

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION FOR A DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

*Romolo CONTINENZA**

ABSTRACT

Born in the context of the dissemination of environmental heritage, Heritage Interpretation (HI) was subsequently extended to include cultural heritage and has been widely disseminated and internationally recognized. The contribution aims to briefly show the reasons, the history, the principles and methods of the discipline, by highlighting the most recent developments at international level and by showcasing applications carried out in Italy and abroad.

Keywords: Intangible assets, Translation, Interpretation, Multiculturalism, Globalisation

1. Foreword

Museums, monuments, sites of historical, environmental or archaeological interest are typically equipped with comprehensive and well-illustrated iconographic and illustrative systems. However, it is not uncommon, to see groups of visitors who lose interest in the exhibition, after the first few rooms: they are sometimes even more interested in the snacks on sale in the vending machines, rather than in what remains of the exhibit.

You may have noticed that children and teenagers often end up playing with their phone or with each other, sometimes even disturbing other visitors. Younger children take advantage of sheltered corners and comfortable seats to take a nap, sometimes next to some elder.

Although the situation I just presented is not always that gloomy, it is a fact that cultural heritage sites (CH-Cultural Heritage) often fail to capture the attention and arouse real interest in the visitor, despite attracting tourists. More and more people today, unfortunately, tend to consider these spaces and the objects exhibited therein, as intended for a niche group of experts. This tendency contributes to creating a sort of barrier between the public and CH, often triggering feelings of boredom and indifference in the visitors.

* Prof. Eng. (retired), University of L'Aquila (I) Civil, Construction-Architectural and Environmental Engineering Department, L'Aquila, Italy.

These tendencies demonstrate how the organisation of communication materials is often conceived for expert users, rather than for the wider public. The language used is often specialised, naming conventions used are often too scientific. The information contained in the explanatory panels is often extensive and detailed, while illustrations are essential and mainly technical (plans, sections, etc.), given they're often taken from technical and administrative documents.

This communication material can be unsatisfactory even for experts, who would like to access a lot more information than what is included in the panels. We therefore see that these materials fail to satisfy both users, on the one hand the more cultured visitors, who don't receive the detailed information they expect and the wider public, that often finds them boring and distracting.

Those objects we consider to be important elements of CH, and therefore worthy of being included in museum collections, are, in reality, artefacts conceived and made by men for other men. They are intended to perform important functions in the daily social, political and religious life of men. They constitute the material testimony of our continuous struggle for survival and of our attainment of happiness. The person in front of these objects lives the same struggles as the person who made these artefacts many years, if not centuries before him/her. He or she may therefore look at those artefacts with more interest, if the information on their creation were presented in a more accessible and clear fashion, if the social, political and historical context in which these objects came about was better framed.

This is how CH can fully fulfil its function as an important component of personal education. Hence, the contents, the recipients and the communication methods of CH become central elements in the planning on these processes.

2. History and promotion of Heritage Interpretation (HI)

Over time, in this field, pedagogical techniques based on knowledge but also on emotions and behaviours of user groups have been developed. These techniques have been widely applied and further explored and formalised into a new applied social science called "*Heritage Interpretation (HI)*".

This discipline was born in the USA, with the aim to promote natural environment conservation policies, through the creation of natural parks and by training staff to involve users in a pleasant and instructive learning experience.

The term "*interpretation*" was first used by John Muir¹ who defined it as a purely individual learning process, which allows the subject to translate the language of

¹ Wolfe, L. 1978, *The life of John Muir*. Madison, The University of Wisconsin press.

natural phenomena into a personal experience. This learning method that can be defined as a romantic way of relating to naturalistic values has long been tested, since the foundation of the US National Park Service in 1916.

In 1920, Enos Mills introduced a training and certification system for nature guides of the Rocky Mountains National Park, that he saw as "*translators of the great book of Nature*"². This approach to knowledge dissemination was then extended to Cultural Heritage (CH). In 1940 the term Heritage Interpretation (HI) was used to define all existing information and educational services.

In 1954 the first trade association was founded in the USA: the Association of Interpretive Naturalists (AIN). In 1957 the journalist Freeman Tilden³ set the theoretical framework of the discipline⁴ which aimed to develop of a new relationship between the user and cultural and naturalistic assets by highlighting the profound connections between these and the daily lives of users.

