



2022

IL CAPITALE CULTURALE
Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

eum

Rivista fondata da Massimo Montella



Il capitale culturale

Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

n. 26, 2022

ISSN 2039-2362 (online)

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Registrazione al Roc n. 735551 del 14/12/2010

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Progetto grafico / Graphics +crocevia / studio grafico



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Museums as Living Organisms: Temporality and Change in Museum Institutions

Elisa Bernard*, Maria Luisa Catoni**

Abstract

This paper takes Greek philosopher Plato's well-known observation that no living organism stays actually the same throughout its lifetime since its fundamental nature is instead continuous change, and applies it to museum institutions. Museum institutions might be regarded as living organisms as well and, from this perspective, we can ask what causes a museum to be perceived as the same museum over time. In so doing, we can thus also analyse the conditions under which the balance between stability and change breaks down. Combining contextual analysis and a case study approach seems the most promising strategy to address these questions. In this paper, we analyse the debate over the function and mission

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Both authors conceived, designed, conducted, and discussed every part of this study together and they take full responsibility for its content. Regarding the writing of the manuscript, Elisa Bernard drafted the second and fourth sections while Maria Luisa Catoni drafted the first and third sections. Both authors critically revised and approved the article. The translations are the authors' own unless otherwise specified.

of museums in post-Unification Italy to show that museums can serve multiple purposes, purposes which in turn might shape museums' collections, visions, and display and narrative strategies. We also present the analysis of a case study which not only demonstrates that museums never stay the same but also allows us to draft an analytical model according to which the substantial changes museums undergo or trigger in interaction with and relation to societal changes enable us to identify the fields of force in any given concrete situation in which museums are located and act as institutions.

Questo articolo prende la nota osservazione del filosofo greco Platone che nessun organismo vivente rimane di fatto lo stesso nel corso della propria vita dal momento che la sua natura fondamentale è invece il cambiamento continuo e la applica alle istituzioni museali. Anche le istituzioni museali possono essere considerate come organismi viventi e, da questa prospettiva, possiamo quindi chiederci che cosa faccia sì che un museo sia percepito come lo stesso museo nel corso del tempo. Così facendo, possiamo dunque analizzare anche le condizioni in cui l'equilibrio tra stabilità e cambiamento si rompe. Combinare l'analisi del contesto con il metodo del caso di studio sembra la strategia più promettente per porsi queste domande. In questo articolo, analizziamo il dibattito sulla funzione e la missione dei musei nell'Italia post-unitaria per mostrare che i musei possono essere asserviti a molteplici obiettivi, obiettivi che, a loro volta, possono plasmare le collezioni dei musei, le loro visioni e loro strategie espositive e narrative. Presentiamo anche l'analisi di un caso di studio che non solo dimostra che i musei non rimangono mai gli stessi ma ci permette altresì di abbozzare un modello di analisi secondo il quale i cambiamenti sostanziali subiti o stimolati dai musei in relazione a cambiamenti sociali ci consentono di identificare i campi di forza in qualunque situazione concreta in cui i musei si trovano e agiscono come istituzioni.

1. *Introduction*

Museums are often described as spaces in which cultural values and cultural policies, property, and knowledge undergo institutionalized negotiation and, therefore, as hubs for the creation of heritage and “identity”¹. As such, museums have been interacting with nation-, state- and identity-building processes since the rise of post-imperial nation-states². This framework has become progressively nuanced in the post-colonial era. Today's difficulty in using heritage and museum narratives to claim, articulate and represent what is – a bit superficially – referred to as *identity* reflects changes in the composite physiognomies and migration patterns of societies as well as the resurgence of ethnic, territorial,

¹ Aronsson 2015; Poulot 1997, 2012.

² Anderson 1991; cf. Karp *et al.* 1992; Kaplan 1994; on identity-building and the cultural construction of national narratives, see also Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990. See the recent project *European National Museum: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen* (EuNaMus 2010-2013: <<http://www.ep.liu.se/eunamus/index.html>>, 30.9.2022).

class, gender, and sexuality-based claims across the globe³. Furthermore, the burgeoning of new museums and substantial refurbishment of existing ones has given rise to changes in the narrative construction of the past and led museums to question which voices are heard by museum leadership and whose voice the museum itself speaks with and to make changes in these areas, challenging traditional white patriarchal expertise and curatorial practices.

