

AISTHESIS

DISCOVERING ART WITH ALL THE SENSES

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Supports and publishes studies and research on sensory perception and the accessibility of the cultural heritage



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The Museum: current ventures and the future

Luigi Gallo, Director, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche/ Regional Directorate Marche Museums

Interview by Gabriella Papini

- 1. In recent months, as never before, the real role and effectiveness of museums has been the subject of intense inquiry and discussion at a scientific and journalistic level. Do you think now would be a good time, a profitable time, to broaden the debate further and examine the issues in greater depth?**

The debate surrounding museums and, more generally, the role of art in people's lives is always topical. It is helpful to bear in mind that the foundation of modern museums – first with the Vatican Museums in eighteenth century Rome, then in post-revolutionary Paris with the Louvre – inevitably goes hand in hand with a profound reflection on civil society and its aesthetic expectations, on political creeds, cultural roots and ethical matters. Take, for example, the Della Rovere pope, Sixtus IV's donation to the people of Rome of the bronze statues which used to be housed in the Lateran and were transferred to the Capitol, marking the creation of the earliest public museum in the world: it was a deliberate move, proceeding from a vision, at once profound and practical, of the role of art as the symbol of the community, as the common root, and, at the same time, an assertion that the pontiff was the guarantor of history, in continuity (and also in subtle contrast) with the Roman Senate. A museum is always a "social" place, and should be interpreted as such, responding to the needs of the community but also proffering new visions conducive to its cultural development.

I attach great importance to the recently updated definition of museum, approved in Prague on 24 August 2022, within the framework of the ICOM Extraordinary General Assembly, the culmination of a long participatory process involving 126 National Committees from all over the world. Art. 3 of the ICOM statute was amended in order to recognize the institution's role in society: "the museum is a permanent, non-profit

institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability". As this substantial amendment makes clear, we are living at a time in which considerable attention is devoted to the question of cultural heritage, seen not merely as artefacts bearing witness to a historical period and its taste, but as the principal means of communication and transmission of knowledge. So the present time is a real turning point in the history of Italian museums, offering a great opportunity to rethink ways of communicating between art and the public.

I feel it is important to stress that when the well-known restrictions associated with Covid were finally lifted, museums welcomed flocks of visitors returning to their halls in search not only of the beauty which had been denied them during the long period of lockdown, but, also, symbolically, of their cultural roots: works of art are an important part of our past as individuals and of the future of our society. I still remember the queues outside the Scuderie del Quirinale to see the works of Raphael: because art is an answer.

2. In the light of your considerable professional experience prior to arriving in the Marche, would you say that the museum system and the cultural system associated with it are growing and evolving qualitatively? Both at a national level and a more strictly regional one?

I think the museums that I have the honour and responsibility of directing - and, more generally, the many excellent diocesan, civic and private museums, together with the foundations which all contribute to make up the cultural wealth of the Marche Region - are responding to the multiple demands arriving from society at large and offering new, innovative interpretations. For our part we have been successfully carrying forward a number of ventures, including exhibitions and the inauguration of new museum spaces. For instance, in Ascoli Piceno in April, after a ten-year wait, we opened a whole section related to the Roman city. Fully accessible and inclusive, it proved a huge public success and was warmly welcomed by the citizens. I should also like to mention the second floor of the Ducal Palace of Urbino which we opened fully to the public in mid-July, exhibiting over one hundred works which trace the history of art in the region between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; many are the result of donations, like that made by Senator Paolo Volponi, or works held in storage, like the extraordinary collection of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Pesaro.

The setting up of the rooms on the second floor, arranged by the museum staff from both a scholarly and exhibition viewpoint, is varied in accordance with the architectural character of the settings and the materials to be displayed. The introduction to the artworks has also been redone thanks to a major panel writing project involving students from the School of Specialization in Art History in Rome. The opening of the new rooms on the second floor – never before used as an exhibition area – completes that process of designating the entire building to cultural purposes which began with the establishment of the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche in 1912, under the direction of a very young Lionello Venturi. As well as increasing the exhibition areas, and therefore the number of works on display, the extension includes very important parts of the palace not previously visible to the public, such as the slender southern tower and the loggia and Gallo terrace.

