

AISTHESIS

DISCOVERING ART WITH ALL THE SENSES

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The multisensory museum

Stefano Zuffi, art historian, Curator Pinacoteca Civica Ancona

I first visited the Pinacoteca Civica di Ancona over forty years ago. At the time I was studying at the Università Statale di Milano and had travelled to the Marches Region on the advice of my tutor, Pierluigi De Vecchi, to visit a memorable Lorenzo Lotto exhibition, curated by Piero Zampetti across a number of venues. Despite the occasion and the appropriate focus on sixteenth century art in the Veneto-Marches Regions, the painting that struck me most was the Guercino altarpiece with Saint Palatias. I bought a postcard, which I keep to this day, and which I consider a sort of talisman that brought me, so many years later, to concern myself with this very gallery. By continuing to look at that masterpiece which I feel so attached to, and thanks undoubtedly to my Ancona experience with the Museo Omero, I think I have finally grasped why it never fails to strike me: having reached the peak of his artistic maturity and of his career, and possessing a vast international culture, Guercino realised that his painting ought to strive beyond the mere sense of sight. In fact, in the picture the beautiful young saint swings a strikingly realistic incense burner.

The Olfactory Guercino

A wisp of incense wafts towards the onlooker, and thanks to Guercino's extraordinary skill the museum room seems to be permeated with its scent. It is a mere suggestion, a hint which evokes the sense of smell (though I trust, sooner or later, to be able to make it an actual sensation for the visitor by using an aroma dispenser), and it certainly supplements and enhances the synaesthetic effect of the painting.

And we need to remember that this is an altarpiece: it was originally placed in an intensely multisensory setting: real - as opposed to fictive – incense, the sputtering and the tremulous light of the candles, their waxy scent, the tolling of bells, the echo of prayers and chants, even the creaking of pews and the pleasant coolness of a marble balustrade... All sensations, I say again, which were an integral part of the physical reality for which the painting was conceived, and which have been lost with its removal to the inevitably more impersonal context of a museum.

Compared to a few decades ago, Italian museums have shown that they can adapt their criteria: alongside the function of preserving and protecting artworks - given priority until almost the end of the twentieth century - is the no less important obligation to welcome visitors, and to consider their needs, not as a useless nuisance, but as a point of reference and a parameter for assessing the quality of the museum. But this alone is not enough. In recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of cultural events described as “experiential” or “immersive”. There is certainly nothing new in this: without going back as far as those viewers frightened by the arrival of a steam train in the Lumière brothers’ film, we only have to remember the naive thrills provided by the old “ghost trains” in period funfairs.

Beyond sight: scents and sounds

However, there can be no doubt that what is offered by traditional museums, based exclusively on the sense of sight, is in danger of becoming less and less attractive. This enforced involvement of a single sense reminds us of the strict warnings of the past (“Look, but do not touch”); the visitor feels passive, boredom threatens, the temptation to check our mobiles proves irresistible, and the exit is the place to head for without delay.

Let us be clear: it is not a question of coming up with tacky special effects or fairground-style attractions. Among the many purposes of an art museum there is also the pleasant duty to nurture in the visitor a feeling of respect, possibly even of gratitude, towards the artistic heritage. The emotional experience offered by the Museo Omero – which I sincerely believe should be considered the most original cultural venture that Ancona can boast – has already produced a knock-on effect: the Brera Gallery in Milan has recently installed a series of panels enabling visitors to touch samples of fabrics identical to those depicted in the paintings. So, by means of touch, they can now experience the different textures of velvet or lampas, of satin, silk and wool.

Podesti alongside Rossini

I mentioned earlier the example of the hovering incense in Guercino’s picture of Saint Palatias, but the Pinacoteca Civica di Ancona contains other works which look as if they are potentially conducive – the experiment might be made – to multisensory exploration, offering the prospect of a more engaging visit. In his *Memorie*, Francesco Podesti recalls being in touch with Gioacchino Rossini while painting his *Giuramento degli Anconetani*

(The Oath of the People of Ancona), and explicitly mentions Rossini's William Tell: the incomparable final three minutes of that opera ("Tutto cangia, il ciel s'abbella") might provide the perfect aural counterbalance to Podesti's majestic Risorgimento canvas. With the appropriate caution, one might appreciate the natural produce depicted in Crivelli's Madonna even more intensely by savouring a slice of apple or even a small cucumber. And I dream of the time when we shall be able to look at Titian's Gozzi Altarpiece while hearing the distant lapping of the sea which plays such a key role in the masterpiece, as Titian makes little attempt to conceal.

