

# LOCUS PACIS. Museums in the contemporary world<sup>1</sup>

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Museums, in the democratic paradigm of *collections for all*, as we generally know them today, are a creation of the contemporary western world, as also is the notion of the *historical or heritage site* that is now universally disseminated. Like universities, which also evolved and spread as a paradigm of free teaching (thanks largely to the *libertas scholastica*), museums are born from the love of knowledge and science and are based on the primacy of individual freedom, as well as on the notion of the common good.

This notion, in turn, is founded upon goods that are also understood as common, and explains why UNESCO came to create, for historical or heritage sites, the notion of World Heritage, with which it seeks to promote their safeguarding and protection. It is, furthermore, a concept that has been continuously evolving and adapting to the most diverse cultural realities and has come to include the notion (and consequent enhancement) of intangible heritage, which is even broader in its scope.

Museums, in their turn, are distinct from heritage sites, being dedicated to the preservation, study and dissemination of the movable heritage, on which they construct narratives that, in essence, seek to provide an integrated and scientific understanding of these objects. And, even if the criteria justifying the incorporation of this heritage into museums are the fruit of temporal circumstances (and thus frequently questionable today), they have always been understood as the dwelling-places of time and beauty, seeking to pedagogically transmit to the coming generations a kind of religious devotion through the very idea itself of the *beauty of time* — distanced from the never-ending noise of ideologies and passions.

In the western world, military or political conflicts between blocs or powers have not harmed the relations (or, at least, attempts have been made to minimise this) between cultural institutions or between cultures that were understood to form a common pantheon. Museums are places of peace, simultaneously cultivating the preservation and study of their respective treasures.

In art museums in particular — but even in history or science museums — it is always the work born from human genius (which one seeks to protect from the action of time and to enhance the understanding thereof) that most

completes the museum. They represent a genuine cult of the *beauty of time* in the global worship of the human past, which is essentially incorporated into the future through their pacifying work. They are places where the *beautiful* and the *good* complement one another and merge together, as an illustration of the very act of creating, in all that is essential to the human condition.

It is this association between the beautiful and the good, and its intrinsic link to Man and his earthly journey that I shall begin by evoking the words of His Holiness John Paul II, in 1999, in his *Letter to Artists*: “beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty”. In the words of the poet Cyprian Norwid, Polish like him, cited by the Pope, “*beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up*”. And it is, I believe, the spirit of this Conference.

The work of museums, certainly stimulated by their ultimate aim of preserving the active principle of beauty (even if this is the beauty of the time that has passed), has precisely the essential aim of teaching that eternal affinity between the *beautiful* and the *good*, illustrated in the heritage, understood as a universal dimension. It is this dimension that has constructed the flow of generations and seeks to preserve itself for the benefit of those yet to come. The resurgence to which we are summoned, for the sake of Humanity’s eternal progress and development, needs continuous hard and creative work, as well as beauty, which promotes our enthusiasm for it.

There is, therefore, nothing more profoundly moving (nor more eloquent) than the image that, not so long ago, was brought to me through the pages of a newspaper: in the depths of Portugal (a Portugal that we might never believe could ever be real), two middle-aged siblings, Olga and João, had been sharing, for more than thirty years, a dwelling that only with great effort could we even begin to describe as a “house”, deprived as it was of the most basic comforts — electricity, water, any trace of the most elementary support of civilisation. With no ceiling and having only the strictly essential furniture.

In one of the three rooms of the house, devoid of any decoration, all that stood out, was a banal image of the Mona Lisa, housed in a dark pine frame. By chance it had the real proportions! Within the biblical confines of the Portuguese hut (such a banal reality in so many regions of the world, even today), in its symbolism about the importance of beauty as a source of enthusiasm — without which there is no strength to do the work on which these people depend, at the minimum threshold of subsistence in which they live — Leonardo’s masterful work acquires a more monumental character than the real painting itself, shining brightly amidst the sea of treasures that inhabit the Louvre, the museum of museums, the bastion of human civilisation.

