

Drifting Gondolas

The Precarious Present of an Artistic Artefact

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Abstract Gondolas are still potent Venetian icons. Nonetheless, now they face a profound identity crisis, as a consequence of market trends and the use of new materials and techniques which are radically changing the way they are built. From a wider perspective, the juxtaposition between the new ‘gondola *simulacrum*’ an empty symbol without any artisan quality and the traditional ‘gondola valuable handicraft’ reflects the clear dividing line between the city of Venice crossed every year by almost 30 million tourists and the living city animated by inhabitants and original activities. In this way the process of gondola’s heritagisation (recent attempts to candidate it in the UNESCO List) becomes a lens to read the destiny of an entire city where resilient energies, not properly native but deeply rooted, look for forms of survival to mechanisms of mass tourism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Icons and *Simulacrum*. – 3 Subversive Artisans. – 4 ‘Autochthonous’ Gondola. – 5 A New Heritage Identity.

Keywords Venetian craftsmanship. Gondola’s heritagisation. UNESCO.

1 Introduction

This paper aims to report the challenges and the main results of an ongoing research which has begun some years ago. My involvement has started after the El Felze association’s decision to propose the craftsmanship of the gondola to be included in the UNESCO Representative List of ICH. I was asked to cooperate due to my experience in CH field, particularly in view of the identification and cataloguing of ICH, as required by UNESCO to application path.

The first meeting organized by email took place on the ridge of San Sebastian on 2 December 2011. After the visit to the different artisan workplaces (*squero* of San Trovaso, *squero* of Dorsoduro, the workshop of *remèr*), the meeting ended at the Malcanton’s seat of the university.

I consider a characteristic feature of this experience the merger and the alternation of the academia and of craftsmanship. And this precious balance has been made possible thanks to a sort of *cultural mediator* such as Saverio Pastor, president of El Felze, who is in some way between these

different worlds.

That day at the beginning of December caused a substantial change in my relationship with the city of Venice or at least with a part of it. From being a resident of the hinterland (few dozen kilometers far from Venice) confined to an outside look, and being only a curious tourist more or less tolerated, I gained an involved, privileged role of those who have access by invitation to niches of intimacy of one of the most popular places in the world. A town used for defence to stereotypical convenience facades, if not explicit hostility. After that symbolic investment (even if without formalized assignments), the overall sense of my presence in Venice has changed. I began to feel a little part of a place geographically close but always perceived as an 'elsewhere' reserved to a few. A reality accessible only through the exterior of the appealing beauty, but isolated from every trace of true life. After that first passage with initiatic value, there were many meetings and occasions to share views) with El Felze's artisan and other venetian residents involved in the topic.

The study has been conducted using the classic ethnographic research methods through participant observation, bibliographic insights, interviews, informal chats and a lot of reflections shared by e-mail too. Between 2013 and 2014, a part of the research was funded by Regione Veneto. The raise of awareness of the Venetian context towards the topic suggested the Bureau of Strategic Projects and Community Policies to involve the craft of the gondola in the cataloguing program provided by the project *Adria-Muse*¹ focused on traditional maritime professions. Within this regional project, I recorded interviews to El Felze² craftsmen, contributed to the realization of short documentary films about some construction phases as well as about the launch of the gondola and some aspects of the social life in Roberto Tramontin's *squero*.

Now the investigation continues with the dilated times of free research and with the integration of the Facebook tool which almost daily provides updates inside its typical dimension, disengaged and alternative, between real and virtual. It provides me updated information about initiatives, news, public and private concerns, about artistic craftsmanship and the transformations of the Venetian social context.

1 Project *AdriaMuse* is a cross-border project of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme IPA Adriatic 2007-13, co-financed by the EU.

2 Giuliana Longo milliner, Ermanno Ervas smith and restorer, Saverio Pastor builder of oars and *fôrcole* the rowlock or oarpost, Roberto Tramontin *squerarolo* gondola builder, Antonio Peroni ebanist, Matteo Tamassia boat builder, Michele Pulliero apprentice gondola builder.

