

**THE HYATT MUSEUM AND THE RESIN VENUSES.
ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURISM AND EDUTAINMENT
SOCIETY**

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Etruscans at the Hyatt

Milan is worldly well-known as one of the capitals of the fashion and every year it receives thousands and thousands of visitors interested in fashion and in shopping related to it. Despite the monumental treasures of the town and the rhetorical discourse about the new cultural trends of the rich “slow tourism”, this kind of mobility appears to be principally business-oriented. To receive these rich tourist and business fluxes with dignity, in the very centre of the town a new impressively wealthy hotel has been recently built. This hotel belongs to the Hyatt chain, the famous international organisation specialized in luxury leisure. When entering its hall, just in front of the brightening golden-style doors, you may admire two large glass show-cases with five huge ancient vases. At the first glance they appear to be quite interesting: red and black figures, with not so usual shape. Probably, an Etruscan work inspired by Greek artisans: a little museum for the pleasure of the guests.

This little exhibition seems apt to represent the contemporary condition of the global mobility: ancient vases show the complex cultural interrelations existing in the ancient world as a symbol of the present complex society strongly embedded in today’s global processes. The choice of Etruscan vases is even more interesting: Etruscan society was particularly elegant, fashion-oriented and devoted to endless dinners, as its archaeological remains clearly show. Its culture was probably more sophisticated and certainly more mysterious and fascinating than the Greek and Roman ones, of which we know much more. Moreover, it was a “minor” society, oppressed

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and obscured by the Roman one. What's better for an international firm willing to give a message at the same time "politically correct" and clearly embedded in the world of wealth, fashion and exclusivity, to which the rich guests of the hotel belong or aspire to become part?² We are facing a typical contemporary consumption of the antiquity. An archaeological object is not used because it tells us something of its ancient world, but to create a show of the present. In this case this mechanism is quite evident: the archaeological sign is only a piece of the past, used not as a part of a puzzle, but as something embodying the idea itself of the past. It is the History, the Tradition: a magnificent mirror where the modern traveller can regard himself both as a part and an arrival point of a long-standing process that shows continuity and gives identity. There is no difference between the members of the ancient elites, rich, elegant, banquet-oriented and so sophisticated as to understand the values of masterworks imported from abroad, and the members of the modern upper class, wealth, global-travellers, fashion-oriented and so smart as to appreciate the beauty of ancient Etruscan vases. But the designer who conceived this luxurious museum-style hall was probably smarter than hotel's guests and surely understood one of the cultural and psychological trends of modern society. The vases are fake and none of the objects exhibited is a real archaeological remain. They seem to be true archaeological pieces, but they are not. This helps us to understand both the use of antiquity in modern society and the frailty of the contemporary idea of authenticity: two questions deeply involved in today's archaeological tourism.

Sons of Alcaeus

Why had one to exhibit copies or fakes? The Hyatt case is quite interesting. In this context it was clearly a choice, not a question of money. Ancient vases, even original, are often much less expensive than the bill of an interior designer. The fact is that to exhibit an original is not important and, in this case, it was not even the aim. The

² We could single out a Hyatt global standard, based on luxury and consumption of status-symbols: this style is clearly present in Milan, a town that in the modern tourist imaginary is mythically constructed on these elements. According to the *Europe on a shoestring*, Lonely Planet, Footscray, Oakland, London 2005, "You almost need to be among its worshipped modelling or football elite to afford all Milan offers".

hotel's owners wished to give an impression, not a lesson. Antiquity was used in order to create a sensation and an image of tradition and respect of tradition, exclusiveness and attention to exclusiveness. They chose an archaeological object because it usually gives an image of antiquity and rarity, but they need only this meaning, not the object itself: its image was enough. In this perspective we are completely inside the modern society of the appearance, where people and things are important, or even exist, only if they appear and vehiculate a message oriented to the basic values of consumption. In this perspective, the antiquity is only a *griffe*, a strong reliable brand that helps to sell and, before, to construct identity³.

