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The perspective from the United States

In the United States the last few years have generated a considerable debate about what constitutes the country's cultural heritage. My remarks will be on what the theme of this session – «Protection and circulation of cultural heritage» – means in today's United States. We will see that in America 'protection' is tied up with 'interpretation'.

Although I shall not talk of circulation, let us think of one of Goya's most famous paintings, which from 1904 to 1974 was here in Villa Ruspoli, perhaps in this very room where the seminar is taking place. It is a reminder that what constitutes cultural heritage changes. In 1974, when offered for sale, the painting was not bought by the Italian State, but by collector Luigi Magnani.

The debate on the American cultural heritage erupted into the general public's consciousness at a neo-Nazi, white supremist rally over the proposed removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee (*fig.* 1) in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Lee was the commanding general of the Confederacy, and monuments to him can be found throughout the American South. Many of them were not erected in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, which ended on 9 April 1865, but in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century during the period of Jim Crow, which refers to the laws enacted by southern state legislatives to disenfranchise Black Americans and included the segregation and racial screening of the U.S. government civil service under President Woodward Wilson starting in April 1913. The Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, was begun shortly after, in 1917, and was dedicated in 1924 at an event organized by three historical associations: the Confederate Veterans, Sons of Confederate Veterans, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Cadets from the military academy marched through town that was «gaily decorated in Confederate colors»[1]. General Lee's three-year-old great-grand-daughter pulled the Confederate flag draped over the statue.

The statue had been finished by Leo Lentelli, a Bolognese immigrant to the United States, after the death of the initial sculptor, the New Yorker Henry Merwin Shrady. At his death, Shrady had also been working on the monument to the opposing general, Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union troops and later president, for a prime position in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. It was on 6 January 2021 that a seditious – largely white supremist – mob, egged on by Donald Trump, rallied before breaking into the Capitol in an attempt to reverse the results of the election. It was of little importance to these rioters that Grant had fought for the end of slavery and the preservation of the union.

In America, statues become flash points of conflict.

The Robert E. Lee monument was financed by a donor to the University of Virginia, Paul Goodloe McIntire, a Charlottesville native who had made a success on Wall Street. It was one of four sculptures that he underwrote. The others are of the Revolutionary War general George Rogers Clark, Confederate general Thomas Jonathan Jackson, known as Stonewall Jackson, and the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

McIntire's contributions to Charlottesville were not only for monuments to men who fought for the preservation of slavery or land steals in the frontier West, he also funded the departments of Fine Arts and Music at the University of Virginia. In doing so, McIntire was fulfilling the original plan of Thomas Jefferson, who had founded and designed the university in 1817, and who had always hoped that there would be a professor of fine arts.

McIntire's role has proved to be an embarrassment to the present-day art department. A statement on its webpage questions whether his name should remain: «In addition to pursuing the possibility of changing our department's name in consultation with University stakeholders, we are committed to researching and confronting the white supremacism McIntire helped cultivate and maintain, along with the name's continued impact on our community»[2].

At most, McIntire's gift of the four statues can be seen within the context of the City Beautiful Movement, which had grown out of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago as an effort to improve urban neighborhoods with the erection of public monuments. It was essentially a beautification project for America, but one that also wrought destruction. In Charlottesville, a neighborhood of largely Black residents and businesses was razed to create a

1. *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, 22 May 1924. Cited in the description by Betsy Gohdes-Baten in the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: catalog.archives.gov/OpaAPI/media/41678617/content/electronic-records/rg-079/NPS_VA/97000447.pdf (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

2. See art.as.virginia.edu/history-paul-goodloe-mcintire (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

Fig. 1 – The statue of Robert E. Lee, with the date «1619» spraypainted on the pedestals in 2019 (photo by Jamelle Bouie).

park to house the *Stonewall Jackson Monument* and there is little doubt that the donor, McIntire, was a supporter of the white supremacism.

In April 2016, the Charlottesville City Council had appointed a committee called the *Blue-Ribbon Commission on Race, Monuments and Public Spaces* to address the issue of monuments, which were offensive to Black and Native Americans. In February 2017, it was voted to remove the Lee statue, which became a rallying point for white supremacists and neo-Nazis and the site of a terrifying torch-lit march on 11 August. The *Unite the Right* rally took place the next day with counter-protests. At 1:40 in the afternoon, a car driven by white supremacist James Alex Fields, Jr., rammed into the crowd injuring nineteen people and killing Heather Heyer. Photographs showed the murderer at the rally earlier that morning. The statue was later covered and finally removed in 2021 (along with the three others financed by McIntire). In the meantime, there had been lots of protests about other monuments to Lee and in particular the one in Richmond, Virginia's state capital, which had been motivated by the horrific incidents of police violence, like the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

