



# All Things Sacred. An Experience in Diversity and Active Citizenship at a Contemporary Art Museum

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**Abstract.** In 2020–21, the Italian government introduced citizenship education in middle and high school curricula. One of the central subjects of this curriculum is the protection and enhancement of artistic heritage, in coherence with Art. 9 of the Italian Constitution.

The paper analyses a case study concerning the mediation of artistic heritage promoted by Gallery of Sacred Contemporary Art in Milan (GASC) and designed by ABCittà, a collective of social researchers. The project places visual media within the broader framework of cultural diversity education and aims to build up a dynamic, ongoing “library of interpretations” characterized by an interreligious and intercultural approach.

The paper argues that, through the interpretation of contemporary artworks, the museum setting can become one of the main actors in education to active citizenship for adolescents. This work also aims at disseminating a methodology which presupposes intercultural as a part and parcel to image learning in contrast to the more prevalent rhetoric revolving around “inclusiveness” at museums. This strategy is even more relevant when a museum of Catholic art is engaged in questioning stereotypes about the perception of religion, cultural belonging, race, etc.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Art · Interpretation · Migrant Audiences · Religious heritage · Education to citizenship · Adolescents · Cultural diversity

Civic education for teen-agers is not an easy task, especially at a museum dedicated to Catholic contemporary art. In particular, the Gallery of Sacred Contemporary Art (GASC) has a peripheral location and is difficult to access via public transport. How can a museum like this become an active interlocutor for students for whom, incidentally, the civic curriculum is mandatory, and who – at the project’s onset – had to attend courses online due to the Covid-19 pandemic?

Art history, seen through the lens of the Italian Constitution’s ninth article, ought to enable all citizens to engage with their heritage through layered acts of awareness and safeguarding. This challenge heightens when trying to involve a group of teenagers in interpreting contemporary religious art which can, at times, take on highly abstract and opaque forms. The difficulty increases even further when these visitors are asked to interpret works freely without pretending to be a curator and to express their impressions, beliefs, and feelings.

If accompanied and mediated, students can experience a gradual, personal encounter with artworks in a “safe” space, allowing meaning to manifest and the educational role of art to express its potential. Moreover, it is only within a pact of mutual trust that museums can become spaces which allow active citizenship to take shape.

## 1 (Un)safe Spaces for Unsafe Ideas? Beyond “Integration”, Towards “Interaction”

When I refer to the idea of a “safe space”, I mean a place for open debate, where differences and even conflicts can emerge and be addressed nonjudgmentally (through professionalism and not mere good will): I distance myself from the rhetoric of the “comfort zone” which suggests a therapeutic approach to museum work. As Bernadette Lynch writes, “It is important to remind ourselves that museums must be ever-vigilant not to slip back into a carer-client relationship, adopting a therapeutic museum model [...]. The emphasis in some museums on a consensual, empathetic approach may be in fact more to do with the museum’s (and the museum professionals’) discomfort with people openly expressing emotion, anger and widely differing points of view”.<sup>1</sup>

When Elaine Heumann Gurian said that “museums are safe places for unsafe ideas”,<sup>2</sup> back in 1981, the museum studies’ field was at the beginning of a long trajectory towards a new consciousness of its political agency and its social role. While most scholars today recognize the timely and even anticipatory potential of that quote, they also agree that the accent should shift away from “safety” towards free speech, dissent, and conversations about controversial issues such as gender inequality, non-binary sexuality, colonialism, patriarchy and other social justice concerns.

In order to delve concretely into the idea of the museum as a place for open conversations, and the role of artworks as catalysts, let us take a step back and describe briefly the project’s background, main features and objectives.

In 2020 Luigi Codemo, director of the museum, asked ABCittà, a collective of social researchers (educators, museum mediators, cultural operators, architects) of which I am a member, to create an educational tool for multicultural audiences. The tool was aimed at transcending the boundaries of Catholic messages incorporated in the collection, to make it transversally accessible to different beliefs, faiths and spiritual attitudes, be them confessional or not.

