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Seven wonders of the world: how to remember destroyed Artworks

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Abstract

This contribution tries to develop an interesting theme: the memory of an imagined artwork. Case in question, the seven wonders of the world, is the most famous because explains how ancient (and destroyed) artworks have fortunes in order that they become an archetype that lives from antiquity to contemporary age. The reason of this success is present in the same definition of Wonder: Aristotle's philosophy introduces this word, identified as a primordial feeling that is at the beginning of knowledge; man is amazed from the phenomenon and tries to understand his essence. Wonder is a philosophical word and then it'll shift into scientific and artistic trades. Rhetorical work *De septem orbis spectaculis* attributed to Filone da Bisanzio is important because helps us to understand that the Wonder is a word's gift, a concept that can be transmitted only by words (history and literature). Art cooperates with technology to become "wonderful" and "amazing" creating veritable masterpieces, first machines then art miracles. In this context, it's necessary to explore wonder's meaning and then examine the seven architectural wonders of the world and their critical fortunes over the centuries. The fortune of these archetypes is created by their fundamental character: they live between legend and reality, utopia and architectural greatness. The "travel in the wonder" includes characters of the likes of Antonio Averlino, Francesco Colonna, Pirro Ligorio, Athanasius Kircher, J. B. Fischer Von Erlach, Le Corbusier, Wright and Albert Robida; through the analysis of these artists, it is possible to chart a course including reworded versions of the ancient archetype demonstrating how arts (figurative arts, literature and science) are a potent and evocative mean of past's memory. The past is reinvented depending on needs of the moment. It can be amazing to note that contemporary projects are based on this images (archetypes) as ancient as legendary.

Key words

Wonders, Imagination, Speculation, Reconstruction, Mental Journey

Cognitive Wonders

A Wonder is fascinating, possessing features which are exceptional and unexpected. Grandeur, legend and myth are everlasting words connected to the famous list of the seven *Spectacula* going back to its most ancient creation. An analysis of the seven Wonders of the world will be herewith analyzed as well as the essence and the role fulfilled in art-like culture up to our present days. In order to do so, it is important to start off from ancient culture, an era in which human genius created colossal masterpieces up to our present days. It is important to understand the process which has allowed the Wonders criterion to become so famous, creating a sort of *sequence structure*, which is still *in fieri*.ⁱ This analysis, seen as an experimental recreation, initially comprises Science and Philosophy, subsequently reaching Art, which endorses a scientific-philosophical orientated principle with the subsequent introduction of the Art of Wonders.

Classical philosophy defines Wonder.ⁱⁱ All that needs to be done is understand the words of two masters of our Greek Philosophy: Plato and Aristotle. The sense of Wonder is the fundamental notion of knowledge. Both philosophers share the principle that man, the moment he perceives the sense of wonder, starts asking questions and furnishing answers. *Therefore*, Wonder is awareness of one's ignorance and the need to withdraw from this state, that is, the need to learn and know. It is not an aesthetical feeling but rather theoretical, leading man to question the reason for what he is being faced with (the phenomenon) considering the fact that he perceives no cause. The Wonders are supported by a *principle* (relating to knowledge, artifice, beauty). At this point, in order to understand such a concept, the platonic philosophy comes to our aid furnishing a clear vision of what the principle of life consists in. If Aristotle conceives a universe without a beginning or end placing it at temporal limits, Plato shapes the image of Demiurge, a god which in principle, created a world out of goodwill calling it back to order. Nature is wonderful because it is a product of supreme art by Demiurge, defined as an artist which shapes matter turning it into a masterpiece: in this way, the idea of "Art of Wonder" is born.