In 1997 all four of the Charlottesville statues had been placed on the *National Register of Historic Places*. The propriety of these monuments had not yet been seriously questioned, although in that year several women's rights groups had questioned – to no avail – the humiliating portrayal of Sacagawea in the monument to Lewis and Clark. The request to be placed on the list appears to have come from the City of Charlottesville. It was approved at the state level by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and a researcher, Betsy Gohdes-Baten, had been employed to write up the history of the monuments. She evinced no embarrassment about what these statues represented. The *National Register of Historic Places* was established as part of the *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966* passed by Congress during the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson. It is simply a listing and unless owned by the *National Park Service*, the monument is only entitled to a rather anonymous plaque designating its status. Like the green and blue plaques in London, such as those commemorating the place of Queen Elizabeth's birth in her maternal grandparents' townhouse or Karl Marx's London sojourn, the designation does not give legal protection to the monument. The United States has few federal laws concerning the preservation and care of historic sites. In September 2019 someone spraypainted the date «1619» on the pedestals of the statue of Robert E. Lee (*fig.* 1) and Stonewall Jackson. This was undoubtedly a protestor who wanted the monuments removed. 1619 is the date that the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia as commemorated by a marker at Fort Monroe on the Chesapeake. There are notable

Fig. 2 – Different texts in 1994 and 2015 commemorative markers at Fort Monroe on the Chesapeake (left: NPS Photo / Aaron Firth; right: REUTERS/Michael A. McCoy).

differences in the text from the original 1994 marker to the one put up in 2015, including the date that the United States abolished slavery (*fig.* 2)[3]. The earlier one gives the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 as the end of slavery, whereas the second gives it as the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of 1865.

The date 1619 spraypainted on the Charlottesville statues is a reflection of the publication in the *New York Times Magazine* of 18 August 2019 of the *1619 Project*, which represented the results – for a wide public – of an ongoing historical research and interpretation of the origins of American slavery and its effect on the early history of the country and its consequences today. Conceived by historian Nikole Hannah Jones, the mission statement reads: «The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from the *New York Times Magazine* that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative»[4].

The project had an immediate impact on teaching in schools and the Pulitzer Center, the same organization that gives out the Pulitzer Prizes, created a curriculum for schoolchildren of varying ages. This emphasis on the history of enslaved peoples and of the Black contribution to early American history created a serious backlash in conservative, particularly Republican America. Senator Tom Cotton introduced a bill that schools that taught it would lose federal funding. A clause of his proposed bill reads: «An activist movement is now gaining momentum to deny or obfuscate this history by claiming that America was not founded on the ideals of the Declaration but rather on slavery and oppression»[5]. As the 2020 election approached, Donald Trump realized that the history wars could be a potent weapon in his arsenal. At the White House Conference on American History, held on 17 September 2020, he declared that «critical race theory, the 1619 Project and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country»[6]. On

3. The 1994 marker reads: «The first documented Africans in Virginia arrived in 1619 when a Dutch warship landed here at Point Comfort. The "twenty and odd" Africans, captured from the Spanish, were traded to the Virginia colonists in exchange for foodstuffs. Early Africans who lived here included Anthony and Isabell, and their son William, likely the first black child in present-day Hampton. They served Point Comfort Commander William Tucker, but whether the early Africans were treated as indentured servants or slaves is uncertain. The institution of slavery evolved during the 17th century as the term of service for Africans was extended for life. The U.S. abolished slavery in 1863». The 2015 marker reads: «The first documented Africans in Virginia arrived here in Aug. 1619 on the White Lion, an English privateer based in the Netherlands. Colonial officials traded food for these "20 and odd" Africans, who had been captured from a Portuguese slave ship. Among present-day Hampton's earliest African residents were Anthony and Isabella. Their son, William, was the first child of African ancestry known to have been born in Virginia (ca. 1624). Many of the earliest Africans were held as slaves, but some individuals became free. A legal framework for hereditary lifelong slavery in Virginia evolved during the 1600s. The United States abolished slavery in 1865».

4. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

5. www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-117s2035is/html/BILLS-117s2035is.htm (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

6. trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-white-house-conference-american-history/ (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

Fig. 3 – A tour in Monticello, residence and plantation of Thomas Jefferson and now a World Heritage Site (the Thomas Jefferson Foundation).

2 November 2020, a few days before the presidential election, he signed an executive order creating the 1776 commission to teach the true history of America's founding[7]. Chaired by Larry P. Arnn, president of the private Hillsdale College in Michigan, it issued an error-filled report on 18 January 2021, which was only two days before the end of the Trump presidency[8]. The commission was disbanded by Joe Biden a few hours after he became president.

