THE OPERA IN IMAGES
ICONOGRAPHY OF THE *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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The project of the *mise-en-scène* has a highly visual nature and is expressed in images. The digitization of many archives of historical theatres made available a vast repertoire of images, the analysis of which allows us to understand the phenomenon of the *mise-en-scène* in its historical roots and evolution. The present research focuses on the repertoire of stage images investigated in their intrinsic nature as visual and communicative artifacts, classifying them according to the purpose of the representation and the techniques of execution to reconstruct the role that images played in defining a theatrical imaginary of places and costumes. The articulation of the paper will distinguish three different types of images, each investigated in its visual and technical characteristics. The first concerns the visual component of the project, which was expressed through the sketches, both regarding set design and costumes. The second typology is that of visual witnesses of the stage for dissemination purposes, whose distribution was mainly entrusted to illustrated periodicals. Finally, the third typology includes the images for promotional purposes of the nascent poster advertising.

Per far scena di teatro ci vogliono pittori di teatro. Pittori che non abbiano la vanità di far valere soprattutto la loro bravura, ma di servire il dramma (Giuseppe Verdi).

INTRODUCTION

We are used to think about opera as text, music, performance. But text and music need a *mise-in-scene* to become spectacle, and the *mise-en-scène* project has a primarily visual nature and is expressed in images. The digitization of many archives of historical theatres made available a vast repertoire of images, whose analysis allows us to understand the phenomenon of the *mise-en-scène* in its historical roots and evolution. These are wordless images showing costumes and scenography, whose analysis suggests multiple interpretations, bordering between illustration and theatre history, proof of the evolution of image distribution techniques and artistic creation. The period considered here is the nineteenth century, of which the richest iconographic repertoire is preserved, testifying a phase in the history of theatre when realism became a fundamental element of *mise-en-scène*. Much has been written about nineteenth-century theatre, (De Angelis, 1938; Povoledo, 1961; Trabucco, 1988; Perrelli, 2013) but the research, even where it addressed the subject of costumes and scenography, mostly considered the point of view of the history of theatre and costume design, rather than graphics and illustration. In the field of representation, the subject of scenography was mainly addressed with studies on the use of perspective in the design of the stage space, conceived by the set designer with the sketch of the scene to produce the desired illusory effect (Pagliano, 2002).

The present research instead focuses on the repertoire of stage images investigated in their intrinsic nature as visual and communicative artefacts, classifying them according to the purpose of the representation and the techniques of execution, and attempting to trace the role that images played in

defining a theatrical imaginary of places and costumes, up to the transition towards the new modes of visual communication that gave rise to the first advertising posters, which took their first steps in the field of performing arts.

THE SCENE SKETCHES

The first distinction that emerges from an analysis of the theatre's iconographic material is between the design drawings and the visual evidence of the spectacles to inform the audience. The design was expressed through the sketches, both for scenography and costumes.

In scenography, the sketch, realised in perspective, contained all the necessary indications for the staging of the scene, whose exact transposition into the space of the stage had to be guaranteed, and made use of the accelerated solid perspective as a tool to simulate a perceived space deeper than the real one (Pagliano, 2009). The sketches were mainly made in pencil on cardboard, and eventually coloured with different techniques: watercolour, tempera, oil paint. At a later stage, the drawings could be placed on a three-dimensional scale model, to better verify proportions and visual effects. The interesting aspect for the present study is the definition of archetypal models of stage sets, which during the 19th century gave rise to an iconographic repertoire that was reproposed in the visual component of other performances, using very precise relationships between the scenic image and the dramatic situation staged. This process started from the theatre treaties of the late 18th century, in which the need for realism in scenography and costumes had been codified, according to a historical correspondence with the period in which the opera was set (Milizia, 1794). The sources available to 19th century set designers were literary, pictorial, illustrative, documentary and theatrical, but were used with a certain freedom. Alongside these, tangible testimonies such as the ruins of past architecture were also available. The synthesis of these

