



THE INTERPRETATION OF PREHISTORIC VISUAL EXPRESSION IN INDOOR MUSEUMS

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Abstract - The interpretation of prehistoric visual expression in Indoor Museums

Representing prehistory in museums, with all the contradictions that the term 'representation' may imply, is always very controversial from the interpretative point of view, implying a series of different philosophical and scientific positions, both on prehistory itself, and on the way of introducing it to the public, particularly today with the resurfacing of the need to dedicate some attention also to the social and the so-called immaterial contexts, to the myths, the rites, the cults, to the interpretation of life and nature, overcoming the obsolete concept of museums exposing manufactured articles. In the long decontextualisation process of the objects involving, unfortunately, every kind of museum, the merely academic preparations are slowly giving in to new orientations, divided into purely aesthetic, and interpretative and communicative. The traces of the most distant prehistory, particularly prehistoric and tribal art, are in fact as conceptually fascinating as they are poor from the merely objective point of view. Among non-literate peoples visual expression has undoubtedly constituted the first medium of communication, but simultaneously it has been the source of a primordial language and a crucial part of human identity. This immense patrimony of art expression, both movables and immovables, has to be understood in order to transmit messages, to help with the pre-literate history of humanity. The museums illustrating the most ancient traces and bringing the human beings who left those same traces to the ephemeral life of exposure, are perpetually standing on a borderline between the necessity to tell and not to invent, between the demands of language in a contemporary museum and the concern to surpass scant archaeological finds.

Riassunto - Interpretare l'espressione visuale preistorica nei musei

La musealizzazione della Preistoria, con tutte le contraddizioni implicite sul tema della "rappresentazione", è oggi oggetto di discussione dal punto di vista interpretativo. In effetti implica una serie di scelte filosofiche e scientifiche diverse sia sulla Preistoria, sia sulle modalità della sua presentazione al pubblico, in particolare, oggi i nuovi allestimenti impongono la necessità di dedicare maggiore attenzione al sociale e ai contesti cosiddetti immateriali, i miti, i riti, i culti, l'interpretazione della vita e della natura, superando l'obsoleto concetto dei musei che espongono solo manufatti. La decontestualizzazione degli oggetti ha interessato, purtroppo, ogni tipo di museo; gli allestimenti meramente accademici stanno tuttavia lentamente cedendo il passo a nuovi orientamenti, che rispondono a esigenze maggiormente estetiche, interpretative e comunicative. Le tracce della Preistoria più lontana, in particolare l'arte preistorica e tribale, sono in effetti concettualmente affascinanti ma molto povere dal punto di vista meramente oggettivo. Tra i popoli non-letterati, l'espressione visiva ha costituito indubbiamente il primo mezzo di comunicazione e, allo stesso tempo, è stata fonte di un linguaggio primordiale e di una parte fondamentale dell'identità umana. Questo immenso patrimonio di espressioni artistiche, mobiliare ed immobiliare, deve essere inteso come strumento per trasmettere messaggi, ed aiutare alla ricostruzione della storia pre-letterata dell'umanità. I musei che espongono le tracce più antiche e riattualizzano, nel breve arco di tempo a loro disposizione, la vita degli uomini che le hanno prodotte, sono perennemente in bilico sulla linea di confine tra la necessità di raccontare e non di inventare, tra le esigenze del linguaggio museale contemporaneo e le difficoltà derivanti dalla scarsità dei reperti archeologici.

Résumé - Interpréter l'expression visuelle préhistorique dans les musées

La représentation de la préhistoire dans les musées, avec toutes les contradictions que le terme « représentation » peut impliquer, est toujours sujette à controverse du point de vue interprétatif. En effet, elle implique une série de positions philosophiques et scientifiques différentes à propos de la préhistoire en elle-même et de la façon de l'introduire au public. C'est particulièrement le cas aujourd'hui, puisque nous ressentons à nouveau le besoin de prêter attention aux contextes sociaux et « immatériels », aux mythes, aux rites, aux cultes, à l'interprétation de la vie et de la nature, ce qui dépasse le concept obsolète des musées exposant des articles manufacturés. Durant le long processus de dé-contextualisation des objets, qui implique malheureusement tout type de musées, les préparations simplement « académiques » prennent tout doucement de nouvelles orientations, qui répondent à des demandes purement esthétiques, interprétatives ou communicatives. Les traces de la préhistoire la plus lointaine, surtout en ce qui concerne « l'art préhistorique et tribal », sont en effet fascinantes du point de vue conceptuel mais pauvres du simple point de vue « objectal ». Chez les peuples non lettrés, l'expression visuelle a inévitablement constitué le premier moyen de communication, mais elle a en même temps été la source d'un langage primordial et une partie cruciale de l'identité humaine. Nous devons comprendre cet immense patrimoine d'expressions artistiques, qui sont à la fois mobiles et immobiles, pour transmettre des messages et pour nous

