

Landscape: a natural and cultural heritage*

by Manuel Roberto Guido

Over a quarter of a Century after European Architectural Heritage Year (1975), the Council of Europe has launched the "Europe, a common heritage" Campaign with the aim of promoting a more up-to-date and wider concept of heritage encompassing movable and immovable assets, sites, the natural environment, non-material assets and the landscape. Indeed, the landscape, given that it has been shaped by both human beings and nature, is a particularly appropriate theme to represent the Campaign message.

Acknowledgement of the importance of landscape is by no means recent: back in the late 19th Century, several European countries introduced legislation to protect regions of particular interest. It is only recently, however, that a more sophisticated vision of landscape has emerged at international level, resulting from the pooling of research in a range of disciplines. As a result, the concept of landscape today encompasses a variety of discrete values, enabling landscapes to play a bigger part in the context of our common heritage. The landscape has environmental value as part of an ecosystem; cultural value as the historic evidence of a site and the transformations it has undergone or as a feature to be learned about and studied, and which provides inspiration to writers and poets; aesthetic value as a visual and representative expression of the relationship forged over the centuries between human beings and their environment; and social value, in that it increasingly reflects human identity.

A broader definition

This change in the concept of landscape is the result of a series of processes deriving from human and scientific disciplines. The Italian ability to identify and preserve elements of its heritage dates back to the Roman era, when particular care was devoted to religious artefacts. Subsequently, art works were included in the heritage to be conserved and then, much later, the major archaeological remains, monuments, their surroundings, minor architecture, historic town centres and the landscape. Furthermore, not only was there an increase in the number and size of heritage items, but the field of interest was extended to include documentary sources. Landscape, no longer regarded simply as a beautiful vista, has developed along similar lines, together with the acknowledgement of environmental values and the need for nature conservation, primarily under the influence of the countries of northern Europe, where the concept of landscape is traditionally linked to the natural features of the territory.

A wider scope

The approaches of the traditional disciplines, the natural sciences and the humanities tend to merge today with regard to the landscape since there is virtually no European virgin territory left, given the impact - both positive and negative - of human activities on the environment. This cross-sectoral approach to landscape requires us to abandon approaches focusing merely on the conservation of regions which are particularly rich in terms of natural, cultural or aesthetic features at the expense of those where any transformation is possible. In contrast, the concept of landscape, because of the multiplicity of values it encompasses, must be extended to the whole of the territory. However, because these values vary in terms of concentration and the degree of impairment sustained, action taken on the landscape must be diversified and range from conservation to reclassification, and include rehabilitation and creative development in order to bring about a better quality of life for the people living there.

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