United States is a large country without many laws or traditions for the preservation of its historic, archeological, architectural, and artistic heritage, but one in which interpretation of the past is constantly debated. There are those like Cotton and Trump who want a single triumphant interpretation of the country's founding and those like Nikole Hannah Jones, the *New York Times*, and the Pulitzer Center who wish to expand our understanding of the founding chapters in the country's history.

Both these viewpoints affect how we experience museums and historic sites. And in these places, the debates continue. I could demonstrate many examples of how this is playing out in labeling and audience outreach at art museums, but perhaps it is no more evident than at the many plantations in the South, where the slave quarters have been researched and excavated in the past three decades, or so. When I was much younger, a visit to the Monticello of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence with his memorable phrase «all men are created equal» would concentrate on the Palladian architecture of the villa. Pastoral as it looks, it is of course on the top of the hill overseeing the five-hundred-acre plantation where, over the course of Jefferson's life, about six hundred people worked in bondage. In relatively recent times, there has been work on Mulberry Row, where the quarters of those working for the nearby house were located (the agricultural workers were housed much farther away, nearer to the fields). Special tours (*fig.* 3) can be taken of this area, which has been object of an archaeological dig and in part reconstructed.

I have been there. A tour of this area usually comes after a visit to the house and an account of Thomas Jefferson's accomplishments as an eighteenth-century intellectual of the Enlightenment and defender of the Rights of Man. It is a real shock, even if one knows what is coming.

Such reinterpretations of historic homes are not restricted to the American South. Historic associations in the United Kingdom are increasingly acknowledging that the source of wealth of the builders of the great country houses was slave-based. This has been a focus of the reinterpretation of Marble Hill in Richmond owned by Henrietta Howard, who was given shares in the South Sea Company by her lover, the Prince of Wales, the future King George II. While

7. www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/11/05/2020-24793/establishing-the-presidents-advisory-1776-commission (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).
8. trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023)

Vice Admiral Sir Timothy Laurence, head of English Heritage (and husband of Princess Anne Montbatten-Windsor), acknowledges that this information might make visitors uncomfortable, he says, «History is what happened. Telling the story of Marble Hill without making the link to the slave trade and to mahogany would be wrong, in my view.[…] The transatlantic slave trade was one of the most appalling things in British history»[9].

This type of interpretation could also be applied to monuments in Italy and indeed here in Florence. The riches of the Feroni Chapel in Santissima Annunziata or of their property such as Palazzo Spini Feroni in Piazza Santa Trinita and the Villa Bellavista at Borgo a Buggiano (Pistoia) are fruit in part of the family's dealings with the slave trade for the Dutch East India Company with the ships *La Speranza*, *La Prudenza*, *La Santa Caterina*, and *La Santi Giovanni e Cosimo*[10]. In recent Trumpian times in America, there has been a pushback. Newspapers have recorded white visitors to plantations complaining about the emphasis on slavery. As reported in the *Washington Post*, a sightseer at such a historical site in Charleston, South Carolina, complained in an online review that she «didn't come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves»[11]. At Monticello, a tourist could not stomach hearing how «what a bad person he [Jefferson] really was»[12]. Both at Monticello and Mount Vernon specialized tours about the enslaved people are offered free, as well as at various charges. And as a guide at the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana noted «honestly, 'plantation' and 'slavery' is one and the same»[13]. On the website for Monticello there are several videos about slavery also accessible on YouTube[14]. One deals with overseers and violence, and talks of how Jefferson went after runaway slaves. One newspaper notice is to recapture Sandy who run away after a violent beating. The video, narrated by a guide, notes that many visitors inquire if Jefferson treated his enslaved people well, to which the only reply is that one must understand that «it is impossible to be a good slave owner»[15].

As one can see from my remarks, in the United States, the debate about what constitutes the country's cultural heritage is ongoing and it is not so much focused on how to preserve it, but on how to interpret it and most importantly teach it for future generations. I am almost sixty-nine years old and certainly what I learned about it in school in the 1960s – that liberal decade – does not resemble any of the discussion happening today.

9. *Financial Times*, 29 May 2022, "House & Home", p. 2.
10. Cools H., *Francesco Feroni, intermediario in cereali, schiavi e opere d'arte*, Quaderni storici 122, 2006, pp. 353-65.
11. Knowles H., *Retropolis: As plantations talk more honestly about slavery, some visitors are pushing back*, The Washington Post, 8 September 2019.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. https://www.monticello.org/slavery/the-plantation/ (last accessed 09 July 2024).
15. "Overseers and Violence": www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGMNZ-3E05Y&t=8s (last accessed 20 Sept. 2023).