The topic on the fundamental principles outlined by classical philosophy is important in order to understand the reason why ancient populations have furnished the name "Wonders" to the seven colossal antique buildings in the Mediterranean. The latter have a universal value relating to production on Earth born under Destiny and with a permanent construction that goes beyond temporal and destructive limits.ⁱⁱⁱ Wonders may be defined as "divine artifices", famous examples of man's potentiality who transmits such a high standard of perfection to the point where he manages to challenge the very same laws of nature. In this way, Wonders enter the history of science and artifice

before entering history of art. The understanding of Wonders is obviously established according to a multi-disciplinary database comprising philosophy and science as well as art. By trying to bring together technological innovation in factories (that is, the practical-scientific concept) and their poetic-symbolic aspect (that is, the aesthetic-artistic concept), the task herewith carried out is to outline the *archetype*, which comprises both aspects and is inherited by future generations.

The Ancient testament: Wonders as a historical reality

It is not appropriate however to look at these seven masterpieces as simple artifice symbols. Bringing together the moments when the seven Wonders were realized, the scholars unanimously reached the first list in the third century a.c, in the few years when all seven masterpieces had been quoted. It's as if the third century man were to settle the principles relating to ancient history reducing them to symbols, thus trying to pinpoint the passage from contemporary man, conceived as a type of the "end of a historical path".^{iv} With the death of Alexander the Great in 323 a.c the Mediterranean populations as well as the populations of the nearby Orient lost political unity which they had possessed under the reign of the great Macedonian, creating in historians one single reality: the end of Hellenic prosperity as well as that of grandeur had been reached. Greece and its different populations gained a common denominator in the world reaching a period of slow decadence towards the collapse of the entire sense of Hellenism. It is this very same historical passage that get third century populations to settle the accounts, to outline a testament demonstrating to what point, populations defined as "ancient", have got to as well as the results they have reached. Symbols have thus been chosen (the seven Wonders), that not only represent maximum examples of technological geniality by the ancient man-creator, but are also, as Fagiolo states, "steps towards evolution in the world". All seven buildings represent a historical phase in the world. What links *Mirabilia* to historical phases is the *universality* feature. The third century man, on seeing the disastrous results (fratricide wars, powerful ambitions) of the disunity that Alexander had left, decides to convey as a model of prosperity those historical eras in which the whole world was unified under a unique political and cultural power. The basic enumeration of *Spectacula* needs to be considered at the beginning of the very same History. As we look towards the city of Halicarnassus in the fifth century a.c. he, who is considered "the Father of History" can be recognized: Herodotus. Apart from describing his contemporary society, he managed to look back in history recreating the grandeur of two populations that had deeply influenced the lives of the Mediterranean populations: the Egyptians and the Babylonians. Amongst all the preceding relics that had survived, Herodotus stated that two were noteworthy in the fifth century: the great city of Babylonia and the towering Pyramids of Egypt. The first two Wonders are in the most remote antiquity and witness man's grandeur of the past. The other four represent the more recent stages in Mediterranean history. Following Herodotus' course of action, he subsequently concentrates on narrating the episodes of the two great populations who, in his times, dominated the Mediterranean: the Persians and the Greeks. The choice of the two Wonders is extremely symbolic (both situated in the peninsula of Anatolia, "the land in between", that is between Greece and Persia) representing the phase of coexistence and contrast amongst two powers: The Temple of Diana and Ephesus and the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus. It is important to highlight the contamination of the Persian-oriental strategy by the Greek one (and visaversa) in these two creations. The second world era, following the Egyptian –Babylonian one, does not only comprise the rise of the Greek era but rather the coexistence of two great cultures: Greece and Persia. The Wonder, in these two cases, as from the sources analyzed, is born from the cooperation from such great cultures notwithstanding their diversity. The third stage is, in actual fact, the assertion of Greek culture in the world. It is no wonder that the third century Greeks chose, as a symbol of grandeur in their culture, Zeus from Olympus, that is, Phidia's masterpiece. He was the most important artist in the fifth century which appears to be the apex of Greek art, which overcomes the very same concept of grandeur by communicating with the gods. Alexander the Great, on the other hand, is he who concludes the "wonders" of history. It is he who brings Greece to becoming a universal model, not only from a cultural point of view but also politically and socially. The Lighthouse, (created after Alexander's death, precisely from 297 a.c), besides being an innovative masterpiece due to its functionality and structure, is the symbol of the entire alexandrine cultural politics in the period during which the Macedonian Empire was at its maxim expansion: The aim behind its construction, born directly from Homer's verses, is to highlight and show to what extent Alexandria, its history and its institutions represent the new frontier of the world inherited by Alexander. If Alexandria is considered the positive consequence of the Hellenic era (spread of culture and learning) Rhodes, on the contrary, is the negative consequence. The Colossus is born after the fratricide war between Demetrius from Syria and Ptolemy from Egypt. In the historical-political context, the Colossus is the symbol of "nostalgia", of the memory of Helios' grandeur on earth, that is, Alexander.

