

Lives of yesteryear

The Guatelli Museum rises in the heart of the countryside of the Italian region of Reggio Emilia, near the city of Parma. It contains over 60,000 objects that tell the story of those who have used and collected them. Describing this museum is practically impossible. Mario Turci, who has been expertly directing it for years, will do it for us. But what is represented and embodied in the museum named after maestro Ettore Guatelli?

Reflections by Mario Turci, Guatelli Museum director, collected by Maria Gregorio

What appears evident in the museum is the interest that Ettore Guatelli nurtured for the world of the poor, prevalently that of peasants. A world that finds expression in daily life and its footprints and testimonials in objects. Ettore's project was never to create an ethnographic museum to represent merely the work of the peasants, the way they lived. He wanted to collect stories of lives that could express the substance and importance of their existence. We could define the Museo Guatelli as the museum of existences.

BUT HOW CAN LIVES BE TOLD? Ettore desired to become a writer, he wanted to write, and he does write. He uses essentially two types of writing: one is the usual form that consists in producing texts and collecting interviews. And the other is the museum. On paper, Ettore uses words and phrases; in the museum, he uses the object and the composition. The Museo Guatelli is a continuous composition. What to us anthropologists are ethnographic writings, to the eyes of those who are involved in art they appear as works, compositions.

ETTORE USES THE PROJECTS AS WORDS AND THE COMPOSITIONS AS PHRASES, because his eye sees the objects as bearers of history. And so in his museum, the objects become so dense not because they are beautiful or curious, but because they bear witness to life. It is for this reason that he himself speaks about his museum as "the museum of the obvious".

Generally, people go to museums to be surprised, to discover something extraordinary or artistic... he used to say "tutti i cojon j'en bon ad metter in mostra il còsi eccezionali" ("anybody is capable of putting exceptional objects on display"), and in his museum you can find everyday things, the marvels of the obvious. The aim to astonish is there, but it is there to make people appreciate that every person's story is important.

Ettore caters minutely also to particular aspects of everyday life, the ones we can define as "doing the best with what one has", the people's design, the application of small practical sciences to the solution of everyday problems. And the other vein, a transversal one, is connected to the re-utilization of objects that thus become "other" objects that we could call "migrating objects". For example, the wooden accordion case that becomes a pigeon cage by using the handle and adding two pieces of net. Or the helmet that becomes a chimney, the canister that becomes the base of a fiasco bottle, if cut well. This makes for similarities between Ettore and Bruno Munari, even though the two never met.

I always say that when I enter the museum, I hear a buzz of voices; the voices of the people living behind and inside the objects, the multitude of lives, aspects, colors, shapes ... I don't know to what degree Ettore was aware - maybe not completely - that his works were descriptive of all of the humanities, made up not of leaders nor of great heads of State, as he always said, but rather of everyday life which is comprised of suffering and also, why not?, geniality and eroticism. Like in that small work of art that is his tale of the odyssey experienced by the Polish refugee Boris.

PERSONALLY, SINCE 2003, MY LABOR IN REGARDS TO THE MUSEUM HAS BEEN SORT OF EXISTENTIAL. And the main reason is because I had to distance myself somewhat from the presence of Ettore, to elaborate the mourning for his absence. When you arrive in a place and you see the work of a man, the work in which that man has invested his whole life, you know that you have to be careful, very careful, and you continually ask yourself: "Would he have done this? Would he like it?"

This elaboration, which is not mine alone, has somehow stopped us from doing something. Now that we are being freed, we are halfway there, and this elaboration makes us freer to produce exhibit displays that are not merely ethnographic, but rather tied to Ettore's form of writing. An example of this is the film created to make people acquainted with the new work "Cortina Varsavia", that celebrates and describes Boris and his story. Here, we wanted to play with Ettore's objects without touching what Ettore has left for us - we would never do that. It means elaborating new exhibit forms, of course using our sensitivity, what we are, using the language that Ettore proposes.