In the director’s words, it is time to “decolonize the realm of the sacred”:<sup>3</sup> in other words, to dismantle the complex net of meanings, taxonomies, automatisms that tie a certain iconography to a certain faith, linking these to a certain community as if it had given, static properties. To “decolonize” means here to introduce greater dynamism and fluidity to the superposition of a country and its main religion, in this case, Italy and Catholicism. On the one hand, there is a growing variety of religions due to immigration and, on the other, due to the weakened ties between Italians and the Catholic religion

<sup>1</sup> Lynch, B. Introduction. In: Chynowett and others (2021).

<sup>2</sup> This quote is elaborated in the essay Answers to the ten questions I am most often asked: A review of exhibitions and learning. In: Heumann Gurian E. (2005), pp. 137–149. An updated reflection on that concept can be found in episode 31 of the Museopunk podcast.

<sup>3</sup> Email exchange, 2021/04/04.

(caused by a number of historical, political, societal reasons which is unnecessary to recapitulate here). Italy is often associated with a certain reactionary, even folkloristic form of faith characterized by a hint of superstition. This stereotype is unfortunately reinforced the ubiquitous image of a rosary in the hands of right-wing politicians like Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega Nord party.

By loosening linear and top-down narratives, “decolonialized” museums gain the capacity to generate new meanings and make room for new epiphanies.<sup>4</sup> Museums have to find new tools to open up honest discussions, in a time of huge global upheaval concerning identity, race and colonial legacies (to which religion is also privy). Cultural historian Clémentine Deliss articulates the concept of “remediation”, specifically in ethnographic museums, by suggesting a lens which might be fruitful for all museums: “What do I mean by remediate? First, to remedy something: for example, the ambivalent resonance of the colonial past. Here we need to develop something like a post-ethnographic museum [...] taking those extraordinary objects as stimulus for future innovation and therefore the starting point for new knowledge production”.<sup>5</sup>

There is a subtle form of ambiguity lying in the will to “teach” to immigrants the meanings of religious symbols, as if these were part of a monolithic culture or an integral element of society as a whole. Today’s reality is much more nuanced. It seems more fruitful to connect the dots between different religions and their iconographies so as to gain mutual understanding, always preserving their differences. In keeping with these assumptions, the GASC decided to incorporate diversity as part of the process from the very beginning and deliberately avoided asking participants about their faith, origin, race, etc. (Fig. 1).

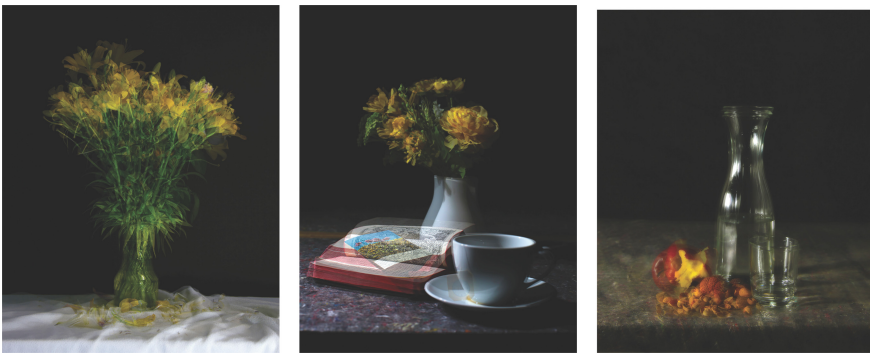


Fig. 1. Davide Coltro, *Continuous Still Life*, digital paintings, 2015

<sup>4</sup> As Paul Ariese writes (Ariese 2021), “Public knowledge of religious stories and practices is slowly disappearing. However, (...) the role and impact of religion in the broader sense is all but diminishing. Spirituality is a growing market, and religion is central to the life of many migrants and expats. In this context, religious heritage can be assigned new roles, functions and meanings. These developments urge museums to change collection policies and require the inclusion of new perspectives and additional contextual information in their displays”.

<sup>5</sup> Deliss (2020), p. 37.