2 Icons and *Simulacrum*

A gondola is still a potent icon, a unique symbol recognized internationally. Nonetheless, despite being a peculiar Venetian product, it faces a profound identity crisis, as a consequence of the use of new materials and techniques which are radically changing the way it is built. Authenticity, quality, beauty, uniqueness - these are just some of the celebrated requirements called into question by a Venetian market which put pressure on artistic craftsmanship. As means of transport, gondola has always been included within a series of models and techniques which are evolving so as to keep pace with to contemporary needs. Nonetheless, a violent break is about to come and this cannot be brought within the terms of an evolving tradition. Now transformation is too violent to be re-absorbed by a naturally moving tradition

and gondolas seem destined to be transformed into mere shadows of their former selves, emptied of all their value and traditional knowledge; the same elements that made them a symbol of the 'Venetian thousand-year-old water civilization'. (Saverio Pastor, speech at the *Scuola Grande di S. Teodoro* Conference, Venice 9 May 2012)

What is actually happening is an almost invisible metamorphosis, apparently inconsistent to inexperienced eyes.

It might seem paradoxical after what we said, but gondola, as good, is enjoying good health: it is still the Venetian symbol that has never put into question. Even though there is neither the risk to disappear nor the possibility to be confined to a museum as many other historic artefacts of recognized value, it is no longer clear what should be considered a 'gondola'. In other words, *what makes a gondola a gondola?* Is it possible to identify an essential core which allows -beyond the changes- to recognize the gondola?

Over the centuries, several small and big transformations had an impact on its shape and on its typical imbalanced line. Let us mention here some of them. It can be clearly noticed in paintings and historical photos that the gondola used to have a less curved line: the *imbananatura*³ (banana shape)

³ The *fracadura* is the procedure through which the gondola takes its typical half-moon shape. The degree of the hull curving is decided by the gondolier. "When there will be the *fracada* 'banana' shaping of the boat, the stern and the bow will be, while heating, squeezed by some points from the ceiling until it turns out to have the line that the gondolier requires. Some prefer an impressive gondola and you notice this vessel coming ahead. It is like a curvy woman, it is stunning. The low ones are anonymous instead". Interview of the writer with Roberto Tramontin by his *squero* boatyard in Dorsoduro (January 2014) during the cataloguing of the ICH of the small-scale traditional Venetian boatbuilding, sponsored (2013-14) by Regione Veneto.

is only a contemporary trend. Moreover, the Felze – a discretely curtained shelter for the passengers – was removed because it did not respond to the contemporary needs of tourists and it increased instability. And today, high water, which is more frequent than in the past, led to choose a hinged *ferro* ('ricciolo' metal design) on the stern, which can be moved to one side to facilitate the passage under the bridges. Another element is that even the typical black colour was a result of a turning point which occurred at the beginning of the 17th century. Also the techniques changed over the years, at the end of 18th century the hull was pitched by the caulkers while today it is painted; the importance of the pitch still remains in frequent common expressions such as: "*impegoeà, che pegoea...*".

The old hatchet masters used to buy durmast trunks, 12 meters long, and keep them inside the *squeri*, as long as it was necessary to have them completely dried. Today the process is industrial and no longer takes place in Venice.

The changes confirm the dynamic evolution of the gondola as well as of the *craftsmanship community* surrounding it. This can be considered as part of a natural process of renewal. Nonetheless, the transformations recently introduced by some *squeri* are well beyond what is necessary to guarantee a renewal of the tradition, and they rather wipe out centuries of history, keeping just the façade of it.

The gondola is celebrated as part of the most interesting Venetian tradition and represents centuries of high refined skills that are transmitted from generation to generation. Nonetheless, what remains today is only a minimum of manual skills at the expense of historical craftsmanship whose market is shrinking. Accordingly, the *gondola's system* is at the centre of a paradox: the profession of *gondoliere* is thriving, and the category includes 433 licenses, 180 substitutes, and young trainees ready to become substitutes and be included in the list of places made periodically available by the City Counsel.