The other "Sun" that Philo describes, is more than anything else the symbol of the "earthly" Helios, Sun King (Roi Soleil) that the earth had ever known until that moment. To reinforce the idea that the Colossus in Rhodes might back up to perfection the figure of Alexander, is the fact that it was the first, amongst all the Wonders, to disappear; in actual fact, it had an extremely short-lived existence. Just like the death of Alexander, no-one would have imagined that such a colossal masterpiece could collapse from one moment to the next, defeated by the force of nature.

In the Blaeu Planisphere (1640) symbolically two aspects of the wonders are found. The picture of the five continents of the Earth is supported by the seven planets on the top; on the bottom, by the seven Wonders; on the left there are four elements; on the right the four seasons. It is a map seen “as the synthetic and dialectic summa of Nature and History”. If, on the one hand, History is the first context within which there are the seven *Spectacula*, so too, the seven Wonders appear to be the paradigms created by man especially due to the permanent feature of the creation beyond temporal limits and destructions.

The Journey towards the Wonders

The rhetorical text on the Wonders by Philo from Byzantium is one of the two most ancient texts (together with the sonnet by Antipatros by Sidon, *The Wonder of Wonders*) where major reference is made in order to deal with the theme of the Wonders of the world. From sources at our disposal, we learn that it is divided into six paragraphs (in which, after a general introduction, the author analyzes one Wonder after another) and he then suspends the text.

“Everyone has spoken of the Seven Wonders of the World but very few have seen them.. In order to do so, , it is important to go abroad, , to Persia, to cross the Euphrates River, to travel to Egypt, to spend some time with the Elii in Greece, to Halicarnassus in Caria, to navigate towards Rosi and visit the Ephesus in Ionia. Only after back-breaking trips around the whole world, can our expectations be satisfied, when years have gone by.”^v

Philo realizes that , in order to be able to admire all seven buildings, it is necessary to go on a very long trip. Man must move along the Mediterranean, from Egypt (*The Pyramids and The Lighthouse in Alexandria*) to Greece (*Zeus from the Olympus and the Colossus in Rhodes*), to the ancient persian territory (*the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the Temple of Phoebe and Ephesus*) to then reach the banks of the Euphrates River (*The Wall and Hanging Gardens of Babylonia*).

Augè talks of the trip as an opportunity of creating a masterpiece, of an experience favored by disorientation, the result being (with reference to Philo’s text) that of an inner dual disorientation. An ambivalence exists between *an outward journey and return* which carries an intrinsic tension between *expectation* (as a principle) and *memory* (in retrospect). The following elements are asserted at this point: *image*, subdivided into two categories: *primary images* (at the start) and *memory images* (which will remain in retrospect). At this point, the journey will become a sort of evaluation of reality which, in order not to disappoint, will be similar to the impression that one has of the very same journey before the departure. The Wonders, for us simple readers, appear as “mythical events”, a great human experience as well as ephemeral. In actual fact, they come back to life simply through *retrospection* leading us to the sources like Philo from Byzantium. This concept is therefore fundamentally important for our trip to the Wonders as all the images that will be encountered are a “reproduction” or a “reconstruction” of the *retrospective image* that the ancient historians have conveyed, at times, in the form of a myth.

“It is therefore a great and marvelous gift that of culture , which frees man from the need to move about and which shows him the beauties of the Earth in his home, donating eyes to his soul.