## 2 Teenagers Interpreting Sacred, Contemporary Art: Images of Diversity, Ways of Looking

### 2.1 The Context

The Gasc is a museum of Christian art founded by the St Paul's Society and opened in 1955, when the Milanese diocese built many churches in the city's suburbs to accommodate mainly southern Italian immigrants. This cultural project concerned both the museum and the city and was led by Giovanni Battista Montini, Archbishop of Milan from 1954 to 1963, the year he became pope Paul VI (1963–78).

On the eve of Italy's economic boom, many Lombard and Milanese factories attracted migrant workers mostly from the country's south. New neighbourhoods were designed to host them in the city's outskirts, broadening the cityscape with interventions often of high urbanistic value. As new churches were built, a new generation of artists was encouraged to engage with religious themes (Gramigna, Mazza 2001).

During its first years of life the museum was located in a magnificent, 18<sup>th</sup>-century villa and served as a workshop, a shared "co-working" space where those artists could meet, create and discuss their art. Along a similar vein, the GASC has sought to open its premises to a wider public and to work as a reference point for embracing diversity in its neighbourhood, in the city, and beyond.

Due to the social aspects of its original mission and to the particular attention paid to local immigrants, the museum decided to invite fresh voices to meet and interpret the collection.

The Interpreters of diversity project, described in this paper, was funded by Fondazione di Comunità Milan. It began in Fall 2020 and technically speaking, ended in Spring 2021, when the participants' interpretations were published as an online book.<sup>6</sup> As explained below, a second stage foresees contributions collected from future museum's visitors and related podcasts.

### 2.2 Articulating the Process

ABCittà, which coordinated and facilitated the process, decided to involve two cohorts in order to elicit new interpretations of the collections: adult immigrants and 16- and 17-year-old high school students. The book published by GASC contains results developed with both groups, but this article focuses on the second, as the teens constitute a larger and a – so to speak – "newer" audience for this museum.

Two school groups were invited: a fourth-year class from the Cesare Beccaria High School and a third-year class of Bertrand Russell High School, the latest located very close to the museum. These groups worked together throughout the whole process, regardless of their institutional affiliation. Their teachers verified that approximately 30% of the students had migratory backgrounds: not the highest rate compared to other Milanese neighbourhoods, but still a representative sample.

Through a series of online workshops, the project covered two different obligations: the "civic education" curriculum, mandatory from 2020–21, and the PCTO (Percorsi per

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.villaclerici.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/interpreti-della-diversita-3.pdf>, last accessed 2021/05/31.

le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento: the sum of a number of experiences related to different work environments, aimed at helping students recognize their professional vocations).<sup>7</sup>

Initially, the process envisaged the use of the museum's premises: its huge rooms decorated with ancient frescos, the atmospheres, the gardens would have played a big part in the learning experience. But we had to do without.

The backbone of the project was clear from the start: the slow process of empowering interpretation. We were aware that finding one's voice in writing would have been challenging, especially since this form of expression is so unfamiliar to many. So we decided to proceed at a comfortable pace.

Despite the presence of youth with different migratory and presumably religious backgrounds, operators shared the main assumption that they would ask no direct questions whatsoever in this regard. Diversity was subsumed in the process, "taken for granted" as a data inscribed in today's society. At least this is the case in big cities like Milan, whose immigration history dates back to the 70's. Rather than erasing differences, this choice considered them constitutive parts of "everyday multiculturalism" (Wise, Velayutham 2009).

Talking about intercultural approaches in museums, Simona Bodo assumes that instead of reifying difference and circumscribing people in "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) or strict categories, a new approach "will demand an honest, open and comprehensive rethinking on the part of museums around what it really means to carry out intercultural work... as a bi-directional, dialogical process which is transformative of all parties (majority as well as minority representatives; those from host as well as immigrant backgrounds) and in which all are equal participants?".<sup>8</sup> Our answer to this question is affirmative and we consider this point a methodological stepping stone.