While the demand of tourists for 'gondola tours' does not decline, some of the historic workshops involved in the process of construction of the gondola and that sell accessories shut down or face unbearable difficulties. The artisans who preserve the 'traditional' procedure focused on quality, who create original pieces avoiding mechanized reproductions and who continue to employ premium raw materials are the ones to be most affected.

This contribution starts from the experience of a group of artisans who gathered in the El Felze⁴ association in 2002 "to count how many they

4 The association gathers the following artisan's categories: *squeraròli* who build the gondolas; *remèri* specialized in the oars and *fòrcole's* production; *intagiadori* create chisel and carving decorations; *fravi* forge and restore the stern and bow's 'ferri'; *fondidori* make the brass accessories; *battilloro* obtain by beating the very thin gold leaf and *doradori* who lay the gold leaf on the wood parts; *tapezzier* make the *pareci* fabric decorations such as

were, to be considered, and to tell”⁵ (Pastor 2014, 54). Their purpose was to offer a different meaning to their personal and professional experience and to attract the attention on a process that otherwise could have remained unknown; considered as a sad but inevitable adaptation of the gondola to modern times.⁶

The peculiarity of some of the protagonists, -figures split between the world of the craftsmanship and the one of the research- led to the creation of dynamics and relationships, which raised the attention of some local institutions such as the University and the Region. On this issue, UNESCO and, in particular, the 2003 Convention provided theoretical and partly practical tools to renew the role and the meaning of the work of the gondola’s artisans, who have become the symbol of what Venice is losing with the progressive reduction of the local residents to the advantage of the exponential increase in the number of tourists:

The mixture of the functions of the historical city dies and the tourist-hospitality monoculture steps in. (Settis 2014, 12)

The difficulties of gondolas is typical of the contemporary craftsmanship, but at the same time worsened by the Venetian context with high rental costs and a real estate market that is out of reach for the local residents. Administrative and normative formalities disadvantage workshops, while unfair competition deriving from the black market labour and the new techniques (still to be considered as craftsmanship) which are appealing in terms of low costs and time required to obtain the final product. From solid wood subject with a long drying process it is changing toward cheaper marine plywood which requires less maintenance work. Accessories which were traditionally entirely handmade and often personalized accordingly to the gondolier’s preferences are now replaced by series production: *forcole* (rowlocks) can be reproduced by machines; *ferrì* (metal hood ornament) on the bow are neither hand shaped nor adapted to the gondola but they are now printed on a stainless-steel plate resistant to the salt air;⁷

the seat covers; *baretèra* make straw and wollen cloth hats; *sartori* are specialised in the production of the gondoliers’ uniforms.

5 “Per contarsi, per contare, per raccontare”.

6 For instance, Saverio Pastor remembers the shutdown during the post WWII of the Arsenale as State shipyard and at the end of the '50s the affirmation of the engine which caused the end of several traditional vessels (2014, 53).

7 Ermanno Ervas senior blacksmith and restorer highlights as the *ferrì* made in stainless steel and with the milling machine are chunky while those worked with the forge are drawn thin up to 2 millimeters. He also stresses that the iron requires some maintenance and needs to be protected in order to avoid rust and erosion caused by the salt air. Once it was used to pass them with pork fat. Today the protective substances have changed and

the brass prancing horses⁸ which required long polishing sessions are now available in plastic. The overall result is a gondola or its simulacrum that allows a cut by two thirds of the production costs and time, also reducing the need of maintenance.

Overall, the changes concern the whole small shipbuilding industry of the Venetian lagoon where now the boats are almost entirely in fiberglass or in marine plywood; cheap materials, steady and easy to handle that make superfluous the know-how acquired after long training which is indeed necessary to build planked wooden vessels.

