

In time with tear flow

by Marco Pasi

Your domain was on the high seas;
 your builders brought your beauty to perfection.
 They made all your timbers
 of juniper from Senir;
 they took a cedar from Lebanon
 to make a mast for you.
 Of oaks from Bashan
 they made your oars;
 of cypress wood from the coasts of Cyprus
 they made your deck, adorned with ivory.

Ezekiel, 27: 4-6

Water often plays a significant role in Giorgio Andreotta Calò's works, and this is particularly evident for the sculptures presented in *Scolpire il tempo*. The title itself is an obvious reference to Andrej Tarkovskij, in whose films water appears consistently with symbolical meanings that seem to have deeply inspired Calò in his works¹. Water acts in Tarkovskij's films as a mirror of reality, it represents the power of dreams and imagination, displays its baptismal function of purification, stands for the processes of nature that transform the primordial chaos into organized life and then into consciousness. But it can also be a force of dissolution and destruction.

Calò had been working for a while on mooring poles that, after being corroded by salt water to the point of breaking, can be easily found either floating or on the shores of the Venice lagoon. For *Scolpire il tempo* he has created identical duplicates (like mirror images) of three of them, and he has joined the original and the duplicate on their tapering side. The result, vaguely recalling the shape of an hourglass, has then been turned into a bronze sculpture. The sculptures stand on a floor covered with a film of water, creating an elemental landscape, an aquatic forest of poetic imagination.

The sculptures would not exist without the caressing hand of the lagoon of Venice, whose tides have carved the wood of which they were originally made. It is certainly significant that such a work would be created and presented for the first

¹Tarkovskij presented his ideas on cinema in a book that, in its Italian edition, bears the same title:
Scolpire il tempo, Milan, Ubulibri, 1988.

time in Holland, a country that shares with Venice a history of love and struggle with water, of pride and domination in seafaring, of maritime splendor and, after the climax of secular fortune, slow decline. Stones and bricks, canals and churches tell a similar story of past glory and present memory to inhabitants and visitors. The analogy, however, lies not only in the past, but also in the future. The corroding action of the lagoon tides may recall the dangers related to water, which in Venice as in Holland are a matter of frequent, recurrent concern. In apocalyptic scenarios of global warming, with a possible rise of the level of the seas, it is precisely places like Venice and Holland that would be first affected with dramatic consequences. It is intriguing here to note that Calò has shown in his previous works and statements a particular interest for John's Book of Revelation and its eschatological images. In Revelation water plays an important, but often negative, role. For instance, one of the two great evil beasts appearing at the end of days is rising out of the sea (13:1). In another passage, the red dragon trying to harm the "Woman clothed with the Sun" (symbolizing either the Virgin Mary or the whole community of Christians) pours "water like a river out of his mouth . . . , to sweep her away with a flood" (12:15). This element points to an intrinsic ambiguity in the symbolism related to water, an ambiguity that has been emphasized by Gaston Bachelard in his classical study, *L'Eau et les rêves*². Water is often symbolically associated with the feminine, with motherly qualities, fertility and growth. But there is also another side, more violent and masculine, based on conflict, challenge, conquest. This is mostly associated with the salty vastness of seas and oceans. Carl Schmitt, in a book that was published – intriguingly – in the same year as that of Bachelard, described the history of the West as a conflict between traditional political entities based on land domination, and the new maritime powers emerging in the modern era (Venice, Holland, and most importantly England)³. Being immersed in esoteric suggestions and biblical exegesis, Schmitt identified symbolically the maritime powers with the biblical sea monster, the Leviathan. Interestingly, the water at the basis of Calò's work is at the intersection of these two symbolical identities. Being the water of a lagoon, it is a mixture of the feminine sweet water of rivers and the masculine salt water of the sea. The ambiguous, suspended identity of lagoon water finds a correlation in the ambiguous relationship of the sculptures with time.

Sculpting the time means showing how time can be treated as a malleable, yielding matter. How hands can touch it and strip it naked. How the artist's will, like that of a magician, can stop it. Andrea Emo, a philosopher whose family has deep roots in

² Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1942.

³ Carl Schmitt, *Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*, Leipzig, Reclam, 1942.

the history of Venice, has discussed the artists' wish to arrest the flow of time with their work, and how this creates a reciprocal relationship within the negative nature of this flow⁴. The eternal return of time makes the work of art meaningful, while the work shows how time can live only in the present instant. This corresponds to what Eliade called an "archaic" notion of time, which he saw as manifesting itself, perhaps unexpectedly and unwillingly, in certain forms of modern and contemporary art⁵.

As Eliade elsewhere shows, cyclical notions of time are often expressed through the symbolism of trees and vegetation⁶. Trees participate most visibly in the rhythms of nature, changing their aspect in every season. With new green leaves they can easily represent rebirth after death, the beginning of a new cycle when the old one has come to its end. The mooring poles, which could be seen in the context of Calò's installation as altars of a sacred ritual, were originally nothing else but trees. And it is interesting to see how the carving power of water has made their original nature visible again, by uncovering their inner sap-carrying ramifications and the concentric rings of age. Within the denaturalized object of use, we rediscover the original identity of a living being. It would be easy to make a comparison with Giuseppe Penone and his trees carved out of beams, but there is of course an important difference here. It is not the hand of the artist that makes nature appear again out of a dead object, but nature's hand itself. The artist is at the receiving end of a process where his simple perception of metamorphosis plays a major role. Yet, he does not leave the process there, because he decides eventually to carry it a step further, and fix the rediscovered signs of nature in a bronze sculpture. There is maybe something apotropaic in turning this wood into metal, arresting its decay, and creating hourglass-like images with it. In a powerful passage, the biblical prophet Ezekiel describes the maritime power of Tyrus, the Phoenician merchant city enemy of Israel. With a transparent metaphor, he compares the city to a wooden ship and foresees its decline and destruction by the hand of God⁷. Even if *Scolpire il tempo*, in its elementariness, transcends with

⁴ Andrea Emo, *Supremazia e maledizione. Diario filosofico 1973*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1998, pp. 4-6, and 56-59.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, "La permanence du sacré dans l'art contemporain," in: id., *Briser le toit de la maison. La créativité et ses symboles*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, pp. 25-30.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996; see chapt. VIII, "Vegetation: Rites and Symbols of Regeneration," pp. 265-330. See also chapt. V, "The Waters and Water Symbolism," pp. 188-215.

⁷ Ezekiel, 26-28.

different layers of meaning a single interpretation, it is hard not to see in its alchemical transmutation of wood, an underlying concern of the artist for the fragility of Venice, “perfect in beauty” like Ezekiel’s Tyrus, but not immune from the fate of the enemy of Israel.