

THE HARMONY OF A PRODUCTIVE LANDSCAPE

“When Europe was a garden”

I'm going to present a case study of Mediterranean culture expressed in agricultural landscape.

The case study is located in Sicily, main stage of the myths of classical antiquity.

Georges Duby, medieval historian, wrote that Europe was a garden when most of the territory was cultivated and the forests exploited. This happened in the Middle Ages before cities converted rural territory into a subsidiary space. This caused the slow abandon of agriculture.

When we look at rural well-structured territories, we wonder if the arrangement of the elements relates only to practical and productive issues or if there is also an aesthetic look that follows those layouts.

During the 30's, the geographer Jules Sion, observed something like a local style in the layout of the cypresses in Umbria and Toscana that revealed a bit of the soul of their people.

Beyond the productive technical or geographical issues, there was also an aesthetic option that approached the real landscape to the paintings of the *Quattrocento*.

This observation relates to the Oscar Wilde's idea that life imitates art and not the contrary.

REPRESENTATION OF THE TERRITORY PRIOR TO CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE

As Yves Luginburg says, the representations of the territory in the West before the birth of the concept of landscape appear often linked to the world of agriculture.

These representations appear as a background in which a main scene takes place (Effetti del buono e del cattivo governo in città e in campagna Lorenzetti, ver site).

Sometimes they are related to practical issues, such as in *Tacuina Sanitaris*, Middle Ages illustrated books that showed the medical knowledge at the time, in particular the influence of food in health.

In other cases these representations are linked to the cycles of the seasons, as showed in Books of Hours such as *Très Riches Heures du Duke of Berry* from the Limbourg brothers.

The influence of these representations in the birth of landscape painting as an independent genre is fully recognized nowadays. According to the culturalist current, the concept of landscape comes from the art world, as Alain Roger said.

But even before the landscape concept, there was a sensibility towards the landscape that emerges from the representation of agriculture.

MEDITERRANEAN MICROCOSM

According to the generation of French geographers that studied the Mediterranean represented by Vidal de la Blache, the agricultural landscape of Southern Europe was influenced by the climate of warm and long summers and the interaction between farmers and shepherds.

Two main issues followed their investigation: On the one hand the permanence of the forms of exploitation, on other hand their variety and richness.

The idea that the forms of exploitation had an ancestral origin, as well as the understanding of the diversity of the Mediterranean field system,

led them to seek references in the Classical World. The differentiation between the land (*ager*), the orchards, (*arvus*, *arvustus*), the pastures (*pascuus*), and the Mediterranean shrub (*saltus*), were already present in Cicero's *De Republica*.

The references to roman texts had a deep significance: It helped to understand the structural properties of Mediterranean rural landscape.

These kind of land management has been present in the countries of the Mediterranean basin until today.

The variety and richness of these ways of management or "*coltura promiscua*" that Jules Sions speaks of, answered not only to the variety of the physical environment, but also to the influence of exotic cultures.

From the Arab culture, for instance, it remained the irrigating systems, the variety of vegetables and certain forms of gardens.

The study case than I am going to present could be considered a paradigm, in a smaller scale, of the rural model of the Mediterranean. I will focus on some remarks described above:

- Field structure based on resistance to climate and the confrontation between farmers and shepherds.
- Variety and richness of crops as a result of the influence of different cultures.
- Domain of hostile nature not only for practical purposes but also for aesthetic ones.

"LA PIANA" ESTATE

Located at about 6 kilometers from the Sicilian town of Cefalu', is the Estate of "La Piana", almost the last historical farm on the coast line.

It is an example of a cultural landscape that has kept its identity due to the endeavors of its owners.

Their contribution maintained and enriched the heritage, resisting the urban pressures of the last few years.

They have also adapted its agriculture fields to recent trends such as biodynamic agriculture.

Its location in the coastline converts it in an extremely attractive place. It enjoys the presence of the sea and the protection of the hills.

The sea represents the unreachable. The beach belongs sometimes to the sea and other times to the land. It is the transition area between both.

The agriculture land remind us of bucolical images.