Renovation, based on reduced costs and practicality, has led to consequences in the shape of the boat, such as the loss of the smooth and blunt lines, core elements of the nautical design and proof of the boat building ability to bend wood:

The curved line represents the cognitive horizon of the boat builders, their challenge and their destination. (Sanga 2009, 123)

Curving that is never perfectly replicable, it is fruit of sensitivity stemming from a long experience and it is the deal between the artisan and the seafarer⁹ in a progression, almost anatomic, of adhesion to the unstable flow of the water which rejects any straight line. We can therefore understand the deep change of these new boats characterized by simplified lines, which put an end to the natural relationship of mutual adaptation between the man and the water to be sailed. Thousands of connections are undermined by the revolutionary introduction of the engine and of synthetic building materials. This changing is almost more critical when involved the gondola, “the greatest example of constructive sophistication of the Venetian boatbuilding” (Munerotto 2011 in Pastor 2014, 55).

3 Subversive Artisans

In the middle of this critical situation, while an entire world was being dismantled, a significant event was capable of renewing the perspective of the El Felze association artisans. In Venice, in October 2010, a conference

the mineral wax has replaced the animal fats. Interview of the writer with Ermanno Ervas at his smithy in Preganziol (TV) (February 2014) during the cataloguing of the ICH of the small-scale traditional Venetian boatbuilding.

8 They support the ropes on the side of the passenger’s seat.

9 “Its oar cuts the water as a razor and at the same time as a feather it lines up to the sequence of the movements guaranteeing the boat’s flow without jerks and without waste of vain energies...”. Comment collected from Facebook which gives an idea of the type of communication which takes place between client and artisan (Saverio Pastor).

took place¹⁰ entitled *Tangible Properties, a Human Heritage to Save* with a dedicated session to the venetian reality.¹¹ Local traditions in terms of ICH were officially at the core of the debate: from the gondola to the Venice carnival, from Murano glass to Burano lace, to the tradition of refined venetian fabrics. More specifically, the application to Unesco's ICH list was described as an easy step considering the extraordinary characteristics of 'gondola'. From that moment, the gondola craftsmanship entered a new era: the gondola has become part of the heritage landscape, so new meanings have been put into play and some of the actors showed to be able to manage a practice of heritagisation as an opportunity to deal with new strategies of survival. In that respect, it is interesting to point out the possible ambiguous meaning of the expression 'bottom up' referred to initiatives which, when studied in depth, reveal the involvement of experts. They in fact are the only ones able to think about and to model process of heritagisation by applying the UNESCO Conventions.

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out the emergence on the scene of a typical process: as soon as a cultural reality becomes an object of interest by the UNESCO, it is transformed into a metacultural production. It is revealed as part of external system and so used between quotes (Ciminelli 2008, 326). In several occasions, even official, it has been repeated in an ironic tone to take some distance from the logics that are perceived as unrelated to which some try to adapt: "We, artisans, have realized to be 'healthy bearers'¹² of ICH". The process of the gondola's heritagisation coincided with a rereading of the traditional Venetian craftsmanship and highlighted merits that had already been known as well as recognizing different ones suitable to contemporaneity. For instance, the civil value of handmade work of quality has emerged:

We ask for the support of our 'bearers of intangible heritage' because they contribute to improve the society by witnessing thoughts, knowledge, creativity and manuality. (Saverio Pastor, speech at the *Scuola Grande di S. Teodoro* Conference)

The requests put forward within the working place have found echo inside the local disorientation suffered by those who are directly experiencing

10 Organised by VTP Events at Venezia Terminal Passeggeri S.p.A. operator of Porto Passeggeri di Venezia.

11 The title of the session: "The Intangible Cultural Heritage: a World Stage for the Venetian Traditions".

12 The translation does not make the idea of words game: *portatori sani*. It is an ironic expression that paraphrases a medical figure of speech in order to stress the strange impression to discover to be 'studied' and of interest because of their traditional job now defined ICH. In this sense *portatori sani* are who bear some illness without knowing it.



Figure 1. Launch of the gondola commissioned by the gondolier Mauro Barugolo to Tramontin's squero (Dorsoduro Venezia), 25 April 2014. © Photo by Ugo Perissinotto

the evolution of Venice into a 'no-place' (Augè 1999) or *nobody place* (Sloterdijk 2006): that is spaces that are only crossed and not lived, where relationships are not built and therefore lack of any sense of belonging and identification. They are functional only to practical and basic needs managed by the great economic systems: to move, to eat, to enjoy, to sleep...