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éclairer sur l'histoire pré-lettrée de l'humanité. Les musées illustrant les plus vieilles traces et donnant, le temps de leur exposition, une vie éphémère aux êtres humains qui les ont produites, sont perpétuellement tiraillés par la nécessité de raconter sans inventer, par les exigences de la langue dans un musée contemporain et le souci de dépasser les maigres découvertes archéologiques.

Representing prehistory in museums, with all the contradictions implied by the term 'representation', is always very controversial from the interpretative point of view, as it implies many different philosophical and scientific positions about prehistory itself and how it should be introduced to the public. This is true particularly today, as the need to pay attention to the immaterial, to the social context, myths, rites and cults, and the interpretations of life and nature, is strongly resurfacing, overcoming the obsolete concept of museums exposing manufactured objects. In the long decontextualisation process of the objects, which unfortunately involves every kind of museum, the merely academic preparations are slowly changing into new orientations, divided into the purely aesthetic, and the interpretative and communicative. The most distant prehistory traces, especially prehistoric and tribal art, if conceptually fascinating are, in fact, very poor from the merely objective point of view. Among non-literate people visual expression has undoubtedly constituted the first medium of communication, though at the same time it has been the source of a primordial language and a crucial part of human identity. This immense patrimony of art expression, material and immaterial, is meant to transmit messages that can contribute to the pre-literate history of mankind. The museums involved in illustrating the most ancient traces, and, above all, in bringing to the ephemeral life of exposure the human beings who have left those traces, are perpetually standing on a borderline between the necessity to report and not to invent, between the demands of a contemporary museum language and the concern to overcome scant archaeological finds.

The possible contradictions among the exhibited items are of vital concern in prehistory exhibition, and, more generally in the archaeological ones, even according to Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, who underline that the apparent simplicity of artefacts must not be confused with the basic simplicity of their conception (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, pp. 95ff.): in these cases, in fact, simplicity lies in the objects, while complexity lies in the minds that have produced them. However, the task of a museum is to display both the aspects, teaching the public to think from things, and, at the same time, making them comprehend that each thought is not absolute, but a part of the long and difficult cognitive process, in which the observer's conceptual positions (and most of all those of the curator), are not without influence (Wylie, 2002).

In the contemporary research on exhibition topics, the most relevant aspect concerns interpretation, which, together with the rising affirmation of the new 'museum memorising' patterns (Ruggieri Tricoli and Rugino, 2005, pp. 171-92), has shifted towards new communicative schemes, no longer directly corresponding to a scientific function, but to the necessity of the presentation to the public (Nardi, 2004). That is why, for instance, the difficulty of making use of a prehistoric site, it even being a real obstacle, has the advantage of producing creativity, even if sometimes this can lead to results apparently not very suitable and so open to criticism (Francovich and Zifferero, 1999, p. 465).

When it comes to interpreting prehistorical visual expression, we cannot avoid the extreme convergence between the exhibition of contemporary art and that of the prehistoric, considered by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew parallel visions (Renfrew, 2006), in whose centre we can find the concept of excavation, not only material but mental too, together with that of the cognitive process. To these we should add the concept of display: the exhibition should intuitively highlight the meaning of things by getting to that hidden essential typical of the contemporary artist as well of the historian (Bradley, 2009, pp. 225ff.). Obviously, we are not only referring to the art of the hyper-realistic re-take (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 9ff.), now widespread all over prehistoric art, especially rupestrian, considering most of all its inaccessibility or the precautions necessary for its preservation. After Lascaux II, first example (Heyd and Clegg, 2005, pp. 177-90), that art has lately seen a large number of museums emerging showing Paleolithic wonders to a public without any speleological knowledge, thus granting everybody an immersive and emotional pleasure (Melotti, 2007, pp. 121-2), and providing for the preservation of extremely delicate artworks at the same time (Figure 1).