On a different note, the inexorable growth of technology since the turn of the twenty-first century has changed the way museum collections are preserved, studied, shared, and accessed. Technology makes it possible to communicate museum objects' most precious potential, that is, to unlock their multiple narratives and contribute to reconstructing their histories and contexts across the spectrum of time and space. Digital technologies such as virtual and augmented reality not only enhance the immersive experience and entice audiences to enact multiple and multichannel forms of engagement, they also allow museums to pluralize history by narrating multiple histories and diversity: in a word, to communicate the complex sets of values, meanings, contexts, and relations embodied by objects from the past and museums themselves. In turn, objects and museums that are broadcasted across geographical boundaries and beyond their original settings have the potential to reach and engage various and diverse audiences and to challenge the interpretative narratives proposed by museums themselves. On the other hand, by multiplying the possible ways in which objects and meanings can be interpreted, manipulated, and used, museums become actors in the very same process that detached an object or notion from the context in which it was initially produced to hand it down to us, that is, to relocate it into a context characterized by very different practices, sets of values, interpretative frameworks and needs.

Where does heritage belong, therefore, and how are we to recognize, access, or even appreciate it? What is the role of museums in translating the knowledge and understanding of heritage to an ever-wider audience? (How) can museums concretely show the multiplicity, diversity, multidimensional and multilingual nature of heritage? In today's era of globalization and digitization, these questions surface with ever-increasing urgency.

As society changes, so do museums and the very notion of the museum itself. Museums not only change in terms of the way collections are preserved and shared or in the sense of their curatorial and governance models. As public institutions in a changing context, museums are also required to continuously reassess their missions and visions and how they (re)build bridges between the

³ Recent collections of essays, books, and articles from across the spectrum of time and space include Borowiecki *et al.* 2016; Silverman 2015; Aronsson, Nyblom 2008; McLean 2005; MacDonald 2003; McIntyre, Wehner 2001; Simpson 2001; Fladmark 2000; Boswell, Evans 1999; MacDonald, Fyfe 1996. See also the *European Museums in an Age of Migration* (MeLa 2011-2015: <<http://www.mela-project.polimi.it>>, 30.9.2022).

past, present, and future. Recently, even the ICOM's definition of "museum" has been contested, particularly in relation to the shifting points of intersection between museums and communities. These premises spark a reflection on the conception of heritage as a unified, monolingual and monolithic entity and even as the set of values that a given community can recognize as a sort of mother-tongue.

Setting off from a passage in Plato's *Symposium* regarding the everchanging character of knowledge, this paper proposes an analogy between museums and living organisms. We use the debate over the function of museums in post-Unification Italy to show that museums can serve various purposes and that these purposes, in turn, might shape museums' collections, visions, and display and narrative strategies. We then present the analysis of a case study that not only reveals that museums never stay the same but also allows us to draft an analytical model according to which the concrete changes museums undergo or trigger in a changing society enable us to identify the fields of force in any given concrete situation in which museums are located and act as institutions.

2. *Living Museums*

Mortal nature always seeks as best as it can to be immortal. This is possible only by genesis, as it always leaves behind a new creature in place of the old. It is only for a while that each live thing can be described as alive and the same, as a man is said to be the same person from childhood until he is advanced in years: yet though he is called the same, he does not at any time possess the same properties; he is continually becoming a new person, and there are things also which he loses, as appears by his hair, his flesh, his bones, and his blood and body altogether. And observe that not only in his body but in his soul besides we find none of his manners or habits, his opinions, desires, pleasures, pains or fears, ever abiding the same in his particular self; some things grow in him, while others perish. And here is a yet stranger fact: with regard to the possessions of knowledge, not merely do some of them grow and others perish in us, so that neither in what we know are we ever the same persons; but a like fate attends each single sort of knowledge. What we call conning [i.e., learning, practice, exercise] implies that our knowledge is departing; since oblivion is an egress of knowledge, while conning substitutes a fresh one in place of that which departs, and so preserves our knowledge enough to make it seem the same. Every mortal thing is preserved in this way; not by keeping it exactly the same for ever, like the divine, but by replacing what goes off or is antiquated with something fresh [as if it were the same]. Through this device, Socrates, a mortal thing partakes of immortality, both in its body and in all other respects; by no other means can it be done. So do not wonder if everything naturally values its own offshoot; since all are beset by this eagerness and this love with a view to immortality⁴.