I would also cite the big exhibition, Urbino Crocevia delle Arti, (Urbino: Crossroad of the Arts), open until 9 October, which has provided an opportunity to take stock of the artistic production of the court of Federico da Montefeltro. Our various projects are proving really successful with public and critics alike: in August alone we counted 31,000 visitors, which, together with the numbers for the previous months, confirms the central role of the Ducal Palace within the Italian museum system. We have also been active in refurbishing the archeological museum in Cingoli, and several major projects are getting off the ground in Arcevia, Senigallia, Ancona and Gradara, helping to overhaul the style and accessibility of museums in the Marche Region in line with what is happening in Italy and abroad. In Ancona, for example, a key project is about to get under way on the storage areas of the National Archeological Museum; it will make the archeological remains there more accessible as well as opening up the prospect of their being studied and more suitably exhibited.

3. Would you like to see an increase in study and research activities, together with new and original opportunities for experiencing art? Perhaps going beyond the traditional aesthetic pleasure?

I would certainly be in favour, and this is precisely the direction we are moving in. I have already mentioned our association with the School of Specialization in Rome for the introductory panels, but there are several other projects under way: first and foremost, the work in progress involving the four universities of the Marche region who have joined forces and are conducting an impressive in-depth study of the history of the fortresses in

Senigallia and Gradara so as to produce a state-of-the-art interpretation of their building strata. I am also thinking of the excellent work carried out on Palazzo Ferretti in Ancona by the School of Specialization in Architectural Restoration of Naples University, which has uncovered a number of interesting new facts and helped to draw up the guidelines for the restoration of this magnificent sixteenth building which will begin shortly. A number of arrangements have also been put in place involving the universities of Urbino, Chieti, the School of Specialization in Art History in Gubbio, and the IMT in Lucca where a doctorate course is being set up specifically in museum studies, all helping to make our institutes centres of excellence in education and training.

Alongside these collaborative ventures we have strengthened the role of museums in the life of the city, hosting prestigious international festivals, like the Early Music Festival in Urbino, so as to offer the public a varied and multi-layered experience... without in any way detracting from the aesthetic pleasure which is indispensable to a thorough and intimate understanding of art.

4. How can you extract the most from a museum, make it more “inhabited” and not just visited? More lived in, both by specialists and professionals and by the inappropriately names visitors? A forum for further and alternative forms of artistic expression, also at times and in ways that are different from the usual?

Whoever works in a museum lives there, too! Because the work is intense and demands great dedication and passion. As regards time-tables, over the summer we tended to focus on the evenings, staying open until 23.00, as well as on live shows. We hope to be able to carry on in this way, besides introducing opening times which are convenient to workers and public alike. Meanwhile, we look forward to welcoming you in droves, especially on our free Sundays!

5. Should the business community contribute more to the organization of art at a national level, as it already does to some extent? Might this give greater impetus to the planning and realization of cultural projects?

I believe that the partnership between public and private is of vital importance, and not just from a financial angle as might at first seem. As I mentioned earlier, the culture of an area is provided with a voice and a powerful sounding board through the museum; the museum

recounts its history, highlighting all that is specific to it, weaving a tale which is necessary in order to piece together and hand down the identity of the society it represents – an identity which, in being specific, is also universal. The support given by the Confederation of Industry, for example, to the restoration of the Della Robbia lunette in Urbino is evidence of just how strongly the business world feels about conservation matters, not merely because of a legitimate interest in the visibility that sponsorship confers, but from a real sense of belonging to the area and its artistic masterpieces. One could say the same about the restoration work sponsored by the General Confederation of Italian Artisans and other regional associations. It is really important that the debate on art and the management of art should remain an integral part of present-day life, bringing together all the main actors, the businessmen and those responsible for protecting and promoting the artworks, so as to offer the best possible future for our heritage.

6. What is your view of the transition to digitalization and the ever greater accessibility of the whole cultural heritage system? Urbino and the wonderful Gallery of which you are the director must surely afford a privileged viewpoint. Can all this improve our daily lives?

