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The Museum as a Tool for Social Education. The Experience of Palma Bucarelli (1945-1975) at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna

ABSTRACT:

The first chapter of the history of museum education in Italy was written by Palma Bucarelli (1910-1998), director of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome from 1940 to 1975. In the hands of this beautiful, educated and intelligent woman the museum became a school, daily open to the public of any age and of any social class, wishing to show the latest trends of Italian and International contemporary art. After the end of fascism, with the help of Lionello Venturi and Giulio Carlo Argan, Palma Bucarelli proposed new cultural communication strategies (educational exhibitions, conferences, video projections); for all these reasons Palma Bucarelli was awarded with the title of "First woman manager of culture in Italy".

In Italy, in order to carry out a research project on the role of the museum in the education of the young people from a historical point of view, it is vital to examine the contribution given by the person and the place that are unanimously considered by Italian museology to hold the absolute primacy in the field of museum education: Palma Bucarelli (1910-1998) and the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome.

This beautiful, well read, intelligent and extremely resourceful woman, who reconstructed the identity and the role of this prestigious cultural institution in the context of contemporary culture and society after World War II, in fact wrote the first chapter of the history of museum education in Italy, as we know it today. Palma Bucarelli was the first woman to run an Italian State museum. When she was appointed between 1940 and 1941 (initially on a temporary basis, to replace the previous Superintendent who had been called up), she was very young (only in her thirties, as she was born in 1910). Her biographical and intellectual experience gained impetus from the very debris and rubble of the war and the reconstructive enthusiasm of the Liberation. Indeed, Gabriella Bartoli

has already rightly reminded us of how Palma Bucarelli responded to the trials of the war period, when she managed to rescue many of the masterpieces belonging to the National Gallery of Modern Art, threatened by the bombings as well as by theft from the retreating Nazi army¹.

Shortly after the Liberation of Rome (June 4th, 1944), the National Gallery of Modern Art was the first Italian museum to reopen to the public, a distinction of which Superintendent Bucarelli was extremely proud. Nevertheless, something more had to be done, perhaps something that nobody had tried to do before with such ethical and moral conviction, with such a strong sense of what belonged to the public and of the relations between cultural institutions and society. Citizens had to be brought into the Gallery, to ensure that the museum had a public as wide and numerous as possible.

In Italy, in 1945-1946, the ideas of American pragmatism and pedagogic activism (from John Dewey onwards) were finally starting to circulate. In fact, during the period of Fascist cultural autarchy, these innovative currents of thought had been censored. In the American perspective, schools and cultural institutions (starting with museums) were centres of extraordinary intellectual vitality and creativity – both individual and at the same time social – and played a crucial role in building a democratic citizenship.

Bucarelli enthusiastically welcomed these new ideas, which she approached using two different channels. First, she established a close collaboration with the Allied Control Commission (ACC), which played an active role and worked closely in the various Roman public offices. Its sub-commissions were in fact organised in such a way that they could control the Italian reconstruction, including at the Ministry of Education, on which cultural heritage and museums depended (a specific Ministry of Cultural Heritage would be born in Italy only in 1975). In those years, school policy, and more generally, culture policy was geared, at least theoretically, towards a view of strongly promoting social mobility (which was denied by the pedagogical-educational classism typical of both

¹ Palma Bucarelli recorded the events in war-torn Rome during the Liberation period in her daily diary full of valuable information about the life of intellectuals in that difficult time (see BUCARELLI, P. (1977). *1944: cronaca di sei mesi*. L. Cantatore (Ed.), Roma: De Luca). The day after the Allies arrived in Rome, the same Bucarelli wrote an article for the journal *Il Mercurio*, directed by the writer Alba de Cespedes. In it, she recalled the perilous adventure of rescuing the most precious works of art from the National Gallery of Modern Art (see BUCARELLI, P. (1944). *Opere d'arte alla macchia*. *Mercurio*, I (1), now in ID. (2010). *Cronache indipendenti: arte a Roma fra 1945 e 1946*, L. Cantatore (Ed.), Roma: De Luca, 29-31.