Paradoxically, the fakes vases of the Hyatt have the same meaning as the vases and objects that Alcaeus and the members of his *etairia* could admire in the hall of their banquets (fr. 140 Voigt). When they watched them together, appreciated them and understood their value, they realized to be part of the same cultural, social and political group. The Hyatt guests, passing between the fake vases, feel to be part of a special elite group able to understand the old Western art. At the same time, despite their inability to realize the fake nature of the objects exposed, they unconsciously testify their belonging to the contemporary global society of mass-consumption, dominated by media and digital devices.

In such a world "originality" has a weak and relative meaning. Firstly, all objects that construct the modern social value not only can be reproduced, but they have to be. Only what is massively reproduced has a global social value and can define the modern idea of exclusiveness. Secondly, and with a stronger connection with the present society, many objects can be reproduced in a way that, conceptually, makes them equivalent to the original: a digital copy is another original⁴. We must not forget the power of virtuality, although

³ I have already studied the case of a huge shopping centre in the area of Rome, "Castel Romano Outlet", whose entrance, with gate, walls and towers, is built in an ancient Roman style. An advertising leaflet explains: "It is a real ancient town with arches, columns and walls and more than 90 boutiques. It would be as walking among palaces of Imperial Rome in the middle of shops of more exclusive brands". Shopping and archaeological tourism live together: shopping centres are today important spaces of our life and contribute to create our identity and our tradition as archaeological sites and museums were used to do. See M. Melotti, *Mediterraneo tra miti e turismo. Per una sociologia del turismo archeologico*, Cuem, Milano 2007, pp. 186-195.

⁴ The present situation is rather far from the serial reproduction described by Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*,

it is something to which we are well accustomed: the images created by movies, television and other media are thought as being authentic. What is shown exists and is real because it is shown. This habit to the large-scale digital and virtual reproductions has deeply changed our way of seeing and thinking the objects, the ancient ones not by any way excluded.

In the Hyatt case this habit to the reproduction and consumption of copies – which also means lack of interest for the authentic things – is embedded in another habit, which helps us to understand another aspect of archaeological tourism: the importance of authority. The hotel exhibits its fake vases without any label, but inside to large museum-style glass show-cases. It is the case that makes the vases authentic or, at least, gives them an archaeological aspect. If exposed on normal tables and without show-cases, they would appear nothing but design objects. The glass of the case introduces a psychological and temporal barrier between the consumers and the object, gives authority to it and introduces it into the visual immaterial world of “museality”. This barrier makes it a precious masterwork and, thanks to its ancient aspect, makes it an archaeological remain.

This is an exemplar process of authority-making. The show-case marks a strong discontinuity in the space and defines another world, with its own temporal and cultural status. This is an easy but powerful action, able to transform the relationships between the objects and their visual consumers. These easily accept the authoritative effect, since they are used to accept authority. The show-case presents its space as a special one and involves the visual consumers in a museum-like cultural experience. The source of the power is by no way evident and the decision-maker who had created the case is indefinable: who decided that these objects were ancient, precious or special? Nobody knows, as nobody usually can answer such questions for real museums, or even raise them, but the case does

1936 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1979), and the “staged authenticity” theorized by Dean MacCannell, *The tourist. A new Theory of the Leisure Class*, Schocken Books, New York 1976 (University of California Press, Los Angeles 1999). Digital copies have changed the commune concept and perception of authenticity: it is no more necessary to recreate authenticity with inauthentic performances; copies are accepted and no more necessarily negated, often are requested and even staged in the tourist experience. The virtual reconstruction, although perceived as modern, is real and appears to be authentic and authoritative.

exist and marks a special sign that makes its contents special. It is the tradition that defines authority. Values are values because are presented and transmitted as such. You have only to accept them or to refuse the system. Enough curiously, such a system is not so far from that, typical of face-to-face societies, which created the images depicted on the vases (if authentic, of course): heroes are heroes because they have been “told” to be such; kings are kings because they are children of kings; gods are gods because they are worshipped as gods. The vase in the cage is an icon and must be worshipped as such. The only difference is that in our society there is an enormous lot of icons and meaningful signs and their power becomes much more relative (even if the Pope does not seem to appreciate it too much).