In the very words of John Paul II, “beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty”. Without even suspecting this, in their miserable existence, Olga and João and their solitary Mona Lisa are the living demonstration of this universal truth.

At the same time, at the opposite end of the spectrum (of the world and human reality), and in the most striking demonstration of synchronism, televisions disseminate in the news, consumed by developed societies, the most disturbing images of the violence being perpetrated in the Middle East upon the heritage (upon universal beauty) by the actions of the self-appointed *Islamic State* — as at the Museum of Mosul or in the massacre of defenceless visitors to the Bardo National Museum in Tunis.

Images that, in a most dramatic way, force us to refocus our attentions on the essential importance of the *beautiful* and the *good* — and, consequently, on the emblematic value of museums as social institutions, at the level of universal civilisation, and for this very reason used as the privileged stage for enacting the *Jihad*, in its own histrionic show, destined for western consumption.

Such images, intellectually improbable in the framework of the values that have shaped our so-called western world, are, however, confronted with a political rhetoric on which the last few years have imposed a utilitarian pragmatism, justified by the economic and financial crisis, greatly distanced from the notions of the *beautiful* and the *good*. And culture — when not associated with the spectacle, which in itself generates political dividends — has necessarily been the central victim of this, relegated to a peripheral position in the allocation of resources, both human and financial.

In turn, museums have come to occupy an even more peripheral position, with the consequences that arise from their institutional dimension, through their natural requirements for stability (most immediately at the level of resources) in order to carry out their work of research, conservation, dissemination and the continuing enrichment of their collections: for the common good.

But it is the dramatic successes earlier evoked, and the equally metaphysical significance of the histrionic destruction of heritage that is commonly considered to be universal, which have afforded the beautiful and the good an unmistakable political value, not only at the ethical level of their cultivation and admiration, enshrined in the history of museums, but also at this other, more current, level of the role that they play in our contemporary existence and in the battle (work) that we are called upon to wage in defence of civilisation and of the values of freedom: the old *libertas scholastica*, associated with the knowledge that has illuminated the world since mediaeval times.

Public opinion therefore finds itself bound by a sudden awakening from the torpor into which *realpolitik* has gradually been plunging it, under the effect of a shock that not only involves a sense of repulsion in the face of the destruction of heritage and the gratuitous violence exerted upon innocent people, but also the desecration of spaces that are consciously or unconsciously considered as territories of peace, universally recognised, visited and respected in this condition — because of the ecumenical preservation that they operate upon the common memory of the cultures and civilisations evoked in the heritage that they preserve.

We are, therefore, forced, in a most abrupt manner, to turn our attention on the value of peace. Peace, or its absence, is being brought into our homes and into our shared lives, in real time, through the media, and its necessary preservation is transformed at an increasingly vertiginous pace into a central concern of the same pragmatic and utilitarian discourse. And the world finds itself obliged to awaken from its torpor, confronted with the unbearable costs (even economically and financially) of its absence.

As we tread these strange paths, we will be compelled to rediscover the instrumental and pedagogical value of museums, in their operative transmission of the common memory of civilisations, by nature global and redemptive and therefore inducing the culture of peace. In turn, museums themselves will be forced to emerge from the abstract world in which they have tended to rest, focusing on their aseptic work of conservation, in order to rediscover the greater good that they represent and the new mission that they are called upon to fulfil.

As is always the case with the human condition, peace is a conquest of pedagogy. And it is in this way that Beauty fulfils its exemplary convening and inspiring role.

<sup>1</sup> Communication presented at the Italian Parliament, on May 28, 2015, within the *International Conference for Culture, Art and Peace. Incontro con Sua Santità Papa Francesco* (Rome, Vatican and Chamber of Deputies, 27 and 28 May), an important event for which 17 world personalities were selected. The *Manifesto for Culture, Art and Peace*, written with the contributions of all participants, was delivered in the audience with His Holiness the Pope that took place on the 27<sup>th</sup>.