But in these cases we should ask ourselves if, by trying to present and to interpret prehistoric visual art, we can possibly dislocate in an imaginary way a whole context, not neglecting scientific

rigour and communicative effect. Good examples here are certainly the Altamira Museum (Agnew and Bridgland, 2006, pp. 177–83), or the more recent and perhaps more absorbing and effective Teverga Museum (Figure 2), whose museum exhibition has been designed by the Equipo de Diseño in Madrid, greatly experienced in archaeological museums and open to slavish replicas and reproductions, as we can plainly see in the Domus Romana Museum in Juliobriga, Cantabria (2003) (Figure 3).

The extraordinary operation carried out in order to enhance the Cueva de Altamira, a beautiful cave in the Cantabrian region, whose rock walls are full of Palaeolithic graffiti, sets a good model: because of the considerable difficulties in reaching the original site, a series of specific strategies have been carried out and put into practice in the more accessible Altamira Museum (2000) (Magnago Lampugnani and Sachs, 2001, pp. 188–93), designed by Juan Navarro Baldeweg, placed not far away from the original site. On the inside, the main solutions for the exhibition are represented by a real scale replica of the cave and its graffiti (Figure 4). The perfect reproduction of the *cueva* is mixed up with a series of exhibits in which an irreplaceable interactive multimedia platform presents the places and findings, following a logic that allows the visitor to play an active role in his exploration and to retain a greater quantity of information on a selected theme.

The well-known Parc Pyrénéen de l'Art Préhistorique, together with its *musée de site* 'Le Grand Atelier', one of the most controversial in the scientific community, has been a precursor of this peculiar museological methodology. Surrounded by an evocative natural setting, the museum is an extreme example of *présentation du rien*, in which, like the Victorian age, replica is the most important element. Visitors in the darkness of the museum experience an unnatural, though realistic, subterranean atmosphere that prepares them for the emotional encounter with the Salon Noir, in which stands the almost inaccessible Niaux Cave replica. What is reproduced there might look like an excessive and artificial mechanism, incapable of presenting the correct perception of the real conditions, because the recreational strategy overcomes the scientific and didactic. Still, it can immediately convey the cultural message, by kindling curiosity and a deeper awareness of the value of prehistoric art and of its expressiveness (Eliade, 1974), as a cognitive dimension of man's becoming. So art, especially the most ancient, is a way of creating useful tools that can help in reading the present more deeply and in understanding, even if only generally, the future (Accardi, 2008, pp. 4–8). Therefore we must get back to this immense interpretative and cognitive patrimony, starting by giving a greater attention to materials like the archaeological finds, graffiti, cave paintings, statues of different cults, and continuing by developing questions and searching for the right answers. Thus we can also stimulate the critical observation of data, and, contemporaneously we can make a continuous check of what has been reconstructed by making comparisons among the various other realisations. That is why in the Salon Noir a big wide screen (made up of six screens) reproduces lots of the works that prehistoric men have painted, drawn or carved on the rock faces of the caves of the entire world, from Africa to Australia, from America to Europe (Figure 5).

The cave, the rock, the stone in man's conscience look 'invulnerable and irreducible ... became the symbol and image of being' (Eliade, 1962, p. 44). The stone and the prehistoric art carved on it hit human being's sensibility, suggests immortality to them, most of all because they have survived (Lippard, 1983, pp. 15ff.).

If the examples cited so far testify to an evolution of the communicative strategies of museum exhibitions, this dialectic between artistic expression and architecture has ended by deeply transforming even the architectural structure of the museum institution, primarily affecting the criteria of choosing collections and of the composition of the spaces in which they are to be placed. The museum exhibition contributes strongly to the definition of the museum context, whose internal spaces are designed in order to help the exhibition to communicate a figurative, evocative and emotional power. Otherwise, there are temporary or permanent installations that try to trigger a trans-epochal short circuit between a very faraway past and a present with defined borders, cleverly mixing contemporary productions and languages with the prehistory fascination, a way to keep people of the past alive in our present. This way is much less problematic than the various reproductions attempted by other museums, which have tried to give the public a tangible vision of our ancestors through questionable mannequins or complicated dioramas and much less uncertain than the many different interventions attempted at archaeological sites. These, no different from indoor museums, have often resorted to the use of silhouettes or other reproductive expedients, with further difficulties in handling them outdoors, or, if inside in a crypt or under a cover, in a difficult comparison with the ruins.