The consciousness of relativity accompany us everywhere and defines the “distract gaze” that characterizes our experiences of consumption, from shopping to cultural tourism⁵. The guest, when enters the pseudo-museum space of the hotel and looks at the vases in a distract manner, does archaeological tourism, although in the sophisticated and unconscious way that is typical of our ages.

Similarly, what about the real ancient Greek wall that you may see in the ground-floor of the elegant Divani Hotel in Athens? The hotel is built on it and enwraps the ancient structure. This is almost a visual metaphor of the violent relationship existing between antiquity and modernity and recalls us the use of the former by the latter. The original ancient remains act as luxurious interior-design exactly as the fake vases of the Hyatt do, despite the many centuries that separate them.

The marble and the resin

The example of this luxurious hotel in Milan is not unique. We might define a whole system based on such commixtures: mobility seems tourism, edutainment seems archaeology, hotels seem museums, and originals and fakes live together without any

⁵ We could consider such a “distract gaze” a new expression in the contemporary context of the *blasé* metropolitan man described by G. Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, in K. Bucher, F. Ratzel, G. v. Mayr, H. Waentig, G. Simmel, Th. Petermann, D. Schäfer, *Die Großstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung, Zahn & Jaensche*, Dresden 1903.

distinction⁶. The Tourism Authority of Corfu has recently presented an inviting advertisement aimed at promoting its tourism with particular attention to cultural and submarine tourism. A beautiful image shows the blue waters of the island with a scuba-diver among a lot of fish and near an impressive and crusted piece of an ancient Greek statue. Sea, amusement and archaeology. What more? But, also in this case, the statue was a fake one, made of resin, accurately deposited at the bottom of the sea in order to create a romantic and mysterious image. The authenticity is not important: people need impressions and feelings. Where is the scandal? Also our image of antiquity is largely based on fake images: the idea of a “white” classic culture, made of virgin marbles, derives from Winckelmann’s misconceptions inherited by the racist society of the colonial age; and the majority of ancient Greek masterworks are copies, often serially made by the Romans, who, exactly as occurs in the Hyatt hotel, desired to decorate their public spaces and private houses with icons and signs showing their wealth, culture and respect for the past. Is there a real difference between a modern statue made of resin and a Roman one made of marble, when both of them probably derive from an ancient Greek original made of bronze?

People usually deride the popular gentrified tradition of positioning Milo’s Venuses made of resins in gardens, but do not realize that the conceptual distance between these copies and the sacred marble original in the Louvre is not greater than that between many Roman statues exhibited and worshipped as icons in many world-class museums and their lost bronze Greek originals. In fact, although different, both cases show the same mass-consumption use of an iconic model accompanied by a scarce awareness of authenticity.

In Tarquinia, a little town in central Italy founded by the Etruscans and now enlisted in the Unesco World Heritage for its important archaeological remains, there is an artisan who defines himself as “the last Etruscan”. This man, who used to do unauthorized archaeological excavations and sell real Etruscan objects to museums, is able to create fake Etruscan objects with sophisticated techniques and has also sold some of his home-made vases as “authentic” Etruscan remains. They are not real copies, because they

⁶ On such problems connected with authenticity in archaeological tourism see M. Melotti, *Mediterraneo tra miti e turismo. Per una sociologia del turismo archeologico*, Milano, Cuem 2007.

were originally reinvented, but, at the same time, they are not originals, at least according to the archaeological standards. Nevertheless, many museums expose his new vases as ancient ones. In this case the authority of the museums gives authenticity to the objects and what had to be only edutainment becomes archaeological tourism. But, because this process depends on authority, the same effect cannot be obtained always and everywhere. The same artisan bought an old cave, probably an Etruscan mine, and has begun to display there not only some of his "original" vases – not different from those sold to the museums – but also seven depicted tombs, excavated in the rocks, which imitate the original Etruscan ones (some of which are not so far). However, this museum, enlisted in the what-to-see list of many guide-books, is usually visited as an edutainment-park: only a few visitors think to be in a real necropolis and many tourists avoid visiting it, for they judge it an expression of contemporary kitsch. The feeble authority of the founder is not able to give it the same level of credibility as the Etruscan vases made by him exposed in the "official" museums or even the vases of the Hyatt hotel.

