Opening Speech

Allocuzione Inaugurale

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Dear friends, colleagues and distinguished guests,

Thank you for being here and participating in this occasion of contact, dialogue and synthesis. Thank you for your contribution in this commitment of sharing knowledge, conclusions and also work hypotheses.

As always in the past, the contact, the dialogue and comparing different ideas are essential for the advancement of research and culture. We have gathered here as colleagues from about forty countries. Such an attendance indicates the will of searching, searching even deeper, searching together.

The aim of searching is knowledge, of knowing is learning, of learning is communicating, of communicating, is searching together. This is the thread of culture. Culture is our identity, the identity of the human species, the identity of the society in which we live, but also of each individual, of researchers, of teachers and students, of lay researchers and curious people.

We are at the XXIII International Valcamonica Symposium. Twenty-three symposia in forty years have marked the pace of advancing knowledge in the field of visual art and concepts in the prehistoric and tribal world.

Through them we followed the considerable evolution achieved by this field in half a century. Going through the proceedings of this Symposium and the previous ones we realise how much we have grown in methodology, aims, concepts, and the philosophy of research. Valcamonica has played its role and the Symposia have had a substantial function.

From a secondary or marginal field of humanities, the study of prehistoric and tribal art has become a major field. In forty years, the initial purely descriptive works have developed into profound analyses, syntheses and interpretations that have push forward the knowledge of the intellectual roots of the human species.
The subject of study has always been prehistoric and tribal art, but each Symposium has focused on specific aspects. We have dealt with technical themes such as conservation, dating, documentation, management, and the museology of prehistoric and tribal art, and conceptual themes such as the origins of art, art and religion, symbolism and mythology, graphics and semiotics, new methods of interpretation, the social function of art in different societies, the role of art as a educational tool, a factor in ethical and aesthetical growth, in social cohesion and solidarity, in cultural identity. In forty years we have built a data bank with a rich content of many aspects related to the main theme.

Interdisciplinary cooperation with a reciprocal contribution of various disciplines of human and social sciences, of natural sciences, and science has led to an enrichment of methods, knowledge, and cultural context. From Valcamonica was sent the message of multidisciplinary cooperation. The ghetto of provincialism and excessive specialisation have been the prisons from which scientific research is setting itself free.

The theme of this XXIII International Symposium of Valcamonica is “Producing history from prehistory: the role of rock art”. Before writing a great deal of rock art was like writing by having the three fundamental characteristics of writing itself: communicating, expressing oneself, and conserving memories.

Recent studies have attempted important levels of decoding. There are millions of rock engravings and paintings in at least 180 countries of the world. They are millions of illustrations that aim at communicating, iconographic associations that are phrases to be read. Each group of signs contains messages that prehistoric people could understand; our task is to decipher them. Describing rock art is only the beginning, understanding and let other understand is the aim of research. Each step toward decoding leads to new ways of decoding.

The significance of this operation is obvious. If we succeed in reading messages that are thousands of years old, we can understand better and more intimately our roots, ordinary and extraordinary cognitive processes and, so doing, add new chapters to our written history. The vision of a history of humanity that begins from the first attempts of formulating graphic messages is no longer a utopia.

The history of human beings begins with their artistic creativity. It is no longer the history of the last 5,000 years. This conventional length of time referred to written history becomes multiplied by ten. Thanks to the work we are all carrying out, the history of humanity now begins 50,000 years ago, that is for a period ten time longer than stated until
recently. We have the great privilege to be the protagonists of the great intellectual adventure.

Thank you for participating in this cultural revolution that opens new angles and new horizons of knowledge and consciousness. Reawakening the sense of history, the interest in understanding who we are, and the awareness of a past that enables us to understand the present enriches teachers and the education of youth, our culture and each one of us. Such healthy interests must be spread around, become a patrimony and a source of personal enrichment for everybody.

The emergence of this intellectual renewal could not be more timely, in a moment when creative culture is being neglected by the mass media, by the strategic planning of governments, and also by an authoritarian education system, which abolishes or downsizes the teaching of history in school curricula and university. We are sailing against the wind. It is not the first time, we are used to it, and no doubt in the future, as in the past, time will again prove us right.

