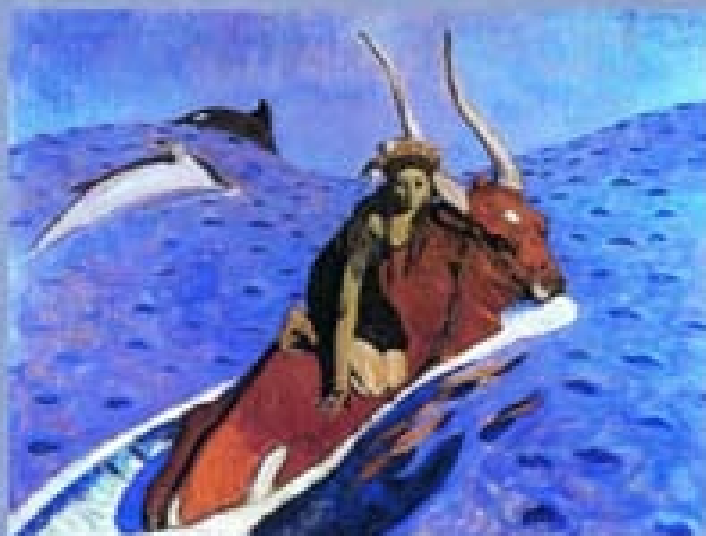


Figures d'Europe

Images and Myths of Europe

Luisa PASSERINI (ed.)

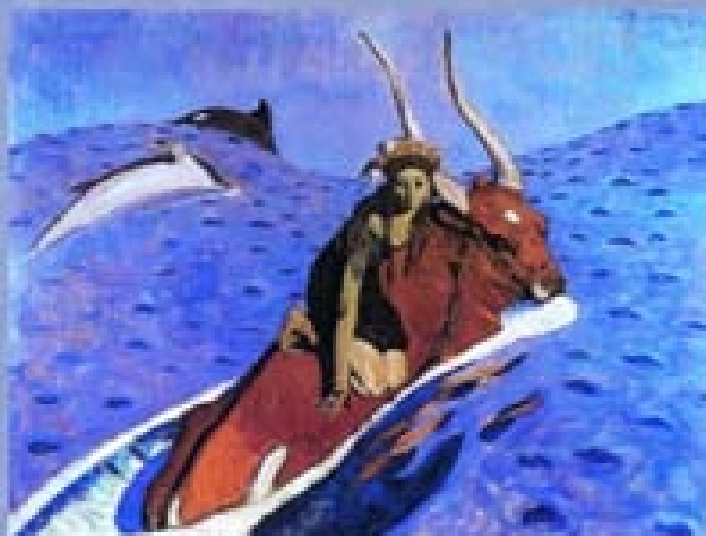


Peter Lang

Figures d'Europe

Images and Myths of Europe

Luisa PASSERINI (ed.)



Peter Lang

Introductory Note

This book is partially based upon the Conference that was jointly organized, under the scientific direction of Luisa Passerini, by the European University Institute and the City of Florence, and held at the Badia Fiesolana and the Palazzo Vecchio in April 2002 (unfortunately it has not been possible to include here some of the papers presented at the Conference, such as those by Cristina Acidini, José Antonio Gonzalez Alcantud and Sylvain Piron). The conference was part of a series of initiatives that involved the collaboration of various cultural institutions, such as the Gruppo Editoriale Giunti, the Sovrintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Architettonici, the Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Firenze, the Progetti Toscani Associati con FabbricaEuropa, and the EUI. These initiatives included the exhibition at the Uffizi “Il mito di Europa da fanciulla rapita a continente” (11 June 2002-6 January 2003) directed by Cristina Acidini, and the art workshops and shows of the Festival FabbricaEuropa that took place in May and June 2002. The nucleus of these initiatives was the research that I had been engaged in at the Department of History and Civilisation of the EUI (research that led in 2002 to the publication with Giunti of *Il mito d'Europa. Radici antiche per nuovi simboli*). They expressed the need to extend reflection on the theme of the presence of myths in contemporary culture to a larger audience than the academic community, and to understand how the process of European integration can find new myths and symbols or give new meanings to those traditionally transmitted.

