

Towards which Representation?

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It was important for the first Focus of the 2017 UID Convention in Naples to be centered on the theme of the identity of drawing in terms of temporal evolution. It is the first reflection that we participants are called to face and that we “must” know how to deal with. The first question we ask ourselves, coherently with what is requested of us, is, in fact, how we stand today in the context of an evolution that has important repercussions even on teaching –if there has actually been an evolution– and how we relate to its undeniable metamorphoses or, more properly, “mutations” as Darwin would call them. Perhaps the question must be dealt with in a more specific way than has been done up to now, in particular as regards the ways in which man took his first steps on

the path of communication through images; a path which also in this case (it's better to say it right away) was long and blind, like the work of Richard Dawkins' watchmaker [Dawkins 1988]. Therefore, a glance at history must be given, even if briefly, starting from very long ago; that is to say when, with the first hominids in the caves of the Paleolithic era, experiments of graphic or engraved decoration were begun and the similarity was noticed of natural or engraved marks on the walls of the caves with the visual appearances of the world: animals, actions, perhaps thoughts. But the figurative analogy, while clearly revealing how flat images can perceptively reproduce three-dimensionality, hardly shed light on what immense advantages would be derived by the first users for their

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Fig. 1. Rupestrian painting in Tassili n'Ajjer, Sahara, Algiers. Gruban photography (CCBY-SA 2.0): <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Algerien_5_0049.jpg> (accessed 2018, March 12).

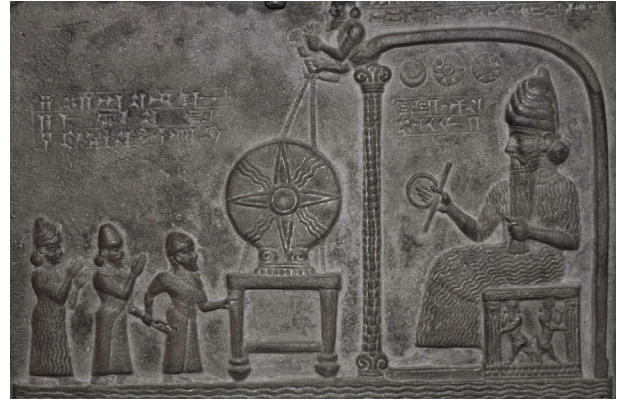


Fig. 2. Nabuapliddina Relief found under the pavement of the Ebabbar Sippa. London, British Museum: <http://unvasopienodiparole.blogspot.it/2016/05/i-babilonesi-periodo-cassita-il-rilievo_12.html> (accessed 2018, March 12).

own survival. The appropriation of the techniques of representation was, in fact, very slow and gradual: it did not last less than a few tens of millennia. Subsequently, opportunities began to appear which better revealed their usefulness, especially of those used essentially for signifying and ordering the various actions of daily life [Hauser 1955-1956]; and therefore those good for planning hunting forays. The ways in which these came to take shape as real, intelligent plans for creating collective strategies certainly required the prolonged length of time necessary for the slow modification of the acts and objectives of human activity. But it was not the result of conscious ameliorative intentions to determine these changes, but occasional events and fortuitous circumstances to trigger them [Gould, Vrba 2008].

This had already been demonstrated by the similarity of accidental spots or marks with the shapes of animals; and proven even more by the very origin of the physiological ability to represent things, which was favored by the skillful use of the hand, freed now from its locomotor function following the assumption of an upright posture (fig. 1).

Only much later did occasions occur in which the usefulness of also representing things that had to do with places of habitation became evident. But above all, it was the intention of making use of representations to plan the realization of habitable constructions to be late in manifesting itself. In fact, the ability to make drawings,

graffiti or engravings existed much earlier than the ability to prefigure, through images, the concrete realization of what is represented. It is significant that the traces of measurements made on half-finished building materials date from before the use of these materials incorporated into functional systems: construction was first done with modules and sequences of determined physical quantities, before being based on ultimate images of their overall figurative outcomes. The marks were, in fact, initially used to shape basic, rather than anticipatory components to represent the final product [Inglese, Pizzo 2014]. In primitive design thinking, the stone comes before the column and the column before the temple.

