

The Profundity that Originates from Silence

The relationship that is established between a Western visitor and the East with which he comes into contact cannot be expressed solely in terms of the diversity between two cultures and the distance in time and space between two worlds. The contrast is more profound because it is between two conceptual universes, two world views that compel the observer who is truly willing to understand what is before him to abandon most of the reference points for his ideas. If the "observer" is a photographer, then things become more complicated because for far too long-ever since taking photographs become one of the common, almost automatic actions that anyone can perform with no special difficulty-the camera has been a modern knapsack into which one can fling fragments of the reality captured or perhaps plundered from life.

It was not in the past, when visitors who arrived in the distant lands lingered with their sketchbooks to do drawings resulting from acute observations and patience, transforming what they saw into art.

Giuseppe Ripa has taken those studies produced by travellers long ago -diaries and guidebooks, curious tomes accompanied by intriguing illustrations-as the starting point for his beautiful photographs of the ruins of Angkor, in Cambodia.

Oustanding among those past authors is the French naturalist Henri Mouhot, who discovered the ruins and made them known to the West. However, whereas Mouhot brought with him the late romantic ideology so dear to followers of the Grand Tour, during the very years when the process of photography was taking hold, Giuseppe Ripa directs a very different gaze at these imposing finds.

One sees immediately, however, that he does not completely abandon common reference points, for, although the use of the camera implies a particular conceptual universe, this does not make him forget an underlying view of the Western world: the search for the elements that make up the intensity of memory. This photographer from Milan surrenders to the extraordinary beauty of these places, yet constantly maintains control of the situation; he chooses unusual compositions, as if they might ease our entry into a different world where even ways of seeing are not what we expected, but he does not give way to any kind of complacency. In preference to what one might define as "the rhetoric of ruins", an obvious limitation of the romantic view that tended to superimpose itself on reality too emphatically, he adopts a gaze that is more strict and severe, but not less intense. The decision to give space to the sacred proves victorious because it permits the recovery of the memory of these places, and also, going beyond the immediate differences, it enables one to grasp connections that link legends, fears, rituals, and myths more than one imagines.

Men, demons, and deities act in a world endowed with a mysterious power represented by the grandeur of these buildings. In the Khmer civilization that is so distant from our (and that we may have come to know as a result of the atrocities and butchery of our contemporaries rather than from the profundity of the reflection of the ancients), Ripa has a surprising ability to grasp the aspects of a dimension of the sacred made up of silence and rhythm, an expansion of time that leaves space for thought and profundity that originates from silence.

The choice of a very carefully tended black and white is not accidental: here, the shadows are never so distinct as to conceal all the details that emerge from the darkness, while the highlights do not dazzle, but serve to give a sculptural quality to what is photographed. The eye rests on a world that preserves its mystery, but seems, at the same time, ready to reveal it to those who know how to wait, observe, and reflect without allowing themselves to be seduced unduly by the wonder that clearly leave its mark upon. Here one wanders in a truly imaginative universe-Angkor is one of the largest archeological sites in the worlds-with the sensation of seeing not stones, but presences that preserve and intense vitality: the tree roots plunging into temples and merging with them in a splendid metaphor, the fragments of columns and lintels that sometimes obstruct the way and sometimes suggest a new path, and the many faces of Buddha smiling enigmatically from stones

bas-reliefs do not seem to belong solely to the past. Here and there we see men and women perfectly at ease amid these walls, meditating before a flight of steps, silently pacing on ancient paving stones, balancing in an empty window. Perhaps this is a way of reformulating the sinuous movements of the ancient female deities, the solemn stillness of the priests, the wisdom that one still finds in their serene gazes and in the eye of strange, distant gods who taught men to endure adversity with the knowledge that it is transient, to accept good while realizing that is short-lived, and above all to engage in the pursuit of beauty.

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