

Drawn Writings

Agostino De Rosa

Luigi Serafini's (1949) passion for nature has its roots in his childhood, when, in Pedaso, in the Marche region, he spent seemingly endless summer days in the enchanted park surrounding his relatives' house, reached from Rome by car along the Via Salaria with his family. It was within this botanical and zoological enclave, situated not far from the river Aso, descending from the mythical Sibillini Mountains (though perhaps, as Serafini himself maintains, possessing a karstic source near Mount Aso in Japan), that the young Luigi began to draw plants and barnyard animals, perhaps sketching the first iconograms of that fantastic bestiary and herbarium which would later become the *Codex Seraphinianus* [Serafini 1981]. Symmetrically aligned with the longitudinal axis of the Apennines, as though within the mirror-world of Alice, the passion of Serafini for the classical world –nurtured by his father's love of antiquities– had the opportunity to develop in the Eternal City, where he was allowed to freely wander among the Fori Imperiali, in a world equally resonant with mythological echoes, composed of arches, columns, brick walls, and precious marble claddings.

These two passions of Luigi's found convergence, driven by his extraordinary aptitude for drawing, in a concrete academic interest when he enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture at La Sapienza, University of Rome, where Serafini attended courses taught by distinguished professors who helped to sharpen his tastes and those expressive tendencies

already *in nuce* within him. Although his university years coincided with the season of student protest and the clashes of Valle Giulia [cf. Merlino 2008], for the young Serafini this was nonetheless a period rich in fertile encounters, among which he particularly recalls the one with Bruno Zevi, who returned from the United States in 1944 after the Liberation and was at the time a lecturer in Architectural History, as well as a passionate defender of the 'organicist' line [cf. Zevi 1945] (in opposition to the 'rationalist' one) in modern and contemporary architecture, under the protective aegis of the master Frank Lloyd Wright –a figure who never ceased to exert influence upon the language of the young student and future architect. The permeability and continuity between interior and exterior spaces, the idea of hybrid forms inspired by nature, with their sinuous and phytomorphic development (here emerges the theme of metamorphosis as a constant within his *modus operandi*), and characterized by patterns resonant with the biomorphic world, are all themes that Serafini draws from the experiments of the American architect, before reworking them in his own way. That same university also became the setting for two further fateful encounters: respectively with Maurizio Sacripanti (1916-1996) and Luigi Pellegrin (1925-2001), with whose professional studios he would later collaborate on important projects, among which we may mention here, for brevity's sake, only the middle school in Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna

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(Forlì), designed by Sacripanti. The empathetic resonance between Serafini and these two architects was probably grounded in the high degree of visionary intensity characterizing their expressive languages, centered upon a continuous dialogue between architecture and the arts, but also upon the use of 'drawing' as an autonomous expressive vehicle, free from the intrusions of conformist patronage [see De Rosa 2016; Mezzetti 2003], and thus a true avant-garde expression. Yet these were also the years of another Serafinian love: England, initially mediated by a romantic relationship that prompted him to cross the English Channel frequently, drawn above all by the linguistic and anthropological renewal with which architecture – thanks to the experiments of Peter Cook (1936) [Cook 1970] and the Archigram group [Wolfler Calvo 2007], founded by Cook himself in 1960–1961 – and English society were engaging. In the 'swinging London' so vividly portrayed by Michelangelo Antonioni in *Blow Up* (1966), the futuristic, neo-technological, and utopian projects of the members of this collective, though for the most part remaining on paper, outlined an aesthetic-creative process once again founded upon the hybridization of the natural and the artificial, so dear to Serafini. Le Corbusier's *machine à habiter* thus became, in the hands of Archigram, a synthesis between the carapace of an insect and the shell of a machine, prefiguring the sublime and pataphysical alchemical and configurative transmutations of the more mature Serafini. Yet even in this nation, the echo of antiquity and its outsider representatives called him back like enchanting sirens: thus he undertook a Scottish tour in order to deepen his knowledge of the works of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928). In the sinuous lines and formal abstraction typical of the Glasgow architect, Serafini discovered an expressive language which was, on the one hand, entirely alien and original, and on the other indebted to the Tudor style: in his projects, the past was rescued from the sclerosis of history. After Gothic England, it was the *flamboyant* French cathedrals that attracted his attention during one of the long and fateful journeys – which also led him to Babylon, along the Euphrates, in 1972, and to the then République Populaire du Congo in 1973 – armed only with a Rolleiflex camera and a sleeping bag. It was, however, the four-month journey to the United States in 1971 that represented a *limen* in Serafini's biography: a *terminus a quo* as well as a *terminus post quem*, from and after which everything changed in his life, including his artistic trajectory. Attracted by the fluid mobility of the youth of that era, almost constituting a sort of human internet network *ante litteram*, and by the vague promise of employment in New