Over the past thirty years digital technologies have been a driving force for change, affecting progressively both the social sphere and the cultural. Where museums are concerned, digitalization touches on every area of activity: from administration to the cataloguing and conservation of the collections, from organizing exhibitions and mediating down to communication and marketing. Since the task involves all sectors, across the board, the different areas are called upon to work together to address it. Digital tools can be used to enhance the exhibition experience and provide further specific information. The Internet is not merely the initial source of information and amusement; it is also the network where shared knowledge is generated, a shared and creative cultural heritage is developed, and issues of social importance are addressed. The website and the different digital platforms make their content available irrespective of time and place, and in turn have an impact on the museum. Digitalization offers museums a vast range of opportunities for carrying out their mission as places of knowledge, conservation and communication, in ways that are diversified, wide-ranging, connected, International, inclusive and participatory. The digitalization of the cultural heritage is therefore a fundamental issue: it comes down to ensuring new prospects for our cultural heritage, in

terms not just of accessibility but of conservation and protection, too. It is an indispensable process which all museums are carrying forward in order to make their collections fully available, and one which we, too, are working at in the form of a number of PNRR-funded projects involving the National Gallery of the Marche and the Regional Directorate.

7. So, living with and for culture means securing, as far as possible, a bit of happiness for oneself?

Let me borrow a remark of Tolstoy's to answer that question: "The secret of happiness is not always to do what you want, but always to want what you do".

Let's Change Outlook!

Elena Martinelli, President of the Fondazione Alfredo Catarsini 1899 – Associate Professor of Motor Sciences, University of Florence.

Interview by Monica Bernacchia

Even children Introduction and aim of the project

“Let's change out look!” is a challenge, a project for social inclusion by means of an experiential and multisensory exercise workshop. The aim is to make images and works of art more accessible to the visually impaired and those with acquired blindness so as to improve their health and their quality of life. By studying the influence of motor activity on sensory perception it is hoped to enable people with acquired visual impairments to enhance their abilities and to learn new skills. Since the project is promoted by the Fondazione Alfredo Catarsini 1899, which mainly deals with art, the intention is to use the figurative arts as a means of assessing the effective results achieved through physical exercises specifically devised to enhance sensory and cognitive perception (Sensory reactivation on a motor basis using C.A.MO method).

1. In your experience, how do lifestyles change in blind or visually impaired people?

Even though you are able to use some visual information, you can still have problems recognizing colours, reading, focusing on an image. You are often forced to change job and adapt the home environment to meet your new needs. It is a real effort, and every failure feels like you are slipping backwards and tempts you to give up. The main consequences involve the emotional, psychological and motor spheres. Even if the visually impaired person is open to new ventures, the family entourage can react in an overprotective manner which encourages sedentariness, isolation, fewer stimuli, with everything that follows on from that.

The visual deficit conditions the way in which people glean information from the environment and relate to it, and it determines an alteration in the perceptual processes and a different way of acquiring information. But these people can nonetheless achieve a satisfactory quality of life by adopting specific strategies for using their residual visual

capacities and compensating for the information shortfall. There are methodologies not just for stimulating the other senses but also for devising new and hitherto unexplored treatments, such as the use of adapted motricity, which is our sphere.

2. What damage can be caused to the central nervous system by the cancellation or severe reduction of sight?

Normally sight loss is at least partially compensated by smell, hearing and touch. This is made possible by the innate ability of the brain to adapt in response to experiences (neuroplasticity). But what changes in the brain of a blind person? Research on people blind from birth - led by neuroscientists at the Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston and published in PLOS One - has shown evidence of functional and structural changes in the brains of people with congenital blindness: the changes are much more extensive than was previously thought and affect not just the area of the occipital cortex, normally concerned with image processing, but also areas assigned to the higher cognitive functions, like memory and language, which are reduced in volume and thickness respectively.

Another study into the consequences of glaucoma, conducted by the University of Siena in 2016, showed that the neurodegenerative process might not be limited to the visual system but could also affect other brain systems.

So we know that in the absence of visual stimuli the brain alters, but we are still studying what new connections are formed, and therefore how we can intervene to enhance the person's ability to interact with the environment. However, it is known that the enhancement of blind people's abilities depends on activity, on practical exercise. The challenge we have set ourselves is precisely this: to assess the extent to which, in a person with acquired blindness, you can limit brain damage and how far they can be assisted in acquiring new abilities (like using computer systems, sensory maps etc.) through the C.A.MO method of sensory reactivation on a motor basis.

