

## Comment

SCIENCE CENTRES AROUND THE WORLD SEE UNREST FOR ART AND SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

# Arts and science under the sign of Leonardo. The case of the National Museum of Science and Technology ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ of Milan

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*ABSTRACT: Drawing on the example of Leonardo da Vinci, who was able to combine arts and science in his work, the National Museum of Science and Technology of Milan has always pursued the blending and the dialogue of humanistic and scientific knowledge. It has employed this approach in all of its activities, from the set design of exhibition departments to the acquisition of collections and, more recently, in the dialogue with the public. Now more than ever, following a renewal path for the Museum, these guidelines are being subject to research to achieve a new and more up-to-date interpretation.*

When Guido Ucelli, a Milanese industrialist and the founder of the Museum in 1953, launched the strategic development plan for this Institution, he had a very clear vision from the outset: a modern Museum of Science that could overcome the traditional division between scientific knowledge and humanistic culture and that should have been able to let Arts and Science dialogue, live together and complement each other.

This is why the figure of Leonardo was and is still today an evident case of merger of different knowledge, immediately become the leading theme of the Museum. The Gallery exhibiting the models of the machines built in 1953 based on the interpretation of his designs displays real artistic handicraft items, not only technical-didactic creations. Through the charm of the models, the designs and the studies of Leonardo became more accessible and understandable by the general public and, in the 50s, at the time of their building, they undoubtedly were innovative instruments for the dissemination of his work and way of thinking.

The educational function, but also the evocative atmosphere of the Gallery is the pivotal element around which the heritage of the Museum was built over the years. According to the vision of Guido Ucelli and his collaborators, in the following years the historical collections were arranged as an ideal interpretation and continuation of the multifaceted work by Leonardo. First of all by reasserting the continuity of Arts and Science with an important strategic agreement signed in 1952 with the Superintendency for Artistic Heritage, at that time managed by Fernanda Wittgens. Thanks to this agreement, the Museum acquired a considerable and valuable set of ripped frescoes coming from the storehouse of the Pinacoteca di Brera and pertaining to Leonardesque masters such as Bernardino Luini, many of which are still exhibited. It was the realization of a successful union of Leonardesque models, Lombard frescoes and the appeal of the museum, not a modern building, but an Olivetan monastery of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, restored after the damage caused by the war, having served as barracks for a century and a half.

The museum also became a lively centre for debate and exchange of ideas even thanks to two large halls which still preserve today the atmosphere of their monastic purpose: since the 50s, they have been the venue for conferences, concerts and any other type of events having the purpose of highlighting the role of the Museum as a place for meeting and debate. On one side, the *Sala delle Colonne*, the old Renaissance library, with three aisles and a vaulted roof, and on the other side, the *Sala del Cenacolo*, a 18<sup>th</sup>-century dining hall, one of the few entirely frescoed late baroque halls still preserved in Milan, with trompe l'oeils by Giuseppe Castelli and the large fresco depicting the *Wedding Feast at Cana* by Pietro Gilardi.

The galleries of the monastery, where it is not easy to set up an exhibition given their long and narrow shape, got busy in the late 50s with technical and industrial machinery, from the furnaces of the metallurgy department to the large thermoelectric power station “Regina Margherita” of the company Franco Tosi of Legnano, a machine of considerable beauty and harmony of shapes, exhibited at the entrance of the Museum in 1958. At the same time, the steam machine by Horn, exhibited in the basement in the ‘prime movers’ department, represented the taste of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century design, according to which large industrial machines were enhanced by elements inspired from classical arts, in this case a large cast iron Doric column inserted in the load-bearing structure.

The same years saw a better definition of the scientific but also technical vocation of the new departments, from Clock-making to Musical Instruments, which aimed not only at displaying historical items, but also at illustrating the handicraft context of quality and mastery where many items came from. This is the underlying concept for two masterpieces of the Museum, where arts and technique merge: the reconstruction of two craftsman’s workshops, the one of clockmakers Bertolla of Trento and the one of Milanese lute-makers Bisiach, where the charm of the working instruments merges with the values of high technical mastery these workshops convey and with the evocative power of the setting.

The importance of the Arts conceived and used in the first years of the Museum lies both in the educational and ethical values they carry with them when they create or enrich an evocative scenario where the items in the technical collections are enhanced by affinity or contrast. This is why it is usually the charm of the past, of the ancient times, to drive the choices in the settings and the designs of a museum. The furniture of the Museum, from chairs to shelves and tops, is created with a vintage taste based on the previous monastic purpose of the building. Even the old pharmacy of the monastery was reconstructed with cabinets, pots and also stuffed crocodiles.

The close dialogue between Arts and Science in the first five years of the Museum was also supported by the donation, in 1958, of the important art collection of textile industrialist Guido Rossi, comprising paintings and sculptures of the Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with masterpieces such as *La Processione* (“The Procession”) by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo and *I Fidanzati* (“The Lovers”) by Silvestro Lega. This apparently unusual donation is explained by the friendship between Rossi and Ucelli, but also by the will to support the union between Arts and Industry which was properly embodied by the Lombard entrepreneurship in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Guido Rossi was not the only one to donate and over a few years the Museum received other two art collections: the Collezione Capitini comprising essentially Tuscan paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including two important works by Giovanni Fattori, and the collection of engineer Francesco Mauro which includes a number of Japanese art items, from tsubas, the hand guards of a Japanese sword, to netsukes, small sculptures used on kimonos.

Although the Renaissance charm of the Monastery of San Vittore was always an inspiration for many of the history-inspired choices in the museum settings, the institution has also believed in the ability of contemporary arts of creating a link to the historical collections and the industrial heritage. This is the case of the important commission given in 1958 to Giò and Arnaldo Pomodoro to make an environmental sculpture devoted to the history of copper to be included in the new metallurgy department inaugurated in that year. The work is made up of twelve panels, the first ten by Giò and the last two by Arnaldo, which fit into the section of the Gallery, creating a large arch under which visitors have to pass still today. Likewise, a few years later, the frieze by sculptor Marcello Mascherini portraying the Myth of the Argonauts was put back in the reception room of the fore bridge of the transatlantic liner Conte Biancamano, reconstructed in the Aeronaval Pavilion and turned into a congress hall.

In the past few years the ideals of union, contamination and dialogue between Arts and Science expressed by the founders of the Museum are present more than ever in the activities and in the projects for the public. This is the case of an important collaboration launched in 2007 and still ongoing between the Museum and French artist Patrick Mimran, who exhibits in the cloisters his Billboards, huge panels usually located on the external or internal walls of public spaces used to launch a debate on arts, science and technology through lapidary sentences.

Since 1953 both old and contemporary arts have always been an instrument through which the Museum searched for new and evocative settings, and now arts have ever more frequently become an occasion to spur the debate and the discussion among the public. This complements the ever more countless educational activities, giving substance to the idea of a museum to be, aside from a container of historical items, a place for meeting and dialogue.

*Translated by Massimo Caregnato*

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