With the progress of civilization and of culture, opportunities grew for eliciting those stimuli and those opportunities of communication which extended the practice of representation to all human activities, especially those related to the use of the image as a specific objective of aesthetic communication and information, as well as a tool for designing all sorts of artifacts. Together with the ability of "making" increasingly complex, more perfect and more useful things, the need grew for "teaching how to make them" and thus schools were born, with teachers who traced the paths and students who were able to learn their skills. As a result, along with the progress of techniques and methods, the great epics of art and graphics in all their forms ensued. Being able to re-

present became an essential tool for becoming aware of the varied and marvelous multiplicity of the world. Just as “knowing how to teach how to make it” was essential to being able to give the world an appearance, that is, to be able to communicate, in an appropriate manner, the awareness of its existence, its epochal characteristics and its identity in every respect. But also the awareness of one’s own existence and of one’s role in its respect: what others would then define as “the image of the world” [Schrödinger 1963].

Drawing, as well as every figurative art, especially in that part of the world which in Classical times was to become the cradle of Mediterranean culture, played an essential role in acquiring this awareness, and certainly this was their golden age, during which often sublime works were conceived and realized (figs. 2-5). All united by the desire to capture the essential features of what was gradually becoming the common human habitat, with all the meanings that culture was beginning to attribute to it. Indeed, it was culture itself that assigned human values to the world and it was culture that made the figurative qualities of space inseparable from the values that man himself attributed to it. The world was becoming the theater of human history, configuring itself as a physical, moral and spiritual construction of its life, in the way that thought itself was shaping it. Thus a new concreteness was born, which could be formalized in the figurative aspects of the world in relation to the meanings that were gradually attributed to it. Now, thanks to the possibility of capturing and fixing the morphological aspects of evolution, every change could be recognized and dated with new parameters, including figurative ones, capable of measuring and evaluating the passage of time (figs. 6-9).

It was therefore becoming possible to connect forms, and the actions necessary to configure them, not only to space but also to time, that is, once again, to the characteristics of the ongoing evolutionary phase.

An evolutionary phase in which it was making more sense to speak of quality, taste and fashion not only in the context of the ephemeral but also with reference to the most essential aspects of life and the behavioral attitudes that derive from it.

In this way, representation also channeled itself into more codified teaching paths, linked to the renewal of ways to produce and transmit images. At the same time, its infinite expressive possibilities were becoming defined and differentiated. And, while the irrepressible development



Fig. 3. The Great Sphinx. Egypt, Necropolis of Giza.

Fig. 4. Hunting scene in the marsh, 15th century a.C. Tomb of Nebamun, Valley of the King in Thebes, Egypt. London, British Museum: <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TombofNebamun-2.jpg>> (accessed 2018, March 12).

Fig. 5. The Lion Gate, a symbolic expression of the monumental entrance of the citadel of Mycenae in the 2nd millennium B.C.



Fig. 6. The spectacular construction of the image of the world in the full expressiveness of the Palace of Knossos, 16th century B.C., here in a demonstrative reconstruction.

Fig. 7. Synthesis of expression and functionality of Greek art of the 5th century B.C. in the Erechtheum of the Acropolis of Athens.

Fig. 8. The first experiments of perspective illusionism borne witness to by the Fourth Pompeian style in the 1st century A.D.

Fig. 9. The Apollo of the Belvedere, roman reproduction of a greek sculpture. Vatican City, Vatican Museum. Image by Livioandronico2013 (CC BY-SA 4.0): <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36447892>> (accessed 2018, March 12).





Fig. 10. Giotto, *Lamentation over the dead Christ*, 1503-1505. Padua, Chapel of the Scrovegni.



Fig. 11. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*, 1485-1490. Florence, Firenze, Church of Santa Maria Novella, Cappella Tornabuoni Chapel.

Fig. 12. Pietro Longhi, *The Little Concert (The family concert)*, 1750-1755. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.



Fig. 13. Alfons Mucha, *Réverie (F. Champenois)*, 1897. Detail. Richard Fuxa Foundation, Foto © Richard Fuxa Foundation: <<http://www.artemagazine.it/mostre/arte-moderna/item/115-milano-alfons-mucha-e-l-art-nouveau>> (accessed 2018, march 12).