3. How does the visual memory change in a blind or visually impaired person?

We mentioned before that the areas of the brain assigned to image processing and visual memory are reduced in volume and thickness respectively. But we know that mental abilities can be improved through practice and also that there is a very efficient

compensation mechanism (vicariance) which comes into play when a sensory ability is lacking. The visually impaired tend to use sensory memorization strategies in everyday circumstances, so they train this mental ability to the utmost and display a greater overall memory.

Moreover, blind people are able to dream images, even when they have had no visual experience of them. We bear this in mind in our exercises designed to activate the perceptual processes by stimulating the higher cognitive functions (like abstraction, memory, language, imagination). These exercises process the stimulus and interpret it. In fact, a person who cannot see nonetheless has sufficient competencies, albeit reduced, to form a mental image of something they have never actually seen. Furthermore, linguistic input has a key role in supplementing and completing the information that blind people gather through the sense organs – hence our quest to codify the way to illustrate an image (whether a work of art or an advertising poster) so that they can understand better, learn and benefit by acquiring the same descriptive scheme.

4. So what do you think can be done to enhance sensory and cognitive perception?

The eye is an exteroceptive organ but it is also the main source of kinaesthetic perception directed to the postural tonic system which transmits it to the central nervous system; it enables us to understand distances, perspective and acquire eye-hand and space-time coordination. Visual problems, whether dependent on sense or brain organs, whether total or partial, have consequences for the perceptual and motor system and cause posture modification precisely because of the series of connections between the visual system and the structures and constituents of the static and dynamic posture regulation system. Vision and posture are two mechanisms within a single perceptual process, so our teaching approach is based on the postural rebalancing that can be achieved through practical exercises.

As regards the postural disorders consequent on impaired vision, the most common are: a bent back, head jutting forward and shoulders advanced, resulting in poor load distribution for the spinal column, the pelvis and the lower limbs; opening of the support base of the feet, shorter steps, stiffness in the heel, altered deambulation, balance loss and tiredness, resulting in stiffening of the joints and loss of overall strength. All these changes, together with sedentariness, form a vicious circle which causes a reduction in motor capacity,

chronic difficulty in moving, balance and orientation problems, and feelings of fear and inadequacy. My advice is “to stay ahead of the game”: the period of deterioration is a precious time, you must not delay but use the time immediately by involving the visually impaired person in sensory reactivation courses using the C.A.MO motor-based method.

By using proprioceptive strategies, the contribution of Motor Sciences is decisive in stimulating a knowledge of one’s own body and static and dynamic posture through exercises which involve the whole body, beginning with plantar support, the arrangement of the lower limb and pelvis and the behaviour of the spinal column, all factors which affect balance and weight distribution when standing erect or walking. Motor-based proprioceptive-cognitive strategies are effective and easily practised by all ages – children, adolescents, adults and the elderly – and through personalized work it is possible to modulate the sensitive afferents and the responses to the extent of modifying the postural state as regards the central nervous system. Postural awareness is a “motor skill” which produces important results: there is an increase in the strength, resistance, suppleness and sense of wellbeing which movement generates in all of us, and, as a result we gain greater confidence in ourselves and our abilities. This procedure furnishes the essential premises for helping the visually impaired to acquire new skills, too, such as, in our case, using equipment and devices for reinterpreting the image and the work of art...and much else!

Amusing... A European Network of Good Practices for Visual Accessibility

Annalisa Trasatti, Services Organizer, Museo Tattile Statale Omero

Success in the comments of teachers and students from Spain, Italy, Greece and Lithuania

The European project AMUSING (Adapting Museums for Inclusive Goals) recently came to a close. It was co-funded by the European Union through the Erasmus plus programme and, besides the Museo Omero and the artistic liceo "Edgardo Mannucci" for Italy, it involved a further eight international partners from Spain, Greece and Lithuania.

The main aims of the project were to pool good practices for making it easier for the visually impaired to become acquainted with art, increasing knowledge and awareness of their needs, also by exploiting the potentialities of 3D printing, and involving students from partner schools in making some prototypes.

Between 2019 and 2022 various gatherings have been held in the member countries: at The Lighthouse for the Blind of Greece, the Lithuanian National Museum in Vilnius and the Ajutament in Valencia.