Many contemporary museum designers have turned to prehistoric art for inspiration and also, often for aesthetic or pragmatic reasons, to the expressiveness of ethnic populations of endangered species but, more often, in order to give their buildings a distinctive identity. The National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa (1998), designed by Jasmx Architects Group, whose plan and orientation towards the Wellington seafront acquire a very deep symbolic and cultural meaning, is a clear example of this (McCarthy, 2007, p. 102). But it is on the inside that the symbolic sense achieves its greatest expression: architecture, emulating and proposing the art of the people, becomes decorum, defines the big scenery, contextualises the reconstructions, sets the diorama and mingles with the exhibited things (Figure 6). In the prehistoric and naturalist, scientific and ethnographic museums, it has been a long time since a process of re-composition and interpretation of geography and history has been started, in which the exhibition design acquires a metaphorical sense, strongly empathetic, inextricably connected with the semiotic power of the exhibition.

Examples of a *mixage* between contemporary shapes and materials, and of iconographies directly drawn from the historic, prehistoric and imaginary, and, even more, from contemporary imagination of history and prehistory, are the Niaux mammoth (Figure 7) (Rambert, 1994, pp. 30–43) and the Neanderthals we can see in many shapes in the park of the Neanderthal Museum in Germany. There are a number of examples that rely on materials such as cor-ten, which is considered to be modern and suitable for archeology because its surface rusts (Figures 8 and 9), but at the same time such examples are really not always interesting, because the creativity of the artists dealing with ancestor images is not always capable of avoiding falling into caricature-like frankly ridiculous images.

Among the artists most typically representative of the extraordinary bond between prehistoric art and contemporary art, between an artist's mind-set and an archeologist's mentality, even putting himself a little in the curator's shoes, Renfrew quotes, apart from Mark Dion, Antony Gormley, Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy and David Mach, the pop sculptor Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (1924–2005), for his biography and his artistic life strictly connected to Scotland, a country that, in fact, since 1999 has displayed his works in the National Galleries in Edinburgh. An example may be the frequently quoted case of the robot-like sculptures made by Paolozzi for the Museum of Scotland (Figure 10).

Actually, the taste for mixing contemporary art with the most ancient archeological finds, discovering in it strange assonances and unusual formal congruencies, is present in many similar museums, that have all mixed an idea of prehistoric art with that of a primitive one (Quemin, 2002, pp. 15–40). People in the British Isles have particularly constantly felt the need to relate to the products of their prehistoric age through human (or heroic or divine) images of contemporary artists, in a general propensity for revisiting their prehistory and their most ancient history by means of contemporary retrievals of images, languages and examples. In the 1930s, for instance, the English painter Paul Nash used the images of the famous Wiltshire megaliths in abstract art images (Smiles and Moser, 2005, pp. 133–57). Getting into a complex discussion about Celtic and pre-Celtic art reinterpretations, so typical in Scotland, Ireland or Wales, and even in England, though to a lesser degree, since the first years of his fortunate career, Paolozzi described his own work as a 'metallisation of a dream' (Paolozzi, 1963). A prehistoric dream, obviously. Today his work is most of all considered as one of the most typical examples of the connection between contemporary art and the Paleolithic, and of the ability of both to be integrated into museums, as today's art supplies to the needs of a complex and obscure science, as archaeology is, with its own ability to determine 'the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the tangible and the intangible' (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 279). In 1987 Paolozzi's ability to be in tune with primitive art had already given an excellent account of itself, when, after having spent three years exploring the materials of the Museum of Mankind (British Museum ethnological department), he presented in the same museum the 'Lost Magic Kingdoms' exhibit, in which the findings were exhibited in new and unexpected assemblages, and through which he intended to cross 'the division between museum objects and life' and to find the meaning of the objects by now 'lost to the original makers and their successors' (Lumley, 1988, p. 18). This exhibition was considered to be a clear demonstration of the contemporary museum's new trend, that has become a medium that expresses itself through every traditional concept of scientific exhibition (Miles and Zavala, 1994, p. 168), and even an explosion of meanings (Bouquet, 2001, p. 157), and the transformation of things into 'transcultured objects' (Robertson et al., 1994, p. 178).