Territory and roots: a poetic homeland

Umberto Piersanti in conversation with Gabriella Papini

- **We're with Umberto Piersanti, a major contemporary poet and Nobel Prize nominee for literature, to talk about the role of poetry today. The recent World Poetry Day on 21 March 2023, a day designed to promote a message of peace, intercultural exchange and dialogue between peoples, has prompted many of us to reflect. Does it inspire us to trace certain memories, certain affections, certain vestiges of what has been? What do you feel?**

Poetry doesn't make us any better or wiser. Sometimes it can send positive messages, but that's not its job. The main task of poetry is to identify a word which touches the roots of being: it's no accident that archetypes are often the founding themes of poetry. Archetypes such as love, memory, nature, the passage of time, fear of the last, and so on... In an age like ours, dominated by the need to make all things spectacular, words and images spread like wildfire and everything is so fast and transient. The word of poetry is a still word, it's a word that endures. A final point: the value of poetry lies primarily, not in a sociological or civil dimension, but in an anthropological one. If mankind lacks poetry, it lacks something profound, and this lack renders it less human.

- **Numerous ventures have been launched with increasing success. Are they useful? What is really achieved? Do they inspire more people to read?**

The scarcity of poetry readers is an old problem; any venture is welcome. This applies to public readings as well as to prizes. Poetry can never aspire to a mass readership but it must reach beyond the circle of the initiated; it mustn't reduce itself to the rank of Assyrian archeology. Anything that can broaden that readership is good, it's useful, not forgetting that for poetry to be understood the reading must be solitary and firsthand.

- **Do you feel that poetry - in addition to being read, heard on the radio and TV and at the theatre - can have a permanent role in museums, thanks to its specific characteristics, as has already happened with music?**

I believe that poetry has also a musical value. Giorgio Caproni used to claim that poetry isn't musical, it's music. Let's take an example. If I write "sempre caro mi fu questo colle

ermo”, I’ve only shifted the position of the adjective “ermo” but the “Infinite” has disappeared. So a museum or, if you like, a media library with the voices of the poets and performers is very important for understanding the poetry itself.

(Translator’s note: the first line of Leopardi’s “L’infinito” reads “sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle” – literally “always dear to me was this solitary hill”. Piersanti shifts the adjective “ermo”, or “solitary”, so that it follows the noun “colle”. This is grammatically possible in Italian but the result, he notes, is irreparable damage to the poem.)

- **The Montefeltro of your poems enchants and captivates, to the point of your being numbered among the pure ecologists, in the sense of loving what is certainly your territory, your poetical homeland. The strength of one’s roots seems to counteract globalisation, including cultural globalisation which is still ongoing. Can poetry be a means of resistance?**

Yes, poetry can be a means of resistance, not just against globalisation but against the superficiality of the world, of life, and the impulse to reduce them to spectacle.

- **Various poets have made their land a “poetic homeland”: if I approach the Langhe, I can’t do so without remembering the poems of Pavese and his output in general. A poetic homeland means investing a land with a universal dimension. D’Annunzio’s Abruzzo and Versilia are valid for every people and clime, just as Fellini’s 1930s Rimini even manages to enthrall a Japanese audience.**

I don’t feel that I’m an ecological poet in the sense that I don’t intend to make a manifesto of my love of nature: this absolute, primordial love precedes any ideological dimension. Ecology is an ideology, important and proper, but nonetheless an ideology.

- **By remaining, on the whole, immersed in a kind of past, isn’t there a risk of removing oneself from the present and becoming trapped in one’s memories? The meadow was greener because it’s further off in time?**

It’s enough to read Leopardi to learn that what is removed in time, even a field or a meadow, becomes more important, more meaningful, and touches us more deeply if it is the stuff of memories. Leopardi’s Zibaldone contains pages which are extremely clear on this point. More than building the future, poetry has the task of keeping our memory alive,

of not allowing us to lose it. Not just the individual memory but the social and historical. I can understand more of the meaning of Greek and Latin civilization by reading Sappho and Virgil than I can by reading Herodotus and Tacitus.

- **The aims of World Poetry Day are bold. Are they illusory? What can we hope for?**

World Poetry Day reminds everyone, even the most aloof and indifferent, that poetry is a fundamental value, necessary to man by virtue of his very nature.