Besides providing comprehensive information on the phenomenon under consideration, the interpreter, in Tilden's conception, must provoke emotional reactions, by revealing unexpected aspects or by emphasizing some that are otherwise neglected. The interpreter has to show users how the phenomenon relates to problems and situations they may experience in their everyday life. By involving the users and by raising their interest, CH wins back its temporal and experiential dimension.

Similarly, the conservation of architecture characterised by meticulous conservation methodologies and precisely regulated restoration processes, has to be undertaken with the aim to define a strong relationship with the material and cultural wealth of the past, thus justifying its preservation.

A holistic consideration of CH, requires a balance between the container (e.g. the building) and the intangible conditions that contributed to giving it its shape and structure. Stories, myths and traditions must be kept in mind and preserved, together with works of art and architectural objects, thus striking complementarity between material and immaterial conservation.

This balance is crucial to any discussion addressing the elements of cultural heritage and really allows architectural monuments to be "*living monuments*". "*Living*", in this case, refers not only to the conservation of the material that constitutes the buildings, but also their intangible components. The heirs of the cultural heritage do not seek to experience only the tangible evidence of the

² Mills, E. 1990, *Adventure of a Nature Guide*. Friendship, New Past Press (first published in 1920), p. 130

³ On behalf of the US National Park Service

⁴ Tilden F., 1957, *Interpreting our Heritage*. Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina Press

activity of their ancestors, but also to those non-physical aspects of life, such as the history and culture of those who inhabited these places. The intangible components are as important as the material ones. A good interpreter must try to leverage these to create new and unexpected ways of fruition.

3. Principles and fundamentals

Heritage Interpretation, characterised by the ethos of North American romanticism and transcendentalism that opposed to European rationalism, is first outlined in the book "*Interpreting our Heritage*" by F. Tilden, where the characteristics of the "*interpreter*" are delineated. Tilden details various methods to engage with users and encourage them to interpret phenomena through their own personal experience and by seeking deeper meanings underlying the facts. Through specific communication strategies, the interpreter must capture users' attention and make them discover particular aspects of the phenomenon with the aim to expand their level of knowledge.

3.1. Tilden's six points

In his book, Tilden describes a communication strategy built around in six points that are still considered today as basic elements of the HI discipline:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

The interpretation process must therefore be calibrated on the specific needs of the user, whose personality and experience must be swiftly identified, in order to increase the level of knowledge. The interpreter must be able to provoke

fascinations and then reactions, avoiding excessively emphasising details to preserve a global vision of the phenomenon.

3.2. Tilden and his cultural environment

Tilden's work collects and responds to the educational needs of his time. The experiential learning that he theorizes in the field of Natural and Cultural Heritage originates from the wealth of pedagogical studies and insights gained at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Western world. Among these the best known are to be found in the pedagogical experiences of J. Dewey in America, of A. Sutherland in Scotland, of CB Freynet in France and of M. Montessori in Italy⁵, which, in turn, are permeated by contributions, in the psychological field, from the thought of AH Maslow, M. Csikszentmihalyi, KZ Lewin.

In Tilden's approach, the user, personally involved by the interpreter in experiencing the phenomenon, through well-calibrated maieutic expedients, is emotionally led to learn about the phenomenon's history as well as to internalise its values, thus better appreciating its conservation, also in consideration of future generations.

3.3. Users

Understanding the user's needs is a primary requirement of the interpreter's work. This knowledge allows him/her to calibrate his/her communication methods. In general, only few people will be interested in knowing all about a certain site. Some users will be moved by simple curiosity or the desire for entertainment, while others by the desire to offer their family, or a group of friends, the experience of a particular site. Others still will choose to visit a certain site in order to respond to social status criteria, such as being able to say, within their networks, that they have visited that place. Other, in conclusion, may want to visit a site because of its mystical / magical aspects.

Age groups are even more varied: the cultural level of users also presents many differences, ranging from young people in school, to more mature and educated users in university, to those who are just literate, up to elderly users. All of them are willing to expand their knowledge. In recent years, a new phenomenon emerges, that of relatively young and fit grandparents who accompany their grandchildren. Each category needs to be approached in a different way and each use may fall into one or more of the categories we just outlined. The interpreter's training must also include elements of psychological and behavioral disciplines that will allow him to better manage varied group of users.