After an in-depth analysis of the collection, we selected four themes based on our prior experience as educators and mediators. We chose artworks from the at the GASC which were likely to elicit pronounced reactions from student visitors.<sup>9</sup> We decided that the themes should be broad enough to allow everyone to identify with them. The themes were worded in an interrogative form to convey them more evocatively. The huge painting by Elvis Spadoni dedicated to the adulteress (2019) was linked to the question: *Can you make mistakes and be forgiven?* The digital tryptic by Davide Coltro (2015) representing slightly, slowly changing still-lives, reminiscent of the Dutch Golden Age but through a technological medium, was related to the question: *Will we be able to wait?* The diptych by Patrizia Novello, born out of a text exchange with her then-boyfriend (2017), elicited the question: *Will you be there? A certain presence.* Finally, *How long shall we wait for the light?* was the question accompanying a group of three paintings hung side-by-side

<sup>7</sup> The PCTO is a 90-h program distributed across the last three years of high school, and it can be formed by the sum of different experiences in any professional field.

<sup>8</sup> Bodo (2019), p. 520. See also Bobick, DiCindio (2020); Buggeln, Franco (2018); Buggeln, Paine, Brent Plate (2017a); O'Neill (1995).

<sup>9</sup> The choice presented some risks: would the students find the works selected interesting? Wouldn't they feel uncomfortable? A previous experience of peer-education in a contemporary art museum, led at the Museo del Novecento in Milan, constituted a reference point in this regard. The project is described in Cimoli (2017).

and related to the three days before Easter (Michele Dolz, *Notte oscura*, 2010; Raul Gabriel, *Cristo Buon Pastore e Agnello*, 2011; Valentino Vago, *R.9–62*, 2009) (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Elvis Spadoni, *The Adulteress*, oil on canvas, 2019

The first workshop took the form of an introductory lesson whose aim was to describe the contemporary museum (and the art museum in particular) as a place for debate, as a mirror for our varied and multi-layered society. The overall idea was to suggest that the museum can also be an arena for dissent, protest, self-expression (and of course also fun, consolation, rest...).<sup>10</sup>

In the following workshop, the director presented selected art works as well as the related issues. Two of the artists, Coltro and Spadoni, were invited to take part in the next one, sharing their artistic trajectory, their sources of inspiration and their work routines. The encounter with two artists – something which rarely happens also in Art History faculties – was highly appreciated by the students, as pointed out in their evaluations.

The next step was dedicated to individual writing. Since the “blank page” can be scary to many, we had clarified this task from the very beginning of the process. At that point, the participants had had the opportunity to see the artworks several times, only through their screens, but mediated through different voices: the mediators’, the director’s, and – in two cases – the artists’ themselves. We deliberately planned time between one workshop and the next, allowing students to become familiar with the themes, iconographies and their hidden, multiple meanings. As an “ice-breaker” we provided a sheet with open questions which served as a flexible guide for writing. It read as follows (Fig. 3):

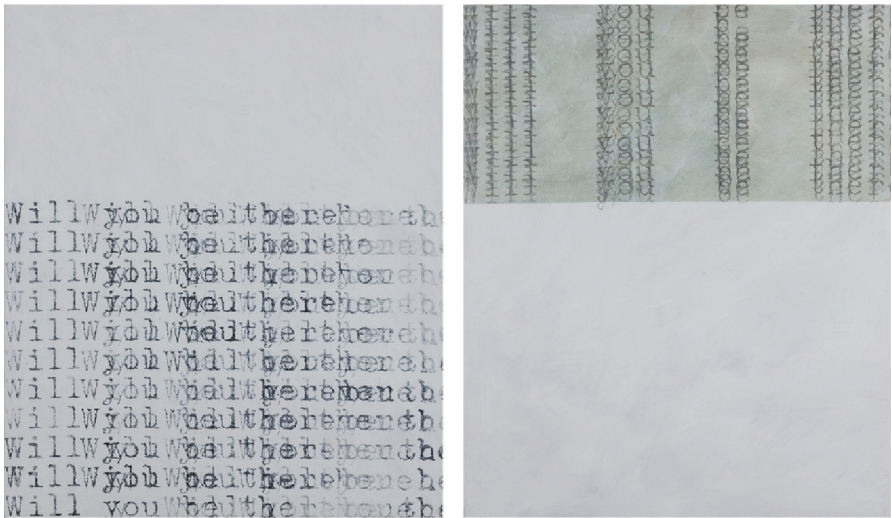
*Answer in a personal way, maximum 15 lines. You can follow the outline we propose or write a free text.*

1. *1. This work resonated with me because it... (e.g. speaks to a time in my life, addresses questions that I also ask myself, touches on a topic that interests me, talks about values I believe in/do not believe in, reminds me of someone in my family or circle of friends, etc.).*

<sup>10</sup> Janes, Sandell (2019). See also Sandell (2007).



