



Dwelling on space
 representation and safeguarding
 of its tangible and intangible heritage



20th

Anniversary 2003-2023

Intangible Cultural Heritage

In occasion of the twentieth anniversary of UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Carmine Gambardella
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20th Anniversary 2003-2023 Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Indice

Celebrating the XX Anniversary 2003-2023 – An Overview.....	5
<i>Francesco FIMMANÒ</i> Distance learning for African students as a response to the issue of immigration and the creation of on-site experts for the protection and valorisation of cultural heritage.....	6
Intangible Heritage – Perspectives.....	10
<i>María Victoria Vivancos Ramón; Priscila Lehmann Gravier; Valeria Navarro Moreno</i> The dissemination of Marine Intangible Heritage as a tool for education and sustainable development. OCEAN ART PROJECT .	11
<i>Nicola Pisacane</i> Drawing the Uniqueness of Intangible Heritage. ‘Gigli di Nola’ obelisks and their procession	15
<i>Francesca MUZZILLO, Fosca TORTORELLI</i> Urban vineyards in contemporary cities; from neglected areas into vibrant and attractive spaces	19
<i>Angela P. COLONNA, Alessandro RAFFA</i> Communities of Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge and Adaptation. The UNESCO site of the Sassi di Matera as an experimental laboratory of water resource management in a changing climate	22
<i>Sabina Martusciello</i> ‘Cucina italiana’: identity design.....	25
<i>Dominik LENGYEL, Catherine TOULOUSE</i> How Visual Abstraction Safeguards the Intangible Heritage of Architecture.....	28
<i>Maria Natale</i> Legal rules in progress From the protection of “works of art” to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage	33
<i>Antonella Giarra, Marco Annetta, Cristiana Spano, Marco Trifuoggi</i> An integrated approach for a better quality of urban air: the MonAir Project.....	37
<i>Andrey V. VASILYEV</i> Research of Environmental Pollution Near to the Places of Development of Oil and Gas Fields in Russian Federation	41
Case studies & Project presentations.....	46
<i>Rosaria Parente, Elif Hasret Kumcu, Giuseppe Ciaburro</i> THE IMPACT OF FLOODS ON AGRICULTURAL TERRITORY: AN APPROACH BASED ON REMOTE SENSING	47
<i>Maria Vittoria Bramante</i> Cultural Heritage: from the Faro Convention to the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe	53
<i>Elif Hasret KUMCU</i> DIGITAL MARKETING APPLICATIONS IN GREEN MARKETING	56
The Contactfood Platform.....	61
<i>Ilaria Cavaliere, Dario Costantino</i> Ghost Town Refuge. An innovative Project for the ghost town of Craco. .	65
<i>Alexandrino Basto Diogo, Francisco Carlos Almeida Nascimento e Oliveira</i> Architectonic conceptual paradigms - from vernacular to digital architecture	70
<i>Giulia Sagarriga</i> An aesthetic of space. Culture, mythology, and art in the Pacific Ocean.....	80
<i>Anna Rita VILLANO, Donatella DIANO, Katia FABBRICATTI</i> Games in Street, intangible cultural heritage for the regeneration, maintenance and care of spaces of collective use	84
<i>Roberta VARRIALE, Laura GENOVESE</i> Sperlinga, the last inhabited cave dwelling in Sicily	90
<i>Paola Raffa</i> Signs and codes of communities. Identity and transmission of a heritage of knowledge	95
<i>Nicola Orlacchio</i> Priorities for Safeguarding Africa's Intangible Cultural Heritage: An Analysis of the Implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention.	100
<i>Johnathan Djabarouti</i> Constructing ‘Slow Events’: Integrating Tangible and Intangible Heritage Perspectives	103