⁴ Plato *Symp.* 207d-208b: «[207δ] ... ἡ θνητὴ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν αἰεὶ τὸ εἶναι ἀθάνατος. δύναται δὲ ταύτη μόνον, τῇ γενέσει, ὅτι αἰεὶ καταλείπει ἕτερον νέον ἀντὶ τοῦ παλαιοῦ, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἐν

This passage from *Symposium* should resound in our minds whenever we make use of the notion of identity, a term derived from the Latin pronoun *idem* (he himself/fit itself, the very same) that corresponds to the Greek *eaautos* (or *ho autos/to auto*) and discussed by Plato, as a notion, in the passage quoted above. Plato introduces an interesting parallel between living organisms and knowledge to argue that nothing stays the same, even though we may adopt the convention of considering it the same thing. Although conceptualized as the same throughout its lifetime, so Plato's argument goes, even a living being undergoes a perpetual process of loss and substitution as a result of which it is not actually the same: it can only be *said* to be the same. Its *identity*, or sameness as we could say, is actually the product of convention while its fundamental nature is continuous change. Even knowledge, Plato argues, undergoes this same process and takes part in this same strategy to achieve immortality: new knowledge is developed while old forms dissolve. Every piece of knowledge is kept alive by continuously replacing the old with the new.

In this respect, the museum, understood as a hub for the institutionalized negotiation of knowledge, might be regarded as a living organism. To perform their function and in the very process of renegotiating their internal and external relationships, museums themselves undergo a process of change, in interaction with and relation to manifold stimuli both exogenous and endogenous. These stimuli include the acquisition of new data, new scientific hypotheses and results, new objects, new instruments of inclusion and public engagement, new research, new juridical and administrative rules, organizational forms or arrangements as well as the new needs, ways of accessing the museum, and contextual knowledge generated by different types of publics.

Any one type of stimulus embodies, in turn, the circumstances of its genesis: for example, the acquisition of objects occurs in a variety of ways, through finds, purchases, donations, bequests, or the return of looted property. Conversely, objects may decay or be lost due to various physical or non-physical causes, including theft, destruction, the passage of time, and restoration. Similarly, we

ἕκαστον τῶν ζῶων ζῆν καλεῖται καὶ εἶναι τὸ αὐτὸ—οἶον ἐκ παιδαρίου ὁ αὐτὸς λέγεται ἕως ἂν πρεσβύτης γένηται: οὗτος μέντοι οὐδέποτε τὰ αὐτὰ ἔχων ἐν αὐτῷ ὅμως ὁ αὐτὸς καλεῖται, ἀλλὰ νέος ἀεὶ γιγνόμενος, τὰ δὲ ἀπολλύς, καὶ κατὰ τὰς τρίχας καὶ σάρκα καὶ ὅσα καὶ [207ε] αἷμα καὶ σύμπαν τὸ σῶμα. καὶ μὴ ὅτι κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν οἱ τρόποι, τὰ ἦθη, δόξαι, ἐπιθυμίαι, ἡδοναί, λύπαι, φόβοι, τούτων ἕκαστα οὐδέποτε τὰ αὐτὰ πάρεστιν ἐκάστω, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν γίνονται, τὰ δὲ ἀπόλλυται. πολὺ δὲ τούτων ἀτοπώτερον ἔτι, ὅτι καὶ αἱ ἐπιστήμαι [208α] μὴ ὅτι αἱ μὲν γίνονται, αἱ δὲ ἀπόλλυνται ἡμῖν, καὶ οὐδέποτε οἱ αὐτοὶ ἐσμεν οὐδὲ κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμας, ἀλλὰ καὶ μία ἐκάστη τῶν ἐπιστημῶν ταῦτὸν πάσχει. ὁ γὰρ καλεῖται μελετᾶν, ὡς ἐξιούσης ἐστὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης: λήθη γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἕξοδος, μελέτη δὲ πάλιν καινὴν ἐμποιοῦσα ἀντὶ τῆς ἀπιούσης μνήμην σφίζει τὴν ἐπιστήμην, ὥστε τὴν αὐτὴν δοκεῖν εἶναι. τούτῳ γὰρ τῷ τρόπῳ πᾶν τὸ θνητὸν σφίζεται, οὐ τῷ παντάπασιν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι ὡς περὶ τὸ [208β] θεῖον, ἀλλὰ τῷ τὸ ἀπὸν καὶ παλαιούμενον ἔτερον νέον ἐγκαταλείπειν οἶον αὐτὸ ἦν. ταῦτη τῇ μηχανῇ, ὃ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, θνητὸν ἀθανασίας μετέχει, καὶ σῶμα καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα». Translation by W.R.M. Lamb 1925 with minor changes.

can identify multiple different reasons why particular objects, monuments, or even museums themselves might suffer a reduction or loss of voice.