The natural landscape encounters the human landscape: Umberto Piersanti

Roberto Marconi, literary critic, educator

Faithful to himself and to his poetry, in his recent works especially Piersanti guides us in unforgettable journeys. Starting out from the titles - "I luoghi persi" ("Lost Places") (1994 and republished in 2022), "L'albero delle nebbie" ("The Tree of Mists") (2008), "Nel folto dei sentieri" ("Deep in the Pathways") (2015), "Campi d'ostinato amore" ("Fields of Stubborn Love") (2020) – he takes us by the hand to leave us on his Cesane hills, afoot. As he writes, "he who knows not where to go / does better to walk". The experience of nature (accompanied by meticulous bestiaries, botanical varieties, mythical characters) and history (conversations with Umberto Piersanti always include historical narratives) and loved ones (among the many, his son: "perfect and designed / whom evil offends / but does not bend"): these are the beloved themes that the poet wants to convey. As attentive readers now acknowledge, he has always been an enquirer into topical areas and crucial figures. He uses words to paint the places he has known; it could not be otherwise since memory, of the "stubborn" sort, "nourishes the day" and is "tenacious in giving a meaning / to each thing". Every time the verse is quick to begin a new line, in an extended song; as a whole it creates a singularly poetical prose which compensates - in the breathing (a breath for each line), - for the "sedimentation" of experiences and, on the other hand, enriches the poverty of country places. He carefully, almost meticulously, commits his writing to the page, concerned not to let substantial situations slip away, since "one day of our life is not like another".

He is no hurry at all, far from it; he retraces his steps, he slows down, sometimes "the foot / constrains him", he stops, reflects, traverses back and forth across his memory (in nearly all the poems), he must necessarily fix the duration, draw on memories in order to counteract the anxiety of whatever flows, overwhelms and leads to oblivion. His more frenetic days leave fewer memories and he finds the time to record his visions. Almost like Ungaretti, he feels the need to date every poem, not just so as to form a sort of autobiographical diary, but also to reveal how time flows and leaves in its wake, as it were, puddles of memory: the sea of memory allows this poet to remain afloat and the waters

are like eternal words. Thus every work of the poet engages in a continuous process of reasoning on landscape which, fatally, encounters the human landscape, and in the transition from the page to the public presentation Piersanti's train of thought finds its vital, substantive endorsement. Tenacity to life as against the effort of living: it is this which ultimately distinguishes his art. Umberto Piersanti is indisputably one of the most important contemporary poets, and his "Luoghi Persi" ("Lost Places") takes its rightful place in the history of Italian poetry. To write poetry you need to have read what has been produced over the centuries, and listening to Umberto is a little like reading the poetry of the twentieth century, and not just the Italian.

From “I luoghi persi” (“Lost places”)

Umberto Piersanti

WINTER DAY

It snows, but it's sleet,
indefinite, which only in places
whitens these low
hills, the sea rims them
and hems them with its grey blue,
now on the Cesane
the roe deer run
in the luminous fields,
the wolf sinks
his slender paws
into the dense whiteness,
the sumacs stand bowed
beneath the great weight,
silver the fir
high in the sky,
the blue-eyed forebear
is at the spring
and with her bare hand
cracks the ice,

fills the pitcher with water

the coldest,

then slowly makes her way

towards the house

THE SOUL

I had never understood

where the soul comes from among the thorns

but the soul is small, made of air,

it passes between the thorns and is not scratched

Pinuccio Sciola's Sound Garden

Annalisa Trasatti interviews Maria Sciola

- **How did the Sound Garden come about and how does it relate to the surrounding area?**

Pinuccio Sciola's exhibition area was the family's citrus grove, eight hectares dotted with olives and orange trees which the young sculptor used in the 1960s as a workshop for his skilful carvings of olive wood, trachyte and sandstone. He held his first exhibition in 1963 when Foiso Fois, Aligi Sassu and Beppe Viola, who would later become close friends of his, travelled to San Sperate, a few kilometres from Cagliari, to get to know the "peasant artist". Sciola's incessant curiosity, supported by grants, enabled him to travel around Europe pursuing his studies, from the Magistero d'arte at Porta Romana in Florence to Salzburg International University. But it was in 1968, on returning home after his years at Moncloa University in Madrid and his winters in Paris, that he took stock of the cultural gap that had now opened up between him and his contemporaries and began to form the idea of involving them in an art which had its existence outside museums and was accessible to everyone. The idea blossomed and led to one of the first ventures in public art in Italy, transforming the village of San Sperate – a village of mud and farmers – into a Museum Village which today boasts over 500 murals and artistic installations. The family garden became a meeting place for a gathering of minds, a forum for new ideas.