It is bizarre, but he who visits a place once, the moment he leaves, forgets all about it, the perfection of a masterpiece slips away and he forgets the details; instead, he who learns about the wonder through the spoken word as well as through the accuracy of man’s enterprise, completing this very same effort as a whole, will cherish the impression of each image forever, because the soul has perceived extraordinary objects.”^{vi}

The physical experience of the trip is imperfect, a fleeting experience. A man who is wise must trust culture, an immeasurable concept which allows man to learn about the “beauties of earth” through the *spoken word*. The journey pointed out by Philo in order to reach the Wonders created by man is an inner trip because the Wonder is nothing but *the gift of the spoken word* , a concept which can be recreated and realized in time only through the spoken word: “One speaks of a journey *towards the text*, that is, portrayals of a *mental, imaginary universe, full of meaning*”. With the spoken word, Philo introduces the itinerary that is to be followed; he describes the *landscape (inner)*. Using very few words, the author perfectly outlines how to observe and interact with the theme relating to the Wonders of the World:

“What I herewith state will appear to be true if my presentation, in its systematic description and all inclusive of each of the seven Wonders, will be accepted by the reader encouraging him to believe he is a *spectator of reality*.”^{vii}

Philo, who recreates the *memory shapes* which are the essence of this journey, aims at allowing the reader to travel with him along the evocative power of the spoken word , imagination and the desire to apprehend (the Aristotelian

wonder). He talks to whoever is thirsty for *culture*, to whoever wants to challenge time and generations, moving along the Eastern Mediterranean in order to pursue human grandeur (*culture* belonging to the various Mediterranean populations symbolized by the seven *Spectacula*.) thus providing “eyes for one’s soul”.

Wonders as a Constructive element

From this moment on this journey becomes a *sequence of shapes* adopted to recreate the added value of the seven wonders in the world which possess *permanence* and *growth*. Their existence, simply as a result of sources of the ancient ones observed by them, inspires two types of rearrangements: an *objective rearrangement* and a *subjective rearrangement*, that identifies the wonder as a model for endless rearrangements, variations and transformations of the theme which they represent.

However, it is necessary to highlight the *universality* feature from two points of view:

- Firstly, man is essentially spoken of considering his creative abilities and there is no distinction between races or nations. The whole world gives its contribution towards reaching scientific-technological results that may help man to create great architectural masterpieces.
- Art and Science contribute to becoming one, unique element: art cannot be created without scientific elements and visaversa. The Wonders appear to be *machines* on the one hand (science) and *miracles* on the other (masterpieces), combined by the pure sense of wonder (*incantum*).

Way back to the Macedonian era, the Wonders criterion, had become so godsend that Marcello Fagiolo hypothesized a method, similar to philosophical pilgrimage, whereby a “journey along the Wonders” was to take place, a journey at stages (man’s itinerary towards the gods) which would lead directly to God through the help of awareness towards man’s genius.

In the Middle Ages, the magical-symbolical-religious vision of life becomes more and more established and what is remembered of the great results of ancient science (which reached its peak in the Hellenic period) appear weakened and surrounded by magic and mystery. In this way, looking back to the past, the list of the seven *Miracula* are considered; they become divine creations in remote and indeterminate areas, with such complex and incomprehensible features that they become supernatural, worthy of the most refined tale. The classical example, in this regard, is Caesarian’s quotation which sees, in the seven *Spectacula*, buildings for supermen created by supermen. Cristian Wonders are brought together to pagan ones which possess other features which are just as prodigious (from the Temple of Solomon to Noah’s Ark, from celestial Jerusalem to the entire city of Rome). During the Renaissance, the Wonders are seen from a different perspective; they are stripped from the very many legends linked to them and an attempt is made to “archeologically” recreate the ancient model in order to enhance its grandeur. The *Libro delle Antichità* by Pirro Ligorio is an authentic encyclopedia and is one of the most important examples relating to the recreation of classical antiquity by the Renaissance man. In the *Introduction*, Ligorio historian is outlined, an historian who pays careful attention to sources with the precise intention of creating a universal knowledge trying to bring order to the very many sources which are often erroneous and at times obscured or misinterpreted by his contemporaries. He directly reproduces the ancient historians and their words without caring about what was written in his period because he is convinced that the historical truth belongs to “whoever created it”. If the *De septem orbis spectaculis* offers more opportunities for expressing philosophical and mythical positions, Ligorio tries with every means at his disposal to be objective and to report information which is as close as possible to the real history of these buildings. The writer compares the different tales of the ancient authors in a majestic way with the aim of creating an image of the masterpiece from different aspects. This study encourages a record of primary and secondary sources, that is, those sources that Ligorio suggests as models.