By maintaining this biological analogy, museums can thus be observed as organisms reacting to and variously interacting with these stimuli through both ordinary behaviours (of institutional maintenance and collection management) and extraordinary actions, including those of constructing different narratives, refurbishing exhibits, renovating and redesigning galleries, updating their settings, opening new wings/sections/rooms, changing location, adjusting their juridical and administrative status or organizational set-up, amending internal statutes and regulations, and revising their mission and governance models. A museum can discard old narratives/exhibits/displays/status and replace them with one or more new ones and yet perfectly well go on being *said* to be the same museum. We might ask, therefore, what causes a museum to be perceived as the same museum and under what conditions might the balance between continuing existence and change break down. In turn, we also propose to view the new items resulting from the changes museums undergo or trigger as engaging with and mirroring the knowledge, politics and poetics, values, and aesthetics of contemporary society. A close analysis of museums' changes allows us to observe and explore these organisms' self-perceived and perceived role in society as well as the way they express and embody societal changes, values, practices, cultures, and priorities.

To construct the analytical tools that would enable us to examine museums as living beings, the most promising strategy seems to be a combination of contextual analysis and case study approach. For example, analysing the complexity of specific contexts has the potential to reveal the corresponding complexity of the fields of force in which museums have acted or currently act.

The debate over the function of museums in post-Unification Italy, for example, is paradigmatic of the way diverse notions of 'the museum' can simultaneously coexist and how museums might be expected to perform multiple, varied functions and meet divergent objectives. When one of these functions/objectives comes to prevail over others, this in turn entails various consequences in terms of museums' statutes and the way they exhibit their collections and structure their narratives.

3. The Debate over the Function of Museums in post-Unification Italy

The second decade after Italian Unification, archaeologists, historians, and politicians began to debate the function and mission of museums. In this crucial moment in the process of defining the functions of the new state, including by organizing public education and museums (the same governmental department, the Ministry of Public Education, managed both sectors), two opposing

views concerning museums and cultural heritage surfaced. These views can be best illustrated through the activities of the archaeologists who represented them, Giancarlo Conestabile della Staffa (1824-1877) and Giuseppe Fiorelli (1823-1896)⁵.

On one hand, Conestabile conceived the function of museums as analogous to the experimental laboratories of the natural sciences, mainly aimed at training and research⁶. As one of the most immediate consequences of this notion of the museum, Conestabile proposed that objects be exchanged among museums and allowed to circulate freely. The idea behind such exchange was to make museums as “complete” [*sic*] as possible and indeed this vision posited three main actions to achieve “completeness”. First, through the intra-national exchange of originals and duplicates, a specific museum would be able to position itself as a centre for studying and researching a particular type of archaeological material, period, or context⁷. Museums could also be “completed” for a different scope, that is, to represent Italian archaeological heritage through objects from outside that specific museum’s collection or geographical region. To illustrate this idea, Conestabile used the example of Pompeii, suggesting that a selection of the countless duplicate bronzes found in Pompeii could be sent to state museums that owned no such objects so that other Italians might develop “a real idea” of the shared culture representing their common past⁸.

Second, Conestabile maintained that Italy’s archaeological museums lacking collections of allochthonous antiquities, namely Oriental ones, should acquire Assyrian and Babylonian relics that would illustrate «the relationships between East and West»⁹. Ruggero Bonghi (1826-1895) supported this point, adding that the newly born nation’s lack of foreign antiquities was an embarrassment that revealed its «laziness, as [it did not] feel a stimulus of science vigorous enough to research beyond the Alps and see those wise comparative [monuments] by which some light could have been shed on our own past»¹⁰.

⁵ For a discussion of the debate about protecting cultural heritage and organizing public education in post-Unification Italy as well as a comparison with the German and the French educational models, see Catoni 1993. More in general, for an overview of the evolution of Italian Cultural Heritage legislation, see Mariotti 1892; Emiliani 1973; Mattalianno 1975; Rossari, Togni 1978; Balzani 2003; Gioli 2003; Fusar Poli 2006; Ragusa 2011, 2012. Regarding the institutional apparatus and procedures for preserving and valorizing heritage, see Bencivenni, Dalla Negra, Grifoni 1987. Concerning archaeology specifically, see Manfredini 2018. Concerning the history of Italian archaeology, see Manacorda 1982; Guzzo 1993; Settis 1993; and Barbanera 1998, 2001, 2013, 2015.

⁶ Conestabile 1873, p. 545 and 1874, p. 370. See also Bonghi 1874, p. 322; De Ruggiero 1874, p. 76.

⁷ Conestabile 1874, pp. 365-366. See also De Ruggiero 1874, pp. 80-81.

⁸ Conestabile 1874, pp. 366-369. See also Bonghi 1874, p. 323; De Ruggiero 1874, p. 80; Salinas 1874, p. 22.