There remains a problem that raise some other little questions: can people really distinguish an original from a copy? How many times we worship fakes in museums? And, finally, is it really important to distinguish originals from copies? The new media, from movies to tv-documentaries, show that knowledge and sensations can be diffused also in this virtual way. Etruscan objects showed in a tv-documentary have a virtual consistence that make them no less original or no more fake than the vases displayed in the fake necropolis of Tarquinia.

The archaeological tourism at the prehistoric caves of Lascaux and Altamira clearly show that people practise tourism, even archaeological tourism, with an acceptable degree of leisure and acquisition of knowledge, regardless of the authenticity of what they see. Since 1983 in Lascaux every year 300,000 tourists visit Lascaux II, i.e. a copy in concrete of the original cave, which was closed to further visits to preserve it from damage. The reconstruction is at only 200 metres from the original cave and this creates a peculiar system where Disneyzation and archaeology appear to be closely interrelated. In the same way, in Altamira the tourists normally visit the Neocueva, a resin copy of the original cave built in a little museum near the original cave, while the "real" visit is reserved to few scholars and

qualified visitors⁷. The local authority assures that in the new cave (which is at 300 meters from the site) temperature, humidity and sonority are the same of the copy: they aimed at creating a complete virtual experience that could reproduce also the concrete sensation of the archaeological visit, correctly conceived as a physical experience. This shows the awareness by practitioners of archaeological tourism that an archaeological and a tourist experience need feelings, sensations and atmosphere, as in any other edutainment and leisure experience, and that authenticity is connected more with such an immaterial feelings than with real objects.

But can we still speak of archaeological tourism, when its aim is not a real archaeological object? People do not refuse the visit, though it is conceptually equivalent to the fake Etruscan tombs, and do not seem to dislike it. In this case the museum context assures credibility and authority (without presenting the caves as original) and assures both cultural content and leisure that are the aim of this kind of new slow-tourism, devoted to the consumption of symbols of culture.

In Paestum, the little town in Southern Italy well-known for its ancient Greek (and well preserved) temples, the local authority intends to build a Greek temple made of stone and concrete. In this case there is not an archaeological motive of defence and tuition of ancient remains, but only a political purpose of wasting public money through the exploitation of the new trends of cultural tourism interconnecting edutainment and archaeology. But the very fact that somebody could project such an absurd thing shows that it could seem part of an international trend.

In effect, in Luxor the archaeological authority is building a new museum in ancient Egyptian style and this initiative has been motivated with the respect due to that sensitive archaeological context. But such a policy is to be framed in a larger process of Disneyzation of archaeology, sites and museums, which has much to do with the construction of an edutainment society where leisure, culture and tourism are considered only industries and tourists are regarded as precious resources to flatter and spoil.

⁷ A web site devoted to Altamira (www.cantabriajoven.com/cuevas/altamira) explains that "it is possible to visit the exact copy whose fidelity and quality will satisfy the interest of visitors". In the new digital society technical precision is an aesthetic value and can become something worthy of mobility.