York, Serafini discovered the difficulties of integrating into the American professional world, eventually finding temporary work in Chicago as a painter-decorator for the dioramas of the Field Museum of Natural History. It was the city in which Wright had designed his celebrated Prairie Houses, but where Louis Henry Sullivan and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had also worked: and this compensated him for the sacrifices he had thus far endured. From Illinois he then travelled toward the West Coast, crossing that borderland of manifest geology which is Arizona. Here occurred two decisive encounters with two equally emblematic communities, specular in their intentions yet entirely antithetical in their formal and anthropological results: that of Taliesin West [cf. Smith 1997], Wright's academic residence during the cold winter months when he abandoned his Taliesin East in Wisconsin, whose buildings had been shaped to integrate organically with the rocky landscape surrounding Scottsdale; and that of Arcosanti [cf. Wilson, Sarda 1999], the 'arcological' [1] and utopian city conceived by Paolo Soleri in 1970, 110 km from Phoenix, in the heart of the desert, where people from all over the world had gathered in order to realize the project of an eco-sustainable and self-sufficient city. It was above all there that communal life left an indelible imprint upon Serafini's imagination: the long nights spent with young men and women from across the globe, seated in circles beside the vapors produced by heated volcanic stones subsequently drenched with water, exchanging new existential perspectives while listening to Soleri's pantheistic orations – inspired by the thought of the Jesuit philosopher Teilhard de Chardin and hybridized with shamanic techniques derived from the Native American Hopi – would later find their counterpart, *mutatis mutandis*, precisely in Rome, during his apprenticeship in Pellegrin's studio, Pellegrin himself likewise having returned from the United States, during equally sleepless nights spent drawing and designing upon old technigraphs, nights that inevitably also became moments of intense intergenerational dialogue. It was within this atmosphere that, in 1982, Serafini – by then increasingly present in Milan for editorial reasons – met Ettore Sottsass through the mediation of Alessandro Mendini. Enthusiastic about the plates of the *Codex*, Sottsass invited him to participate in the birth of the Memphis group [Fitoussi 1998], the collective of architects, designers, and graphic artists that attempted to renew the creative language of the era by blending styles of the past, industrial materials (for example through the intensive use of laminate), and contemporary suggestions, through a refined and at times uninhibited use of kitsch. For the group's first exhibition, held in Milan in

September 1981, Serafini designed a freestanding mirror in tubular metal and laminate which enjoyed considerable press success, though not commercial success. Nonetheless, the liaison with Memphis ran its course very rapidly, perhaps because it was tied to a repetitive mannerism that proved constraining for the young artist-architect, who began to explore the realm of design in solitude and with ever greater intensity: from this period date works such as the *Santa* chair (steel and velvet/leather, 1986, designed for Sawaya & Moroni); the *Strappo* coffee table (tempered glass, 1989, Tonelli) and the *Luigi* chairs (black and chrome-plated steel frame, seat and backrest in tempered glass, 1990, Tonelli); the stands of the *Circo Massimo* series (925 silver, 1990, Cleto Munari) and the *Totem* centerpiece (925 silver, 1990, Cleto Munari); several lamps (ceiling and floor lamps in Murano glass, Artemide) and several toy ceramics (*Nessy* and *Hyppoteapot*, 1985).

His interest in craftsmanship inspired by classical traditions found further focus during those years in the exhibition *Abitare il tempo* (Verona Fair, beginning in 1986), which, thanks to the intuition of Carlo Amadori and the sophisticated cultural direction of Ugo La Pietra, succeeded until 1997 in highlighting the manufacturing excellences throughout Italy, connecting it with architects, artists, and designers. Serafini participated in at least ten of these events, engaging on multiple fronts. At the invitation of Adolfo Natalini, for the 1988 edition, he designed the Choir-Wardrobe Room, in which he placed his *Curvadio* cabinet [2] (painted wood and walnut burl veneer, 1988); while for the 1990 edition, as curator of the Umbria pavilion, and while visiting the productive realities of that territory so dear to him, he decided to ask the exhibiting companies to manufacture his 'functonoids' [3], objects resembling familiar and reassuring utilitarian forms but performing surreal and unsettling functions. The tutelary spirit of Ovid and his fascination with metamorphoses hovers over all these creations, characterized by a playful and refined use of formal combinations between the organic and the inorganic, between the botanical and zoological worlds, between functionality and gratuity –the gratuity of the gift that so often characterizes the work of Luigi Serafini.

