WHO’S AFRAID OF CESARE BRANDI?

Prior to this edition in English, a selection of Brandi’s writings on restoration, collected in 1994 by Michele Cordaro, was published in Italian under the title “Il restauro. Teoria e pratica”.

Subsequently they were published with more or less the same title, first in French (La restauration: Méthode et études de cas, Paris, INP – Stratis, 2007) and then in Spanish (La restauración. Teoría y aplicación práctica, Editores Pilar Roig Picazo y Pablo González Tornel, Editorial Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2008). Since these writings date from after the publication of the Teoria del restauro, they were not included in it.

The current selection, made by the writer of this article, meets the basic criteria of the representative nature of the chosen “cases” at an international level, so as to obtain a more flexible instrument and, at the same time, a less persuasive one – without in any way diminishing the depth and complexity of Brandi’s contribution over so many years of uninterrupted concentration on the most pressing problems in the fields of conservation and restoration. In practical terms, the curators of the French and Spanish editions mentioned above took the same decisions and followed the same path 1, albeit with occasional variants, sometimes of considerable significance and, importantly, making some essential adaptations to local requirements.

The same thing was not possible for this English edition, produced by an Italian publisher, as had previously happened with the Teoria del restauro, and with the proceedings of the seminar in London and more recently with the proceedings of the study day in New York 2. At any rate, the signs of a radical divergence between the neo-Latin tradition and the English language tradition in the approach to problems of restoration had become evident much earlier, dating back to the notorious spat about the cleaning of some of the paintings at London’s National Gallery; and the situation has hardly changed since then, even though the sharp tones of that occasion have no longer been used. One could say that all signs of open “belligerence” have disappeared, not surprisingly since, at the time of the dispute, the English-speaking parties turned down Brandi’s repeated invitations for a meeting which would certainly have been lively but also useful for the progress of restoration culture.

This attempt to keep a “low profile” is not entirely disinterested since, at a distance of so many years, Brandi’s position seems to be objectively unassailable (and in some cases, even recognised by authoritative figures in the English-speaking world) 3. The only exception (as far as I know, and obviously at a high level of commitment, but with the aim of burying Brandi’s theory and practice of restoration) is the slim volume recently published by Salvador Munoz Vinas, first in Spanish then in English, which once again demonstrates not merely a “total inability to grasp Brandi’s theory” in terms of its critical value at the highest level 4, but rather a prejudicial closure against the values of the humanist tradition, accused of effective subjectivity, compared to the presumed objectivity of the world of science and technology.

At the start of the 21st century, such a position is incredibly “ingenious” and, apart from all other considerations, does not provide a full solution in practical terms, which should in fact be its main aim.

But, regarding the subject of this note, even more incredible is that the speakers at the above-mentioned meetings in London and New York clearly showed that they have no direct knowledge of the Teoria del restauro even though the English edition has been available for more than two years.

Needless to say, at a time when science and technology are increasingly present, it seems that every reference to them must always lead to an advantage. However, it’s not by chance that in recent years the rate of translation of Brandi’s Teoria into other languages is increasing, and involving cultural traditions that are far removed from European humanistic values; but what is more important, setting up a useful dialogue on methodology or even forms of sharing and collaboration in the most advanced cases, not only at the operational level but also in terms of professional and vocational training (in China, Serbia, Egypt, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Peru, India) – much more than a mere agreement on a particular chemical formula, behind which one can often spot the hand of powerful western industries.

To end this brief note, I would like to point out the inclusion of a paper dealing with the organisation of work – an aspect of the life of the Institute during the first ten years, with Brandi as director, that is often ignored.

Due to space restrictions, it was not possible to publish the whole paper on the sociology of work by Giancarlo Buzzanca and Patrizia Cinti 5, but the extract I have included is enough to explain why Brandi’s invention seventy years ago still constitutes the only organisational model that is truly functional in the field of conservation and restoration, going well beyond the different cultural traditions with which we come into contact from time to time.

GIUSEPPE BASILE

The progress of restoration culture. This attempt to keep a “low profile” is not entirely disinterested since, at a distance of so many years, Brandi’s position seems to be objectively unassailable (and in some cases, even recognised by authoritative figures in the English-speaking world) 3. The only exception (as far as I know, and obviously at a high level of commitment, but with the aim of burying Brandi’s theory and practice of restoration) is the slim volume recently published by Salvador Munoz Vinas, first in Spanish then in English, which once again demonstrates not merely a “total inability to grasp Brandi’s theory” in terms of its critical value at the highest level 4, but rather a prejudicial closure against the values of the humanist tradition, accused

1 The selection is a sort of practical demonstration, with examples, of the principles contained in the Teoria del restauro, as confirmation of the main characteristic of the Teoria – that is, the continuous interaction between theory and practice.