The French version of the title of this book, “Figures d’Europe”, expresses its intents, because *figures* in French has many meanings. As Roland Barthes explains in *A Lover’s Discourse*: “we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale). [...] Underneath each figure lies a sentence, frequently an unknown (unconscious?) one, which has its use in the signifying economy” of a discourse. Therefore “figures” can be dug up from an unconscious or semiconscious usage and brought to a conscious one, to a level at which they reveal their collective or shared nature. Consequently, this book intends to make explicit what has remained implicit in the creation or adoption of symbols and myths for the new Europe under construction. The essays that compose the book are written by scholars from various disciplines (history, literary history and criticism, cultural studies, art history, music history, archaeology, economics, and sociology) and from a dozen countries of Europe and other continents. They give rise to a

large variety of perspectives from which “Figures d’Europe” may be understood.

Part One of the book is devoted to assessing the supposed “symbolic deficit” of the European Union and of Europe as a whole, studying the value of existing myths and their transformations, and the awareness that Europeans have of these symbols. It takes its title from a phrase by George Steiner invoking the need that contemporary Europe has for a mythological dimension. While stressing the achievements, the essays in this Part do not hide the contradictions and conflicts that lie behind Europe’s need for myths.

Part Two analyzes the history and meanings of some of the myths and symbols for Europe today, such as the myth of Europa and the bull, but also the European hymn and flag, and the allegorical dimension of the representations of the continent. The myth of Europa is relevant because it is a myth of origin, and it gave the continent its name. It represents, among many other meanings, passages of populations, cultures (the alphabet), symbols and religious cults from the East to the West. The “unfinished” character of the European hymn and the debates on the European flag indicate the nature of European identity as a form of open and problematic identitary investment, while the allegorical representations of Europe as a woman (particularly the somatopic maps) recall the importance of gender in the image of the continent, and indicate the crucial relevance today of subverting past representations of lands as women to be conquered or defended, in order to find new images of women and of Europe.

Part Three explores the meanings that have been attributed to the Euro, a new and powerful symbol of European unity, by both experts and ordinary people in daily life. After the old myths and symbols, the new coin is analyzed as a site of the symbolic and the mythical today. Its double face – one national, the other continental – symbolizes the relationship between the local and the international, in terms of both geopolitics and the imaginary. But the new coin also alludes to the problematic nature of the sense of belonging to Europe, as something that is not already given and taken for granted, and that rather requires many exchanges between different people in different fields in order to be constructed.

The question of European symbology is posed within the context of the cultural relationships between Europe and the other continents, in the spirit of understanding the role of this continent as a place of cross-cultural encounters throughout the ages. The intent is to reconsider critically the positive sides of such encounters in order to transmit them to present and future generations. This book intends to open/continue the debate on the relevance of this topic, in order to allow new readings and interpretations of European symbology, and to see their implications for European identity, conceived as open and multicultural.

At the basis of this book is both the belief that Europe today needs myths and symbols in order to reformulate a sense of belonging that is adequate to a time characterized by large movements of people and cultures, and the assumption that Europeans want to develop forms of allegiance free from the exclusions and hierarchies of the past. The re-visitation of ancient and new symbols and myths aims at enriching our understanding of what it meant and means to be a European, and what this will mean in the future. The subject of the new European identity can no longer be only white, male and Christian; it will be plural at the ethnic, religious and cultural levels.

The myth of Europa, which gave the continent its name, represents, among other meanings, passages of populations, cultures, and religious cults from the East to the West. The image reproduced on the cover, by the Russian artist Valentin Serov, is particularly meaningful today, since it portrays not a violent abduction, but rather a concordia between the vigilant woman and the powerful bull. Contrary to many other representations, this Europa travels from West to East – if we accept the conventions of geographic maps – and thus alludes to the importance of the Eastern integration of the European Union and Europe as a whole.

L. P.