<i>Mariateresa Petino</i> Sustainability and Heritage: towards a shared future	105
<i>Marcella Zanchetta</i> Cultural Heritage: between wars and natural disaster	107
<i>Laura Ricci, Carmela Mariano</i> Cultural heritage and urban regeneration strategies	110
<i>Daniele Colistra</i> The art of Calabrian ceramics and the representation of popular myths	114
<i>Ryu Hyunguk, Ishihara Yasushi, Yokoi Takahiro</i> Changes in the environment and support system for Deaf people and sign language in North Korea	120
<i>Chiara Simoncini</i> The color of soda. The garden city of Rosignano Solvay, a heritage to be saved.....	129
<i>Andrea Boito Ghebbi</i> : an African unit of living	132
<i>Jeannette Sordi</i> Microscapes. Micro Tactical Gardens for the temporary activation of of the UNESCO Industrial Landscape Heritage Site Fray Bentos, in Uruguay.	136
<i>Maria Carolina Campone-Saverio Carillo</i> The “Hagiopolitan” liturgy: Intangible Cultural Heritage and Conservation of early Christian Architecture	141
<i>Natalina Carrà</i> The communities guardians of the intangible heritage of places	145
<i>Antonio Conte, Marianna Calia, Roberto Pedone, Rossella Laera</i> The reconstruction of human memories between Art and Design in the small Lucanian towns on Matera hills.	148
<i>Valeria Minucciani, Michela Benente Nilufer Saglar Onay</i> Dwelling in historical atmospheres	153
<i>Rosa Indelicato</i> Environmental heritage, an asset of which we are custodians andwhich we must responsibly pass on to future generations	156
<i>Andrea Montanari</i> For an autonomous legal consideration of cultural expressions	158
<i>Teresa Cilona, Maria Ala</i> Mediterranean landscapes to live and re-inhabit. An innovative project to be safeguarded, enjoyed and enhanced.	161
<i>Ferdinando Trapani</i> Cibo, salute e stili di vita per l'apprendimento del benessere come prevenzione primaria	166
<i>Concetta Tavoletta, Maria Gelvi</i> The contemporary relic as a heritage of the future	169
<i>Giuseppe Di Gregorio, Gabriele Liuzzo</i> Between Real and Virtual, from the museum of Opera dei Pupi in Sortino to the museum of Immaginario Verghiano	173
<i>Nour Zreika, Daniele Fanzini</i> Minor Cultural Heritage, an Approach towards Sustainable Urban Development	178
<i>Stefano Chiarenza</i> Representation as a didactic communication tool for intangible cultural heritage	181
<i>Alessia D'Errico</i> Historical Heritage: how to safeguard it and make it sustainable through surveying	185
<i>Aldo Accardi</i> The evolution of museographic strategies as the key to communities' comprehensive access to <i>tangible</i> and <i>intangible</i> heritage, against the backdrop of the evolving concept of heritage itself	189
<i>Alberto Loffari</i> Living Heritage in Emergencies: experiments with paper composite elements in Shigeru Ban	194
<i>Lucio Junior Prisco</i> Synergistic Advancements: Unleashing Innovation via Collaborative Endeavors.....	199
<i>Valeria Cera, Marika Falcone</i> A knowledge system for Micaelic rupestrian architecture in Campania (Italy)	203
<i>Noemi SCAGLIARINI</i> Reconstructing Urban <i>Heritage</i> : Carlo Aymonino's Vision through the Paganini Theatre Project in Parma	208
<i>Michele Mario Truosolo</i> Cultural Heritage: between architecture and urban planning	212
<i>Rosaria Parente</i> Design and Bim for the management of hospitals	216
<i>Alessandro BARCA – Stefania MASSARO</i> The role of teaching in creating immersive and inclusive cultural contexts. Crossmedia at the service of Intangible Cultural Heritage.....	224



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Daniele Colistra The art of Calabrian ceramics and the representation of popular myths

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Abstract

The paper summarizes research aimed at enhancing and safeguarding ceramic art in Calabria, particularly the depiction of myths and figures of popular culture. It is a cultural expression that concerns two prevalent sectors among those defined by the *Convention*: "oral traditions and expressions" and "traditional craftsmanship". The research highlights the historical, artistic, and ethno-anthropological value of narration through representation and relates it to similar expressions of the immaterial culture of other regions of the world.