Most authors herewith mentioned are well known and they regard famous artists such as Herodotus, Strabone or Diodorus Siculus while unfortunately only a few examples are at our disposal and some have also been lost such as Metrodorus Chius, Eratosthenes of Cyrene, Arthemidurus of Ephesus and so on. The *Libro delle Antichità* is the first step towards the recreation of the ancient model. After having recreated the historical image from a literary point of view by means of the sources, the second step regards the practical activity, that is, introducing a visual image of the seven *Mirabilia*. The best example is traced back to a series of engravings around 1570, the same period in which *Libro delle Antichità* was published; the Dutch painter and engraver, Maarten Van Heemskerck, carried out engravings which were to become a fundamentally important turning point in the archetype of the seven Wonders. All the scholars agree that this godsend series of engravings would establish the criterion for having strongly divulged the seven architectural wonders. The main reason behind such a positive outcome, in my opinion, is having traced back the “historical accuracy” of the presentation. By carefully analyzing the ancient sources, the painter manages to bring together, symbolically, in the engravings, all the elements that are featured in the history of the masterpiece that has gone lost (the genesis, the commitments, the architects and the “marvelous” characteristics). By observing the engravings and, reading at the same time the sources thereof, it is possible to perceive a strong relationship between the two representations, recreating, in this way, the word-image relationship which is the essence of the Wonders and of their recollection. What is more emblematic is the engraving of the Colossus of Rhodes. When observing the

image, it is possible to see that it is subdivided in two parts. The back represents the Colossus erected in the port of the island while the front of the Colossus appears to have collapsed, with the architect, Charos of Lindos by his side with the project in his hands. If Maarten Van Heemskerck's aim was that of representing the Wonder, why should he have shown the Colossus which had already collapsed due to the earthquake? The answer is found in Plinius' words: "*This statue fell to the ground after sixty six years due to an earthquake, even though on the ground, it is an equally marvelous sight*"^{viii} The Colossus is a Wonder despite its collapse, therefore the engraver feels he has to represent the two stages of its grandeur: the moment when it was erected in the port and the moment when it collapsed and was thus cherished as a ruin by the Rhodians. Pirro Ligorio and Marteen Van Heemskerck are two poles that have recreated the historical research of the ancient model which is typical of Renaissance culture. The image of the seven Wonders, long-lost masterpieces which have become utopias, at first are subject to a literary recreation (being simply the *result of the spoken word*) promoted by Pirro Ligorio who brought together all the reliable sources on the subject, and then, it subsequently became a figurative recreation with engravings by Maarten Van Heemskerck who follows the historical information of the sources.