After having read the present papers and thought about the discussions to come, you will be convinced that this Symposium marks a historical turning point, a renewal of interest in what has been humanity’s principal vocation indeed throughout 50,000 years: knowing in depth the existential reality of the human species. We are holding to the motto “Recover the Past to Discover the Present”. Valcamonica and this Centre must maintain their role of world leader in rock art research, and such a role is confirmed by your presence here today.

The events we are discovering in the rock art of five continents tell about pieces of history; each small chapter added to global history is a tessera of a gradually shaping mosaic. Vicissitudes, frights, beliefs, myths, stories of human relationships that are being told in Africa, Australia, Asia, Americas, and Europe provide a new dimension of this man who until yesterday was considered “primitive” or a savage.

Ever since they became sapiens, human beings have been curious and creative, which justifies the term sapiens, but also artists and intellectuals. Artists and intellectuals are not exceptional persons; they are those who set a tone of human existence, as we all do in a way. Man, as far as we know, is the only animal that reasons with a complex consciousness of time, thinks at three time levels: past, present and future. From the very beginning, from the first art works, each one of the three time levels has been expressed at further levels: simple past, past perfect, simple present, present perfect, simple future, future perfect. Among other things, pri-
Primordial art reveals the dynamics of our cognitive system.

Among Australian Aborigines, the Time of Signs, “Dreamtime” or “Alcheringa” as they call it, is an absolute time in which past perfect and present perfect represent the same time. The cosmological of world creation is outside the real time and it belongs to past perfect. Ancestral spirits, for expel, belong to the simple past but they are present in the present perfect. The concept of the afterlife, in maintaining the spirit in the world of the dead, held in many tribal and non-tribal cultures, is part of the future perfect. Such ideas of time are confirmed by millions of rock images engraved throughout millennia, not only in Australia but also in other parts of the world. There are fundamental data waiting to be interpreted.

In the primordial art one discovers thoughts, feelings, existential problems, human relationships, the need of addressing ancestral spirits or deities, in the belief that they can operate supernatural acts to give to man more tranquillity and wellbeing. The faith in men, supermen, demigods, and gods has always supported man’s morale and such a need is already present in primordial art.

In rock art one discovers encounters and clashes that have characterised human relationships. One reveals cognitive processes, thoughts and actions of many periods and many ethnic cultures that have contributed to the cultural patrimony of humanity. This common heritage has build up, has evolved, and has acquired its own identity throughout the millennia that we are bringing back to awareness and consciousness. In all periods human beings have revealed aspects of their heart, their minds, and their soul. Heart, mind and soul are the three dimensions characterising different identities.

The effort of memorising the past, decoding messages, and understanding their own origins requires, even for contemporary hunter-gatherers, energy and time that are much more consistent of those required for physical survival related to three fundamental elements found in all time rock art: sex, food and territory.

Even just to produce the millions of rock art images left behind for us, our ancestors have invested more time that to satisfy their mere physical needs.

From the innumerable small events, small messages that appear in the rock art of the whole world emerges a main common denominator. They reveal the soul, the mind and the heart of man, his cognitive system, his analytical faculties, his interpretation of nature’s forces, his existential relationship with the environment, with other living beings, and with those poorly understood aspects of nature.

Presso gli Aborigeni australiani l’Epoca dei Segni, il “Dreamtime” o “Alcheringa” come loro la chiamano, è un tempo assoluto nel quale il passato assoluto e il presente assoluto sono lo stesso tempo. Il concetto cosmologico della creazione del mondo è fuori dal tempo reale ma appartiene al passato assoluto. Gli spiriti ancestrali appartengono al passato remoto, ma sono presenti nel presente assoluto. Il concetto della vita nell’aldilà, della sopravvivenza dello spirito in un mondo dei morti, presente presso molte società tribali e non, è parte del futuro assoluto. Tali visioni del tempo sono testimoniate da milioni di figure rupestri, nel corso dei millenni e non solo in Australia, anche in altre parti del globo. Sono dati fondamentali del nostro sistema cognitivo che attendono di essere letti.

