



A statue for Margherita

A contemporary idea of monument

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Abstract. The first statue dedicated on public grounds, in Italy, to a woman scientist. Who could better represent this kind of figure in Italy than Margherita Hack? The bronze casting is set to be ready in time to celebrate her centenary, following a competition exclusively for women artists and offered to the Milano municipality by the non-profit Deloitte Foundation. I was involved in the board elected to choose the opera to realize. I will go through the process and the main themes that were discussed and offer a challenge at the end.

Key words. Margherita Hack, Cultural Images, Gender Equity, Cultural Identity, Art: Sculpture

1. Introduction

Many different biographies of Margherita Hack have been written, and more so in this year that celebrates her centenary. I can suggest for instance to browse Greco (2013) or Taddia (2022), or, for kids, Cerrato (2022). Comprehensive reviews of her life are Hack, Gradari, Pagan (2013), where her thoughts and her smile are collected and told, in the last months of her life, by two people very close to her, and the one of her lifelong collaborator and dearly missed Corrado Lamberti Lamberti (2016). There is no need then to review here all of her life and her accomplishments. I will just highlight a few facts that I deem particularly interesting, and describe my personal recent involvement in the selection of the project of a statue for Margherita Hack in Milano.

2. Margherita, the life

Margherita was a special child since her birth, if we believe in the influence of the skies upon us, which we don't. However, in a strange twist of faith, it cannot be ignored that she was born close to a place called Campo di Marte (Mars Field) in a street called Centostelle (Hundred Stars) (see Fig. 1). Her adolescence was full of activities and lots of sports, which trained her to work hard to achieve, to go a step (or a jump) further. Possibly in these years she also learned the tenacity and the love for tangible things, the ones that you do with your own hands, that accompanied her for her entire life. Her social and political engagement are well known, from vegetarianism out of respect for animals, to women rights in the scientific fields, from pacifism to participation to the political life.

About her scientific life, I just recall that she was for a period in the same Institute where

I work now, and clearly her attitudes in making science were much different from the old, conservative, and very masculine ways of the time. She was not deterred by those attitudes, and went on her own way. In Trieste, the role as Full professor and Director of the Observatory gave her the freedom to choose her way which she never had before. She renovated the Trieste Observatory and made it a world class institute.



Fig. 1. Margherita in Campo di Marte, ca. 1924. Credits: courtesy of Margherita Hack

3. Margherita, the public figure

Outreach has not always been a common denominator for scientists, until a few decades ago. This is probably why Margherita entered the field of reaching out to the public relatively late, and why most people remember her just in her old age. Her name, however, has become the synonym of “woman astronomer”, as most of us, woman in astronomy, can testify: how

many times were we asked “So then, are you the new Margherita Hack?” I reckon that this is due to her abilities of inclusion, of walking and talking on the same level of her listeners, of finding simple ways of explaining difficult concepts. Which you can do only if you know the concepts well. Of course her particular wit, that came to her with the birth in Tuscany, was a staple of her character. One of her most famous lines was that we are made of the same stuff as the stars. From the ancient Greek philosophers, like Tito Lucrezio Caro or Anassagora, the idea that the Cosmos is one and many: we are the product of the evolution of the Universe, and we will return to be part of the Universe, to enrich new generations, in the future.

4. Margherita, the statue

It might seem surprising, but as of the 2020s there are no statues dedicated to women scientists on public grounds in Italy. This is why Fondazione Deloitte, aiming at finding new ways of promoting STEM fields and the access to them, in particular for women, found that donating a statue to the Milano Municipality was a perfect match for the Foundation goals. After a long internal discussion, Margherita was chosen because she is so well known that there is no need to justify her. Another name that comes to mind is that of Rita Levi-Montalcini. Maybe more worthy in scientific terms (one the only 12 women to win a Nobel Prize for Medicine), but certainly less well known to the general public and perhaps less empathetic. The way to go was a competition between female artists that were invited to send ideas, complete with description of the artwork, and a miniature sample of the opera. “Casa degli artisti”, a center of residence and artistic production in Milano open to the whole city (<https://www.casadegliartisti.net/>) hosted the display of the samples and followed the contacts with the artists, under the wise guidance of the President, Valentina Kastlunger. A commission, very varied in its composition and chaired by the art critic Vincenzo Trione, was then appointed to select the opera to fund. I was one of the scientists invited for the selection and I believe this has been a very interest-



Fig. 2. Margherita knows well how to use the correct language with every different public Credits: Courtesy of the American photographer Reed Young

ing opportunity to peer into an entirely different world than the one I am used to.

Figure 3 illustrates the variety of proposals received. All of them had some good qualities, and none stuck as the preferred one for every one in the selected commission. So the discussion was lively and interesting. One of the operas that I personally liked very much - and I still hope it will see the light in the future - is that of Marzia Migliora, which earned an honorable mention from the committee. It is a large plaza, with the representation of the Cepheus constellation with the brightest stars made as small cylindrical seats, each with dimensions proportional to the magnitude, and color describing the temperature. Very scientifically correct indeed, but the main reason I liked it was that it looked very inclusive and social and playful, as Margherita was. It brought the stars to the ground and spoke of the passion for discovery. One of the main reasons why it was not chosen was the requirement of a “representative” artifact: not everyone was

convinced that Margherita would be recognizable in such a art piece.