- **Throughout his wanderings, though, there is one material he never abandoned.**

From beginning to end of his career he never abandoned stone and always described himself as a sculptor: "stone is nature and nature is mother", and he continued to plant his monoliths, thinking and hoping that they would return to being a part of that nature from which they were generated. And to this day the Sound Garden is a place of pilgrimage, the heart of the Museum Village which keeps the artist's philosophy alive. When you come away from these places it's with a new insight into what respect for nature means.

- **Since when have you been running it?**

I started working full time with my father in 2014, realizing what had been my wish since childhood and putting in practice what I had learned from my studies. That same year we decided to make the Sound Garden an exhibition area where qualified guides would accompany visitors so that they could immerse themselves fully in Sciola's poetic. The first step was to protect the stones which, being mainly sound stones, were at the mercy of people who damaged them because they didn't know how to approach them. It takes a very delicate touch, even though made with another piece of stone, to spread the particular type of sound. Otherwise the stone gets damaged.

- **What are the aims of the Sound Garden?**

The Sound Garden is a timeless space and each of us experiences it through the filter of their own emotions. Leaving tears and smiles. There's an audio guide spoken by Sciola himself and containing his explanations of eight of the most important works so that the visitor can understand his artistic development over the years. Then there are specialized guides to the Sound Garden, often flanked by university trainees, who guide visitors in the discovery of the sounds of the different types of material.

In the Sound Garden, tactile and sensory encounters have always been vitally important in experiencing and absorbing the full potential of the works. In terms of sound, Sciola mainly worked sedimentary rocks such as limestone and volcanic rock, like basalt. Limestone is formed under water and the sound it produces is liquid and melodious. Basalt, though, is the stone which symbolizes our origins, our culture. Its sound is totally different, deeper.

When these works are made to sound they transmit to our bodies the full vibration that they emanate: all the sound proceeds from a vibration, but to glean it through our hands, especially coming from a material which is always described as powerless, is an unforgettable experience. Like the experience of placing our ear against a stone to feel the vibrations and sounds, those sounds which seem almost innate in our memory, as though drawing us back to the maternal womb.

- **What types of visitors come to the Sound Garden?**

Pinuccio Sciola has created works capable of speaking all the languages on earth to people of all ages; that's why our work turns on communicating with children and the elderly, something which is possible because of the accessibility of an artwork which

manages to be interactive even without the aid of technology. The heart of the district is now the enormous artistic legacy which Sciola has left us. From the murals to the colourful streets leading to the open-air museum: the Sound Garden is a timeless artistic space, a horizon of megalithic stones suffused with the scent of citrus fruits, where visitors can steep themselves in an experience which touches all the senses – touch, for feeling the vibration of the stone, sight, hearing and smell as they make their discoveries among the flowering citruses.

As well as being an interactive museum area, the Sound Garden is also a place of study where art, architecture and cultural heritage students, under the guidance of the art historian, Giulia Pilloni, can become acquainted with this visionary artist by examining past documents and artistic projects at first hand.

- **How do you organise the educational side?**

We pay particular attention to children and schools. Walking through the colourful streets of the Museum Village with the Fentanas Association, which tailors visits to specific age groups and lays on treasure hunts and ancient games workshops, we get to the Sound Garden where Federica Collu, head of the museum's educational and accessibility projects, stimulates our creativity by encouraging us in the crucial task of re-learning how to use our hands. She starts out with simple materials like vegetables which, with a little imagination, can be transformed into imaginary characters, or through the frottage workshops among the relief textures for the works.

But so that it continues to be an art for everyone, we concentrate on the use of social stories, Augmentative and Alternative Communication strategies, special visits for the deaf and blind. We have even embarked on a project with a Sardinian association to allow blind and visually impaired people to accompany visitors, themselves blindfolded so that they see nothing, in an experience which is strikingly novel in terms of enlarging empathy and generating completely new feelings.

- **What projects and collaborative ventures do you have in the pipeline?**

Pinuccio Sciola's life is a jigsaw puzzle to be reconstructed with unflinching commitment by myself, my brother and sister, Tomaso and Chiara, as well as by our splendid team; we're busy filing and cataloguing his works and major projects, aiming to create a digital archive

which all scholars and art lovers will be able to access. We're also working on Sant'Arte (Saint Art), the visual and performing arts festival scheduled for the last weekend in May, which is our major tribute to the artist and the man, and provides an opportunity to celebrate the one saint, as Sciola used to say, who can rescue mankind from mental inertia and uniformity.

[Giardino sonoro Pinuccio Sciola](#)

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