the collective imagination which it feeds.

One example is the packaging for the articles designed by ALESSI, with the figure of Alessandro Mendini, designer and design theorist. The box is an organ of communication which puts the designer's face on the cover and flanks it with thoughts about design in general and the product in particular. Another example also comes from the early years of the century: the Swedish low-cost furniture manufacturer, IKEA, is famous for the instruction leaflets included in the packaging; they have become synonymous with the company's identity.

So the purpose of the box is not simply to protect the article; it communicates the identity of the product, contains instructions for its use before it is even seen or touched, before its imaginative and symbolic identity is recognised.

Our first thought is to repackage the objects, to construct a new box around them so as to introduce them, display them, suggest how they might be used.

The design of the box is linked to three things. The most important is the die, which cuts out the icon of the artefact from the material – resulting in the visual absence of the thing which becomes tactile presence, a border and a boundary to be touched. This is what we sense as we come in the main entrance to the Mole Vanvitelliana, the driveway which passes over the small bridge with its portal in the finest white Istrian stone.

As we walk up the brick-vaulted corridor, we notice the the small temple to Saint Roch ahead of us is perfectly cut out from the volume of the gallery. The gallery seems to have been fashioned deliberately to display the temple and allow our gaze to skim over it, as if inviting our vision to become almost tactile.

The die-cutting machine is backed up by a black relief print which isolates some features of the object from an iconic standpoint, showing how it works and its geometric, functional variation.

It also serves to enhance the account of each artefact in the collection, written by Chiara Alessi.

Relation and Interaction among Scripts

“Tante care cose” (‘So Many Dear Things’) is the title of a book by Chiara Alessi. Reading this work we realize that, for her, design is not merely a product but the living environment in which she has grown up, in which she has developed as an observer, harvesting and gleaning all that is said about design. She is the perfect person to narrate a story, to spin a yarn around the box, on the walls which enclose the exhibits. It is not just her accounts but the quality of her attention, her lightness, which we have found so useful in redesigning the box which contains the artefact.

The boxes do not merely provide explanations; they furnish interesting readings which extend over the containers that surround the artefacts while remaining open in the front. There is a Braille tablet in front of each exhibit - the first design object replicated thirty-two times, apparently always the same. Just as repackaging enhances the presentation of all the “dear things” on display, so Braille is the instruction leaflet for those who cannot see. Unlike Chiara Alessi’s texts, these texts educate us in tactility, or responsiveness to stimulation of the sense of touch; they guide us in approaching the article, in what to search for when exploring it. The description of the product recalls the text in relief, but written in black. But its aim is to help, through tactile exploration, the development of what Montessori calls stereognostic sense: it is the three-dimensional, multisensory image of the object which not only the blind form in their minds through haptic perception; it is the tactility which is concentrated in the body.

These two texts are to be read in different ways: Chiara’s with the eyes, the Braille with the hands. They are two distinct texts which at once raise a relational question: if a sighted person wants to read the text in Braille, they can do so by using their eyes to translate it letter by letter or by asking an unsighted person to read it for them. The museum can be visited on one’s own, as we shall see, but the fullest experience is to be had through the interrelations between people interacting through different channels.

Autonomy

The museum was created with the idea that the exhibition can be visited in complete autonomy. There are two components which help to make this possible: the structure with its long counter which, like a ring, crosses the entire space, and the innovative digital technology which monitors and directs the visitor’s position in the display area.

The artefacts are mainly arranged along this counter which recalls a showroom: the commercial area where I can buy the articles on display, but repackaged within the form of communication mentioned before, communication which revolves around tactility. The counter is a feature which we all recognise where articles are exhibited in a linear fashion. It is serpentine in shape, which enables people to remember the arrangement of things better.

But what is fundamental and innovative is the chance to complete the itinerary autonomously thanks to digital technology: the two bracelets worn by visitors guide them along virtual corridors towards the objects to be touched. On arrival at the objects, two soundtracks start up: one in the exhibition area, the other heard only by the wearer of the bracelets.