2. What in this work is familiar or what is new in relation to my idea of “sacred”?



**Fig. 3.** Patrizia Novello, *Will you be there?*, oil and vinyl on canvas, 2017

Each student was asked to choose just one subject, but had the option to pick more than one. All students provided an interpretation and some more than one. For example, here are two responses to the diptych *Will you be there?* :

*I was very struck by this “will you be there?” because it made me think of my mother, who unfortunately left us after a long fight against cancer.*

*I thought a lot about this painting and its meaning and, frankly, at first glance I saw little that was sacred, but after an explanation by the museum director I came to a conclusion: in the end everyone can think of anyone they want when they read the phrase, that occurs several times on both panels of the painting. The sacred is also in this. A believer turns to God the doubt about that presence that will have to be there tomorrow, while I can see my mom in it and someone else can see something else. In the end, it’s just a matter of different perspectives. (Alexandra, Bertrand Russell High School).*

*The question “Will you be there” is one of the many that I often ask myself. The phrase is repeated in an almost excessive way: it is a typical characteristic of the lover, who never gets tired of repeating the same phrases because he needs those words, those certainties.*

*It happened to me to have feelings for someone who reciprocated me with words, but not with facts; in spite of suffering, I believe that the power of words gives security and transmits positive values. Especially at our age, I think that the confirmation of presence, is one of the many contents that we write to each other with the phone or that we say to each other in voice, in friendship and in love.*

*I wondered if the artist's question could be a request for presence even after our existence. What will be next? Where will we go? In the collective imagination, death represents a mystery, something to be feared. There are people who are convinced that death is an evil, the evil par excellence, but I don't think so. Death is part of life, and I like to believe that afterwards there will be something extraordinary (Marta, Cesare Beccaria High School).*

These two texts, like most of the others, reveal a perfect balance between the personal – sometimes even the intimate – and the universal, as if the time spent looking at the artwork had decanted and generated a new landscape. In some cases, the pieces were as succinct as a haiku. Even though the literary quality of the texts was not at task, many of the reflections are extremely poetic.

The last workshop took place in the museum premises at the end of the lockdown and took the form of a farewell. In that occasion we split into four groups and rotated among as many meeting points. Each group could therefore experience the visit through different approaches: a “slow museum” immersive experience (for Novello’s artwork), a meditation class in association with music (for Coltro’s), a participatory design workshop about ways to collect interpretations from future visitors, and a “classic” walk through the villa and its gardens (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** A session of the project at GASC, 2021

### 2.3 Evaluation and Future Perspectives

The student evaluations (anonymous, qualitative, led through a Google form) demonstrated a high appreciation for the process, despite the online format. 69% of the participants said that the visit to the museum was the best workshop, while 38% appreciated the



encounter with the artists most. When asked about about writing, an equal percentage of participants (46,2%) said that it had not been too hard and that it had been hard but worth it, while only 7,7% declared it was very difficult.

As for the question “How do you feel about your text being signed and published?”, 61,5% said they were excited about it, while 23,1% said they were a bit embarrassed.

A final, open question prompted a personal comment. The most frequent observations were appreciative of the variety of viewpoints and voices involved and underlined the pleasure of visiting a museum after such a long time. Many students were also surprised by the museum world “behind the scenes”: its self-interrogation about about ways of dealing with society.

As part of the funding received by Fondazione di Comunità Milano, the museum will create a series of podcasts with interpretations provided both by the students and the adults. This digital tool will be implemented in the future through other contributions. The agenda includes a collaboration with religious and cultural centres throughout the city. The “library of interpretations” will therefore grow slowly and hopefully provide an example of participatory, multi-layered, trans-generational practice. This repository highly values religious and cultural diversity without putting it under a spotlight, considering this condition as data about our community and information worth protecting and preserving: which is exactly what museums do.

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