

Enzo Sellerio (1924-2012)

Enzo Sellerio was born into a cultured, cosmopolitan family – his father was Professor of Physics at the University of Palermo, where his Russian Jewish mother taught her own language – and came of age during the passionate years of post-Fascism, post-war Sicily.

He took his degree in Law at the age of twenty, and at twenty-three was appointed Lecturer in Public Law at the Faculty of Economics, a position he was to hold for a long time. A period devoted to politics and a brief journalistic experience followed, until Sellerio – already strongly drawn to photography as a channel for both social commentary and poetic narration – urged by his friend Bruno Caruso, entered a regional photography competition and ended up winning it. Encouraged by such a debut and by the acclaim for his first published pictures, he began to approach photography professionally.

In 1955 he produced his first *reportage*: «Borgo di Dio», now considered a veritable masterpiece of Italian Neorealism, featured in the photodocumentary series of the film magazine *Cinema Nuovo*, blending social commitment and formal research.

That being the heyday of pictorial publications, he started contributing *reportages* to Mario Pannunzio's *Il Mondo* and Leo Longanesi's *Il Borghese*, among the leading Italian magazines of the time. His early solo exhibitions, at the Obelisco in Rome in 1956, at the Bussola in Turin in 1957, and at the Triennale in Milan in 1960 (where he exhibited by invitation of Lamberto Vitali) contributed to Sellerio's recognition throughout his country.

On the other hand, leading a provincial life in Palermo was instrumental in sharpening his critical sense, affording him a markedly personal cultural *Bildung*; besides, Sellerio's revulsion from violence and ferocity, overwhelmingly present in Sicily, became a recurrent motive of his art. Sellerio's style – as novelist Enzo Consolo put it – «rests on the difficult balance between word and thing, meaning and signifier, information and expression; between history and poetry, ultimately. There is no violence, there is no *lupara* [i.e. the sawed-off shotgun]. But the human, the all too human, is there. There is love, there is *pietas* towards all the creatures portrayed».

Alongside his photojournalistic career, he pursued documentary projects, such an illustrated survey of the mosaic decorations of the Monreale Cathedral, a work involving microscopic precision (therefore helping Sellerio to perfect his technique) and exacting practicalities: he spent a whole year working from towering scaffolds set up inside the Cathedral, an endeavour he later described as his own «Military Service».

In 1961, the Swiss magazine *du* commissioned him a portrait of the Sicilian capital, eventually published in a monographic issue: «Palermo. Portrait einer Stadt» (i.e. «Palermo: Portrait of a City») – his first international success, followed by another extensive *reportage*, this time focusing on the towns and villages around Mount Etna, published the following year in the Christmas issue of the same magazine.

The realm of international photography then opened up for Sellerio – he was the only Italian invited to join EMP (European Magazine Photographers), an association based in Cologne promoting authorial photography and fostering encounters among the most important photographers of the continent; ZDF, the newly established German national television network, asked him to take part in a project on daily life in Germany, based on his pictures and those of Hiroshi Hamaya and Will McBride; and he started contributing on a regular basis to major international magazines such as *Vogue* and *Fortune*, an engagement that had him travelling extensively abroad in 1965 and 1966. He spent some time in Paris and, most remarkably, in New York, where, lodging at the legendary Chelsea Hotel, was to meet and befriend many eminent personalities from the art and culture scene of the time, portraying them for the American magazines as well as on his own behalf. Sellerio's fascinating gallery is populated, among others, by portraits of Arthur Miller, Christo, Robert Rauschenberg, Virgil Thomson, Henri Tisot, Ben Shahn, Jules Feiffer, Saul Steinberg; among the Italians, Vittorio Gassman, Alberto Sordi, Claudia Cardinale, Elio Vittorini, Giacomo Manzù; and among several Sicilians, Ignazio Buttitta, Leonardo Sciascia, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, Lucio Piccolo.

His first approach to publishing came in 1967, working on a book collection promoted by the Assemblea Regionale Siciliana (the legislative body of Sicily); and in 1968 he and Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi edited a series of supplements to the review *Cronache Parlamentari*, devoted to the seats of ecclesiastical and secular power in Sicily. These were subsequently gathered in volume form and published as *Castelli e monasteri siciliani* (i.e. Castles and Monasteries of Sicily). From then on he focused on publishing, founding the following year – together with wife Elvira Giorgianni – the Sellerio imprint.

Sellerio's irrepressible vocation for story-telling (students of his work tend to agree in defining him «a writer through images») presided over his designing and editing (the photographer's gaze now borrowed by the publisher's eyes) the art and photography titles issued by the firm, and his devising of the graphic design for all collections, most notably *La memoria* (i.e. The Memory), «la collana blu» (i.e. The Blue Collection) giving it the distinctive look that meant so much for the success of the publishing house.

His «third profession», that of collector, led him to realize some of the most remarkable illustrated books ever published in Italy, their very concept and format issuing from a strong passion for antiquities and from his own discovering and collecting minor arts pieces.

Until the end, he fought fiercely to safeguard the artistic heritage (not just photographic and not just Sicilian).

This very much set the pattern for what followed: although allowing himself some photographic «afterthought» – including rare forays into colour pictures – publishing would remain his main activity for forty years, until his very last days. At the same time, though, his photographs kept travelling through Italy and indeed the world – he had solo and group exhibitions in the most prestigious galleries, monographies were devoted to his work, his pictures were – and are – frequently anthologized, also appearing on the book covers of many European publishers intrigued by his unique vision.

Sellerio's style and his unmistakable knack for story-telling make up an important chapter in Italy's cultural history and remain indeed central to the panorama of contemporary publishing and photography.