The idea was to extend the exchange of good practices for teaching art history to students with visual problems. Side by side with the transnational meetings, a week-long training course was organized for participants. It was held at the premises of the Fablab Cuenca (Spain), the project's technical partner, and involved trying out a range of programs and machinery for relief printing with materials such as wood, resin and plastic.

On 5 and 6 May, 2022, Italy was the venue, and the meeting was held at the Museo Omero and the Liceo Artistico "Edgardo Mannucci" in Ancona. Participants particularly appreciated the richness of the Museum's collection and the opportunity to gain a more thorough knowledge of the different strategies for interpreting the art work in the collection, especially the production of relief drawings with the Minolta kiln technique, which is much less common abroad.

The main object of the AMUSING project is to achieve real inclusion for visually impaired learners. It is a task which is tackled from various angles, including ways of learning about the services which raise awareness of the needs of this group of people and the educational development afforded by the potentialities of 3D printing. 3D printing can ease routines and empower the visually impaired students in their planning, production and assessment.

Oscar Lonzano, project organizer (IES Conselleiria, Valencia): “The AMUSING project was a great opportunity to share good practices in terms of museum accessibility in general, and with reference to the visually impaired in particular. In our role as organizer we got to know all the different viewpoints of the partners and we learnt from all of them. It is important to share different approaches in order to improve issues like accessibility, awareness, student and teacher motivation, and the new possibilities afforded by technology. As expected, these were the key points touched upon by the project. Not just the students but the teachers and museum professionals have come to appreciate 3D scanning, design and printing as a useful technology for improving the museum experience of visually impaired people. Of course, touching real works of art is the best way to enjoy them, but sometimes (as with architectural details or very delicate pieces such as ancient jewellery or design objects) this is not possible and an alternative has to be found. Also the link between schools and museums is something that the project has improved, showing that it is possible to work together and learn from one another. Museums are perfect places for non-formal learning, and any venture undertaken to strengthen these bonds is always welcome.”

Carlos Millan (IES Conseilleria), points out that “the possibilities that new 3D printing technology offers the blind community are enormous. The predicted impact is clearly visible. It will have an effect, both in raising awareness of visual impairment (among the students taking part) and in improving the living conditions of the end-users of the 3D objects. In addition, every means was used to publicize the project and ensure its visibility. Similarly, the sustainability of the project is guaranteed by both the long “useful life” of the objects generated and the teaching method adopted. This in fact can be easily replicated in the years to come and will certainly leave its mark (not least in terms of inclusion values) on the students taking part. From a technological point of view, we learnt the photogrammetry technique, and we introduced this technology into the classroom,

adapting the resources to those we had (using the students' smartphones, using computers with Lliurex, which is the Linux distribution used in the Valencian schools, and so on). Finally, where best practices are concerned, it is advisable to be selective in choosing the artworks to be scanned, favouring those that are traceable by author and period so as to create a good descriptive text which is complete and morphologically detailed (more difficult with anonymous pieces)."

The view of the schools themselves is expressed by Elena García-Rubio Caballero (IES Benlliure, Valencia) who describes how a group of fifteen 16-year-old students from her institute actively participated in a project to adapt some museums in Valencia to the needs of visually impaired visitors. "The use of service-learning methods in the classes ensured that – after reflecting on the aims of the project and developing an awareness of the difficulties faced by the visually impaired in accessing museums – the students applied their knowledge to making 3D replicas that can be touched by whoever wishes to. In order to do that, the students had to learn to use photogrammetry programs, mesh retouching and fused deposition printing. This opened up opportunities to learn skills which will be useful to them later when they enter the job market since additive manufacturing skills are increasingly in demand. The printed models are scale copies of some of the collections of the Natural Science Museum of Valencia and the Casa-Museo Benlliure."

And finally a word from Francesca Santi of the Museo Omero, whose views I fully share: "The museum institutions involved discussed the various methods that can be adopted to make their collections accessible: from the importance of a guide and a description to the use of typhlo-didactic aids and the possibility of making copies using a 3D printer. Although this printer offers numerous applications in the teaching field, it is not always the most suitable means of making art more accessible to the visually impaired because it cannot always guarantee good results from a tactile point of view. The possibility extended by 3D printing of making numerous copies of the same artefact relatively inexpensively, in terms of time and money, must not be allowed to distract us from the goal of allowing the visually impaired to touch the originals, wherever possible."

[Website Erasmus Amusing](#)

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