⁹ Conestabile 1874, pp. 368-369.

¹⁰ Bonghi 1874, p. 330.

Lastly, museums could be “completed” via both intra- and inter-national exchanges of plaster casts and other reproductions¹¹. In this way, museums would be able to display archaeological types or items they lacked, fill possible gaps, and stage comparisons between originals and similar canonical artworks (such as between Selinunte metopes and casts of metopes from Aegina or the Parthenon)¹². Also, casts and copies would promote access to artworks that were otherwise unlikely to be viewed by most locals (such as the masterpieces scattered among museums in the mountains of Sicily, plagued by bandits, as Antonino Salinas (1841-1914) lamented)¹³ and gather together the best instances of a specific civilization or art (as Salinas himself wished to do at the Museum of Palermo)¹⁴.

Having been “completed” through duplicates, imports, and copies, museums would be able to convey interconnected «historical or scientific»¹⁵ discourses for the sake of education and training; they might even become – according to Ettore De Ruggiero (1839-1926) – a historical «catalogue [...] like a guide for the history of art»¹⁶.

On the other hand, Giuseppe Fiorelli argued for prioritizing history and preservation over education. He did not conceptualize museums as «teaching cabinets to be designed through exchanges or even completely renovated»¹⁷. Instead, he argued that classical (and artistic) education should be a result of the state’s «protection of the highest interests of the archaeological science [...] to direct advantage of universal culture» and cast museums and conservation as the means to this end¹⁸.

These “interests of science” would be best served, according to both Fiorelli and Conestabile, by preserving what Fiorelli termed the “real value” of archaeological artworks, that is, by considering them “historical documents” defined not only by the intrinsic value of the artworks in question but also by

¹¹ Conestabile 1874, pp. 369-373 *et passim*. See also Salinas 1866, p. 42; Conestabile 1869, p. 611; Salinas 1873, p. 65 and 1874, pp. 12-14, 18-22; De Ruggiero 1874, pp. 80-81.

¹² Salinas 1874, p. 14. Cf. Conestabile 1874, p. 368.

¹³ Salinas 1874, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ *Ivi, passim*. Exchanges of originals and replicas could also serve to re-group *disiecta membra*, as in the case of the marble fragments in the Farnese Collection belonging to the Fratres Arvales inscription, other pieces of which were retrieved in Rome in the 1870s (letter by Mr. Wurts to Mr. Everts of 28 August 1880, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* 1882, no. 410, p. 650; Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, Legislatura XII, Sessione 1876, *Discussioni*, Tornata del 26 aprile 1876; ACS, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale Antichità e Belle Arti, Archivio Generale (1860-1890), I vers., b. 146, fasc. 282, s.fasc. 2).

¹⁵ Conestabile 1874, p. 367 and ff.

¹⁶ De Ruggiero 1874, p. 77.

¹⁷ Fiorelli 1883, pp. 13-14 and 1885, pp. 558-565 *et passim*.

¹⁸ Fiorelli 1885, p. 565.

the «circumstances» of their retrieval¹⁹ and their «respective arrangement»²⁰. In Fiorelli's view, this kind of rigorous approach to not only the object but also the conditions and immediate context in which it was discovered would serve to preserve its historical documentary value; in Conestabile's view, such an approach would (also) function to legitimize an object's provenance and authenticity in the eyes of foreign purchasers²¹.

Conestabile did not consider the «interests of science» as solely and entirely coinciding with the «interest of Italy's museums»²². He maintained that, if archaeological relics found on Italian territory had been subsequently moved either within or beyond the boundaries of the state, «the possibility of intellectual reconstruction of the complex of the single findings» would nevertheless make it possible to reunite these relics virtually²³. For Fiorelli, on the contrary, these scientific «interests» were not negotiable. He asserted that only state retention of Italian archaeological property would assure the conservation of its «real value». Moreover, he maintained that archaeological objects should be preserved and displayed in close proximity to their original context and that exhibits should «demonstrate the exactness with which the survey had been conducted, providing through the arrangement of the exhibits the material necessary for study»²⁴.

It was this point that led Fiorelli to envision a burgeoning web of state museums at the regional and sub-regional level²⁵. Furthermore, he encouraged provinces and municipalities to establish their own museums, thereby eliciting the proliferation of local museums that began to take over Italy from the end of the 1800s onwards and was so highly criticized by other archaeologists and politicians²⁶.