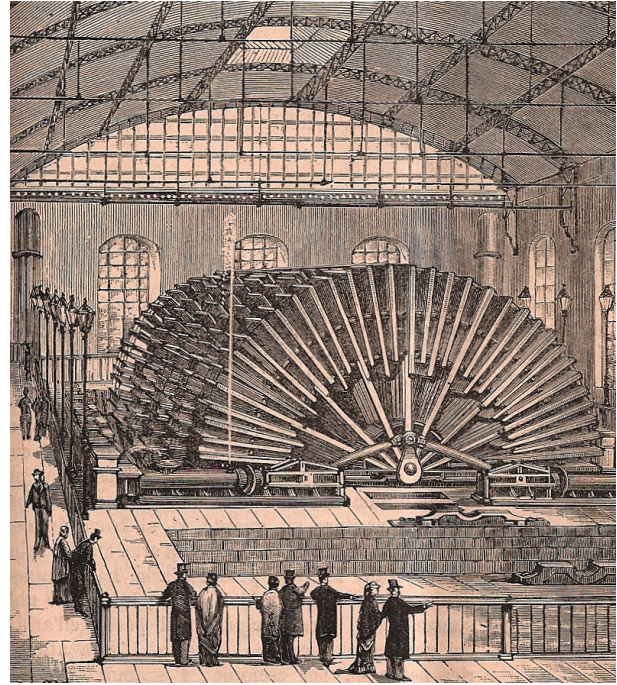
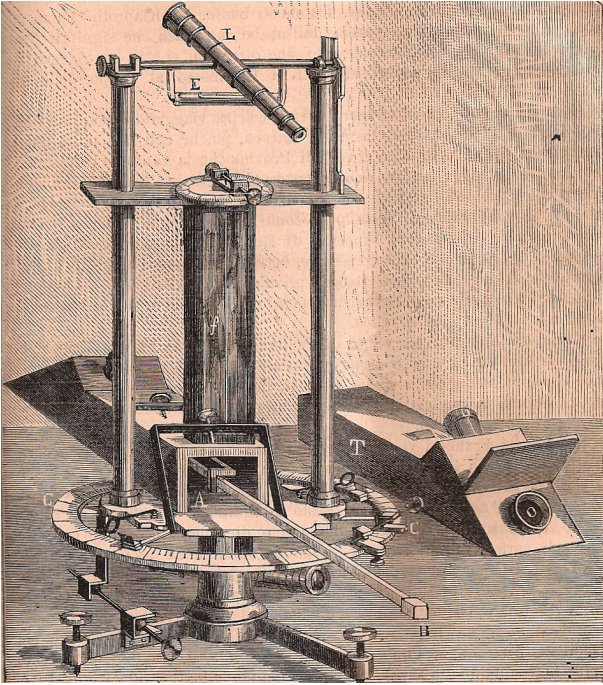
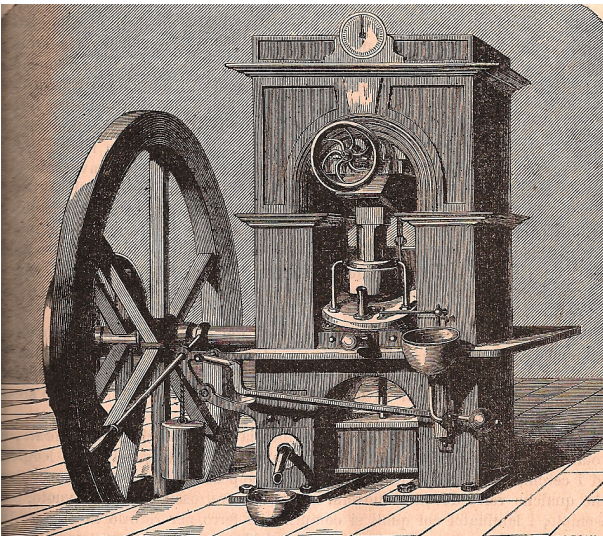


Fig. 14. Gambey's Compass. From Clerc 1885.

Fig. 15. Steering wheel. From Clerc 1885.

Fig. 16. Marly's Machine. From Clerc 1885.



of progress was oriented according to divergent tendencies, various figurative and behavioral modes became active, converging into just as many schools of thought which progressively nourished the various styles and the numerous “-isms” of culture, at first humanistic, later bourgeois and romantic, finally proletarian and, today, global. Many aspects of art and taste characterized the different attitudes, and not only outwardly, in the alternation of figurative languages, but above all for the symbolic meanings and for the social and moral contents associated with them (figs. 10-13).

Over time, and without profoundly modifying the ways of transmitting knowledge, the image explored the main paths of creation and communication of forms, avoiding the many epochal cataclysms that involved, in other re-

spects, politics and economics; in this way it overcame its “developmental crises.”

In the course of half a millennium, within the respective operational reference areas, aesthetic, figurative and design research, as well as the most advanced experimentation, retained a substantial linguistic homogeneity that today, in the light of the revolutions that stir the world of communication in images, appear almost static. Even in the world of technology and science the transmission of knowledge continued to reinforce its inclination to act as a stable common language (figs. 14-17). A language that, although influenced by dated models, began to manifest the tendency for the widespread use of iconic communication that would soon begin to elevate the image to the rank of a diffused figurative language, to some extent also universal.