The first soundtrack is the audio biography of the artefact. Created together with sound artist, Paolo Ferrario, it reconstructs an ideal sound environment around the object which does more than merely present the article in a didactic way; it questions what it might have heard of the life around it. It wonders, in a sonic key, what the artefact might have dreamt. It is a sound narrative at once poetic and artistic.

The second soundtrack is only heard in the headphones. It is a bone-conduction headphone which does not obstruct the outer ear and allows the wearer to hear Chiara Alessi's text.

Everybody Out Room

While work on the project was in progress, the Museo Omero acted on an idea of Andrea Sòcrati's for a neurodiversity room. The idea led to the creation of a protected environment with an exclusive emphasis on design. The aim of responding to the needs of those who seek a safe environment in which to be by themselves for a while was the spur to design a dedicated space, one which reflects the lives of the girl or boy who needs a little solitude to rediscover their equilibrium.

It is a area which takes its cue from a work by Carlo Antonelli (Einaudi, 1996) in which he interviews a generation of young Italians in their bedrooms, "a generation in their own room". Here an intuitive grasp of the need for seclusion becomes an opportunity to introduce other objects akin to the thirty-two on display, other Compasso d'Oro award winners like Bruno Munari's "Abitacolo", or multifunctional bed, emblematic of a space free of the parental presence - and perhaps a good place to wind up.

Tactile poetry with Emilio Isgrò and Lamberto Pignotti

Andrea Sòcrati – Special Projects, Museo Omero

To mark National Braille Day and International Mother Language Day (21 February), promoted by UNESCO and celebrated worldwide, the Museo Omero, the state-owned tactile museum for contemporary arts, multisensoriality and interculturalism (TACTUS) mounted a special exhibition devoted to tactile poetry.

The venture evolved from research conducted by the writer on the subject of art and multisensoriality. By prioritizing the sense of touch, the intention was to build on the experimentation of the Neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960's into what was called "visual poetry", "total poetry", "experimental poetry". The "tactile poetry" project has had the endorsement and active support of two major exponents: Emilio Isgrò and Lamberto Pignotti.

Both are pre-eminent figures on the contemporary art scene and both, in their different ways, have made decisive contributions to the innovation, even the renewal, of literary and poetic language in the post-war period. It was a period marked by new dynamics - consequent on the rapid emergence of mass societies and new technologies - which inevitably led to new relations and new aesthetic horizons. These were horizons which prefigured artistic contamination, combining poetry, painting, collage, music, technology, design, photography, performance, while at the same time reaching out to multisensory and synesthetic experiences. And this was the context providing the impetus for research work which led to the "tactile poetry" project.

Isgrò carried out his first erasures in encyclopedias and books; they were to be understood as a sign of coming rebirth, in other words erasing something so as to pave the way for a future which would need reconstructing. As Isgrò himself explains, "words and erasures are the same thing; we see because sometimes we don't see – as a surplus of words makes us insensitive to their meaning, so a surplus of images makes us blind".

As early as 1944, after assimilating the lessons of the Avant-garde, Pignotti began experimenting with verbo-visual art. In the early 1960s he conceived and provided a theoretical basis for the early forms of "technological poetry" and "visual poetry", and for

the “Gruppo 70” along with other artists and critics. Pursuing his determination to move towards a contamination of artistic expressions, he combined and amalgamated different languages and codes, always prioritizing the five senses. This led to the plastic “object-books”, the poems to touch, to drink, to eat, the “chewing poems”, and naturally the “visual poems” in the form of collages or manipulations of news, fashion or advertising photos, and such like. Words and letters of the alphabet are always subjected to aesthetic modification in different artistic modes. We can find examples in the ancient world with the Latin “carmina figurata” (“shaped songs”), later in the typographic poems of Stéphane Mallarmé, in the Calligrammes of Guillaume Apollinaire, and then in the “tavole parolibere” (“words-in-freedom”) of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

The leader of the Futurist Movement, in his 1921 Manifesto entitled “Il Tattilismo” (“Tactilism”) devotes the eleventh paragraph to “tactile tablets for words-in freedom improvisations”, where the “tactilist”, passing his hand over the tablets, “will express aloud the various tactile sensations” and “his improvisation shall be worded in freedom, i.e. unfettered by rhythms, parody, syntax”.