Conestabile instead favoured a lesser degree of museum decentralization, with «complete» didactic museums for individual civilizations (like the Etruscans)

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 567, 570: «è assolutamente necessario che si conservi con definita custodia e con determinati rapporti, ciò che per un complesso di titoli, che costituiscono il *valore vero* del monumento o dell'oggetto, acquista forza e dignità di vero e proprio documento storico. E proprio e vero documento storico sono gli oggetti di qualunque forma essi sieno, purché si valutino non solo per il pregio che possono avere in sé stessi, ma per quello che acquistano dalle circostanze; e non da alcune circostanze soltanto ma da tutte, considerate col rigoroso metodo scientifico». Cf. Catoni 1993.

²⁰ Conestabile 1874, p. 347. Cf. Bonghi 1874, pp. 323, 326-327.

²¹ Conestabile 1874, pp. 348-349.

²² Ivi, p. 347 and ff.

²³ Ivi, p. 347. See also Salinas 1865, p. 37; *id.* 1874, p. 31.

²⁴ Fiorelli 1885, p. 569.

²⁵ See also Fiorelli 1883, pp. 12-19 and 1885, pp. 569-570, 578 *et passim*.

²⁶ See, for instance, Salinas 1874, pp. 18-19; Atti Parlamentari, Senato del Regno, Legislatura XVI, Sessione 1887-1888, *Documenti. Progetti di Legge e Relazioni, Relazione dell'Ufficio Centrale composto dei senatori Prinetti, Puccioni, Guerrieri-Gonzaga, Barraco G. e Vitelleschi, relatore, sul Progetto di Legge "Conservazione dei Monumenti e degli oggetti d'arte e di antichità"*, n. 13-A, pp. 5-6.

established in key cities in the regions where those civilizations had once flourished (such as Florence)²⁷. Also, he believed that archaeological cabinets for Classical education, comprising plaster casts, should be installed at universities and even gymnasia²⁸. In this respect his vision was inspired by Germany, the country regarded as the model for classical education in that period. Conestabile wanted even Fiorelli's Archaeological School of Pompeii to be moved to «in-between various monumental collections, museums, of either originals [...] or plaster casts [...] or etchings and photographs»²⁹. Fiorelli, on the contrary, disagreed to such an extent as to argue that university museums should be independent of universities and considered «true museums and thus accessible to whoever might like to visit them out of simple curiosity or for reasons of study»³⁰.

From the analysis above, on closer scrutiny this debate over the function of museums (education versus preservation) can be seen to have implied a series of significant consequences. Establishing one or the other function for Italian museums would shape how they made acquisitions and the character and size of their collections (duplicates, imports, and reproductions versus local originals); localization and positioning (a few “superregional” museums versus many regional, subregional, and local museums); their display and narrative strategies and range of action. In other words, the answer to a general question about the function of archaeological museums in the new Italian state would then have to be instantiated in concrete (and highly debated) choices such as exhibition and narrative criteria (whether typological, topographical, chronological, iconographical, or art-historical, at different taxonomical levels). Analysing concrete choices in context serves to reveal nuances in – and even apparent contradictions – vis à vis general and theoretical

²⁷ Conestabile wanted Florence to have a museum of plaster casts and facsimiles of objects discovered in Tuscany; for the Turin Museum of Antiquities and Egypt to gather reproductions of Sardinian and Phoenician antiquities after originals in Cagliari; for Bologna to host a museum of reproductions of objects discovered in Tirol, Switzerland, Styria, Austria, Germany and France; and for Rome to gather, along with its originals, collections of reproductions of Greek, Roman, Egyptian antiquities displayed in other Italian museum, while other “central museums” would be established in Padua, Naples and Palermo (Conestabile 1874, pp. 370-372, 375).

²⁸ Conestabile 1869, pp. 611-612 and 1873, p. 547. See also Salinas 1866, p. 38. An Antiquities Museum is documented at that time in the Royal *ginnasio-liceo* of Belluno, founded in 1866 when the former Lombard-Venetian city entered the Italian Kingdom. This Antiquities Museum was later annexed to the Civic Museum (*Annuario dell'Istruzione pubblica* 1866-1867, 1867-1868, 1871-1872).

²⁹ ACS, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale Antichità e Belle Arti, Archivio Generale (1860-1890), I vers., b. 167, fasc. 343, s.fasc. 1, letter from Giancarlo Conestabile to Minister Pasquale Villari, 10 November 1869.