Another very interesting proposal, albeit not easy to imagine in its complete form, was that of Chiara Camoni, who run numerous tests on material, especially every-day metals to convey the idea that we “are made of stars”. In the end, the chosen one was that of the Italian artist, internationally renowned, Sissi (as Daniela Olivieri is professionally known), from Bologna. Her “Sguardo Fisico” (which I would translate as “physical gaze”) makes Margherita grow directly from the ground, via a large winding spiral galaxy. A popular gesture of looking at the sky, like a child trying to make out lights in the dark. A turning spiral that raises. We are particles of the cosmos, the Galaxy holds us together, the Galaxy unites all and everyone. The simple gesture is there to embrace everyone, but also to remind us that imagination and dream are also part of research. This is what we learned by talking to



Fig. 3. The samples sent in response to the call of the Milano Municipality. Which one would Margherita have liked? Credits: Anna Wolter e Simona Cerrato



Fig. 4. The sculptress, Sissi, with the author of this paper. Credits: Sara Sesti

Sissi (see Fig 4), about her meanings and seeds ideas.

And here we are, on the inauguration day, to celebrate Margherita's hundred years under the oak trees facing the Cà Granda, the building hosting the Università Statale in Milano. First you can see the plaque that has been posed next to the statue (Figure 5), very sober, but with a token of her mind: 'Il cielo è sempre stato un libro aperto' (The sky has been always an open book). Many would have liked to see another of her famous quotes: "Siamo figli delle stelle"

(We are children of the stars), but that would have been too predictable indeed.

As Valentina Kastlunger, president of Casa degli Artisti, explained during the inauguration, the criteria for the choice were recognizability and the symbolic presence of a contemporary monument in a public space. A challenge definitely won, in her words, due to the strength of the opera, explosive and disruptive like both Margherita Hack and Sissi. The artist Sissi concluded: "My body has shaped this galaxy as in a dance."

We should meditate on the immediacy and directness of the statue: to everyone who has listened to Sissi explaining her path to conceive and produce the opera, there is no doubt that the essence of Margherita Hack was in her mind while she was creating. However, as we have seen, sometimes in the blunt way many comments are delivered in social media, not everyone agrees on the final shape of the statue, and perhaps not to everyone the idea of a galaxy of stars is evident. Some have suggested adding stars (there are a few already!) or making the galaxy "the color of our Milky Way", quite a demanding feat.



Fig. 5. The plaque reports the essentials on Margherita and quotes one of her most beloved thoughts: “Il cielo è sempre stato un libro aperto” (The sky has been always an open book). CreditS: Anna Wolter

The choice of installing the statue just in front of the historical building of the Università degli Studi di Milano (see Figure 6) has the undeniable advantage of showing Margherita to thousands and thousands of young women and men looking for their own place in the world. Its presence speaks of science. To fulfill the role of promoting access to scientific competences in STEM fields, as in the auspices of Guido Borsani, president of Fondazione Deloitte. To the ones that have known her, it talks also of her ways with people, of the inclusiveness and the fight for the rights of everyone. To those who have never seen her, perhaps it will instill the desire to learn more about her and her achievements. We hope this will contribute to reach real equity for women, which at the current trend, as Simona Cerrato has very vividly explained at the ceremony, will be obtained in more than two hundred years.

5. Reflecting

The statue of Margherita shows a complex form, accompanied by a simple gesture (Fig.7), that, in the idea of the artist, conveys the meaning that the scientific research is based

on imagination and dream. However, this gesture is very far from what we do in our everyday work. Telescopes as large as tens or hundreds of meters are built, sensitive instruments are launched in orbit to observe light that cannot penetrate the atmosphere, radio waves are converted into emission maps. Most of our time is spent in front of a computer, using data collected with all these diverse more and more sophisticated instruments. We have to remind the reader that this gesture has been modelled after a picture of Margherita Hack taken by Leonardo Cendamo/Getty Images, in Turin, Italy, on August 29th, 2009, possibly during some event in occasion of the Year of Astronomy. It would be very interesting to know what she was saying at the time.

Margherita’s gaze is fixed, as he himself told us, upon the office windows of University Dean Elio Franzini: he will take this as a reminder of what has still to be done so that everyone could have the chance to achieve her own possibilities in school and in life.



Fig. 6. The statue, on inauguration day, in front of the Università Statale, Milano. Credits: Anna Wolter



Fig. 7. The gesture modelled by the artists. It points to the sky. Or maybe directly to the University Dean's office? Credits: Simona Cerrato

So, is the gesture of Margherita's statue still representative of the life and work of an astronomer? Perhaps so, since Castelvocchi (2022) describes it as an "inspirational pose". Is it true?

6. Conclusion - and a challenge

Margherita Hack has been the first woman to head an astronomical observatory in Italy. She has shown leading capabilities in her profession, and has gained a staple role in Italian houses through her participation on TV shows and numerous interviews. She definitely deserves to be the first woman scientist to be represented with a statue on public grounds. Let's hope she will not remain alone for long.

I have learned many things from this experience, I had to deepen my knowledge of her life and achievements, I had to sustain her figure as a role model. It made me also think that we should find a new way of recounting our work, that is not using poetic but long-gone ways of pointing a telescope to the sky and looking through its lenses with our own eyes. We work to learn how the world, the Universe we live in, is made, and to map it for every other human being. I challenge therefore the astronomical community to devise a new, contemporary "gesture" of the astronomer and her work.

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