But perhaps in the world of images, not yet well-perceived ferments of unrest had been active for some time. If this were not so, there would have been no room for the flaring up of those sparks of innovation that ignited the minds of enlightened avant-gardes and that stimulated, during the nineteenth century, outstanding artists to push the frontiers of representation toward never-before-explored territories. On the threshold of the so-called “short century,” linguistic mutations became overwhelming and, between the contestation of the old and the uncertainty of the new, they assumed the role of signs of change. The alternation of fashions became more and more rapid and frequent. Consequently, inventing, producing and transmitting images, but perhaps even more, teaching how to do so, became a crucial issue involved in producing culture.

I again ask myself if this sign of change is also a sign of evolution for civilization and perhaps even for the image. I therefore think of the main objective of this note, in which I would like to distinguish the sense of evolution as “progress,” in the sense of an advancement towards the best, which would require a qualitative judgment, from the sense of evolution in the true Darwinian meaning of the term, that is, the simple replacement of previous models with other more recent ones. Assuming that this change, while being implicit (and necessary) for the effectiveness of the substitution, does not necessarily imply the conscious intentionality of the goal. And at this point, I would ask myself more precisely: is there a substantial “improvement,” over time, of the methods of representation and the ways of teaching it, or is it just a matter of technical innovations, not concerning the meaning and

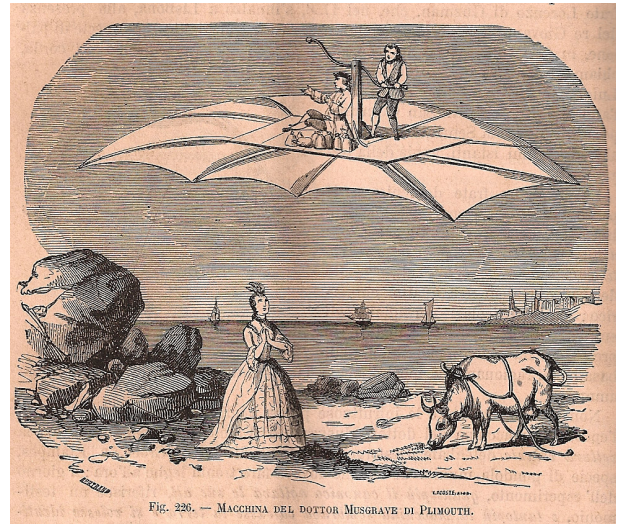


Fig. 17. In the illustration of “La macchina del dott. Musgrave” (“Dr. Musgrave’s Machine”) there are depicted, without any ironic intention, epochal attitudes. From Clerc 1885.

the profound objectives of the procedure? To put it simply, as an example, and with the benefit of hindsight, can we consider perspective an evolution in a progressive sense, therefore intentionally improving representation, or only an evolution in the Darwinian sense, and therefore a simple, circumstantially advantageous instrumental mutation? We know today that, in light of the reflections offered to us by Cubism, the question is open.

Not only, but we are consolidating the certainty that we can never talk about “better” or “worse” ways of expressing ourselves with images, but perhaps only of which circumstances have caused the success or the decline of particular representative models, possibly never determined by deliberate and conscious intentions, but only by the accidental mutations of trends.

It will not, in any case, be the problem of the finalization, or not, of the evolution of the image to affect the profound meanings of evolutionism, but the question is certainly important. For those involved in representation, it is not irrelevant to know whether the changes that characterize it today are part of the flow of events that testify to a great epochal, decisive and “wanted” event, or whether they are to be counted among the occasional



Fig. 18. The *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* shows with which attitude, at the end of the 20th century, we began to re-evaluate how the images of the past had been able to capture and transmit the immense complexity of events, testimonies and reflections, which characterized the times past.

and temporary mutations that can be fully evaluated only in retrospect.

In other words, the question is not terminological, but substantial: it is perhaps the first time that one wonders about the evolution of the image, calling into question its epochal mutations and then subjecting even the evolution of its models of reference to criticism, in trying to make sense of what we do. For this reason, we give great attention to the comparison of our behavior with that of those who preceded us, even in representing the world: Aby Warburg with his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* has offered a famous example (fig. 18). Today we study

the ways in which, in the past, we have represented life, we investigate how we studied the environment and by which interests or curiosities we were driven. In doing so, we focus not only on how these were different from today's, but above all, on how different we were then, as we recorded them and therefore, what the observations we made were. Were we more merciless, more permissive, more superficial? In the dark ages were we too severe when we condemned the past, or were we too lenient when, with ingenious nineteenth-century triumphalism, we welcomed the new and exalted the "magnificent and progressive destiny" of the future? Evidence of these various judgments that remains fixed by images, mirror of reality, is the most authentic testimony and the most precious measure of the time past. We well know the allure and complacency aroused by the exploration, sometimes fascinating, sometimes critical or ironic, of the differences between current models of life and those, for example, of the 1920s. To compare them stimulates transversal reflections and moral judgments whose transience and fallacy can lead to our questioning the validity and universality of what we consider today the most essential values of life, that is to say, what it is right or wrong to do, both socially and morally.