Nell’arte dei primordi si scoprono i pensieri, i sentimenti, i problemi esistenziali, le relazioni umane, l’esigenza di rivolgersi a spiriti ancestrali o a divinità, nelle credenze che essi possano operare atti soprannaturali per dare all’uomo maggiore tranquillità e maggior benessere. La fede negli uomini, nei superuomini, nelle semidivinità e nelle divinità, ha sempre sostenuto il morale dell’uomo e tale esigenza è presente fin dai primordi dell’arte.

Si scoprono gli incontri e gli scontri che hanno caratterizzato le relazioni umane. Si mettono in luce i processi cognitivi, i pensieri e le azioni di tante epoche e di tante etnie che hanno formato l’immenso patrimonio culturale dell’umanità. Questo retaggio comune a tutti noi è cresciuto, si è formato, ha acquistato la sua identità nel corso di quei millenni che stiamo riportando alla conoscenza e alla coscienza. In tutte le epoche, l’uomo rivelà gli aspetti del suo cuore, della sua mente e della sua anima. Cuore, mente e anima sono le tre dimensioni delle identità.

L’impegno per memorizzare il passato, per decifrare i messaggi, per capire le proprie origini occupa, anche per i popoli cacciatori ancora esistenti, energie e tempi di gran lunga superiori a quelli dedicati alla sopravvivenza fisica, a procurarsi i tre fattori fondamentali illustrati dall’arte rupestre di tutti i tempi: sesso, cibo e territorio.

Anche solo per produrre i milioni di immagini rupestri lasciateci, i nostri antenati vi hanno dedicato più tempo ed energia che per soddisfare le proprie esigenti prettamente fisiche.

Nella miriade di piccoli eventi, piccoli messaggi che affiorano dall’arte rupestre del mondo intero, emerge un grande comune denominatore, esse ci rivelano l’anima, la mente e il cuore dell’uomo, il suo sistema cognitivo, le sue facoltà analitiche, la sua interpretazione delle forze della natura, la sua relazione esistenziale con l’ambiente, con altri esseri viventi e con quegli aspetti della natura non compresi che vengono definiti soprannaturali. Ci rivelano anche i suoi...
ture that are defined as supernatural. They also reveal his impulses, his points of strength and weakness, his feelings, ambitions, load of memories, doubts and beliefs.

In this immense archive we discover the deep roots of cognition, of the intuitive and logical intuition, of today beliefs, which characterise the species Homo sapiens to which all of today humanity belongs.

Through the study of art one can reconstruct the road followed during 50,000 years, from the primordial forms of elementary graphics of which we find the origins in the five continents, to the gradually different forms that have led to personality and character in each continent, as well as to different peoples and ethnic cultures. There are many common denominators still surviving today in the urban and literary society that started to expand 5,000 years ago and now is becoming globalised, while partially erasing the ethnic and tribal characteristics of the peoples who produced rock art. Today the last hunter-gatherers still survive in marginal areas of the planet, but they are at the final stage and very soon will not exist anymore.

Their knowledge and memories must be urgently collected because next generation will be too late. They can give to us a fundamental contribution for the understanding of millenaria messages. We are often overpowered by a sense of impotence and indifference, but it is the duty of today scholars to collect data, pass from description to analysis, and then to the synthesis in order to find historical conclusions and be able to transform the result of research into culture.

An important role in decoding ancient art was already played by 19th century researchers who succeeded in the reading of artwork from the direct protagonists. In 1893 Garry Malley published his “Picture-writing of the American Indians”, which remains still today a foundation for understanding rock art. He obtained most of information directly from the protagonists, i.e. from elders and initiated American Indians who were holding the memory of tradition. Throughout the 20th century eminent teachers who promoted the growth of these studies, from the Abbé Henri Breuil and André Leroi-Gourhan, have prepared the bases for the new developments of recent years. Without them it would have been much more difficult reaching the current level of performance.

Recent work shows that some descriptive methodologies are valid worldwide and allow us to obtain the reading of messages with an ever-increasing speed. A new era is beginning in the area of humanities, an era in which man is able to communicate directly with his past, by way of messages

impuls, le sue forze e le sue debolezze, i suoi sentimenti, le sue ambizioni, il suo bagaglio di memorie, di dubbi e di convinzioni.

In questo immenso archivio si scoprono le radici profonde del sistema cognitivo, intuitivo e analogico, delle credenze di oggi, che caratterizzano la razza di Homo sapiens cui appartiene tutta l’umanità di oggi.