2 For this reason, the chosen texts have been gathered into three main groups corresponding to the “theoretical definition of restoration” (“General principles and problems”) and Brandi’s practical experience during the years when he ran the ICR (“Tangible experience of restoration”) and the critical activity concerning what was taking place in Italy in the field of protection and restoration, during the years 1945-1986 (“Diary and critique of restoration”).

3 Licia Borrelli Vld, El Elgin Marbles and the “pattina controversy” sixty years on (in Cesare Brandi and the conservation of our Cultural Heritage, cit., pp. 172-181)

4 Marco Ciatti, Appunti per un manuale di storia e di teoria del restauro. Notes for students, Florence, Edifr, 2009, pp. 440-441

From the publishing director, Prof. Giuseppe Basile, to the AISAR associates

Dear Associates and Friends,

It gives me pleasure to inform you that AISAR has set up a collaboration agreement with the publishing house Provenzani Editore. This means that from today AISAR is in a position to go ahead with an online publishing activity consisting of five sets of books and an “AISAR Prize”, as informedly communicated to the friends and colleagues who have generously offered their time to share this experience.

The sets of books are as follows:
- History of restoration and restorers (blue colour)
- Methodology and practices of restoration (grey colour)
- Technical dossiers (green)
- Protecting and restoring contemporary artworks (ochre)
- Protection and learning how to safeguard artworks (red)

The five sets will be directed respectively by Licia Borrelli Vlad, Giovanni Carbonara, Claudio Modena, Giuseppe Basile (ad interim), Almamaria Mignoosi Tantillo, the people in charge of publishing the AISAR Prize and the corresponding set of texts for university courses, will be Maricetta Di Natale (historical and artistic fields) and Franco Tomaselli (architectural field).

The Guarantor Committee will consist of: Enzo Bilaradello, Giovanni Carbonara, Maurizio Marabelli, Sandro Massa, Almamaria Mignoosi Tantillo, Claudio Modena, Franco Tomaselli, and Licia Borrelli Vlad.

The five first titles, one for each set, will be presented on January 6, on the occasion of the inauguration of Emilio Tadini’s Torre del Tempo, restored as a didactic activity by the students of Palermo’s Academy of Fine Arts, coordinat-ed and supervised by the writer of this letter.

The first five titles will be:
1) Paul Philippot, L’Estituto Centrale del Restauro, la sua organizzazione e le sue posizioni riguardo ai principali problemi del restauro dei dipinti, translated and edited by G. Basile (with the original unpublished French text).
3) Nalini Thakur, Indian Heritage Site Protection and Management: Hampi, Khajuraho, Hast Shilpa Heritage Village.

Titles soon to be published include: the English version of the volume by Brandi Il restauro. Teoria e pratica, edited by Michele Cordaro (also available in French and Spanish), bringing together Brandi’s writings which were not included in the Teoria del restauro; a work entitled Introduzione alla Teoria del restauro di Cesare Brandi; the proceedings of the conference on the state of Giotto’s main cycles of wall paintings, and his followers after the Scrovegni Chapel; the restoration of Giovanni Pisano’s statues in the Scrovegni Chapel; Restauro “passivo”: alcuni esempi; the state of conservation of the works held by the De Chirico Foundation; summaries of the seminars of the cycle “Quale salvaguardia per l’arte contemporanea?”, proceedings of the conference on the state of “Pittura murale in Italia negli anni ’30”, the work entitled Preven-zione: organisational tools and technical instruments (climatic micro-containers, maintenance tools and equipment, etc).

My best wishes to you all

Rome, 2 January 2013

Giuseppe Basile

Prior to this edition in English, a selection of Brandi’s writings on restoration, collected in 1994 by Michele Cordaro, was published in Italian under the title “Il restauro. Teoria e pratica”. Subsequently they were published with more or less the same title, first in French and then in Spanish. Since these writings date from after the publication of the Teoria del restauro, they were not included in it.

The current selection meets the basic criterion of the representative nature of the chosen “cases” at an international level, so as to obtain a more flexible instrument and, at the same time, a less dispersive one – without in any way diminishing the depth and complexity of Brandi’s contribution over so many years of uninterrupted concentration on the most pressing problems in the fields of conservation and restoration.

However, it’s not by chance that in recent years the rate of translation of Brandi’s Teoria into other languages is increasing, and involving cultural tradi-tions that are far removed from European humanistic values, but what is more important, setting up a useful dialogue on methodology or even forms of shar-ing and collaboration in the most advanced cases, not only at the operational level but also in terms of professional and vocational training: in China, Serbia, Egypt, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Peru, India.