³⁰ ACS, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale Antichità e Belle Arti, Archivio Generale (1860-1890), I vers., b. 170, fasc. 1, s.fasc. 7, ins. 5, letter from Giuseppe Fiorelli to the Divisione Università del Ministero, 9 November 1878. Under Royal Decree no. 678 of 13 March 1882, antiquities museums were eventually separated from any other institutions they belonged to, including universities, and became autonomous under the aegis of the Direction General.

intellectual positions. The cast court Fiorelli installed at the Archaeological Museum in Naples in the 1860s represents a good case in point. Although he championed the priority of preserving originals over academic education and training through reproductions³¹, Fiorelli thought that the Naples' cast court would offer «a very accurate source for the monumental and comparative study of ancient art»³².

Conestabile, on the other hand, even while recommending (art)-historical criteria for museum displays³³, nonetheless praised the integration of geographical and topographical principles and even the paradigmatic reconstruction of the archaeological (namely burial) context³⁴. In the case of the Etruscan Museum of Florence, for instance, he was successful in advocating for a reconciliation of Gian Francesco Gamurrini's (1835-1923) typo-chronological display installation criteria with Achille Gennarelli's (1817-1902) geographical criteria by adopting geo-topographical exhibition principles within each typo-logical series³⁵.

4. *Temporality and change in the Civic Museum of Padua*

In recent years (and even more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemics), museums worldwide have begun to carry out serious self-reflection and to critically scrutinize their mission, vision, role, and responsibilities. Two logics have long been at the heart of the museum mission, namely collecting, preserving, studying, communicating, and exhibiting heritage, on the one hand, and promoting education and knowledge as well as enjoyment in the service and development of society, on the other. This two-fold nature is reflected in ICOM's definition of museum formulated almost 80 years ago now and revised over time. Nonetheless, these functions of the museum as an institution seem less and less in tune with contemporary challenges and expectations, so much so that not only have many museums revised their mission statements in recent years, but ICOM itself proposed a new definition of "museum". This proposed definition has been debated heatedly and at length, contested, and repeatedly revised; nevertheless, it was not able to garner a satisfactory degree of consensus and so ended up being withdrawn. This setback in ICOM's attempt

³¹ Fiorelli 1885, pp. 561-562.

³² Fiorelli 1873, p. 25.

³³ Conestabile 1871, pp. 15-16; ACS, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Istituiti e Accademie di Belle Arti, b. 8, Verbale della sessione della "Sezione di Archeologia" della "Giunta di Archeologia e Belle Arti", 30 May 1875.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 8-16.

to draft a new definition of “museum” is symptomatic of museums’ growing importance in societies and their position within a dense field of force.

This very recent failure to reach a consensus about the “identity” of museum institutions brings us back to our point of departure, namely questioning the very idea of identity. Museums are never the same. Like living organisms, they interact at multiple levels with the changes sweeping over individuals and societies while themselves undergoing profound change. As institutions, museums act in the framework of a different horizon and temporal arena than, for example, human beings. For this reason, historical and contextual analysis of those moments when societal change crystallizes in a new statute, display set-up, building or narrative for a given museum seems to be a very promising approach in terms of pinpointing the forces that have succeeded in producing such forms of adaptation to societal change.

For instance, an analysis of the biography of the Italy’s Civic Museum of Padua, among others, effectively shows how diverse stimuli can condense and bring about changes in display arrangements and narratives in moments of a museum’s life that, viewed *a posteriori*, could be considered fatal³⁶. Established at Padua’s Salon and Municipal Palace in the early nineteenth century, the Civic Museum included an archaeological museum, picture and applied arts gallery, library, and archive. Shortly after the Unification of Italy, the museum underwent its first relocation and exhibition updating. Indeed, the collection had progressively expanded through temporary deposits, donations, and bequests by Paduan citizens³⁷ to such an extent that it outgrew the size of the building in which it was initially established. Moreover, the chaotic and hasty installation of new exhibits compromised the accessibility, comprehensibility, and appreciation of both the objects and the museum’s overall narrative. Therefore, after much debate³⁸, between 1867 and 1880 the Museum was moved to one of the cloisters in the Basilica of Saint Antony. The committee in charge of the project, chaired by Director Andrea Gloria (1821-1914), decided to install the new display according to two primary criteria: on the one hand, the historical collections (e.g. the Emo Capodilista and Cavalli collections of paintings, the Tommasoni collection of oriental art, etc.) were to be kept together in the Modern Art Gallery, beside the Pinacotheca and Ceramics Gallery. On the

³⁶ In general, for the history of the Museum, see Gloria 1880; Moschetti 1903 and 1938; Mariani Canova 1980; Zampieri 1994, pp. 9-20; Banzato 2000; Boaretto 2020; see also further bibliographical references below. Archival sources used for this analysis are kept in Padua at the Museo Civico agli Eremitani, the Biblioteca Civica (Archivio del Museo Civico di Padova), the Archivio Centrale del Comune di Padova, and the Archivio di Stato di Padova, and at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome. The authors would like to thank these institutions and their staff, especially Dr. Francesca Veronese, Dr. Vincenza Donvito, and Dr. Elena Ferraro.