Grazie allo studio dell’arte si ricostruisce la strada compiuta nel corso di 50.000 anni, dalle manifestazioni primarie di grafismo elementare che ritroviamo nei cinque continenti alle origini, alle graduali differenziazioni che hanno dato personalità e carattere ai diversi continenti, ai diversi popoli, alle diverse etnie. Molti sono i comuni denominatori che sopravvivono ancora oggi nella società urbana e letterata che ha iniziato ad espandersi 5.000 anni fa e che oggi sta diventando globale, cancellando in parte le caratteristiche etniche e tribali dei popoli che hanno prodotto arte rupestre. Gli ultimi popoli cacciatori sopravvivono ancora oggi nelle aree marginali del pianeta, ma si trovano in uno stadio finale, entro brevissimo tempo non esisteranno più.

Le loro conoscenze, le loro memorie, vanno raccolte urgentemente perché tra una generazione sarà troppo tardi. Essi possono darci un contributo fondamentale nella lettura di millenari messaggi. Ci si trova spesso sommersi dall’impotenza e dall’indifferenza ma sono gli studiosi di oggi che devono dedicarsi alla raccolta dati e passare dalle descrizioni alle analisi, da queste alle sintesi, per poi trovare conclusioni storiche ed essere in grado di trasformare in cultura i risultati della ricerca.


Le recenti ricerche mostrano che alcune metodologie di decifrazione sono valide a livello globale e permettono di prevenire alla lettura dei messaggi con sempre maggiore facilità. Una nuova era sta cominciando nel settore delle scienze umane, un’era nella quale l’uomo riesce a comunicare direttamente con il proprio passato grazie a messaggi che diventano sempre più leggibili. Le fasi di ricerca, i risultati consegui-
that become more and more readable. The new stages of research, the results obtained, the working hypotheses, research methods and theories are presented by you, dear friends and colleagues, in this XXIII International Symposium of Valcamonica.

This meeting has gathered about one hundred scholars and enthusiasts from about forty countries who have a common aim: transforming prehistory into history, making the history of humanity ten time longer of what has been so far. Briefly, from when he became sapiens, Homo sapiens has his own system of writing, a pictographic and ideographic writing that later became the basis of conventional writings, which were born developing urban societies and sedentary society of agriculturalists needed to create a way of communicating for managing human settlements of larger of those were everybody knows everybody. The first structural social systems were the creation of regimes that needed a communication between the emperor and his mandarins or between the baron and his emissaries.

Today we are discovering that the first ideograms used in the Chinese writing, in that of Mesopotamia, in the proto-literary Egypt, as in Mexico some millennia later, had already the same sense, the same meaning of the pictographic writing of prehistoric art. It could be argued that Homo sapiens had already conceived, from the very beginning, the elementary paradigms of writing.

Research has today reached the point of being able to announce that writing was born 50,000 years ago, not 5,000 as believed so far. This statement may scandalise some, but it is so. I refer to a writing that we are beginning to decode.

In order to fix ideas on a substratum, to record facts, to transmit messages, one was already using conventional signs in primordial times, much earlier than when regimes established them to become later phonetic writing. That an undulated line meant water, a rectangle meant territory, hut or dwelling, a circle with rays meant sun, and an inverted triangle meant pubis, had been decided by the “prehistoric” man, thousands of years earlier than the same interpretation was adopted by conventional writings.

Pictographic writing then evolved to become phonetic, but the original writing of rock pictographs had the characteristic of being universal, it contained messages readable in any language, messages that we can still read now with our contemporary languages, languages that were surely not those used by those prehistoric artist 50,000 years ago. Water, hut, sun and pubis change their phonetic name from language to language, but the ti, le ipotesi di lavoro, i metodi e le teorie di ricerca sono presentati da voi, cari amici e colleghi, in questo XXIII Simposio Internazionale di Valcamonica.