The case relating to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

It would take too long to herewith express the evolutionary course of the seven architectural-sculptural archetypes of the Wonders therefore it would be appropriate to limit the talk to one case study, that is, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Even if it has been widely proven that the Wonders are not simply a historical element but also ethical (emblem), cognitive and creative, this does not exclude the possibility of denying the heritage of the single *Miracula* in that society which flourishes on the basis of classicism and its models and to which it incessantly turns back to. In the case study of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Pierre Grimal writes that "the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, despite their fame, have had no influence in the Mediterranean world. They appear to be, if anything, a kind of challenge admired more for having overcome technical difficulties than for their beauty"^{ix}. Looking at the gardens of Semiramis, from ancient sources, they appear to be an enchanted, all-green, terraced mountain which reaches the sky. In actual fact, differently to what Grimal states, there are numerous examples of this architectural utopia starting off from the Middle Ages: The mountain in Dante's Purgatory – used by Fagiolo to show the similarities with the Mesopotamian Ziggurats (made up of seven terraces with cosmological deferments) – ends up with the terrestrial Paradise portraying the idea of a large hanging garden; the garden-palace in the suburbs of *Sforzinda* in the Treaty of Filarete, "divided into mounts, as best as it was possible to divide, according to the world map" situated in the center of premises comprising the Labyrinth (a symbol of journeys and soul purification) and the Island, is the final element, the end of a trip full of obstacles and considerations. It reminds us of the green mountain and it is part of the symbol of the sacred mountain that reaches the sky, surrounded by Dante's terrestrial Paradise; the Island of Kythira in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Francesco Colonna, made up of a series of declined terraces in the center of which there is Venus' Amphitheatre, whose terraces are in actual fact flowerbeds. Thus the ancient model goes beyond the centuries and suggests two elements that architects will analyze: *terracing* and the *fusion between architecture and gardens*: Between Four and Five hundred a series of Italian gardens will look towards the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; those of the Duke's Palace in Urbino, of Villa Medicea in Fiesole, of Villa d'Este in Tivoli, the Empire castle in Pesaro – just to mention a few – up to the Baroque "wonder" of Isola Bella on Lake Maggiore. But these models are also widespread amongst the projects of architects from the 1900's such as Wright and Le Corbusier, up to our present days, where garden architecture has become more and more significant due to the need of combining continued city growth to the loss of green areas: one might think of the architect Emilio Ambasz who, in 1995, suggests a green terraced mountain in the center of Fukuoka in Japan for the "Acros" cultural centre; in 2006, the High Line in New York (1929-34) is transformed into a hanging garden thanks to a contest published by the city council; even more recently, the Big Wood Skyscraper by Michael Charters, created for the «Volo skyscraper competition 2013» and, finally, S. Boeri's project for the creation of a vertical wood in Milan (2014). It is important not to forget the entire front of *vertical architecture*, that is becoming very popular and is continuing to spread (for example the façade of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris). Who knows what evolutionary models the future has in store for us; in the meantime, horizons can be widened by considering in this brief excursion Oscar winner, Hayao Miyazaki's artistic movie talent who, with his representation in *Castle in the Sky* (1986), perfectly recalls the Babylonian archetype which, at the same time, recalls the words of Aristophanes who, in *The Birds* imagines a city in the sky following the example of the city of Babylon.

The case study of the hanging gardens is just an example to explain how our world is still tied to the creative and project-orientated process, of architectural images from the distant past and that, despite the passage of time and destructions, these concepts are deeply rooted in the cultural baggage of whoever needs to analyze "the world of shapes". The most interesting aspect of the catching up of these masterpieces is in the way they are used, in the form of memory instruments, in other branches like philosophy and literature because, as Philo from Byzantium teaches, the wonder certainly creates great and grand masterpieces but, in itself, it is nothing but a philosophical concept which is kept alive with the help of the spoken word^x.

ⁱ For the theme of the “sequence of shapes”: G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 1976

ⁱⁱ For the theme of Wonder in philosophy: M. Brusatin, *Wonder’s art*, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Very important in this kind of research are the contributions of Marcello Fagiolo and M. L. Madonna: M. Fagiolo, *Wonder and wonderful*, 1976; M. Fagiolo, *Bible’s Archetypes: From Eden to Jerusalem*, 1998.; M. L. Madonna, *Pirro Ligorio and his interpretation of the seven wonders of the world*, 1976.

^{iv} P. A. Clayton, M. J. Price, *Seven wonders of the ancient world*, 1989.

^v Philo from Byzantium, *De septem orbis spectaculis*, 225 a.C.

^{vi} Idem

^{vii} Idem

^{viii} Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, XXXIV, 18

^{ix} Pierre Grimal, *L’art des jardins*, 1974

^x M. Dezzi Bardeschi, *The seven wonders of the word as reference models*, 1976.

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