And indeed, in the "Cortina Varsavia" experience, we created a "wall of suitcases", the wall that is the starting point of that long line of shoes ... but it does not speak about the shoemaker nor about the evolution of the shoe. It is a humanity of shoes where, if you find two shoes that have been re-soled in a certain way, it is because this was the way used by that person to make the shoe last longer, because it had to pass from the eldest child to the youngest, and the youngest's feet were longer than his older sibling's. It is all of humanity that passes through the shoes.

I LIKE TO UNDERSCORE THAT THE MUSEUM EXCITES EVERYONE, SOMETIMES CREATING EVEN ANXIETY OR UNEASINESS, BUT IT SUCCEEDS IN SPEAKING TO ALL GENERATIONS BECAUSE, intentionally or involuntarily, it gives everyone the opportunity of opening his or her mind of everyday objects, the same that each one of us has touched or seen in our lifetime. Toys made with canisters or with pieces of wood, beloved by younger visitors. And when we enter two rooms in particular - the glass room and the tin room - we all feel very strong emotions. Who knows? Maybe it is because - and not everyone knows this - it was his parents' bedroom, where Ettore was born. The emotion is productive, and for this reason the meeting with the Museo Guatelli produces relations, words, exchanges, new meetings. I could cite a thousand episodes. The museums, as we always say, should constitute places to meet, and we try our hardest to realize this aim. In the Museo Guatelli all you have to do is follow and be willing to listen. What excites me the most, as a director, is that all this is not just theory: these things really happen at the Museo Guatelli!

Starting from here, we can return to the concept of cultural heritage. I remember Fredi Drugman when he said that all our design or analytical processes have the aim of acknowledging cultural heritage as a collective wealth belonging to the collectivity, not meant as the ensemble of people but rather as the ensemble of humanities. And humanities are comprised of relations and the recognition of different identities. I can say that I acknowledge your identity because I acknowledge the fact that you have rights, but the real acknowledgement I show towards you is when I show an interest in you, in your history. There is a closeness in this, and that is why Ettore insists on the stories.

Let's take for instance a hoe: Ettore speaks to us about the hoe, he deeply describes the hoe, he tells us that it was made this way because it was used for a certain job, and in this place it is made this way, while somewhere else it is made differently ... then he adds: "Luigi told me these things!" Who is Luigi? Luigi is a human being, living in a family context, he bought this hoe, he made sacrifices to purchase it, then one night someone stole it... so the hoe begins to become the footprint of an existence, because we are interested in Luigi and not in the hoe. Or rather, we are interested in the hoe because it belongs to Luigi. Otherwise, our ethnographic museums become museums of the history of technology, as happens in lots of museums of the so-called peasant culture. They are museums of proof, historic proof, beautiful museums. But the anthropological museum must be a museum of testimony. We must be increasingly clearer about this message.

At the core, here, is the relation. My students, for example, here understand that they cannot give meaning to a house unless they read it as a container for the family, that is, of a group connected by relations. This is the anthropological view of things, and it is the view of the Museo Guatelli, where the common denominator is always humanity. I tell my students "it is a great provocation!", because it provokes a certain "museography" on every topic, particularly on the key words: museum/ forum, museum/ meeting place, interactivity, emotion...

THE MUSEO GUATELLI IS NOT A MONUMENT TO MEMORY. Memory lies in witnessing, and in this sense the main objective of the museum is educational. Ettore is a maestro and across his entire work, one can feel the tendency to make people reflect. But in order to induce reflection, the memory must be a useful one because it must make us think about that which exists, and hence our own existence. For this reason, at the Museo Guatelli it is not possible to find a mere museum-like didactic venue of the so-called "inter-cultural dialogue", that sees museums as meeting places between different cultures. We do not like to say "inter-cultural", we prefer "inter-personal", because the person is not the bearer of culture, but rather of a personal experience, that is individual within a given culture. People from other countries will look at the objects and tell their stories on these objects, they will bring us their own objects through their own stories. Freedom lies also in this: in the fact that in such a multi-faceted museum, each of us can always find something: anything we want...

The great American artist, Joseph Cornell writes: "... being immersed in a world of total happiness where every meaningless thing becomes filled with meaning..." o

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The website, very rich in image content, items and news (even on the splendid publications) takes visitors on a virtual tour: www.museoguatelli.it

But the real tour is a must.