Keywords: Engobed ceramic, popular myths, apotropaic masks, intangible heritage, oral culture.

1. Introduction

The *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, adopted by UNESCO in October 2003, identifies five main areas in which intangible heritage manifests itself and must be protected (art. 2, paragraph 1). In particular, the first area ("oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage") and the fifth ("traditional craftsmanship") are both present in ceramics that represent events, beliefs, characters: divinities, apotropaic masks, metaphysical elements present in stories passed down orally. These clay representations have accompanied the evolution of the human species since ancient times and still survive today - albeit to a limited extent - in various expressions of popular culture.

2. The tradition of ceramics and the representation of the myth in southern Italy

In southern Italy, the sumptuous tradition of Magna Graecia and Roman ceramics branched out, during the early Middle Ages, into countless technical and expressive streams, almost always attributable to local traditions. In some cases, these local schools have become extinct; in others, on the contrary, they have been able to renew themselves. Ariano Irpino and the Amalfi area in Campania, Caltagirone and Santo Stefano di Camastra in Sicily, Grottaglie and Laterza in Puglia, Squillace and Seminara in Calabria are just some of the territories where the art of hand-modelled clay has remained alive despite the development of new systems to produce ceramic products.

In the Reggio area, especially in Seminara, this art (the "know-how to do") is closely intertwined with an oral tradition (the "know-how to tell") which refers to a magical and supernatural world. From this union were born the famous apotropaic grotesque masks, the *babbaluti* (anthropomorphic flasks), the fish-shaped water bottles, the hedgehog-shaped jars and the caricatures of characters hated by the people because of their arrogance: anthropomorphic, phytomorphic and zoomorphic figures which keep alive a world that has almost disappeared in the collective imagination and which, therefore, risks disappearing.

3. Art as an expression of collective identity

An artist who for several decades has managed to keep alive this heritage linked to knowing how to do and knowing how to tell is Nicola Tripodi. His laboratory in Reggio Calabria, called *Arghillà-Arte delle terre*, is a real *Wunderkammer* populated with characters that refer both to ancestral figures and to contemporary popular life. His representations refer to the time "when even things were known to possess a soul", but they are also elements that have always been present in the earth, in the sky and

in the sea. Tripodi summarizes his poetics in one sentence: "With my hands I shape the clay of my land, seeking signs of the past, symbols of a culture, of an identity, of Calabria".

The technique used by Tripodi to finish and color his works is engobe, an ochre mixture of clay and water with which the still raw and not completely dried model is covered, with the aim of improving the roughness of the surface and its waterproofness. The raw earth, once covered with engobe, can be further colored with pigments dissolved in water. It is then left to dry perfectly, then fired in a kiln so that the clay, which has now become ceramic, takes on its definitive colour.

4. The research project and the principles of the Convention

The research project we present has the objective of identifying and communicating in a scientific (measurable, verifiable, and implementable) way the representation of myth through ceramic art in Calabria. This art is studied not so much for its intrinsic value, but rather as a paradigm of a heritage of expression and knowledge that has been handed down for generations and which risks being forgotten. Through the research project, the representation of popular myths through engobed ceramics can be communicated and compared with similar expressions of human diversity and creativity. This can encourage intercultural dialogue and mutual respect for different ways of life, strengthening the sense of social and cultural belonging to their land on the part of those who have inherited this great cultural heritage.

The project is divided into two phases. The first is aimed at cataloging the works created by Nicola Tripodi; the second, which reproduces the logical structure of the first, is intended for the vast collective imagination depicted in the tradition of Calabrian ceramics.

The first phase is based on the following actions:

- photographic filing and cataloguing;
- photogrammetric survey;
- restitution of the survey in 2D and 3D, with the construction of interactive three-dimensional models that can be explored in real time;
- synopsis of the events described and the psycho-somatic characteristics of the protagonists;
- technical filing of the production phases of the works, from the choice of materials to the preparation of pigments, from modeling and coloring techniques to the firing phases;
- construction of an open-access digital platform for the communication of the research carried out and for subsequent inclusion in the inventory of the intangible cultural heritage present in the State, as indicated in articles 11 and 12 of the Convention.