It was precisely during this phase of his professional life, and more specifically in 1987, that Serafini arrived at his present studio-home [4]: near the Pantheon in Rome, he rented a large apartment situated on the third floor of a historic building belonging to the Order of the Knights of Malta. Gradually, as the seasons passed and artistic experiences accumulated, Serafini transformed the bare rooms of this apartment into veritable *Wunderkammer*, relying upon a cohort of master

craftsmen whom he had met during previous years and who alone were capable of translating the artist's complex spatial and decorative visions into concrete three-dimensional objects. The first domestic space to assume its present form was the kitchen where, beside a large circular table (with rotating central tray), the heavy prototypes of the *Susprial* chairs in solid metal rod found their place. That space gradually became crowded with salvaged objects such as the genetically modified sideboard that had belonged to Serafini's grandmother, who had also owned the chair suspended above the refrigerator column, as well as his first oil painting (dating from 1960, when the author was eleven years old: a floral still life set in the mythical summer house of Pedaso). It filled itself with mythopoietic multiples and allegorical images (such as the painted reproduction of one of the *Miracles of Saint Francis of Paola* by Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari, 1654-1727, executed for the Roman church dedicated to the saint, or the panel with the metaphysical interpretation of the osmotic bond between the obelisk of Minerva [5] and the adjacent basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva). Yet within the same kitchen one also finds a series of highly functional steel furnishings equipped with state-of-the-art appliances and cooking facilities. It is the most intimate place within this house-museum, a term that then as now could intimidate the unwary visitor: it would therefore be more accurate to define it as a house-laboratory, almost an alchemical crucible where common sense ceases to dictate aesthetic and functional choices, and where the enchanted gaze of the creator of the *Codex* prevails.

And perhaps it is indeed a kind of three-dimensional codex: this impression arises immediately upon crossing the austere door that, from the landing of the fifteenth-century staircase of the Roman palazzo, leads into the rectangular vestibule of the house. Here one is greeted by an explosion of colors, dominated by white and Pompeian red (colors associated by Serafini with the mnemonic persistence of the chromatic systems of road and naval signage, whose synthetic and polysemic graphics inspired a large part of his work). After ringing a bell/dulcimer, among a *Carrot Woman* inspired by Polykleitos, Persian carpets, red runners, display cases containing pagan nativity scenes and science-fiction dioramas, several of his most bizarre and enchanting works are displayed: such as *Sul filo della lana*, a sculpture from 2003 conceived for an exhibition organized by Philippe Daverio in Biella; or *Ora Oceanica*, an enormous vertical wooden disc painted with liquid forms and lysergic colors, connected to a digital clock, alluding to Jean-Luc Godard's film *Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*. Watched over by the archetypal icon of King

Botto, the visitor's never-exhausted gaze rebounds from one wall to another; where the arcane graphisms of his asemic writing pursue one another in the guise of epitaphs, plaques, or Platonic mementoes: we do not grasp the meaning of that alphabet, just as occurs in the 'reading' of the *Codex*, yet we emotionally intuit its empathetic resonance, like preschool children contemplating images. The curves and knots of the 'Serafinian' script, which seem to evoke Kufic or Polynesian

alphabets, follow the logic of the *coup de fouet*, unfolding as well within the furnishings and decorations of the house. Within this and the other o(a)ntological houses of Luigi Serafini there lies concealed a neural –or rather aural– network linking the images and asemic text of the *Codex*, creating, through a simultaneously poetic and magical reaction, "words and things" through the gaze alone, thereby mocking even Michel Foucault [6].

Notes

[1] The term 'arcology', according to Soleri, refers to the capacity of a large building to guarantee and sustain an internal ecology together with a very high residential density: ultimately, it "proposes a highly integrated and compact three-dimensional urban form": cf. Soleri 1970, p. 22.

[2] The object was designed by Serafini to be placed within the Studiolo, the theme of *Abitare il tempo* in 1988: cf. *Casa Vogue*, 198, July-August 1988, p. 82, figs. 2, 3.

[3] Namely: *Salto-di-pesce*, *Biscriteriaire*, *Mobiluovo*, *Elefireplace*, *Lampanda*, *Contaore*, *Astra & Azione*, *Dentro-la-Foglia*, *Ruota Ubaldesca Universale*, *Infusi Umbri*, *Armascura*, *Trono Bizzarro*.

[4] Cf. Villani, Taylor, Saint Pierre 2023; Villani 2010. Prior to this, the artist

resided in an attic apartment at Via Sant'Andrea delle Fratte 30.

[5] Following his stay in Rome, Salvador Dalí drew inspiration from this very obelisk for a series of paintings, among which may be recalled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening*, and *The Elephants*.

[6] For further studies on the architectural work of Luigi Serafini, see De Rosa, Calandriello 2025. Since 2024, the research group *Imago rerum* (Università Iuav di Venezia), under the direction of Agostino De Rosa, has undertaken the scientific survey of all the architectures and design/furnishing objects created by Luigi Serafini; these will be documented in a forthcoming volume and will constitute the core of an exhibition at the MACRO in Rome: cf. De Rosa (forthcoming).

Author

Agostino De Rosa, Dipartimento di Culture del Progetto, Università Iuav di Venezia, aderosa@iuav.it

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