The hatchet and forge masters and their colleagues are united by the quality of the gondola's production chain and have become the spokesmen of a common feeling that can be recognized by the defence of values at risk: the mastery, the quality of work and material, the uniqueness of the pieces, the products personalization, professional ethics, the respect cultivated in long relationships between the client and the artisan, the rarity of the techniques, the tradition that looks into history, the sense of belonging to a rooted corporation. These aspects are celebrated in craftsmanship, but they also work as metaphors to identify a life system that is perceived as a connection to the destiny of a city which is at the mercy of the crowd. Mass of people fast moving and superficial, rapacious and offensive because it is insensitive to the context and its local residents. "What time does Venice close?": this is only one of the several anecdotes



Figure 2. Music at the gondola's launch party. 25 April 2014, squero Tramontin (Dorsoduro Venezia). © Photo by Elisa Bellato

told by residents that synthesize the local imaginary about tourists' attitude toward a Venice-amusement park.

From a wider perspective, the juxtaposition between the 'gondola simulacrum' an empty symbol without any artisan quality and the 'gondola valuable handicraft' reflects the clear and sad dividing line between the city of Venice invaded every year by 30 million tourists and the

true, living and liveable city animated by inhabitants and original activities integrated into a healthy and respected lagoon. (Pastor 2014, 69)

In the Venetian urban context, in fact, gondolas are nothing more than tourist attractions while workshops and *squeri*¹³ are very visited and pre-

¹³ The celebration for the inauguration of a gondola at the *squero* boatyard can be interpreted as a 'total social fact' (Mauss [1924] 2002), an event where come to play several elements that define a community: work structure, propitiatory rituals, food distribution and party drinks (in today's Venice it is strictly fish and prosecco wine), music and dance to celebrate, the clients gondoliers and their family's structures and all the guests, friendship

serve feelings of solidarity and local estimate.¹⁴ It seems it is possible find in craftsmanship a common ground of shared values as symbols of difference.¹⁵ The reference is to those “convivial forms of territorialisation” that are essential for

the communities that are able to find in the local characters of living their reason of existence, in a profound reconsideration not only of the settlement styles but also of the ethics that governs the choices of a community. (Bonesio 2009, 113)

Thus, the craftsmanship model fits into an existential model linked to a certain quality of lifestyle which explicitly refers to Richard Sennett’s work ‘The Craftsman’ which underlines the civic value of quality handmade labour as a guardian of pluralism and creativity as well as sponsor of social and community relationships. He eventually posited that: those who learn to work well will also become a good citizen able to recognize and activate procedures of good government (2008).

This pondered vision of their own profession led the artisans of El Felze to disagree with the text of the economist Stefano Micelli “Futuro artigiano” who argued in favour of a combination of craftsmanship and high technology and therefore for a collaboration between engineers and communication experts. They found in Micelli’s analysis a glimpse of mystification on the role of the artisan which is misunderstood as a manufacturing worker, a maker without tradition employed by the industry. For them the cultivated and experienced idea of the artisan is quite different and appears to be incarnated by those who are responsible for all the stages of the production in an autonomous and creative way.¹⁶ Autonomy, the total control of the whole process (from the design also in collaboration with the client to the direct sale) are considered crucial and incompatible with

relationships, work corporation relationships (gondoliers and artisans), the organisation of the space, the ritual’s aesthetics...

14 El Felze from this point of view benefits from a shared support. Who writes, for example, attended a dinner offered to the association as surprise by the hosting facility that didn’t want to be paid since “You, artisans, represent the ‘true Venice’ and it is a pleasure to welcome you”.

15 In that respect, consider the success of the initiative ‘Disnar per la Storica’, collective dinner organised 26th August 2016 at the initiative of El Felze and with the contribution of several rowing associations. The tables were prepared in 12 different parts of Venice and showed a participation of over 2000 people who were enthusiast to take part at an event that recommends different ways to live the city and above all encourages the participation to the Historical Regata as a manifestation that is symbol of the venetian nautical tradition.