The surprising mutation (figs. 19, 20) sustained today by inhabited and lived-in places, certainly the most radical in the history of humanity, requires us to not defer the question confronting us: that is, how we must orient ourselves in guiding the changes in modes of communication. Naturally in the context of the figurative tools within our competence, if it is possible to do so.

In fact, while the great megacities present a picture of a living environment in which almost nothing of what belongs to normal language is fully recognizable, even representation opens abysses of unpredictability. Are other horizons really opening for other objectives or is there the fear that the new *chances* for understanding the world are just new myths?

I refer mainly to the disponibility of images to be manipulated with the new information systems, with virtual experiences, with augmented reality and with the simulations of every order and degree that storm the world of communications and which promise, or perhaps only claim to offer, more fruitful perspectives for knowing and doing. We ask ourselves if the race toward the new forms and the new contents of representation has been a useful

race or just a senseless flight toward an alternative world that in many respects was proving to be a failure. We had thought of perhaps taking a journey alongside a friendly avatar to be sent ahead to probe the unknown results of technical, social, economic and behavioral experiments of a renewal that, basically, was not sought and, rather, whose consequences were feared.

Fig. 19. Congested space in New York City: <http://wallpaperswide.com/aerial_view_of_new_york_city-wallpapers.html> (accessed 2018, march 12).

Fig. 20. Vision of a megalopolis: <<https://pixabay.com/it/edifici-grattacieliocielonuvole-2581875/>> (accessed 2018, march 12).



Now we go back to asking ourselves if the new instruments of representation and knowledge of that hopefully better world will be effective for understanding it, at first, but then for living there, using and perhaps enhancing and loving it. So not just to exorcise it, reducing the distance that separates us from it, but to grasp its mutability and to give it a current meaning, in the footsteps of what

Fig. 21. The Coliseum: Augmented Reality (ARmedia 3D Tracker): <https://www.archeomatica.it/ict-beni-culturali/armedia-3d-tracker-nuova-applicazione-per-ibeni-culturali-in-realta-aumentata> (accessed 2018, march 12).

Fig. 22. BIM application obtained using Autodesk Revit: <<https://www.autodesk.com/solutions/bim/hub/what-is-bim>> (accessed 2018, march 12).



Aby Warburg did in the last century. In this sense, the current increase in studies on the representation of the environment and the landscape is a good sign. New and updated operational tools are being made available to us for establishing a conscious and intense connection with the globality of the contemporary world and with the continuity we wish to maintain with the past (figs. 21, 22). Here we come back to our initial question: is this a generically explorative phase or are we participating in a conscious epochal evolution from which we can expect the hoped-for better future? Some predictions, or perhaps only some hypotheses, attribute representation with a more secure capacity of control and completeness with respect to the falsifiability of the word. It seems that the image can offer greater guarantees of correspondence to the truth, but perhaps it itself could be thwarted by the pervasion of the illusion, deception, error and falsity, or at least of the superficiality, neither more nor less, of the way it has been up to now.

The question is of the utmost importance: in our hands, as teachers, do we perhaps hold an instrument of truth? We know that representation is a solid and lasting thing, but we ignore the extent to which iconic language can productively substitute alphanumeric language. We are certainly flattered to be protagonists of this essential mu-

tation of the role of the image and we can be confident that it is an important evolution, but this time, not only in the Darwinian sense, that is, not only as a succession of mutations that “ex post,” accidentally, prove to be advantageous, but in the sense of intentional and conscious refinement of communication, oriented to transmit truer truths. And therefore we would like to think that the image, as a renewed and more effective means of communicating “just” thought, will become a more authentic language, capable of transmitting, perhaps more than words, messages of truth.

Will we witness, or rather, actually participate in its “guided” genetic mutation? It would be a decisive step on the path of evolution and could perhaps trigger that spark of lucid intuition, a conscious promoter of perfection, whose existence is so intensely opposed by the most intransigent evolutionism.

Darwin held that just one of these sparks would undermine the entire castle of his theory, and I, myself, (*si parva licet...*) must agree. It would be a beautiful adventure of thought to take part in a process of “purification” of the image, transformed from a messenger of lies to a repository of truth.

May we all –members of the UID, its guardians– share in this hope.

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