Now, my aesthetic project is focused entirely on tactile values, which can be expressed in different ways, and with them the Braille code whose letters and numbers are formed by a combination of six raised dots and therefore have their own three-dimensional plastic value. It is not only not shared by ordinary alphabets but entails decoding with the aid of the hands and not the eyes. Like the letters and words of normal alphabets, Braille dots and their structural combinations form signs and shapes which can be appreciated aesthetically both by the hand and eye, but above all they act, through the medium of touch, on our skin. If the two-dimensional point made with a pencil or the fine tip of a brush forms the basis of the grammar of visual language, of seeing, it is the raised dot which underpins the grammar of tactile language, the language of bodily feeling. In this sense we cannot forego mentioning recent neuroscientific research which highlights the close connection between the production and perception of language and the motor system. The term for this is “embodied language” which opens up interesting prospects for revised approaches to language education where gesture, action and learning go hand in hand, as foreseen by Maria Montessori.

Finally, if visual poetry made use of a new compositional element, i.e. space, to enhance the figural structuring of the page, “tactile poetry” contributes another fundamental component: the support, the page itself. The support which accommodates the tactile

poem is made of different materials which will inevitably come into play in the tactile enjoyment of the work and will therefore themselves educe feelings and intuitions.

The tactile poem in the exhibition, entitled "The Tree", consists of fourteen "verse-tablets", each in a different material, which contain the image of a tree created with raised dots, the basic unit of Braille - fourteen verse-tablets, like a typical sonnet, with tactile rhymes alternating according to the ABAB rhyme scheme for the two quatrains and CDC for the two tercets. The rhymes are defined by the tactile characteristics and assonances of the different materials on which the tablets are printed. It will be up to the hands to discover the shape of the tree and glean the varied tactile sensations which the different materials evoke (including auditory sensations from the sound of the hands passing over the poem), thus conjuring up in every visitor memories, emotions, thoughts, and engaging each in a rare and intimate aesthetic experience. It is an experience which originates in the perceptual and cognitive modes by which the blind apprehend reality, uniting touch and kinesthesia to give rise to that dynamic perception which Rudolph Arnheim held to be the bedrock of aesthetic perception.

The first "tactile poetry" exhibited in the Design Collection room of the Museo Omero features the tangible presence of two leading exponents, in the form of two specially created works. Emilio Isgrò created the first "tactile erasure" for the occasion, a sort of calligram where the words give shape to an image which, precisely because of the embossed erasures, can also be apprehended through the medium of touch. To underline the prominence of tactile values in his work, Isgrò inserts a text in Braille, an operation not merely of a typographical and aesthetic nature but one which has a bearing on the content, providing the reading hands with insights into the sense and meaning of the work. In his work, Lamberto Pignotti evokes the main organ of touch, the hand, by using an ordinary plastic glove of the kind found in the fruit and vegetable departments of supermarkets. The artist traces the outline of the glove with a red marker pen and adds the words "touch poem" with a black felt-tip. The letters making up the word "touch" are each distributed so as to encounter one of the five fingertips. The use of the supermarket glove undoubtedly prompts reflections on the anthropological aspects of mass consumption, the standardization of behaviour, the disenchantment resulting from routine, the Heideggerian anonymity which leaves little or no space for creative thought and art. But above all, as far as we are concerned, as Pignotti himself says, "the glove erases and prevents us from touching what the hand grasps", making the point that from childhood onwards our

upbringing prepares us to keep our distance from the world. Finally, the “erasure” of the glove’s uniformity through the intervention of the artist inevitably draws our attention back to it. It is a distinctive act which becomes a metaphor for the oblivion which has visited our sense of touch, of gesture; at the same time it reminds us of our carnal identity – feeling deeply through the bowels, the muscles, the tendons - in an age which tends to dematerialize experience by propelling us into an ever more virtual reality. “Tactile poetry” is born. We await future developments.

Aisthesis. Discovering art in every sense

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