Liberal and Fascist Italy). One of the main promoters of this was Carleton Washburne (1889-1968), one of Dewey's finest students and collaborators in Winnetka (Chicago), who arrived in Italy together with the Allied army and was a collaborator for Ministers Adolfo Omodeo, Guido De Ruggiero, Vincenzo Arangio Ruiz, Enrico Molè and Guido Gonella. This climate of democratic renaissance encouraged Bucarelli to give 'her' museum the status of a school; even more so when, finally, the great historian and art critic Lionello Venturi returned to Italy after a long period in exile (first in France, then in the United States) due to his antifascist ideas. He was among the few academics to refuse to swear allegiance to Mussolini's regime² and was one of the first academics to commit himself to the scientific, philological and historiographical enhancement of critical activity and study applied to contemporary art. Back in Rome, he recovered his university chair and relaunched his teachings among young people, by beginning to theorise the urgent need to build a firm relationship between art and public, as well as the professional and educational function of the museum. Bucarelli, who had not time to get to know him before the war, showed up with a letter with which she bluntly invited him to pay a visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art, making already a clear reference to the need to «clarify» and «publicise» the heritage of that museum. These two verbs would highlight her museological and museographic mission for the next 30 years of her supervision³. Bucarelli used to recall Venturi's cultural heritage especially as follows:

«Before Lionello Venturi» – she wrote – «an art historian who had worked on modern art would be considered an amateur or a “journalist” in the Italian academic and official field. Venturi, who was not only a great art historian, but also a great art theorist, demonstrated instead how one could not have a clear vision of the past if one did not have a clear notion of current problems. Those problems involve us more closely at an ideological and human level. Again, he demonstrated how a clear historical consciousness determines, in the present, a firm commitment to action»⁴.

² See BOATTI, G. (2001). *Preferirei di no: le storie dei dodici professori che si opposero a Mussolini*. Torino: Einaudi.

³ Bucarelli's letter to Venturi, dated on March 1st 1945, was published in CANTATORE, L. *Introduzione*. In BUCARELLI, *Cronache indipendenti*, cit., 9. See CARLENZI, E. (2015). Palma Bucarelli e gli apporti critici di Lionello Venturi e Giulio Carlo Argan alla Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna di Roma, *Bollettino Telematico dell'Arte*, 19th April (768), retrieved from <<http://www.bra.it/txt/a0/07/bra00768.html>> (last access 16.05.2016).

⁴ BUCARELLI, P. (1962). Ricordo di Lionello Venturi. AICA. *Bollettino della sezione italiana*, year I, issue I, July-September, (3).

This «firm commitment to action» of Venturi, and therefore also of Buccarelli, poured over into the great pedagogical and militant idea of the «museum-school». As contemporary art was worthy of theoretical and philological study and of entering university and school classrooms (where it would be fully accepted only many years later, due to delays and reluctance), thus it also deserved to be valued as much as possible by public museums and to be made available through special pedagogical, educational and didactic programmes. Where schools and universities had not yet arrived, the only State institution responsible for the promotion of contemporary art, the National Gallery of Modern Art, promptly intervened.

Venturi came back to Italy with a myriad of ideas and of bright and vibrant materials, suitable for linking the museum with the culture and the consciousness of all, at a time of deep and traumatic political, social and economic change. The biggest bet was to communicate abstract art, widely accused of Hermeticism, to the general public. In Venturi's opinion, Abstractism was in fact a truly democratic language⁵. The passion for this new current bonded him to his most brilliant student, Giulio Carlo Argan, and to Buccarelli herself, who would thereafter always maintain a privileged intellectual relationship with both Venturi and Argan. Therefore, Lionello Venturi was the main driving force behind Buccarelli's idea of establishing a permanent education programme within the walls of the National Gallery of Valle Giulia. The original educational exhibition had to be set out using reproductions of works and information panels about the authors, the cultural contexts, the historical periods, with overviews and explanations of the techniques used, and so on. This idea already matured and materialised in 1946 with the exhibition of the masterpieces from the XIX and XX centuries (*French Paintings of Today*, October 1946 - April 1947, in which Venturi held two conferences on the origins of contemporary painting, on April 8th and on May 8th, 1947). There ensued a great scandal brought about by the more conservative art lovers. It seemed a mockery to see in a museum framed colour photographs (brought back from the United States by Venturi) instead of original works of art. Yet, although unsophisticated and based on the good will of a few officials and employees who were not put off by the total lack of technical and economic means, it was a brilliant and pioneering way to inform, educate and raise awareness. Many realised this and rejoiced. Contemporary art was still taboo in schools and universities, however. These large photographs at