⁵ But also in Europe, in the US and in many other countries.

3.4. Operational tools and methods

In order not to disappoint individual users, the interpreter must be prepared to use physical, emotional, philosophical or spiritual stimuli as well as all possible tools available. These may include replications of artefacts that can satisfy experiential needs, graphic and photographic reconstructions, illustrative panels, as well as using immersive environments: think, for example, of the reproduction of the Altamira caves, created to avoid the contamination of the original environment. Digital technologies allow the production of three-dimensional representations as well as multisensory experiences, hot / cold sensations and tactile, acoustic, olfactory, gustatory experiences.

The main operational characteristics of a good interpretation process are:

- a_ Breaking down groups into homogeneous subgroups that share the same characteristics and expectations;
- b_ Reporting of peculiar elements;
- c_ Storytelling to illustrate facts, events and stories of the past;
- d_ Interrogation through open questions (such as: "what would you have done in those conditions?") intended to activate multiple answers, initiate dialogue and encourage participants to share their experiences;
- e_ Re-discovery of peculiar elements of the site.

Among these, storytelling is certainly one of the most effective tools. A tree, a particular stone, an image, any object can be used to illustrate little-known stories, often originated by tradition, that are, as a result, memorised in a much more immediate and permanent way.

3.5. Evaluation methods

This innovative way of approaching knowledge sharing is, by its nature, subject to continuous scrutiny that aims to improving the quality of the services offered. There are many tools used in this evaluation process:

- _ Questionnaires may seem a rather obsolete and scarcely stimulating method but allow to collect objective feedback
- _ Individual or group interviews addressed to participants;
- _ Careful and impartial observation of the behaviour of the participants during the visit;
- _ Other methods that, from time to time, may be considered relevant.

2.6. Other players in the field

The interpreter must not only focus on the needs of visitors: other players also bear an interest in the site. There are, for example, the owners or managers of the CH and those who take care of its hospitality, maintenance, merchandising and advertising. Even more involved, if possible, are those who live on site, or reside and work in the surrounding areas.

It is therefore crucial to develop a certain sensitivity to manage the impact of tourism on the population and to consider the issues originating from intensive tourism, such as traffic, availability of parking spaces, waste-management issues and well as noise and air pollution.

3. Dissemination at an international level

The many years of practice of Heritage Interpretation have led to constant improvement and refinement of the methods as well as the operating methodologies of this discipline. The positive outcomes of knowledge dissemination and the considerable promotion of social growth brought about by the discipline were at the origin of the wider dissemination of HI at international level. The discipline proved to be effective in promoting feelings of belonging, knowledge and tolerance of diversity and social cohesion.

International organisations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) also recognised the effectiveness of these methods: in 2008 the International Council on Monuments and Sites promoted the so-called "*Ename Charter*" (Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites). In 2011, ICOMOS issued the Paris Declaration on "*Patrimony as a motor for development*"⁶ and, in 2014 the "*Florence Declaration*"⁷, adopted at the 50th anniversary of the Venice Charter, to further promote the collaboration between local communities involved in CH, to support sustainable development programmes.

3.1 Dissemination in the UK

Cultural affinity, the use of the English language in the theorisation of the discipline and similarities in the way public and private players interact in

⁶ in which it is hoped "to put authenticity at the heart of the development of cultural tourism and the growth of interpretation and communication strategies"

⁷ Declaration of the principles and the declarations on the values of Cultural Heritage and Landscape and the creation of peaceful and democratic society. Web - <https://www.icomos.org/en/about-icomos/governance/general-information-about-the-general-assembly/list-of-general-assemblies/18th-general-assembly-florence-2014/3479-18th-general-assembly-the-florence-declaration> (last consultation: Sept 2020).

managing cultural and natural assets were the main reasons for HI to become widespread in the United Kingdom. In 1975 British interpreters founded the Society of the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage, which counts today more than 400 members among professionals and volunteers who are active in sites managed by public or private bodies. James Carter's book⁸ titled "*A sense of place - An Interpretive Planning Handbook*" was highly regarded as an agile manual for the design of interpretative strategies, not only in the UK but also in Europe.