sources led in many cases to a fantastic archaeology, where certain elements stood as symbols of the scenic situation they wanted to represent, accentuating its meaning on a visual level. Emblematic in this sense is the use of medieval architectural forms to connote the presence of the sacred or its negation through a symbolic form. An example is the Gothic cathedral in Goethe's *Faust* (Figure 1). In the first Parisian edition of the opera, in April 1867, the scenographer Philippe Chaperon depicted the interior of the church using all the well-known medieval stylistic elements to make the reference immediately recognisable: pointed arches, cross vaults, statues, pinnacles (Biggi, 2018). Similarly, the 19th-century staging of *Romeo and Juliet* (Figure 2) was characterised by sepulchral views and dungeons with tombs, taken from medieval aesthetics and adapted to the sensibility of Romanticism, which were configured as coded symbols of the afterlife, and were repeated by various scriptwriters in various theatres (Viale Ferrero, 1988). The sketches themselves, once made, became in fact a powerful tool for codifying the spectacular vision, creating a repertoire of models available to the scenographers for consultation and representation. It is evident how in this way a

Fig. 1 Auguste Rubé and Philippe Chaperon, *Faust*, Act IV, scene 2: the church. Model of the scenography in volume, 1869. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig. 2 Philippe Chaperon, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V: underground crypt. Sketch of the scenography, 1872. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

symbolic imaginary was increasingly delineated, associating visual elements with scenic situations. In the case of natural settings, some correspondences were created between the atmosphere and the feelings expressed in the scene, following the Romanticist conception of nature as a witness and participant in human events.

The same process can be seen in the analysis of the costume sketches. Here too, the design took place through drawings showing the initial idea of the costume designer, often free from material constraints. As for the attempt to achieve historical realism in scenography, late 18th century treatises began to prescribe the permanent presence of a costume designer in the theatre, and the need for the clothes not to reflect the personality of the actor, as occurred until then, but to fit the character to be staged in a verisimilar manner (Marini, 1771). The costume thus assumed a symbolic role, becoming an essential sign of the *mise-en-scène*, making a character recognisable. In the 19th century, documentary research for the creation of stage clothes found philological rigour in environmental and epochal representation, so that, according to Roland Barthes, it signed the beginning of the costume history.

A true history of costume only begins with Romanticism, especially among theatre people, from the moment that actors want to play their roles in period costumes, painters and draughtsmen begin to systematically search for the historical truth of appearances (clothes, scenery, furniture, accessories), i.e., precisely everything that has to do with costume (Barthes, 2006, p. 27).

From a figurative point of view, the sketches made by theatre costume designers correspond to the definition of fashion plate, intended as costume portraits, that is, a portrait that does not show the characteristics of a particular individual, but illustrates the type of clothes that can be dressed (Holland, 1955). As for the coeval fashion plates, one or, more rarely, two figures were portrayed on the pictorial plane, arranged frontally or three-quarter-length to show the dress in its maximum visibility. The only spatial marker, in the absence of a background, was a horizontal line or a small area of shadow at the figure's feet. The poses were rather artificial, aimed at the correct perception of the model of the dress in all its details, according to the iconographic style borrowed from the portraiture of the time. They were mainly made on paper or cardboard and coloured with watercolour or tempera (Figure 3). The drawings were often characterised by bright colours, used for a better effect on stage, considering that theatres were still lit by the feeble light of candles (Niccoli, 2014).

The consolidation of musical repertoires towards the end of the century, with the most prestigious titles being replicated in all major European cities, further contributed to the formation of a visual repertoire of staging through the reproduction of successful productions. Evidence of these staging began to circulate thanks to the new tools for reproducing images.

THE VISUAL EVIDENCE OF THE STAGE

The 19th century marked a gradual expansion of the audience for theatrical performances from court theatres to

Fig. 3 Felice Cerrone, costume sketch for *The White Lady*, San Carlo theatre in Naples, 1827. Source: Biblioteca del Conservatorio di musica S. Pietro a Majella - Napoli.

a larger number of private and public theatres, which were also frequented by the emerging upper middle class as well as aristocratic spectators. In parallel, there was a multiplication of the vehicles for disseminating images, with the invention of numerous technical processes that made faster and cheaper the mass production of lithographs or line engravings. These two factors led to the diffusion of a second type of images to document the mise in scene. Whereas in the case of the previously analysed sketches we are dealing with single drawings intended for the execution of the scenography or costume, in this case we are