Authenticity and eco-tourism

This trend is not new. In 1897 the emperor William II rebuilt a Roman fortress, Saalburg, on the ancient German *limes* on the basis of some archaeological remains. In the “Roman” fortress, curiously too similar to the Prussian barracks of that time, some people dressed in Roman-style played old roles to give an idea of Roman society. The fortress was officially opened to public with a pompous ceremony in the 1900. It was an immediate great tourist success. Private manufactories used the image of the fortress to create and sell a lot of products, from postcards to soaps, mineral water, cigars and even wood souvenirs “made of Roman oaks”. Today Saalburg remains an important tourist destination (with about 200.000 visitors every year), not only for the traditional school tourism, but also for the new sophisticated eco-tourism of trekking along the ancient *limes*. These paths, presented also in book-guides, offer an interesting mix of nature and archaeology⁸. Travellers pass by a lot of archaeological sites, along a route (originally 550 km long) which in 2005 was enlisted in the Unesco World Heritage. But many of these “ruins” have been only recently built and, like Saalburg, show the modern German approach to Roman culture and archaeology, characterized by an ideological exaltation of a supposed political continuity based on a similar idea of power and army’s role⁹. Of course, the idea that Unesco could insert modern reconstructions in the World Heritage List has generated a lively debate¹⁰. But Saalburg is only one of the examples of this kind of archaeological edutainment that have been recently implemented.

These paths deserve attention also for another reason: they often follow a dig in the earth or, better, a lost wall. So, this archaeological tourism is not based on really existing objects or monuments, but on their past, or even only supposed, presence. It is, therefore, a sort of “tourism of nothing”, which however helps us to clarify the meaning of this practice. Often this kind of tourism follows walls, as in Berlin, and this shows, firstly, that archaeological tourism

⁸ See the guidebook by Andreas Thiel, *Wege am Limes. 55 Ausflüge in die Römerzeit*, Theiss, Stuttgart 2005.

⁹ There are several sites reconstructed. Among them the *castrum Vetoniana* near Eichstätt, rebuilt between 1884 and 1900; the archaeological park of Xanten, inaugurated in 1977; and Kastell Pfünz, reconstructed in the 1986.

¹⁰ See the “unsolicited activity report” on Unesco written by Wolfgang Kemp in “Merkur” (December 2005).

needs no real objects, but only icons, and, secondly, that it requires barriers, at least invisible, and walls or, better, shadows of walls that represent strong iconic barriers. Walls and barriers are markers of discontinuity that visualize tourism as a rite of passage and archaeological tourism as a research of temporal distinction useful to define one's own identity.

In this perspective I could recall the interesting "Vias Augustas" project in Portugal and Spain, which has recently restored ancient Roman roads to create new paths for eco-cultural tourism¹¹. Here we have not shadows of ruins or ruins rebuilt, but real ancient structures revitalised in their original meaning by modern consumption. Of course, the visit of the ancient path is a mere pretext to justify the mobility with cultural reasons, as happens with festivals or events, but the real existence in this case of an archaeological content enwraps the visit in a sophisticated kind of edutainment. The archaeological consistence of the road accompanies the travellers during their journey: they remain travellers without becoming visitors, as often occurs for visits to museums and sites. The archaeological object, the mere stone, is used and not abused. Nevertheless the whole experience remains closely connected with modernity and its cultural trends. The ancient Roman highway is today only a little trekking road that receives slow-tourists arriving with the modern fast highways.

The project promotes an important approach to the historical heritage, both in its archaeological components (Roman roads and monuments of every age along them) and in its immaterial aspect (local traditions and slow-culture of the areas). At the same time the project is able to renovate - among scholars and travellers - a reflection on the meaning of mobility in its diachronic perspective. Ancient migrants, Roman soldiers, Middle Age pilgrims, modern country-men and contemporary eco-tourists are only different expressions of a same great process. The tourism along ancient roads revitalizes an historical practice of journey by a sophisticated post-modern experience that is the complex result of a mixture of various forces: the refusal of modernity with its culture (through ecological-correct practices of journey and escape); the acceptance of the new slow-tourism as trendy and fashionable practice capable to give a solid

¹¹ The project, which was sustained by the EU Interreg III A and implemented, among the others, by the University of Santiago de Compostela and the Catholic University of Viseu, aims at restoring 400 km of the Roman route XVII and 350 km of the route XVIII.

cultural basis to tourism; and the new mass-interest toward archaeology and cultural tradition as instruments able to assure historical identity. But will this be enough to avoid the arrival of fake vases and Roman-style merchandising along the roads? Of course post-modernity will arrive with its whole standard and global package that irritates the vestals of the respect of history, archaeology and traditions, but this will assure the lively presence of the past in our future.