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The Story told by Objects.

*Object/specific* prospects in  
material culture

## Introduction

Why do we collect objects? The reasons can be many and more than one often can contribute to fuel the collector's obsession. Pure aesthetic pleasure, acquiring an object of desire, an answer to a passion or to a specific interest, an accumulation mania, economic investment, search for social status ... endless reasons. But whatever those reasons are, those who collect do nothing but accumulate objects and the objects must then be reckoned with.

Italo Calvino wrote in one of his essays in the *Collezione di Sabbia*: "There is one who collects sand. He travels the world and when he reaches a beach, the banks of a river or a lake, a desert or a wasteland, he picks up a handful of sand and takes it away. On return, long shelves await him, with hundreds of bottles full of the fine gray sand of Lake Balaton, the white sand of the Gulf of Siam, the red silt that settles from the river Gambia in Senegal; they show their small range of soft colours (...) I ask myself, what's written in the sand of written words that I line up in my life, that sand which now appears to me so far away from the beaches and deserts of life. Maybe staring at the sand as sand, words as words, we can get closer to understanding how and to what extent in a crushed and eroded world I can still find foundation and model "(1).

There was and is no collector anywhere who has not asked himself what is the sense of collecting, what will be the fate of the collection. A necessary question, without which the accumulation of objects, even in the name of one or more precise themes, reduces the collection to a fetish, being the sum of fetishes. What then can we do with objects? Well, this was my first most important achievement: to see "fetishes" as "objects".

### **The discovery of the *object/specific***

There's a shadow line that separates the world of "ethnic" handicrafts and artefacts in "other" cultures, from that of contemporary art. Despite efforts, by anthropologists and ethnologists on the one hand and by art historians, critics and aestheticians on the other, to create dialogue between these objects on the same plane, the two worlds remain separate. One reason for this stalemate is ethnocentrism, inherent to the concept of Western art, that prevents us from getting rid of the primitivist vision of art.

The objects, artefacts of other cultures or contemporary works of art as they may be, are included - a fact underlined especially in recent American anthropology research - in the overall field of material culture. Hence there is no reason that justifies the lives of objects, till now separate, once they enter the collections of in museums whether ethnographic, archaeological, natural history or of modern and contemporary art; and in all those public or private institutions that, to some extent, deal with human history and creativity.

As now we will try to demonstrate, from an *object/specific* point of view of material culture, in new museum contexts objects and subjects establish a dialogue regardless of the distances, temporal, spatial and cultural, that characterised them in time and space. In the *object/specific* mode, objects from different cultures rather than competing with each other as to aesthetic qualities, interact thanks to their ethical and symbolic values.

In the dialogue between Western art, the art of other cultures, artefacts or works of art from all cultures and, in particular, shamanic art (of which the Foundation Sergio Poggianella can boast a large collection) have always been a source of inspiration for artists and shamans, a sort of site-specific forerunner of the object instead of the place. These objects, with different meanings and functions, are the vehicles transmitting the historical memory of the cultures that created them and of the cultures through which they passed after leaving the place of origin and reaching their momentary destination. A story told by

physical tangible objects, used for example in installations, as also by the intangible, materializing in the performance, temporarily or permanently, via photography, video or drawing.

The objects of material culture that live or lived at the site of production, or in museums, from the object/specific point of view, whenever they come into contact with individuals, start or continue their life stories. As noted by the anthropologist Sandra Dudley, in the last two or three decades much research has focused on the meaning and value of material objects that interlace with social life, and on their material rather than cultural aspects (2).

The *object/specific* prospect points in this direction, highlighting the fact that meanings are not intrinsic to the object, but must be interpreted starting from methods of use and from perception of the object by users. As pointed out by Christopher Tilley "The material forms are essential vehicles for self-realization (conscious or unconscious) of individual entities and groups, as they offer a fundamental non-discursive mode of communication.

We "talk" and "think" about ourselves through objects" (3). Each object then tells a particular story and the stories are all intertwined with the world experienced by individuals. Each subject in turn has a different perception of the object and this, as pointed out by Appadurai (4), causes objects of material culture to have a life of their own, social and therefore we emphasize also cultural, as is well demonstrated by the performances of the shamans.

If we consider for example a Mongolian shaman drum, a symbolic vehicle and a fine means of reaching the upper world or the underworld, to retrieve the souls of the sick, that drum does not tell the same story to the shaman, the sick or the family waiting for a speedy recovery or to other spectators (anthropologists or the curious) present at the event for quite different reasons. The narrative will suffer change in meaning, function and interpretation, even more significant, in the perception of the many categories of visitors to the museum where the drum, for various reasons, has arrived. If we analyze the drum from an object/specific angle, we soon see that the role played by the materiality of the object itself, if we agree with S. Dudley, would help us to understand "how people today experience and interact with objects, on physical, sensory or emotional levels, whether or not they are objects in a museum" (5).

Paraphernalia - including the drum, an object that plays a decisive role in the rituals of many Eurasian cultures - tell stories that may relate to the functional or ritual aspects of the object, or to its aesthetic, magical, esoteric or exotic values, and can tell us about their owners. As also about who took them for a museum, but the perception, interest, and, in essence, the social and cultural act of listening is different for each individual. The drum is an object, like the wings of a bird of prey sewn on the costume that the shaman uses as a vehicle in his ecstatic journey. To the sick and the family, along with the songs and invocations of the shaman and with different perceptions, the same drum evokes the presence of the spirits, while counting the time for healing. In the showcase of a museum, the story told by this object will differ for each subject, whose emotional, cognitive or rational reactions will depend on experience, knowledge and/or expertise.

Given that the impressions and interests that the object arouses in the anthropologist, are not the same as those aroused in the archaeologist, art historian, collector or in those who like to call themselves connoisseurs, an interdisciplinary approach is more than desirable, perhaps even by the public. The complexity of social relations triggered by the object, tangible or not, material or not, whether it is a handmade article, an ethnic artefact, a work of art, an installation, or any other artistic expression (and we can also include the landscape) the latter object, inherent to the world of shamans - constitutes an open dialogue, which can be better analyzed from the *object/specific* perspective, i.e. starting from the meanings of the object itself.

## NOTE

1. CALVINO ITALO, *Collezione di sabbia*, Garzanti (Saggi Blu), Milano, 1984.

2. DUDLEY SANDRA H., "Encountering a Chinese Horse", in Dudley Sandra H. (edited by), *Museum Object. Experiencing the properties of Things*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, p. 4.

3. TILLEY CHRIS, "Theoretical perspectives", in Tilley Chris, Keane Webb, Küchler Susanne, Rowlands Mike, Spyer Patricia (edited by), *Handbook of material culture*, Sage Publication Ltd, London, 2011, p. 7.

4. APPADURAI ARJUN (edited by), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

5. DUDLEY SANDRA H., op. cit., p. 4.

With the new object/specific binomial we do not intend to refer to the specific nature of the object, but rather to the fact that this has become the material centre of every story, communicating to all those it contacts its special history; and the term specific associated with it becomes, from a theoretical point of view, the agent who puts the object in close relationship with the subject. Between the two sides in the dialogue which follows, there is, for example, the *raison d'être* of the installation, the performance and as we have already mentioned, many other artistic forms of expression, which produce that suggestion so desired by Joseph Beuys - by many considered a shaman - so we all can be protagonists once at least and believe ourselves artists at the centre of the total work of art.

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