16 Speech of Alessandro Ervas (a blacksmith expert in restauration techniques) member of the El Felze association at the *Patrimonio culturale. Scenari 2015* Conference, organized at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice 26-28 November 2015.

a single action in an industrial chain context where the different stages are fragmented. Nowadays hand-craft of quality becomes inconvenient, poorly understood and almost subversive in an age prone to rationalisation and to acceleration based on standardisation. Master *remèr* Saverio Pastor clarifies how anachronistic seems the traditional process considering the time required to reach the outcome:

From the moment the tree is cut down to the moment the *forcola* touches the water there is a time lapse of three years (personal communication)

The interventions of inlay décor of a gondola, for instance, may take months between the project of the design shared with the client and the execution with the chisels:

first there is the agreement on the subject with the gondoliers who may already have some samples or they may already know what they imagine, the drawing on paper and then, once the design is approved, the pattern can be finally traced on the wood and the real carving work can start and it may take up to two months.¹⁷

To perpetuate these procedures means to carry on with almost a form of guerrilla which contradicts the serial making, the standardised and easy know-how and the modern system which nurtures them. In this respect, the antagonist role carried out by the artisans of El Felze is in contrast with the dynamics currently established in Venice¹⁸ and it is linked to distant suggestions that confirm, although in a different way, the specific contribution of the role of the artisans and their workshops where they learn to work with continuity and with codified rules that could be also alternatives to the models of the society of reference. In this way, the apprenticeship does not exhaust with the training of handicraft work but becomes a real social pedagogy (Herzfeld 2003).

4 'Autochthonous' Gondola

The gondola of the post WWII has lost its original bond with the city. From means of transport *de casada*, a sort of water carriage for wealthy families,

17 Interview made by the writer to Antonio Peroni, a wood carver at the *squero* Dorsoduro (March 2014) during the cataloguing of the ICH of the small-scale traditional venetian boatbuilding.

18 It refers to a globalised market that is always more and more common in Venice which is based on the sale of imported industrial products of low quality and price that are more or less obviously counterfeited.

distinctive symbol of representation based on the richness of the structure and of the décor, now it has turned out to be strategic for the marketing of a territory that synthesizes Venice only as a tourist attraction. Gondola is thus a symbol of success, then, but is increasingly losing all inner meaning related to the place where it is rooted. The whole gondola system, from its repertory of 'traditional'¹⁹ songs chosen for their international appeal to the clichés proposed by gondoliers to their clients, solely responds to the logic and mechanisms of mass tourism. This form of tourism needs only slogans, quick and simplified messages and stereotyped reading of the local area. Expression of this alienation from the local context are the gondoliers themselves in what seems to be a knee jerk reaction to the tourist invasion. Indeed, gondoliers have been ready to react to the tourist invasion of a place to which they are profoundly bound. This category was born as a closed 'casta', therefore almost limited to few 'indigenous' families connected to the historical city because of their origin. For long time, the license could only be transmitted from father to son or acquired through a long apprenticeship to replace an old gondolier without sons. Over the time this closure has also taken a form of endogamy imposed by a need since Venetians did not welcome the wedding of their daughters to a gondolier (Vianello 2011, 31). Then the reality of this profession has considerably changed and in 1993 a law was adopted to equalize the gondolier license and an ordinary commercial license allowing for free trade. As a matter of fact, the majority of gondoliers still belongs to families whose members have been gondoliers for generations and generations. For instance, the acquisition and transfer of licenses respond to internal dynamics and rest within a restricted circle of sons, relatives and acquaintances according to logics peculiar of a profession with great earning but also with a strong sense of pride and group identity,²⁰ due also to the 'Mariegole' tradition.²¹

On the opposite side, there are the artisans of the traditional boatbuilding who are an open corporation in direct contact with clients, mostly local. They do not inherit the job by bloodline but they conquer it on field through passion and commitment and it is a production that, when tested on the water, makes the difference. Thus, being a native-born Venetian is not necessarily a privileged condition. Nowadays several artisans come from the mainland or from other Italian regions.