Nowadays the farm, occupies 35 ha. next to the Tirreno Sea. Over time, this relatively small space, has developed some of the characteristics of the Mediterranean landscape, such as, vegetable gardens (*ager*) orchards and olive trees (*arvus*), carob-shrubs (montado in portugess) (*saltus*), and pine trees forest (*silva*).

The will to convert barren land into fertile areas, confrontating the action of the sea and the winds has sparked transforming and adapting mechanisms.

These simple mechanisms are of enormous importance for the spatial, biotic configuration as well as the perception of the place. The success of these actions is sustained by being in tune with the natural processes.

The ancient wild olive trees, situated in the area closest to the sea, protect and deform themselves in order to be able to resist the constant action of the wind.

This disposition and the adopted form indicate the capacity for adaptation of the environment and the direction of the dominant northwest wind.

The first lines of trees serve as protection for the next band of produce.

In other cases the planting of lines of tall, svelte trees (cypresses and eucalyptus) creates a barrier that reduces the force of the wind.

The expansion of the plot area and the protection of this zone from animals are achieved via the creation of a wall which generates a dune.

The dune generates a favoured microclimate for the growth of citrus trees and protects the area of the vegetable gardens, constituting a powerful limit between the production zone and the beach.

Which started out as a protective barrier from the animals, the wind, the saltiness and noise of the sea, with time has been colonized by vegetation and has become a characteristic element of the place, rich in flora and fauna.

Before crossing the threshold of the dune, we can sense the solitary sea only by the murmur, the air, the light.

When crossing it, the force and immensity of the sea opens up before our eyes.

In a few metres we pass from an enclosed environment, where man manages to dominate a small piece of nature, to the open and unreachable space of the Sea.

Situated in the center of the property, the XVI century villa is the focus of spatial organization, as it establishes a progression from geometric meshes to the dispersed zones of carob-shrubs and pine trees towards the end boundaries of the farm.

The most important features of the villa are the patio at the entrance, with its outside steps leading up to the main floor and the terrace over the enclosed garden. There are also the olive press with the millstone and an U-shaped stable.

The arab tradition irrigation network is made up of water extraction and channels.

If we look at the estate from the pine-tree forest, the silhouette of the aqueduct stands out against the surrounding green.

The scoop-wheel and the cistern punctuate the area, creating their own space amidst the plantations.

The linear water canals accompany the paths that form the water network, which in turn irrigates the fields.

The extent of the paths, the set up and the scale of the vegetable elements that border them, arises a gamut of sensations. There are lilacs and hibiscus along the access path to the villa, extending up to the beach and dividing the estate in two, forming the main route.

The path of cycads that leads to the cistern is intimate in size, with an exotic feel that carries us through space and time.

A line of cypress trees protects and demarcates the west wing of the house with the adjacent orange fields.

The cultivation plots escape monotony, enriching and filling the place with colour.

The twisted olive trees show the direction of prevailing winds. The majestic carob-shrubs challenge our gaze with their extended treetops. Here and there, we find small structures hidden by the vegetation.

The disposition of each of these elements has a cultural and productive logic adapted to the physical characteristics of the place: wind, solar exposure, soil.

This adaptation creates an equilibrium and coherence to the whole farm.

The superimposing of constructed elements over the years managed to form a harmonic whole, that reminds to us, of ways of living and times gone by evoking the ambience of those rural villas that served as a form of exploitation and control of the territory.

The various cultures reflected the different peoples that inhabited this land and the wisdom of the farmers that diversified their production so as not to depend on only one crop.

These were decisions that were taken for practical reasons and esthetical sensitivity that now reveal themselves to be the creation of an exceptional cultural landscape

The high point of the pine-tree forest is an exceptional stage from which one can contemplate and understand the landscape.

The serenity that it transmits, the simplicity of the disposition of each element make us believe that this landscape has somehow always been like this, or in other words, it was conceived as we know it today.

The future of the estate is in its capability of adaptation to the times.

Nowadays, with the agriculture production going on, the owners have to deal with the challenge of new uses that allows them to maintain the balance of the place.