⁵ See CAMERLINGO, R. (2009) «Non ho mai lavorato per gli artisti o per i critici, ma solo per il pubblico»: storia della Didattica in Galleria (1945-1975). In M. Margozzi (Ed.), *P. Buccarelli: il Museo come Avanguardia*. Milano: Electa, 67.

the National Gallery of Modern Art, explained and commented, allowed the visitors to understand and evaluate them, as well as to develop their own personal impressions and taste. An authoritative witness testifies to the novelty and the revolutionary meaning of that event. This witness was the painter Piero Dorazio, who was not yet twenty at that time:

«In 1946, Lionello Venturi returned to Italy and presented at the National Gallery of Modern Art an exhibition of colour reproductions of the most representative works of the century, from the Impressionists to Chagall. This exhibition was an excellent chance for modern art in Italy because it was visited and discussed by all artists, from Palermo to Milan, and presented works and models which no one had ever supposed even existed»⁶.

Thus, both experts in the field and casual visitors immediately found that this initiative gave them the chance to renew and increase their figurative culture. In fact, if on the one hand it was all about opening up to young artists, giving them the chance to express themselves and set out their views, as well as about letting them become aware of the latest international experiences, on the other hand, for Bucarelli, there was the challenge of opening to the general public, to a potentially mass audience by providing the tools to understand the meaning of contemporary art. Paola Della Pergola, the Director of Galleria Borghese and not always sympathetic to Bucarelli's ideas, emphasised that «after 1945 a different audience regarding their numbers and quality began to attend the museum», and that they had to «adapt the museum to the need to accommodate a much more numerous and less culturally prepared audience, which was nevertheless difficult to do because of their simplicity»⁷.

While in Italy the reconstruction of a school that would finally be democratic, void of Fascist ideas, post-Gentilian and post-Bottaian, free and open to all (as stated by articles 33 and 34 of the Constitution) was under discussion, Bucarelli also wrote her Neorealist page. She dreamt about redeeming the humble (workers, simple clerks, students from every type of institution), welcoming them to 'her' museum, at times suited to their work and study needs, and about providing them with accessible educational tools which might let them become assiduous frequenters of that place, without getting bored or embarrassed and with no inferiority

⁶ Quoted in MARINI CLARELLI, M.V., Palma Bucarelli: il Museo come Avanguardia. In *P. Bucarelli: il Museo come Avanguardia*, cit., 9.

⁷ CAMERLINGO, (2009). «Non ho mai lavorato per gli artisti o per i critici, ma solo per il pubblico», cit., 64.

complexes. The Gallery, which had always been considered a haughty and distant temple, now had to become a centre for meetings and cultural exchanges, where everyone might satisfy their curiosity without being embarrassed about their ignorance. A reference point for all citizens.

The first experiment was a success so that «in the summer of 1949 Bucarelli decided to reserve an entire wing of the museum for “educational” events, allocating four halls for exhibitions and a lounge, equipped with a screen, chairs, a projector and an amplifier, for the meetings and conferences which, from 1951, were to be held every Sunday morning [...] to allow workers and students to attend»⁸.

