



Fig. 1. The main altar of the Cathedral of Valencia, with its profuse baroque decoration. Part of its half-domed top was recently dismantled by the conservators in order to show the Renaissance paintings that were covered during the baroque refurbishing. This made it quite unique, though at the expense of historical or artistic coherence. Image by Salvador Muñoz Viñas

MY FAVOURITE PIECE OF HERITAGE (AND THE HERITAGE BIG BANG)

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The story of this paper begins with an intriguing proposal from the editors of *eDialogos*: to write a paper on my favourite piece of heritage. Aside from being honoured by the request, I thought the idea of writing a piece on one's favourite piece of heritage seemed like a nice endeavour. The author is given the chance to explain his or her own views on something pleasurable, or interesting, or appealing in some way. In addition, the tone of the article need not be as academic, or circumspect as in most other cases: as it is a personal choice, the persona behind those views is perhaps not only allowed, but even expected to show through. For those used to writing in academic fora (like this author), this is a rare privilege. I was glad to oblige.

A few weeks later, however, as soon as I started thinking seriously about it, I discovered that choosing just one piece as my favourite is not as easy a task as it might seem: I just know too many things that could qualify. This is perhaps a common problem: many people surely appreciate very different things for very different reasons. For instance, I very highly regard the cathedral of Valencia, the city where I was born and continue to live. It is mostly a Gothic cathedral with Neoclassic side chapels, a monumental baroque door and other additional features, such as the exhibition of the Holy Grail, no less, and the mummified arm of Saint Vincent. The cathedral is somehow elegant and harmonious: it just feels good inside. Also, its rich history has served as a thought-provoking case study

in my musings on conservation theory (and, as you can see, it still does so). In other words, it is both beautiful and interesting. Any tourist visiting the city should indeed pay a visit to it.

However, to be sincere, it just cannot compete with other monuments on the basis of artistic or historic interest. To name but a few Spanish examples, El Escorial in Madrid, the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, or perhaps even La Lonja, also in Valencia, would all probably beat my cathedral on those grounds –not to mention other elite, world-class monuments such as Saint Peter's, the Parthenon, Hagia Sophia, the Alhambra or Santa Maria dei Fiori.

Now, since I know many other monuments that are both more impressive and, at the very least, as historically rich as Valencia's cathedral, why then is this the monument that first came to my mind when thinking about my favourite piece of heritage? Even after considering those great, really impressive world-class monuments (Saint Peter, the Parthenon, Hagia Sophia, the Alhambra) I kept going back to my wonderful, but not really *that* wonderful, cathedral in my hometown. After reflecting on it for some time, I am almost sure that I appreciate it more than the other monuments not because of its historical relevance or sheer beauty, but rather for very personal reasons. For instance, my grandmother walked me there several times when I was a very young boy, and those are among my earliest memories. For



Fig. 2. A view of the Neoclassical side chapels of the Cathedral of Valencia. Most of the Cathedral was originally Gothic, but in the 17th and 18th centuries it was fully refurbished in the baroque and Neoclassical styles. In the 1980s, an important part of it was restored to its original Gothic appearance. The side chapels, however, retained the Neoclassical look. Image by Salvador Muñoz Viñas.

me, Valencia's cathedral is interesting on aesthetic, historic and intellectual grounds, but it is also loaded with sentimental value. And, as it turns out, this can have a substantial impact on the value I assign to this particular object. I strongly believe that this is not exceptional, that factors of this kind play an important role when it comes to determining the values that spectators assign to any particular heritage.

Feelings, or sentiments, are not easy to quantify; furthermore, they can be easily faked. Perhaps for this reason, they are seldom recognized as a valid factor when making decisions about anything heritage-related. This might be a consequence of the Westernized, would-be-scientific, objectivist view on reality. Feelings are neither measurable nor communicable, and for that very reason, some people just tend to ignore them. And yet, reckoning with them as a reality might have an impact on how heritage is viewed. If I am not mistaken, this trend was already hinted at by Alois Riegl in his *Denkmalkultus*, though it was more consequentially formulated in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

This has had an impact on the very notion of heritage. By considering things that might have values other than well-established historic or artistic values, the notion of heritage (the idea of what heritage is) has broadened in scope: since feelings (or taste, or subjective values) are increasingly being reckoned with, the notion of heritage has kept expanding beyond what Umberto Eco would probably describe as the *hi-cult* universe.