3.2. Dissemination in Europe

The activation, in 1999, of two European projects in the HI sector marked the first European initiative in this field. These are the EU Lifelong learning project TOPAS ("*T.O.P.A.S.-Training of Protected Areas Staff*", originated from the participation of 20 partners from 9 countries) and the EU Leader project *Transinterpret*⁹. Thanks to this program, the "*Interpret Europe - European Association for Heritage Interpretation*" association was created in 2010. Interpret Europe counts more than 300 members from 40 countries; it organises annual international meetings and provides training activities in the field of Heritage Interpretation.

Recognising the educational and training value of the HI activity, the discipline has been included in several European Lifelong Learning projects. In addition to the being included in the Erasmus projects, the InHerit program - Professional Development in Heritage Interpretation - was launched in 2016 at European level, to promote the dissemination and training of environmental interpreters, creating study materials and opportunities for discussion on the topic.

At the national level, HI associations are also operational in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Portugal and Spain.

4. Recent applications

4.1 Italy

In Italy, the involvement of the State in the promotion and management of cultural heritage has for a long time slowed down the spread of experts in the field of Heritage Interpretation. The opening of protected natural areas, as well as the creation of museums and historic sites under local or regional management, is gradually opening up spaces for professionals trained in the HI sector.

⁸ Carter, J. , 1997, *A Sense of Place - An Interpretive Planning Handbook*, Tourism and Environment Initiative, Inverness

⁹ Protected Area Staff Training Guidelines for Planning and Management, 2011, Svetlana L. Kopylova and Natalia R. Danilina, Ed., International Union for Conservation of Nature

Interpretation appeared in Italy in 1983, during a course given by the Parks Management Office of the Lazio Region to promote work in the field of tourism in protected regional areas and, in 1985, the same office, in association with the Latina Tourism Agency, organised the first training course for newly recruited guides working in the National Park of Circeo. In 1992 in this park, the Pangea Onlus Institute was founded with the specific aim to organise environmental training and education. The first course for Naturalistic Interpreters of the State Forestry Body was organised by the Pangea Onlus Institute. Since 1992, Environmental Interpretation has been applied in many national and regional protected areas, with courses for official Park Guides, for the creation of "Interpretation Plans", and for the planning of structures, equipped paths, exhibitions and other media.

Since the nineties till today, Heritage Interpretation in Italy has extended its scope from purely naturalistic and environmental themes to those concerning historical and Cultural Heritage. To underline this expansion, in December 2015, the Directorate General for Education and Research of the Ministry for patrimony, cultural activities and tourism, in agreement with the Superior Council for Cultural Patrimony and Landscapes, published the first National Plan for Education of the Cultural Heritage.

In academia, since 2018, Prof. Marta Brunelli holds courses in "*Heritage Education and Interpretation*" and "*Pedagogy of Art and Heritage*", at the Department of Education, of Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata. Prof. Brunelli is the author of numerous specific contributions as well as of the first book on HI in Italian.

4.2 L'Aquila

In 2015, the University of L'Aquila, the Pangea Onlus Institute, the Caetani Onlus Foundation, the Institute for Construction Technologies of the CNR (National Research Council) and Federparchi (representing national and local protected areas) signed an agreement to encourage the dissemination of HI methodologies in the academic environment and initiation of training programs in this sector. This agreement has so far only led to the organisation of seminars within the courses of the Department of Human Sciences of the University of L'Aquila.

4.3 A practical seminar

In the third semester of 2018, at the Faculty of Architecture of the Gdansk's University of Technology (PL), I held a 60-hour seminar on the topic of HI with practical applications. During the seminar I applied the basic principles of the HI

to the study of an illustrative panel referring to one of the three proposed themes:

1. the recovery of an Art Nouveau railway station for commuters and its transfer to an area of the university campus;
2. the enhancement of a residential settlement located at the foot of the Gran Sasso mountain (AQ)
3. the illustration of the history of a building in the center of L'Aquila as a result of the finding of a series of frescoes emerged during the renovation of the building.

Students were captured and showed great interest in developing explanatory panels that were remarkably and effectively conveying information by means of text, illustrations and other graphic elements.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to offer my thanks to the ICONARCH IV secretariat for the warm welcome that was given to me