5. Conclusions

The research presented contributes to guaranteeing visibility to the art of Calabrian ceramics, highlighting its historical, artistic, and ethno-anthropological value, and allowing comparison with similar creative expressions characteristic of the material culture of other regions of the world. Protection and promotion are based on communication actions to increase awareness of the value of this tradition and the consequent collective loss in the event of extinction. The choice to have given a scientific character to the analysis and cataloging work favors the transmission of the studied heritage and the possibility of continuing its practice. Despite its limited extension, the research contributes to the coordination of efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage at a regional and sub-regional level, and can serve as a model for further similar safeguarding activities, as indicated by the Convention which, in art. 2 paragraph 3, suggests actions aimed at guaranteeing its vitality, "including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education". A further safeguard measure, indicated in the art. 13, consists in encouraging the creation or strengthening of training institutions for the management of intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of this cultural heritage in the context of "forums" and spaces designated for its representation or expression.



Fig. 1: Nicola Tripodi, *Re*, engobed ceramic, cm 20x9x23



Fig. 2: Nicola Tripodi, *Bucaletta bifronte*, engobed ceramic, cm 10x14,8x18

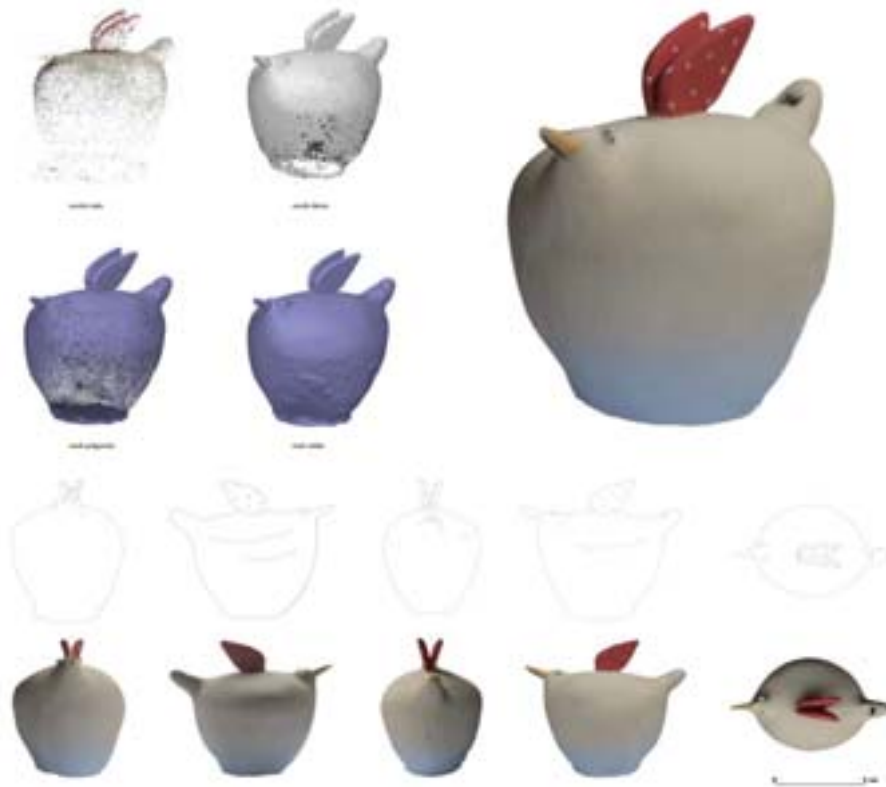


Fig. 3: Nicola Tripodi, *Uccello canterino*, engobed ceramic, cm 8x6,5x12



Fig. 4: Nicola Tripodi, *Ninuzzu*, engobed ceramic, cm 25x12x50



Fig. 5: Nicola Tripodi, *Maria Pizzi*, engobed ceramic, cm 33x20x44

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