19 The writer witnessed a venetian on a bridge to reproach on dialect about a song which was not properly local. The singer who was performing on the gondola replied justifying the song part of the tradition of Naples called 'Santa Lucia', as a tribute to the saint who gives the name to the Venice train railway station.

20 The category that, for example, described itself as "rebel, free and independent" (Vianello 2011, 63).

21 Ancient rules that regulated the gondoliers' corporation organised on *fraglie* and now on *stazi* places of arrangement and boarding.

5 A New Heritage Identity

From 2010, the El Felze association has been committed to obtain an application to UNESCO and it can be noticed that the 'UNESCO system' provided an instrument of empowerment (Ciminelli 2008, 328) giving strength to an image of gondola that does not depend on simple market mechanisms. Gondola made in series, cheap and requiring an easy maintenance, receives enthusiastic response from the majority of gondoliers who are interested in reduced costs and practicality. UNESCO's documents suggest new interpretative keys in support of an articulated analysis of the phenomenon that highlights also the value of what is getting lost: skills transmitted from generation to generation, professional communities, social balance and sustainable economy... Additionally, the heritagisation process elevated the gondola's tradition beyond the destiny of the single artisan becoming a sort of public good with a universal significance due to the interest in being part of the UNESCO lists.

The consequence is to share the commitment for the protection of the tradition:

if we are carriers of cultural heritage and this heritage is collective then it should be the community to bear at least part of the responsibility. (Saverio Pastor, speech at the seminar *Heritage Communities and Creative Enterprises in Venice*, organized by Regione Veneto and University Ca' Foscari, 24-26 January 2015)

It is therefore important to acknowledge the existence of a legal instrument such as the 2003 UNESCO Convention which introduces a new principle of heritage in favour of situations that were previously neglected. As Richard Sennet affirmed (2008), Western history has essentially underestimated the handwork. This general assumption in the little case of Venice means for instance that artisans belonging to El Felze are more and more discouraged and they conclude that "there is no longer room for us, artisans that produce artworks of high quality". In that respect, UNESCO and its legal instruments that introduce new approaches and guidelines for cultural policies and tools, such as the lists, are important actors supporting fragile cultural realities.

At the same time, however, we should acknowledge that some responsibilities need to be taken creating hopes where there is no chance. Until now, the attempts to propose the gondola as a candidate in the UNESCO List have brought no results:

The 2003 UNESCO Convention provides a representative list of the ICH of humanity, a register of the good conservation practices and management but also a list of ICH of urgent safeguard. We tried to add the

gondola craftsmanship on the first list (which seemed unreachable) we looked for good practises of safeguard experience on the territory (but frankly we could find none)...The last attempt will be the addition to the list of goods with a high risk considering the trend of our city's economy to exclude more and more our activities from its birthplace. (Saverio Pastor, Facebook page, 23 December 2014)

This comment was shared on Facebook in December 2014 by the president of the El Felze association who demonstrates the in-depth knowledge of the UNESCO procedures looking also at the Venetian craftsmanship overall situation and describes a condition of stagnation which has remained unchanged.

Otherwise, there is a dimension of heritage identity that is rejected or lived with discomfort. Maria Luisa Ciminelli analyzed the unforeseen consequences of the action of the intangible heritage safeguard under the auspices of UNESCO, pointing out how all this is a *metacultural production* that confers to the cultures in danger "a second life through the exhibition of themselves" (Ciminelli 2008, 364). Linking this observation to the case of Venice, it explains how to be artisans is not enough, since artisans need to show what they are and represent their own profession. This is perceived with uneasiness: "We, artisans, want to be artisans and not tourist guides".²²

It is also true that the artisan's *habitus* has been changing and in order to survive to contemporaneity it needs to diversify its competencies. The El Felze association witnesses how the artisans today in Venice cultivates not only the typical skills of their profession but also create networks on an international level with a social capital that clashes with the image of the small workshop as a modest and isolated place. Moreover, they have to split their work time with communication activity, promotion, organization of events, conferences, publications, workshop attendance and video-making, proving to be cultural and social entertainers. The Venetian gondola's craftsmen act inside a new scenario which is characterized by a specialized workforce, a renewed awareness and new inputs. This perfectly reflects the innovative roles attributed to CH. It seems to be vested with a new responsibility, shifting from a context mainly characterised by aesthetic-cultural terms to a social, economic and political commitment capable of canalizing the needs of our time (Bellato 2015).