Fig. 4 Henri Paillard, *Théodora*, sixth scene: the imperial box, (scenography by Rubé and Chaperon), Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, 1885. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

dealing with images intended for reproduction in multiple copies, to document the performances and inform a public interested in following the life of the theatres and operas. In rarer cases, the images could be made by the same scenographer who drawn the sketches, from which they differed in the presence of the characters within the scene, captured during the action on the stage as in a photographic shot. More often the draughtsmen, either on site or from memory after a performance, reproduced a draft of the scene with the actors in their roles, and then the engraving houses transcribed their drawings with techniques that allowed a wide circulation (Figure 4). Also, regarding the representation of stage costumes, the difference from the design sketches was the reproduction technique, which was usually the engraving. Moreover, as they were

Fig. 5 Stage costumes for *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, 1867. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

intended for the audience and not for tailoring, we often find not the sketches of a single dress, but illustrations containing the costumes of all the characters brought on stage in a performance, each one depicted in a pose consistent with the character's gestures (Figure 5).

The dissemination of these evidence of the stage was entrusted above all to the illustrated periodicals, which experienced a great development in this era. The presence of illustrations in journals was in fact a powerful incentive for circulation to a broader and more differentiated public. The reasons for this success were in the new social and cultural climate and in the technological development that invested the publishing world in those years. The contents of the periodicals were varied and could include literary texts, theatre reviews, etiquette recommendations, information on current affairs and customs, events and society

Fig. 6 Sequence of frames from
Les Misérables, 1890. Source:
gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque
nationale de France.

news, art and travel (Gigli Marchetti, 1997). After 1870 in Italy, following the example of France, the idea of autonomous instruments to improve and deepen knowledge of the event-performance began to appear. Thus, the first magazines arose entirely dedicated to the world of the theatre, to the life of the companies, and to the actors, documenting events and performances in detail through the publication of visual material related to the stage settings and, above all, the performances (Barbina, 2009). The theatrical agencies liaised with newspapers and specialised magazines to disseminate the content, to increase the interest of an ever-widening public. The circulation of these images contributed to the definition of a visual imaginary linked to the mise in scene, to which the performances then had to adapt to meet the expectations of the audience.

Over the century, an evolution of the illustrative typology can also be noted, which increasingly assumed the feature of a visual narrative. In addition to the single scene, we

Fig. 7 Jules Chéret, illustrations for the pantomime *La Fée du Rocher*, 1894. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

can find the publication of illustrations consisting of several frames, each containing a scene from the opera. The images read in sequence gave a visual understanding of the development of the story as in a modern graphic novel, but often without words and entrusted exclusively to the visual power of representation (Figure 6). A second novelty concerns the detachment from fidelity in the reproduction of the scene in the direction of a synthesis of the atmosphere of the stage emphasizing the spectacular effect, to engage and intrigue the audience. This is the case of Jules Chéret's illustrations for *La Fée du Rocher* (Figure 7), in which he proposed an unprecedented co-presence of music, text and image, where it is the latter that captures the attention in a festive whirlwind of dances and colours, a distinctive feature of his posters (Weill, 1977). It is just the presence of one of the fathers of advertising poster art in the creation of the stage materials, together with other illustrious names such as Mucha or Hohenstein, that makes it clear how short the step was from

the creation of spectacular images to visually illustrate an event with the aim of capturing the audience's attention, to the use of images for overtly advertising purposes.

THE SPECTACLE IN ADVERTISING POSTERS

The origins of the modern poster as an instrument for visual communication are to be searched in France in this era of optimism and unconventionality in the fields of entertainment and arts, characterised by a great freedom of expression and a desire to experiment. In particular, the lively Paris, with its spectacles and nightlife, centre of an avant-garde artistic and cultural environment, was its natural cradle. In this context, the poster was the ground for innovative experimentation by many successful artists, with results of great interest and originality, to the point of becoming an autonomous artistic genre with its own peculiarities (Brunelli, 2004). The great novelty of Chéret's posters compared to previous ones was the substitution of informative content with illustration, which became predominant in the communication while the text became an accessory element, a part of the illustration: through its positioning within the field, the shape, the colour, it began to intertwine with the figures in a composition that was unified and harmoniously designed to achieve a visual balance. The style became functional to the content to be conveyed: colours, images, texts had to contribute to conveying first an atmosphere, within which the characters moved. The colour of the background of the posters created a strong contrast with the foreground, accentuating the scenic presence of the characters, who stood out and captured the scene as if a performance was taking place on the poster itself (Piscitelli, 2016).

