



Alberto Argenton
[26.2.1944-23.5.2015]

In May 2015 Alberto Argenton passed away after retiring from the Dipartimento di Psicologia dello Sviluppo e della Socializzazione (Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization) at the University of Padua. He is recognized as one of the preeminent psychologists of art in Italy. The author of numerous scientific papers and books, including a general introduction to the psychology of art (*Arte e Cognizione*, 1996) and an in-depth study of the psychology of expression (*Arte e Espressione*, 2008), Argenton helped form the foundation of the discipline in Italy.

Argenton was born in Asmara, Eritrea, where his father was a doctor. From a young age, he drew and painted, which he continued to do throughout his life. He studied Philosophy at the University of Trieste, where Gaetano Kanizsa, Paolo Bozzi and Giovanni Bruno Vicario, among others, were teaching, and completed his *laurea, magna cum laude*, under the supervision of Carmela Metelli Di Lallo,

with a thesis on *La concezione pedagogica di un classico dell'anarchismo: William Godwin (The Pedagogical Basis of a Classic of Anarchism: William Godwin, 1977)*.

Metelli Di Lallo also taught at the University of Padua and Argenton began teaching there as her assistant in 1972. In 1976, Argenton joined the Facoltà di Magistero (*Faculty of Education*), giving classes on Istituzioni di Pedagogia (*Institutions of Pedagogy*) within the degree course in Psychology. During the 1970s he produced studies in art education, creativity and, often in collaboration with his wife Laura Messina, in conceptualization and sign-production.

In the 1980s Argenton began to produce the work for which he is best known: a series of rigorous, experimental studies based on phenomenological observation. The formal passage to teaching Psychology of Art and Literature occurred in 1990.

In 1987 Argenton was among the founders of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Colore e Arte (Interdepartmental Center for the Study of Color and Art), organizing interdisciplinary meetings and preparing publications.

At the conference in Milan organized by Augusto Garau in 1986, to honor Rudolf Arnheim, Argenton presented a paper, *Lo stile e la sua discriminazione* (Style and its Discrimination) (Argenton 1989) and met the elder psychologist of whose work he became a profound expert. In 2004, Argenton celebrated the 100th birthday of Arnheim with an essay on aesthetic cognition (Argenton 2004). *Arte e Cognizione (Art and Cognition, 1996)* can with good reason be considered the first true textbook of the psychology of art in Italy. Not that there was a shortage of reflections and research exploring the relationship between psychology and art, especially by Manfredo Massironi and Lucia Pizzo Russo, but Argenton's work "nicely fulfills" a need for a systematic introduction to the discipline and "this constitutes a not insubstantial merit" (Pizzo Russo 1996, p. X) – and it also gives an "example of how to use a balanced contribution of both to convey a larger image embracing science and art" (Arnheim 1997, 88).

In this work, Argenton challenges the psychological study of the artistic phenomenon in its totality and complexity "in light of the assumption that art is a product and a manifestation of activity of the mind" and thus "a unified system or apparatus, the cognition, through which man, distinguishing his behavior from that of other organisms similar to him, became a social and cultural being, *Homo sapiens sapiens*" (Argenton 1996, 39). He argued that, if studied as such, art is a determinant for understanding the functioning of the mind itself.

The relationship between the spheres of cognition (intellectual, motivational and affective-emotional), like that between perception and representation, constituted a constant in the scientific inquiry of Argenton, as is also evident from his earlier research on the aesthetic emotion. In this work, Argenton sought to connect

research on aesthetic experience with burgeoning research on the emotions, creating a more robust theory relating to human affect in general (Argenton 1993a, 1993b, 1998).

In *Arte e Espressione (Art and Expression, 2008)*, Argenton treats the perception of expression, which “characterizes in a pervasive, salient and peculiar way the cognitive activity and finds paradigmatic and observable manifestation in the vast world of artistic production,” in strict relation with the “dynamics of perception” (Argenton 2008, 11). That which he offered is a rigorous method of investigation, intended to identify and examine within graphic and pictorial production “particular representative strategies proposed to obtain particular dynamic and expressive effects with a double end: identify the universal character and intentionality in the use of such strategies and the correspondence between such effects and the mental, categorical forms of a visual kind to which we can connect their use,” with the final aim of obtaining, through the study of artistic works, “indications of the functioning of cognitive activity” (Argenton 2008, 14, 16).

Argenton took the profession of researcher very seriously. He was a meticulous scholar, and only delivered works perfect in content and form (and on time!). In the midst of this seriousness, he was capable of subtle and clever irony, making his works a great pleasure to read. In December 2014 colleagues were pleased to present to Argenton a Festschrift on his retirement, *Ragionamenti Percettivi (Perceptual Reasoning)* (Fossaluzza & Verstegen 2014) which coincided with the launch of his website, which contains many of his papers and paintings (<http://www.albertoargenton.it/>).

Ian Verstegen

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Ian Verstegen, b. 1969, has a PhD in Art History. He is Associate Director of Visual Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He works on aesthetics, art history and the psychology of art. In addition to his book, *Arnheim, Gestalt and Art: A Psychological Theory* (2005), he has recently published a companion volume, *Cognitive Iconology: When and How Psychology Explains Images* (2014).

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