



PALERMO THE HISTORICAL CENTER AND THE SIGNS OF THE TIME

Interview by Adriana Piazza

It's a beautiful May morning. I am here, in the Garden of Villa Niscemi surrounded by a mystical beauty that magically brings me back in time. The air smells of antique, with

extraordinary visions that make everything around me less tangible and less real, bringing me back to the seasons of the past, toward the mysterious silences, squares, streets, roofs and winding streets of the old districts held within the old walls.

I just visited the exhibition of Aldo Sessa, dedicated to the places of the historical center of Palermo, which were the witnesses of the most emblematic glorious eras.

Places perhaps irreparably lost or maybe still alive in the china paper the painter uses to make his works breathe through the harmonious marriage of the Palermo liberty experience and the technique of pointillism, in an original graphic representation, rich in details of architectural monuments, lush gardens, sky spotted by shy clouds, transparent waves.

A whole series of images clear and shiny as a skilful goldsmiths' work that brings us back to the ancient times in which Palermo converged all these civilizations and treasures of the world.

On the parchment of Aldo Sessa the ancient reality comes back to life adjusted and embellished with emotion by the dream and the emotion in an surprisingly oniric dimension brought to incandescence by a warm, dreamlike flow and fertile imagination.

Then, every stone, every white wall, every delicious flourish of wrought iron, each Moorish dome, so patiently and persistently illustrated, are covered in wondrous beauty to tell us softly about the past, awakening many scattered moments, many fragments of life, habits and desires. Observing these pictures is like penetrating a buried city where the roofs of "Albergheria" and the rough squares paved with ancient "Balate" (rustic, roughly shaped marble tiles) live peacefully together with the magnificence of the dome of the Carmine church, the austere elegance of the Drago Palace and the romantic charm of the church of S. Maria of

Spasimo. But for us Palermitans, they mean something more. Much more...like rediscovering our history, our roots, our identity. Decrypting a wonderful mosaic where the pieces of the city, evidence of different civilizations, have overlapped and mingled. This is more evident in the work "Palermo: Mediterranean Meetings" a masterful synthesis of millenary civilizations that have alternatively lived in our city.

But the key to understanding the works of Aldo Sessa is also obtained by the cultural experiences lived by him as an artist/teacher (he taught "Drawing and Art History" at High Schools and Art Institutes of the regions of Veneto and of Sicily) and by his human and social commitment that allows him to transmit in his paintings a message of hope, in order to attract attention to the precious restoration of the valuable patrimony of the Old Town. That's why I rather let the artist himself tell us, in his own words, how the restoration of those places that represent the beautiful evidence of our past, has galvanized his attention.

Q. Professor Sessa, in your opinion, in the works representing places and spaces of the historic center of Palermo, what can you catch more, the beauty of the past or the hope for the future,

That is to say the rehabilitation that we are all expecting?

A. The works in which I represent the historical center of Palermo stem from my inner journey. By realizing them I step back with my eyes, my mind and my heart to my childhood, my adolescence, since in some of these places I have lived, and I can sharply remember the life animating them. I can sharply hear and recall sounds, voices, smells, that now, when wandering around among alleys, squares or courtyards I don't find anymore. So I represent them as a scenario without life that expects the work and the skilled- hand of man, driven by love for his city and an awareness that the invaluable and unique assets it possesses can not be further neglected. We must therefore strengthen efforts for their recovery, so that life can come back and we can pass them on to future generations.

Q. What kind of conclusions carry your constant and ongoing commitment in telling us what man has achieved throughout the centuries and every city corner bears precious evidence?

A. Our city preserves a patrimony unique in the whole world. Every monument, every corner of our historical center shows evidence of the

paths that people have taken over the centuries and tells the story, the many problems and the many solutions found. My ongoing commitment is to establish through images this historical evolution, this development of our city, of our culture that has always been made of peaceful coexistence among different races, cultures and religions.

Q. What did you experience during your permanence outside Sicily and what kind of comparisons can you make between Palermo and other cities of Italy as far as recovering the cultural patrimony is concerned ?

A. As a teacher of Drawing and Art History in High Schools and Art Institutes outside Sicily and in Palermo and the province, my school career begins in the Seventies in the region of Veneto near the town of Treviso, in the very heart of Palladian villas, between the plains and the Asolani hills, between Monte Grappa and the Venetian lagoon, between the graves of World War I, between the path of red wine and that of white wine, between the fog in winter and long days of spring rain, (Omit the summers because, as you imagine, I spent those in Palermo) making a comparison between Palermo and the places where I lived and taught for a decade, is very difficult, but still I want to be honest. The Veneto has typically grandiose works of art and almost all are well preserved, although Venice historic center and neglected areas are as highly degraded as those in Palermo. From researches done by my Venetian students about the places of their origin, I have personally observed that, no matter what destroyed, totally or partially, a town or a piece of town, and whatever the cause, immediately their main concern was reconstruction. One example for all: the earthquake of Friuli during the Seventies. Unfortunately we cannot say the same about our land. In the eighties, I returned to Palermo to teach in a Secondary School located in a building in the old part of the town, I made my students do historical research, technical and socio-environmental study of the Albergheria quarter, comparing it to the rest of the reality of the city. Horrific situations came out: entire families housed in dilapidated buildings in constant danger of collapse amid poverty. Mansions gutted by bombs in World War II, underpinned by walls or beams, turned into stables or warehouses; shelters huddled in tenements, half-destroyed churches with residues of rubble mixed with layers of dirt, where basic hygiene was and still is unknown. I believe that we are far from being able to compare the recovery of cultural and social aspects of our city with the rest of Italy,

however, I'll say it again, we all strive to ensure that this monumental and above all social recovery will take place as early as possible to bring Palermo among other European capitals.

Q. What would you propose to trigger in the heart of young generations a deep interest for knowledge and rebirth more than it used to be in the past?

A. My commitment as a teacher who has taught and lived experiences in other Italian cities, has compelled me, since early eighties, to increase my students' awareness through daily interaction with them so that they'd become aware of reality to transform it through the knowledge of political and social history of the monuments of the city.

In order to awaken in the heart of young generations the love and the pride to belong to a City unique in the world for its glorious past, with my greatest pleasure, I've seen this method of mine work, in the project "Palermo opens the doors" "School adopts a monument".

My proposal is that the adoption of any monument by young people should not be limited to a few days per year but it should have a long term commitment. Youngsters should be the guardians of this inestimable patrimony that previous generations have ignored or even destroyed.