An indirect consequence of this expansion is that properly dealing with heritage has become more difficult: firstly, more things need to be taken care of, and secondly, more values need to be taken into account. A very humble case in point is the dilemma this author is facing when requested to choose his favourite piece of heritage: I have already said that my first, *impromptu* choice as my favourite piece of heritage was the cathedral of Valencia, a monument that is neither the most historically relevant nor the most artistically valuable monument I know first-hand. Feelings account for this choice –however, upon further reflection, I cannot help acknowledging that there are indeed things that bring me more intense



Fig. 3. The Eastern and Southern façades of Mestalla, the home stadium of Valencia Club de Fútbol. Image by Salvador Muñoz Viñas.

memories than the cathedral of Valencia, memories that rank higher on my personal scale of emotional intensity. Mestalla, for instance.

Mestalla is the home stadium of my favourite football team. There, I have experienced some very memorable moments in my life –both good and bad. I have been attending matches whenever possible since I was a kid, and I have held my season pass for decades. Mestalla has remained there the whole time, somehow unchanged in spite of its many refurbishments. Now, a new stadium is being built elsewhere in the city. Mestalla will eventually be demolished, and with it, some of the memories of many people, including the author of this paper. In fact, after the demolition of San Mamés, in Bilbao, in 2012, Mestalla became the oldest football stadium in Spain, and, as this text is being written, an exhibition on its history is currently on display. If it is the memories (or feeling, or stories) that a person can attach to some object that makes for a piece of heritage, Mestalla would indeed be, at the very least, as good a candidate as the cathedral of Valencia.

Now, there is no arguing about whether Mestalla is a work of art. It is old for a football stadium; and while it is loaded with memories, it must be admitted that it is neither beautiful, nor even graceful. And, to be sure, football stadiums have little academic pedigree. If aesthetics and cultural prestige were the most important factors in defining heritage, I would instead choose a painting. It would be *Las Meninas*, probably: no surprises here. I do not know of any other piece that offers such a blend of serene expression and sheer elegance. (And I am fortunate enough to have seen not one, but two *Meninas*. The first, the older one, before John Brealey's cleaning, with its nice, subdued, and slightly aged look; and the second, after the cleaning, more vivid, colder, more hieratic. I liked the diffuse warmth of the first *Meninas*, but I also like the livelier ambience of the present one. Wonderful work, really, that of Velázquez –and of its conservators).

However, it is not that easy. The notion of heritage is also expanding into a dimensionless universe (that of pure ideas, or even sheer information), or perhaps into what could be called a fourth dimension (time). Nowadays, the performing arts, and even traditions,



Fig. 4. Las Meninas. What we can now see is mainly the result of Velázquez's work (who painted it in 1656), but John Brealey and the conservators who cleaned it in 1984 also had an influence in how we can now see it. Image from WikimediaCommons.

languages and ceremonies, have become a part of heritage: these things, created and existing through being performed, make up for a part of what is presently known as “intangible heritage”. Just as there exist the “performing arts”, we could perhaps speak of “performing heritage”. To further complicate things, some tangible objects need to perform some actions in order to fully become heritage: a clock, an engine, a mobile by Calder, all may contribute to blur the line between tangible and intangible heritage.

This renders choosing one's favourite piece of heritage even more challenging, as it opens up a whole new world of possibilities. Indeed, if aesthetics were the most important feature of heritage, I would probably not choose a painting or a building as my favourite piece of heritage: it would be a piece of music. It could be Ravel's Piano concerto in G –if it wasn't for Ingrid Haebler's rendition of Mozart's piano sonatas, recorded by Denon in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the performances in those six CDs are simply perfect. They would be my favourite piece of heritage because I have not found any other work of art that compares

in sheer sensitivity, technical perfection, and aesthetic emotion. To me, Haebler's rendition of the sonatas is as moving as art can be.