Remaining in the Parisian context, Alphonse Mucha was another artist who began his career in the theatrical field with a contract with the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, for whom he designed scenography (Figure 8), costumes
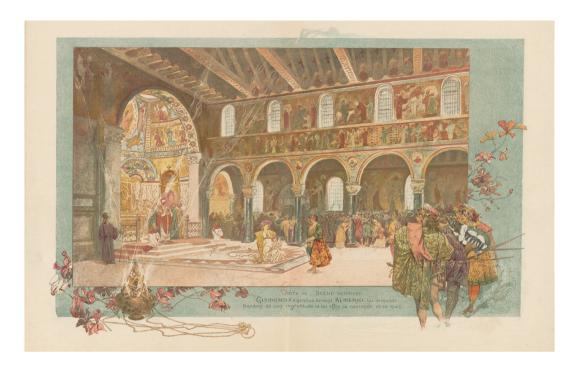
Fig. 8 Alphonse Mucha, scenography for *Gismonda*, act I, scene VII, Theatre of the Renaissance, 1894. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

and jewellery, as well as the advertising posters for *Gismonda* (1894), *La Dame aux Camèlias* (1896), *Lorenzaccio* (1896), *La Samaritaine* (1897), *Mèdèe* (1898), *Hamlet* (1899) and *Tosca* (1899). The background of Mucha's posters was filled with a rich profusion of ornamental motifs typical of the liberty style: floral and geometric motifs, buds, arabesque motifs, mosaic inlays, mixed with other symbols (Sato, 2016). In the posters dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt, it is interesting to note how the depiction always makes use of a symbolic element present in the culminating scene of the work, which becomes an iconographic element that, together with the costume, immediately links to the imagery associated to that work, differentiating posters that were otherwise characterised by a strong stylistic and compositional uniformity (Figure 9). This is the arrival point in the process of defining a symbolic imagery linked to the performance, in which each work becomes recognisable to the public through certain visual elements associated with it.

Fig. 9 Alphonse Mucha, promotional poster for: *La Samaritaine* (1897), *Mèdèe* (1898), *Hamlet* (1899), Theatre of the Renaissance. Source: gallica.bnf. fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

These characteristics are also found in Italy, where opera posters were the first genre in which artists of the late 19th century engaged, starting with Hohenstein, artistic director of the Officine Ricordi from 1889 (Sangiorgi, 1967). His posters of this period display a photographic realism in the accurate description of the characters, depicted on brightly painted backgrounds, alternating with pronounced light and shadow effects. The proposal of an evocative image of the opera and the reduction of textual elements to a minimum broke with the traditional information poster that had

been used in theatres until then, in which the programme was presented using only the text.

The themes expressed in the promotion of the opera were the starting point for the poster art of the nascent cinema, which also made use of allegory and figurative realism in the creation of the first posters. The opera poster artwork became the model from which the representation was taken in a scenic-visual synthesis emphasising the emotional aspects of the film. In fact, a process had been consolidated whereby the poster designer selected elements belonging to the performance (characters, objects, situations, scenes) and organised them in a precise composition. Through an often-hierarchical arrangement of the selected elements, he guided the viewer's gaze along a linear or reticular visual path guided by plastic vectors (lines, shapes, colours) or figurative vectors that conveyed the understanding of the representation by the viewer, who was led to perceive and recognise the figurative subjects and decode the visual symbols (Della Torre, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the extremely rich visual heritage linked to theatrical mise in scene in its period of maximum popularity, described here in a synthetic manner for space reasons, permitted to understand the staging phenomenon in the entire process from design to documentation and promotion of the performance. It is interesting to note how images have developed an increasingly strong semantic link with the content of the work, to the point of defining iconic signs to characterise scenography and characters, enriching the narrative with symbolic elements carrying further levels of meaning. The images demonstrate how the figurative component took on an increasingly essential role in the staging during the 19th century, for an audience that was increasingly demanding for the visual aspects of the performance. The experiments

due to the artists who worked in the theatrical field played a fundamental role in the development of graphics, laying the foundations, from a semantic and compositional point of view, for advertising posters in general and cinema posters in particular. Finally, we can note that since the mise in scene is linked to what the artist considers to be closest to the sensibility and interests of the audience, these testimonies are also an important tool for interpreting the contemporary society, its cultural level, identity models, visual and theatrical culture.

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