Étude sur le mouvement d’art décoratif en Allemagne

Imprimerie Haefeli et Cie, La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1912

L’Étude est le premier livre publié par Le Corbusier, encore sous le nom de Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, mais, à l’inverse de ce qui vint plus tard, il s’agit d’un ouvrage qui ne connut pas le succès immédiat. La recherche et la publication de cet ouvrage sont l’œuvre de la Scuola d’Arte de La Chaux-de-Fonds, où Jeanneret a été formé. L’Eplattenier, son professeur, le promeut pour un voyage en Allemagne pour étudier les progrès dans le domaine des arts décoratifs et industriels et rédiger un rapport sur l’urbanisme, La Construction des villes, mai completé.

Ancora oggi questo rapporto esauriente ma sintetico sullo stato delle arti applicate, sulle relazioni tra arti visive e industria e sull’insegnamento dell’arte in Germania prima della Prima Guerra Mondiale, costituisce un documento prezioso sulla nascita del design moderno.

I due capitoli centrali descrivono le istituzioni pubbliche e private impegnate a far progredire la produzione tedesca, negli aspetti tecnici e in quelli estetici, e le città giardino. Le une e le altre mettono l’arte al servizio della speculazione, ma riescono per la causa più nobile di diffonderla. Delle scuole d’arte sono descritti gli spazi, i programmi di studio e il criterio pedagogico di responsabilizzare gli studenti offrendo massima libertà di ricerca. L’attenzione per la didattica è legata al compito che la Scuola d’Arte, interessata allora da un processo di rinnovamento animato da L’Eplattenier, aveva: aiutare la gioielleria e la decorazione a modernizzarsi e a diventare un elemento fondamentale dell’urbanistica di La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Le Considerazioni generali di apertura e nelle Considerazioni finali, si riconosce lo spirito provocatore che sarà la cifra degli scritti successivi (la Rivoluzione francese è definita disastrosa per l’arte per aver distrutto la raffinatezza aristocratica). Il successo industriale tedesco è attribuito a capacità tecniche e organizzative applicate a conquiste estetiche arrivate soprattutto dalla Francia, di cui l’autore sostiene l’indiscusso primato nel gusto. Per collocare l’Étude rispetto alla formazione di Le Corbusier è utile leggerlo insieme ai carnets dei Voyages d’Allemagne, ritrovati solo nel 1993.

Giuseppina Scavuzzo

2 L’art décoratif d’aujourd’hui, G. Cés & Cie, Parigi 1925.
3 In Architecture, la leçon de Rome, in L’Esprit Nouveau n. 14, 1922, Santa Maria in Cosmedin, a Roma, è definita «ingranaggio perfetto di meccanica spirituale».
The Étude is the first book published by Le Corbusier, under his given name of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, but it is one of his lesser known writings. The School of Art in La Chaux-de-Fonds, where he was educated, requested and funded the study and its publication. His teacher, L'Eplattenier, promoted the journey of his pupil in Germany to study progress in the field of decorative and industrial arts and to write a study on city planning, La Construction des villes, which was never completed.

Today, this exhaustive yet concise report on the German decorative arts movement before World War I is still an important document about the emergence of modern design. The two central chapters describe the institutions, public and private, which sustained the program of technical and aesthetic reform in German industrial production and the garden cities. Institutions and cities "put art at the service of speculation" but also serve the nobler cause of spreading art. These chapters also describe the German schools of art, the quality of their spaces, and the study programs and the teaching method they employed to empower students by giving them maximum freedom to pursue their research.

The attention given to the educational system is explained by the identity of the client of the study, the School of Art, which was engaged in a process of renewal driven by L'Eplattenier. Also the crucial role of artists in industrial development, claimed by Jeanneret, reflects the influence of his mentor, who was working to innovate the regional watch industry.

In the introductory notes to the text and in the final considerations, we can recognize the provocative spirit that will be the feature of Le Corbusier's successive writings (e.g. he defined the French Revolution as a disaster for art because it destroyed the elegance of aristocratic forms). The German industrial success is attributed to technical and organizational skills, applied to aesthetic achievements which originated in France. The author claims that France is indisputably dominant with regards to matters of taste.

In order to place the Étude in the formative education of Le Corbusier, it is useful to read it together with the Carnets of Voyages d'Allemagne, which was found in 1993. The Carnets contain the preparatory notes of the Étude and integrate, with the spontaneity of a notebook, what is written in the form of objective relationship. So we can reconstruct a moment full of contradictions (the interest for jewelry and decoration will be denied in L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui, meetings with key figures, and influences which were metabolised so rapidly it is difficult to identify their relevance (e.g. the artistic direction of Behrens on all the AEG products seemed to impress Le Corbusier, but his comment on Behrens's architecture is lukewarm). The Étude shows the genesis of Le Corbusier's idea of modernity. Here we can recognize the social implications of it, its relationship with tradition (identified with the French culture in opposition to the German one) and the relationship between art and machine.

The efficient German machine attracts the young Charles-Edouard, but the coldness with which he describes it betrays his dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction will take him, after his travels in Germany, to undertake the journey to the East. After the lesson of Athens and the mystery of Istanbul, he will search for the precision of a "spiritual mechanics".

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