Of course, this is also a trait of good books, and some of the best moments in my life have taken place with a book in my hands. Perhaps my favourite piece of heritage could be an old two-volume copy of Jorge Luís Borges' *Prosa completa*, printed by the now-extinct Editorial Bruguera. I have that in my personal library. I have carefully preserved those volumes from misuse, but they look aged anyway. Every now and then, I re-read some tale at random, and it has never once disappointed me. These books have faithfully accompanied me since I was a teenager, and they keep giving me plenty of intellectual and artistic pleasure, with a bit of nostalgia thrown in. Interestingly enough, in this case both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage blend together: the intangible aspect is the book's content, the particular sequence of words that make up for a literary masterpiece, one that could be reprinted once and again over and over; the tangible aspect is this particular copy of this particular edition



Fig. 5. The six Denon CDs that make up Ingrid Haebler's rendition of Mozart's sonatas. This wonderful piece of heritage is surely intangible: in fact, I do not really care about those CDs nearly as much as I care about the music itself –or, in other words, about the particular sequence of bits that make up for that recording. Image by Salvador Muñoz Viñas.

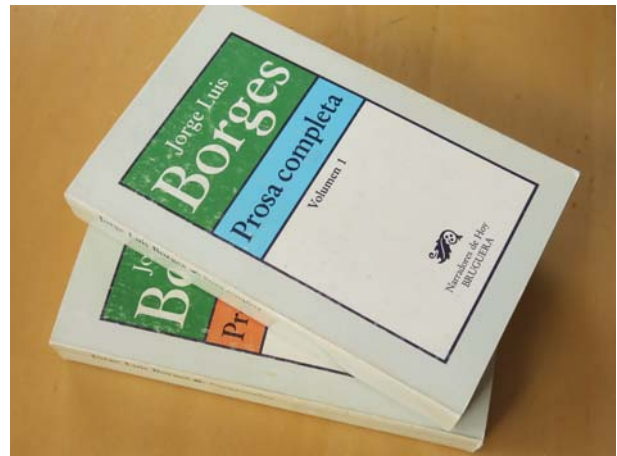


Fig. 6. One of my very private, favorite pieces of heritage: the two-volume edition of Borges' Prosa Completa, published by Editorial Bruguera in 1980. Borges' literature is an intangible piece of heritage (and a very valuable one, for that matter), but these two particular books are especially meaningful for me. Image by Salvador Muñoz Viñas.

of the books, which has its own values and messages: each bent corner reminds me of a different story, almost every little stain represents something to me. A person's own history is inscribed in those two volumes. That person is me, and this is why I find it so valuable. The reader would probably find those books rather insignificant, but to me they could well be my favourite piece of heritage.

And yet, within my personal pantheon of heritage, I now recall another piece that ranks really high. Just like Borges' books or Mestalla, or even Habler's performances, it is something that some people would say is not a piece of heritage at all. It is certainly intangible, and I am somewhat ashamed to confess that the candidate that I am about to mention is nothing more than a computer program. Its title is *Doom*, and it revolutionized the way computers were experienced by many people. *Doom* was (or, more precisely, is) a computer game. When it was launched, it was a technological achievement, a feat of genius. I recall my friends and I closing the shades to the room so as to get more deeply immersed in *Doom*'s dungeons, to escape from the many threats lurking within. Playing *Doom* was like nothing before (and in some sense, nothing has been like that afterwards): it made you shiver, and shout, and rejoice as you advanced. I would try to describe my feelings in greater depth, but I fear that only those who have played it can understand what I mean.