In the *Art Bulletin of the Ministry of Education* of 1952, Bucarelli would draw up an initial account of this great little museographical revolution. Here, the Superintendent made clear reference to the American model (we know that the first educational exhibitions had been organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1935)⁹ and to the central role of an institution like UNESCO – and ICOM within it – in encouraging her idea of a «living, educational and, in the best sense, museum for art propaganda» as «the audience asks for no more than to be helped to understand»¹⁰. She understood that, as Mariastella Margozi acutely summarised, «“showing” was the main duty of her work in the museum and “knowing how to show” had to take on a practical form until it became a real applicative methodology»¹¹.

The idea for the living museum, the breeding ground for ideas where artists and public could meet one another, reached its full maturity during the 1950s. Meanwhile AICA, the International Association of Art Critics, was founded, with Bucarelli playing an active role in the association by stimulating discussions about museum education. After all, these are the years when Herbert Read’s ideas, as well as his volume, *Education through Art*, were brought to Italy by Giulio Carlo Argan, and translated and published by Adriano Olivetti’s Edizioni di Comunità in 1954. A great novelty, art documentary, was now being used alongside the didactic exhibition and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹ On the relations between Bucarelli and MoMA, see CAMPOLMI, I. (2011). “What is a Modern Arte Museum?”: Palma Bucarelli e la GNAM: il modello del MoMA in Italia. In L. Cantatore and G. Zagra (Eds.), *Palma Bucarelli a cento anni dalla nascita*. Roma: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 79-115.

¹⁰ BUCARELLI, P. (1952). Le manifestazioni didattiche nella Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna. *Bollettino d’arte del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione*, April-June, 185-186.

¹¹ MARGOZZI, M., Doni e depositi: la politica di Palma Bucarelli per accrescere le collezioni della Galleria nazionale d’arte moderna. In *P. Bucarelli: il Museo come Avanguardia*, cit., 27.

educational conference methods. Fanatical in support for the usefulness of the new medium aimed at making the public aware and part of the major issues of art (which, for her, *must* affect all closely), Palma herself ventured into the world of directing with four documentaries, which unfortunately cannot be traced nowadays, dedicated respectively to Scipio, Gino Rossi, Macchiaioli and Impressionism. The cinematographic language applied to art captivated and thrilled her at the same time, as it allowed her to reach immediately and with great success a larger and varied audience, even though they were physically distant.

The museum machine set up in a decade of Bucarelli's superintendence provided an inflexible and detailed event factory, as noted by Matilde Amaturò:

«Press conferences, press releases, annual agenda and reports disclosed to the press, photographic reproductions for exhibition panels, boards and panels specifically designed to collect informative material, black-and-white and colour slides, videos and films. The result is a supply of materials, made up of a variety of constituent parts, whose numerical quantity defines its weight and scope on the general system of the “speaking museum”, meant for an audience that must acknowledge and understand»¹².

Bucarelli at the same time maintained close relations with the State's highest authorities and with the most important politicians, while communicating her projects and informing about what she was doing and what she would like to continue to do in the future. Yet, all this required human as well as economic resources. In 1959-60, she managed to obtain from the Minister of Education, Joseph Medici (ex-Minister for the Budget), an important funding, extraordinary for its time: the sum of 300 million lire with which she was able to buy a Monet, a Modigliani and a Van Gogh. Shortly afterwards, she began to think about another of her great dreams, namely to extend the Gallery to adapt it to standards typical in other parts of the world, where museums were increasingly becoming meeting places for social aggregation based on scientific research, promotion, meetings and socialising. For this reason, first in the US and then in Rome, Palma met the great contemporary architect Walter Gropius, who more than any other considered the combination of art and school as playing a central role in requalifying contemporary society. This first hypothesis of entrusting

¹² AMATURÒ, M., Il pubblico di Palma Bucarelli: oltre la didattica. In *P. Bucarelli: il Museo come Avanguardia*, cit., 72.

Gropius with the expansion project had to be buried (the State apparatus was still unprepared and laggard towards such an ambitious idea); so, Bucarelli and Argan focused on the Neapolitan architect Luigi Cosenza, for whom, as Bucarelli points out, «the social and specifically educational aim of architecture was not only a theoretical but also a moral principle»¹³.