Questo incontro mette insieme un centinaio di studiosi e appassionati di una quarantina di paesi che hanno un intento comune: trasformare la preistoria in storia, rendere la storia dell’umanità dieci volte più lunga di quella che è stata. In sintesi l’Homo sapiens, da quando è Sapiens, ha una sua scrittura, una scrittura pittografica e ideografica che poi è stata la base delle scritture convenzionali nate quando le società urbane incipienti e le società sedentarie di agricoltori, hanno avuto bisogno di creare una comunicazione convenzionale per ragioni di gestione e di comunicazione, in aggregazioni umane di dimensioni superiori a quelle nelle quali ognuno conosce tutti. Le prime strutture convenzionali sono opere di regime prodotte per il contatto tra l’imperatore e i mandarini, o tra il barone e i propri emissari.

Oggi scopriamo che molti dei primi ideogrammi usati nella scrittura cinese, in quella mesopotamica, in quella egiziana dell’epoca proto-letterata, come in quella messicana alcuni millenni più tardi, avevano già lo stesso senso, lo stesso significato nella scrittura pittografica preistorica dell’arte rupestre. Sembra poter giungere ad asserire che l’Homo sapiens da quando è tale, aveva già concepito i paradigmi elementari della scrittura.

La ricerca è giunta al punto in cui oggi possiamo annunciare che la scrittura è nata 50.000 anni fa, non 5000 anni fa come si era ritenuto finora. Questa notizia potrà far scandalo ma così è. Ed è una scrittura che stiamo iniziando a decifrare.

Per marcare graficamente le idee, per registrare i fatti, per trasmettere messaggi, fin dai primordi si usavano segni convenzionali, assai prima che ciò venisse stabilito da regimi e che divenisse scrittura fonetica. Che la linea ondulata significasse acqua, il rettangolo territorio, capanna o abitazione, il cerchio raggiato il sole ed il triangolo capovolto il pube, lo aveva deciso l’uomo “preistorico”, migliaia di anni prima che la stessa lettura fosse adottata dalle prime scritture convenzionali.

La scrittura, da pittografica, si è poi evoluta divenendo fonetica, ma la scrittura originale delle pittografie rupestri ha avuto la caratteristica di essere universale, conteneva dei messaggi leggibili in qualsiasi lingua, che ancora riusciamo a leggere nelle nostre lingue di oggi, lingue che sicuramente non sono quelle usate dagli artisti preistorici di 50.000 anni fa. Acqua, capanna, sole o pube cambiano di nome fonetico da lingua a lingua, ma i pittogrammi corrispondenti hanno lo stesso significato nelle varie lingue.

L’idea di poter riaffare un sistema analogo, di poter ripristinare una scrittura pittografica leggibile da tutti i popoli della terra a prescindere da quale sia il
corresponding pictograms have the same significance in all different languages.

The idea of re-establishing an analogous system, a pictographic writing that could be read by all people on the earth regardless of their spoken language, is a utopia that our studies of prehistoric art could make possible. It goes without saying that this would represent a turning point in the capacity of human beings of communicating among themselves, as the first people did many millennia ago. Being able to communicate with whom we have no common language could not be just a mirage.

In spite of today tendency of lowering quality and quickly globalising, we must not be ashamed to have a disciplinary philosophy and an ideology; on the contrary, we think that this may indeed be a guarantee, be of great importance to give a new identity to humanities.

To reach this goal we need a close collaboration between different disciplines, a necessity that we have been stressing for sometime, a condition that is materialising with the present Symposium.

In this operation we have the honour and pleasure to be united in collaboration, syntony and synergy with other disciplines. Anthropologists and archaeologists collaborate with psychoanalysts, semiotics, linguists, historians of religion, historians of art, philosophers and sociologists. Thank you friends for being united in this joint commitment. It is a project that also involves disciplines such as general linguistics, general history and the study of human psyche and cognition to obtain results of global proportions. I am well aware that each one of us makes big sacrifices to respect the commitment of promoting culture without that support that the community should provide.

Great progress has occurred and this must encourage us to continue toward always-new perspectives. The way is open but the work still to be carried out is immense; the cooperation we are trying to develop, clearly demonstrated in this Symposium, is surely an important promise for the advancement of research.

Intense days are in front of us and I open this Symposium by thanking all those who have contributed to it, collaborators, voluntary staff and sponsors. Dear friends, thank you again for your presence and I wish for everybody a week of intense work, useful contacts, serene cooperation, enthusiastic discovery of the past in order to project ourselves toward the future, simple and absolute.