I could go on and on, but, honestly, I do not think I can actually choose my favourite piece of heritage; I

would be lying if I did. Each and every one of those pieces are truly meaningful (to me: the person who has been requested to make a choice, and who is writing this paper). Part of the problem lies in my own indecisiveness, but there is another good reason for my not being able to make a proper choice –a reason that will probably be of a greater interest to the reader, and which actually constitutes the main message of this paper: the notion of heritage is changing, as it is expanding at a fast pace. In the last few decades, we have been witnessing what might be called *the Heritage Big Bang*, or, more precisely, *the big bang of the notion of heritage*. Thus, my favourite piece of heritage need not be a *hi-cult* work of art such as the Parthenon or *Las Meninas* –and if it were, it could be so because of personal values. Indeed, heritage no longer needs to have any aesthetic value, nor does it need to be “historic” (except in such a broad sense that it would just encompass everything around us: is Mestalla “historic”? And if my Borges books are considered “historic”, what else would not qualify as such?). In fact, heritage does not even need to be tangible: Haebler's Mozart is not tangible, for instance; and it does not even need to be old, as *Doom* demonstrates (either that, or the notion of what is aged or not has become so flexible as to be almost meaningless). Even though I did not even dare to consider it when trying to make my choice, the notion of heritage has already been stretched so far that it might also include landscapes, ecosystems or biodiversity.

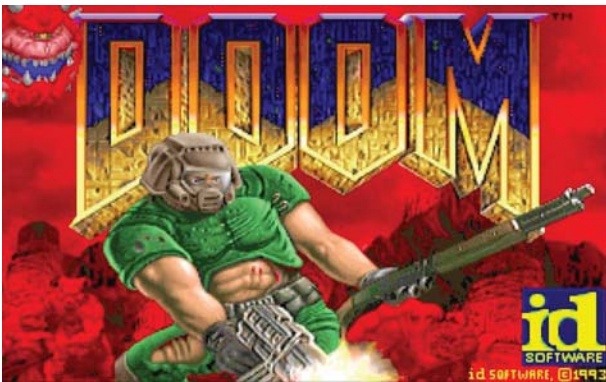


Fig. 7. *Doom* (id software, 1993) is a crucial milestone in the history of audiovisual interactive entertainment. It is an intangible milestone, though: just like Haebler's Mozart, it can be safely kept in (or copied to and from) any CD, any hard disk, any mp3 player or any USB stick without any gain or loss of value.

An immediate consequence of the *Heritage Big Bang* is that things are becoming increasingly difficult in this field, since people dealing with “heritage” need to cover more and more space, more and more notions, more and more values, more and more materials, more and more expectations. It is nearly impossible to find a professional that can deal with “heritage” at large, or outline a comprehensive theory that can cope with it all –not to mention a curator or a conservator who could deal with everything. Simply picking a single, preferred piece of heritage (my original goal in this paper) has become much more difficult than it used to be, since now there are so many more things to choose from.

After the Big Bang (the famous, original one), fragments of material began to coalesce into smaller, discrete entities –the identities we can identify, the identities we use to describe, analyse and, ultimately, understand the outer universe: galaxies, planets, stars, etc. In a way, the same thing is happening in the heritage world. Some fragments of the “heritage-at-large” universe have already started to coalesce: tangible heritage vs. intangible heritage; “world heritage” vs. local heritage; public heritage vs. private heritage; heritage as a whole vs. heritage *property*;



Fig. 8. *Doom* pioneered a new genre in the field of interactive audiovisual entertainment, the so-called “first-person shooter”. However, it is not mentioned here because of its historical relevance, but because of what it meant for the author of the paper.

etc. Waismann even spoke of “modest heritage” to characterize some particular kinds of heritage, and the somewhat imprecise, but well-intended, notion of “cultural heritage” has become an everyday term. The segmentation of the expanding notion of heritage into smaller, more easily digestible units does make sense: it is needed for us to communicate in an effective way, to elaborate consequential discourses, to develop sensible practices.

Now, as I approach the end of this paper, I should perhaps present my excuses to the to the reader. At the end of the day, I have not accomplished my initial goal: I have not chosen my favourite piece of heritage. Instead, I have shared some ideas about this notion, which I hope are interesting enough to earn the reader’s forgiveness. If not, I still have another card up my sleeve: I can offer her or him a very good question, a question that can be very thought-provoking, a question I was fortunate to have been asked before: what is your favourite piece of heritage?

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