Bucarelli was experimenting hands-on with all the initiatives and services that are today regularly made available to the public by almost all the museums in the world, so much so that we have come to consider them obvious. This was not the case in the sixties when, still driven by the same spirit that had placed her at the helm of the National Gallery of Modern Art during World War II, Bucarelli was experimenting with the theory and practice of museography, proudly proclaiming her leadership in small, yet great initiatives:

«If, ultimately, it may be desirable for all museums to have, in addition to a scientific status, also a social one, then it is an absolute and primary objective for a Modern Art museum. It would not make any sense to carry out an intense didactic activity – such as the one carried out by the National Gallery for twenty-five years and which has inspired many Italian and foreign museums, if this teaching did not result in a more animated cultural and social life for the museum. The public must feel at ease in the museum, be able to study, discuss, perhaps even with the museum directors or with other artists, in a place where they can feel at home. The Gallery has been equipped with a small cafeteria, where you can enjoy a coffee or a non-alcoholic drink or smoke a cigarette; a garden full of sculptures has been opened, where you can get a breath of fresh air. However, we are still a long way off from our ambition for the museum-school which we aspire to. Much remains to be done before we can see our museums transformed into aesthetic centres of culture, into real centres that produce culture. How can we hope for museums to become schools in a country where schools themselves are considered to be like museum pieces?»¹⁴.

Indeed, the extension designed by Cosenza constituted the crowning achievement of Bucarelli's thirty-year supervision with the building of a new place: «We wanted to build an instrument to produce culture», as she

¹³ BUCARELLI, P. (1988). Ampliamento della Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna: progetto di Luigi Cosenza. In G. Cosenza and V. Bazzarini (Ed.), *Luigi Cosenza: l'ampliamento della GNAM ed altre architetture (1929-1975)*, Napoli: CLEAN, 14.

¹⁴ BUCARELLI, P. (1972). *Funzione didattica del museo d'arte moderna*. In *Il museo come esperienza sociale* (Atti del Convegno di studio), Roma 4-5-6 dicembre 1971, Roma: De Luca, 87.

explained later; «a museum-school must be the instrument of a method, and as methods are subject to change, space must be at the same time distinctive and capable of changing»¹⁵. Within a space conceived in this way, it must be possible to make art as well as criticism of art, but also music, literature, cinema, architecture and above all, at the same time, research and promotion of the activities. Unfortunately, these noble intentions were relegated to the limbo of utopia because of the shameful management of public affairs. We still have the words of Palma Bucarelli who, in 1972, shortly before retiring, twenty years after that first budget for museum education, summarised the situation in an account full of the moral significance that this woman had always attached to her work in the service of the State and citizens: «culture is education». I am «convinced about making the museum a manufacturer of culture», about «competing alongside the museum to build a democratic culture», about building «dynamic and direct contact between the museum and the general public from all walks of life and class, with the specific aim of capturing young people». Finally, «if teaching is useful to the public, it is equally useful and necessary to the museum, as it provides valuable guidance for establishing the right methodology to be adopted. Thus, it has been possible to verify through experimentation what has eventually become one of the fundamental principles of modern museography: if not geared towards teaching, then museography is reduced just to the trivial matter of furnishing the museum»¹⁶.

A lesson full of hope and expectation that Palma Bucarelli, at the end of her long life, never tired of pointing out to new generations of interlocutors, repeating an assertion made during her initial period of cultural and civil commitment when, from the pages of a newspaper in the elated and optimistic days of the Liberation, she proclaimed:

«I think that if all people, even those not naturally disposed to niceties by nature, were brought up in such a way that they could become really moved by some splashes of colour in a painting and devoted their spare time to this, then there would be less desire for wars around and perhaps even going about daily business would be less difficult»¹⁷.

¹⁵ BUCARELLI, (1972). *Funzione didattica del museo*, cit., 15, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85 and ff.

¹⁷ BUCARELLI, P. (1945). Mostre d'arte. *L'Indipendente*, 30th October, now in ID. (2010), *Cronache indipendenti*, cit., 65.

