

## Heritage and “Cultural assets”

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Vast numbers of tourists from many countries have visited Italy in recent years. A surprise has often been in store for them: the disagreeable habit to which the State-owned museums, including some of the most prestigious, such as the Uffizi, Brera, Capodimonte, the Naples Museum of Archaeology and the Villa Giulia Etruscan Museum of Rome, were prone, i.e. the imposition of near-impossible visiting hours. They were normally open to the public on average five hours a day (from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.), or just four on public holidays (9 a.m. to 1 p.m.). Visitors were equally surprised to see how little care these museums took of their visitors. They had nowhere to sit down and rest or take refreshments, no bookshop or boutique in which to buy a museum guide and postcards showing the most famous objects and paintings. Visitors therefore had to make their purchases from the colourful and popular stalls, which even today surround the most famous Italian museums. Then again, they were surprised by the complete lack of interest shown by the stewards of these museums when they came into any contact with the public. That attitude reflected their disagreeable character, which all too often led to acts of real rudeness. All these factors – short opening hours, impolite staff, lack of services – were particularly hard for visitors to understand. After all, Italy is a country that has always derived great economic benefit from the exploitation of its scenic and artistic beauty in the cause of tourism.

This situation would probably have come as less of a surprise to foreign visitors if they had been aware of the special interpretation always placed by the Italian State on the scientific objects, works of art, historical documents and monuments which constitute the historical memory of the Italian people; a complex set of assets, symbols and traditions which are referred to in French and in English by the collective terms of “*patrimoine*” and “*heritage*”. In Italian, in the other hand, they are not denoted by any single concept, but broken down instead into their 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 the “*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. The use of one term instead of another is no mere lexical formality, but rather the precise reflection of a particular interpretation of the heritage and of its social role. This interpretation is rooted in the policy pursued by the Italian State since the early days of national unity. Use of the term “*cultural assets*” to designate the cultural heritage essentially denotes three things: firstly that, as I pointed out above, objects are considered in isolation and not as the overall entity implied by the terms “*patrimoine*” and “*heritage*”, secondly, that the material aspect of all the objects is given prominence and their symbolic significance hidden; and thirdly that the potential symbolic value is greatly diminished in that 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 bereft 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, historic 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 put in place a cultural policy which was designed to destroy the symbols of the former Italian States dating back to the days before unification, while at the same time seeking to construct and disseminate new symbols of the new nation. Whilst the first act of this policy proved a total success, the second – rather more difficult – failed. The destruction of the symbols of the pre-unified States did not of course imply their physical destruction, but consisted in the “*de-symbolization*” of the heritages of the old States through the organization of a 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 entrusted to the central government. This centralization was effected by establishing, with a few exceptions, a right of State ownership of the cultural heritage and by putting in place stringent control over the national territory. So it was that a network of peripheral offices of the State came to be created on preferential lines: the “*superintendencies*” whose role was to safeguard the heritage, with 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 heritages of the various Italian communities, while inevitably leading to a strong emphasis on the material side of the objects, as distinct from their essential meaning. That is how the “*heritage*” was transformed into “*cultural assets*”.

This cultural policy had two main outcomes. The distancing of citizens from their own heritage and emphasis on conservation of the heritage rather than on its use by the citizens themselves. On the one hand, the emphasis on conservation 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, the negative consequences was the almost total lack of any 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 stewards and no scientific or teaching role. The State’s restrictive interpretation of “*cultural assets*” and guarantors of ownership; places whose opening to the public was tolerated as a minimum concession to the true owners of the public heritage, i.e., the citizens who are often regarded as a dangerous source of potential damage to valuable objects.

This is the explanation for the short opening hours and the lack of services which astonished every non-Italian visitor until recently. 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-necropolis*” (strictly scientific exhibitions without any civic context; a frozen representation of the advance of diggings in the course of history).

In the immediate post-war years, this attitude to the Italian State heritage did not undergo any substantial changes. Indeed, it seems to have been strengthened further, 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*. That situation persisted until 1974, the year in which the *Ministry of Cultural Assets and the Environment* was created, so consecrating the separation of management 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 therefore not until 1998 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 (after the Minister of that name). The revolution of the Italian museum system brought about by the Ronchey laws resided in the fact that, for the first time in the history of the Republic, museums were not simply regarded as State strongrooms, but also 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 the mummified museology context and focused instead on cultural activities for the public) soon turned into concentration on the economic rather than cultural use of museums. Great attention was paid to the revenue derived from entrance tickets, rights of reproduction and contracts for management of the new public services, such as bars, bookshops and teaching materials. In this opening of the Italian museums 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 subaltern – mere appendages to conservation which remained the main function of the museum and was regarded as far more important than educational, productive and cultural actions, let alone the well being of visitors.

Be that as it may, much Italian museology still takes as the focal point of its action the individual physical object and sidelines the visitor, so making it difficult to create the relationship between the object and the visitor which, as is well known, also underpins the significance of the heritage and its identifying role for the community. That being so, the Italian museum cuts off the roots of the objects contained in it twice over; 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.

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