

Heritage and 'cultural assets'

Giovanni Pinna

Vast numbers of tourists from many countries have visited Italy in recent years, and they frequently found a surprise waiting for them. Some of the most prestigious, state-owned museums – Uffizi, Brera, Capodimonte, Naples Museum of Archaeology or Villa Giulia Etruscan Museum of Rome – had a habit of imposing near-impossible opening hours on the visitors. The museums were normally open to the public an average of five hours a day (from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.), and four hours on public holidays (9 a.m. to 1 p.m.).

Visitors were also surprised to see how little these museums seemed to care about their visitors. There was nowhere to sit down and rest or take refreshments, there were no bookshops or boutiques to buy a museum guide or postcards showing the most famous objects and paintings. And many of the attendants in these museums showed no interest whatsoever when they came into contact with the public. Their indifferent attitude was all too often followed by very real acts of rudeness.

These elements – short opening hours, lack of services, impolite staff – are difficult for visitors to understand. After all, Italy is a country that promotes the exploitation of its scenic and artistic treasures in the name of the tourist trade. But foreign visitors would have been less surprised had they been aware of the interpretation that the Italian state has always given to the scientific objects, works of art, historical documents and monuments which constitute Italian *beni culturali*. This is a complex set of assets, symbols and traditions which are referred to in French and in English by the respective terms *patrimoine* and heritage. In Italian, on the other hand, the heritage is not considered as a single entity, but is broken down instead into component parts. In the official documents of the

government, ministries and public administration, the cultural and historical inheritance of the Italian people is not referred to as *patrimonio culturale* (cultural heritage), which would be a perfectly correct term in the Italian language, but invariably as *beni culturali*, meaning 'cultural goods or assets'. Words are never used haphazardly in a given language; and *beni culturali* is the precise reflection of a particular interpretation of heritage and its social role. This interpretation is rooted in the policy that has been followed by the Italian state since the early days of national unity.

Using the term 'cultural assets' to designate cultural heritage essentially denotes three things: first, as I pointed out above, objects are not considered as an overall entity implied by the terms *patrimoine* and heritage, but are taken individually; second, the material aspect of the objects is given prominence and their symbolic significance is hidden; and third, the potential symbolic value is greatly diminished because cultural assets are not regarded as forming an overall entity, as is the case when the concepts of *patrimoine* and heritage are chosen.

This interpretation of the heritage as a complex of individual 'assets', almost entirely devoid of symbolic meaning, has invariably been adopted by the cultural policies pursued by every Italian government since the early days of unification. The same interpretation also underlies the organization of the Italian museum structure, which is derived from these policies.

How could a country, which is so rich in cultural, historical and social traditions, isolate its own heritage from its true context and, by doing so, undermine its historical and social content, and focus instead on the mere physical value of

individual objects? The explanation is simple. When Italy was first unified, the new national government set up a cultural policy that was designed to destroy the symbols of the former Italian states dating from the period before unification. At the same time, it sought to construct and disseminate other symbols, namely those of a new nation.

While the state succeeded in getting rid of symbols, they failed in the attempt to create new ones. By the destruction of the symbols of the pre-unified states we do not mean physical destruction, of course, but rather the 'de-symbolization' of the inheritance of the old states through a kind of diaspora of cultural assets. In particular, the art objects collected in the residences of the old ruling houses were moved elsewhere and management of the cultural heritage was entrusted to the central government. This centralization was effected by establishing, with a few exceptions, state ownership rights over the cultural heritage, and through stringent control over the national territory. Thus a network of peripheral government administration offices was created on prefectorial lines, with 'superintendencies' whose role was to safeguard the heritage, and authority not only over the objects belonging to the state but also over those which were not in state hands. This centralized management resulted in the deliberate destruction of the symbolic and cultural significance of the heritage of the various Italian communities, and emphasis was inevitably placed more on the material aspect of the objects, as distinct from their signification in any historical context. This, then, is how 'heritage' was transformed into 'cultural assets'.

This cultural policy produced two separate outcomes. The ordinary citizens were removed from their own heritage

and emphasis was placed on heritage conservation, rather than on use by the citizens themselves. The emphasis on conservation was certainly a positive outcome of state policy, in that it led to the creation of conservation institutions of an extremely high standard, such as the Central Institute for the Restoration and Fashioning of Stone in Florence. On the other hand, the negative outcome was an almost total absence of any kind of museum organization. However absurd this might seem, in Italy the state museums are not museums, but offices of the 'superintendencies', with no administrative and financial autonomy, no authority to manage their own administrative personnel and attendants and no scientific or teaching role. The state's restrictive interpretation of 'cultural assets' and 'guarantors of ownership' meant that museums became places where being open to the public was tolerated as a minimum concession – to the true owners of the public heritage themselves! It is a fact that citizens are often regarded as a dangerous source of potential damage to valuable objects.

Thus the impossible opening hours and the lack of services which until recently has caused non-Italian visitors to our museums to wonder. It also helps us to understand the museographic layout of many state museums, especially the Museums of Archaeology, which have survived as 'museum-storehouses' (each object being exhibited with its own inventory number, but with no explanatory material) or 'museum-necropolises' (strictly scientific exhibitions without any civic context; a frozen representation of how diggings are advancing in the course of history).

In the years immediately following the Second World War, this attitude to the

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Italian state heritage underwent no substantial changes. Indeed, it seems rather to have been strengthened, as is demonstrated by the persistence of the notion of 'cultural assets' in the different names adopted, after the fall of fascism, by what had been the Ministry of Popular Culture. In the immediate post-war years, after the abolition of the fascist ministry, the Republic entrusted conservation of the artistic and historical heritage to the Ministry of Public Education. This continued until 1974, when the Ministry of Cultural Assets and the Environment was created in a what can only be termed a consecration of the separation of administration from public education. Later, this became the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Assets. Most recently, in 1998, it was renamed the Ministry of Cultural Assets and Activities. It was not until 1998, therefore, that the idea seems to have surfaced for the very first time that a policy for the cultural heritage must not only focus on 'asset-objects' but also on actions. However, what was regarded in Italy as a real revolution in the management of 'cultural assets' took place in 1993 with the adoption of the Ronchey laws (named for the minister who proposed them). A veritable revolution occurred in the Italian museum system, brought about by these new laws. For the first time in the history of the Republic of Italy, museums were not simply regarded as state strong-rooms, they were seen as institutions open for public enjoyment. Restaurant services, bookshops and sales outlets for gadgets were now added to the exhibition spaces for the first time. This revolution in

the management of the state museums (for years many museums outside the state ambit had broken away from these mummified museology practices and had already focused on cultural activities for the public instead) soon turned into concentration on the economic rather than cultural use of museums. Much attention was given to entrance fees, rights of reproduction and contracts for management of the new public services, such as bars, bookshops and teaching materials. As Italian state museums opened onto the outside world the idea of the 'asset-object' remained unchanged: the new services for the public were officially defined as 'additional services', suggesting that they were somehow secondary appendages to conservation, which still remained the main function of the museum and was regarded as far more important than educational, productive and cultural actions, let alone the wellbeing of visitors.

This explains that much that goes on in Italian museology still takes as the focal point of its action the individual physical object. The visitor is on the sidelines, and this makes it difficult to create the relationship between object and observer which, as is well known, informs the significance of heritage and makes it a source of cultural identity for the community. Thus the Italian museum has twice pruned the roots of the objects it contains: first, when it removes them from their place of origin and, secondly, when it prevents them from becoming part of a complex of meanings, in other words an integral part of the cultural heritage. ■