These expectations found a confirmation in the 2005 Faro Convention. The Convention posits that it does not make sense to talk about heritage if not related to the people who live that heritage as such. The legal instru-

²² Personal communication repeated in several occasions by different artisan members of the El Felze association.

ment identifies specific areas of action. For instance, if considered in relation to the Venetian case, it is recognized the heritage's cultural potential as factor of sustainable economic development (art. 10). Such affirmations are broad and can create legal obligations on States only upon ratification, but they for sure witness the importance of good quality of craftsmanship that has a positive impact on the social and environmental context:²³

Through our work and history, we can offer a tangible model for 'the other economy' anxiously searched in the current severe state of economic crisis. Our professions do not exhaust the territory, they do not require any devastating infrastructure but they promote and strengthen the widespread and local economies, they have been producing certified products of quality which have been used for centuries and they have knowledge and skills able to create products that live their own time. (Pastor 2014, 68-9)

Finally, it is possible to affirm that the heritage dimension has offered theoretical instruments to this group of Venetian artisans to reinterpret their situation of difficulty and to support their own requests, which must be recognized as legitimate:

We know to be the carriers of knowledge and cultural heritage that are universally recognized and we ask to be able to work still under those same principles. (Saverio Pastor, speech at the Seminar *Heritage Communities and Creative Enterprises in Venice*)

Starting from 2010, these years of conscious heritagisation process have given an added value to the traditional craftsmanship of the gondola and, as a consequence, defended it from forms of 'touristification' and 'folklorization' which are perceived as an imminent risk for Venice. Nonetheless, it is difficult to assess the impact of these achievements on a practical point. The condition of difficulty for the El Felze artisans has remained unchanged in these years. And, meanwhile, there is a growing doubt on forms of exploitation and sensationalism. In that respect, the words of Marisa Convento, a *perlèra*²⁴, shared on Facebook, reflects her own experience of artisan in the front line, and tells us a lot about the fears, the bitterness but also about her inner strength. This nerve comes from the capacity to read her own situation, and also from playing through possible solutions

²³ The environmental impact of the fiberglass vessels and the problem of their disposal is one of the topics emerged in meetings organized by the El Felze association as part of the annual review entitled "Storie sotto El Felze".

²⁴ A *Perlèra* is a woman working with Venetian glass beads.

(story-telling and ICH) that are suggested as safety nets.

More than a thousand years of history to see a city turning into an amusement park with no limits, free and reduced to a selfie factory just to prove that 'I have been there' and us, as artisans, we have been transformed into a jukebox of intangible heritage, of which soon no one will care about. (12 July 2016, Facebook)

The material culture is under all aspects a communication system. It can be interpreted as a real language that expresses the non-verbal and opaque aspect of the society. The gondola's precarious present in this sense has much to say thanks to its protagonists, the artisans, who provide interpretations broadly shared by the local communities. The gondola "autochthonous vessel" (Vallerani 2009, 9)²⁵ becomes the lens to read the destiny of an entire city where resilient energies, not properly native²⁶ but deeply rooted, look for forms of survival to the "globalized logic of the myth of 'growth' and its destructive and deculturating practices" (Bonesio 2009, 109).

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25 "Autochthonous vessel means a type of vessel used up to a recent past to cross a specific part of a river, lake or lagoon corresponding to the requirements raised by the peculiar structure of the hydraulic flow".

26 "Venetians were not born but made" is a statement that circulates frequently to justify, among other things, the strong bond with the city of those who have chosen to reside in Venice but coming from elsewhere.

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