In the wake of *mixage* between contemporary art and primitive art, several contemporary experiences of the same sort followed, like Serge Pey's temporary exhibition 'Tombeau pour Sawtche alias Saartje Baartman Venus Hottentote' (Figure 11), or 'Animosités' (Figure 12), Pascale Martine's installation, both in 2009.

To summarize, what is important to underline is the perfect success of the encounter between contemporary art and prehistory, pursued in many of contemporary exhibitions, realised in order to actualise the past by presenting it as still *in fieri*. This strategy is so efficacious that there have been exhibitions, too, in which the works of contemporary art do not have the function of completing or supporting ancient finds, but replace them, displaying new images of our predecessors rearranged by contemporary artists (Ruggieri Tricoli, 2010, pp. 11ff.).

The final conclusion we draw, between science and playfulness, is that perhaps the 'poor ancestors', paraphrasing Ian Tattersall (2002, p. 94) and the 'poor Neanderthals', even if invisible, are still among us. As, maybe, a lot of physical and mental features of the *Homo* type are still with us, whose diversity is not a matter of complicated considerations, but, on the contrary, of the profound joy of not being alone, but of sitting at the table together. It must be said, though, that the unpleasant jokes about the objects and people a museum is concerned about should be directed towards other places and not to the museum itself, because this institution has still the duty of communication, which is certainly not free from mistakes, but is still authoritative. Here, between this ultra-remote past and our present, there is a very short distance, and to shorten it 'museums' efforts have been long, hard and often controversial.

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Fig. 1 – Lascaux II: a replica of two of the cave halls with Paleolithic paintings (1983), opened near the original cave in Montignac (Dordogne).



Fig. 2 – The Prehistoric Museum in Teverga houses the most relevant reproductions of Cave Art in Europe.



Fig. 3 – The Domus Romana Museum, in Juliobriga, Cantabria.



Fig. 4 – Museo de Altamira: the replica of the Cueva de Altamira and the interactive-multimedia base allow the visitors to be active in their exploration and to hold a greater quantity of information concerning the boarded theme.



Fig. 5 – Parc Pyreneen de l'Art Préhistorique, the "Salon Noir": the big wide screen reproduces lots of the works that prehistorical men have painted or carved on the rock faces of the caves of the entire world.



Fig. 6 – National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa: the architecture of interior becomes decorum.



Fig. 7 – The entrance of the Niaux Cave, with a great “Mammoth” designed by M. Fuksas (1993).

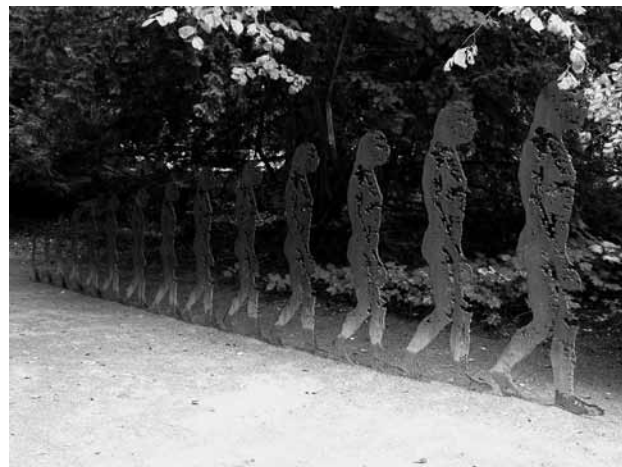


Fig. 8 – Neanderthal men “lives” in many shapes in the park of the Neanderthal German Museum.



Fig. 9 – Neanderthal men “lives” in many shapes in the park of the Neanderthal German Museum.



Fig. 10 – The “Early people” exhibition, by Edward Paolozzi (1924-2005), Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.



Fig. 11 – Serge PEY, “Tombeau pour Sawtche alias Saartje Baartman Venus Hottentote”, temporary exhibition, 2009.



Fig. 12 – Pascale Marthine Tayou, “Animosités”, temporary exhibition 2009.