³⁷ Gloria 1867. Cf. also Levi 2018.

³⁸ Selvatico 1869; Frizzerin 1869.

other, the display of lapidary and archaeological collections was organized in chronological and geo-topographical order³⁹.

These exhibition strategies point to a complex and multi-layered conceptualization of the museum's narrative, mission and vision as an institution. On the one hand, in the aftermath of national Unification, the way the museum's display was set up preserved the memory of Padua's bourgeoisie and aristocratic men and families, many of whom had served in political or military roles⁴⁰ in the revolutionary days, and their artistic sophistication and munificence (in a way that went well beyond the constraints imposed on bequests). At the same time, it also traced the mythical and historical origins of the area's original indigenous civilizations⁴¹. This two-fold exhibition strategy seems to reflect the grand narrative of national identity at a local level. Furthermore, such a display also accounted for the provenance (collecting history) and provenience (findspot) of the museum's objects and how they had been acquired, in this case chiefly by bequest, donation, and finding. Celebrating the artworks' donors, in turn, was an effective way of attracting further donations and bequests by Paduan citizens⁴².

At the turn of the twentieth century, the new Director Andrea Moschetti (1865-1943) re-installed the then "overcrowded" and "inconsistent" exhibition according to state-of-the-art scientific criteria of classification and display arrangement – namely, typological, chronological, and topographical criteria⁴³. After World War I, the museum underwent a subsequent complete renewal and enlargement⁴⁴. The museum had been facing problems of insufficient exhibition and storage space and display "obsolescence" even before the hostilities, and the temporary war-time evacuation of the objects to safe storage locations offered Moschetti the opportunity to refurbish the museum: he was able to extend the exhibition space, refresh the settings, and conceive brand-new display and narrative concepts. Moschetti thus abandoned the previous "pedantic"⁴⁵ typological criteria of presentation and instead set up the Art Gallery display as a suite of period rooms informed by the newest aesthetic and critical principles. In so doing, he aimed to better engage a wider public by «melting the Museum's catalogic frost and infusing the dead things

³⁹ Gloria 1880.

⁴⁰ Leonardo Emo Capodilista (1833-1864) fought in the Second Italian War of Independence while Ferdinando Cavalli (1810-1888) and Giovanni Tommasoni (1821-1880) participated in the city's political life both in wartime and after Liberation.

⁴¹ Tolomei 1880.

⁴² See Levi 2018.

⁴³ *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, from volume 1 (1898) to volume 12 (1909), *s.v.* "Lavori"; Moschetti 1903; Ronchi 1909.

⁴⁴ Moschetti 1938.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 33.

with a new, soft and warm breath of life» (figs. 1-3)⁴⁶. Analogously, Moschetti had finds from the same excavation or context showcased together in the archaeological gallery (figs. 4). In the lapidary collection, he likewise attempted to reconstruct the lost archaeological context of one of the Roman forum's buildings by reuniting its relics, objects that had been retrieved during multiple excavations over the course of a century and were previously scattered in different groups throughout the museum's cloister (fig. 5). His attention to "context" tout court, likely stemming from his idea of the monogenesis and comparative history of the arts⁴⁷, also led Moschetti to take the room had served as a bomb shelter for Paduan citizens during the war and turn it into an exhibition space. By displaying in that space the bombs dropped on Padua that he had collected during the conflict, his aim was that of preserving it as the historical memory of the World War (figs. 6-7).

Almost thirty years later, the museum underwent a further refurbishment in the aftermath of another such trauma, this time World War II. This one was the result of a lengthy process in which several proposals for location change and gallery renovation were drafted in an effort to solve the problem of exhibition and storage space shortages; it was, moreover, opposed by certain political factions that would have liked to restore Moschetti's historical display⁴⁸. The renovation proposal eventually developed by Alessandro Prosdocimi (1913-1994) was informed by the newest, most fashionable trends in museography and interior design (figs. 8-10). Prosdocimi also aimed to engage the public with a concise yet thorough overview of the history of the local civilization and artistic tradition that conveyed the advancement of Paduan and Venetian archaeology and art studies. His exhibition concept was therefore based on three major principles: first, separating the collections according to typology (such as paintings, furniture, sculptures) with artworks being exhibited mainly from the perspective of chronology and art history. Second, making a "harsh choice" in selecting among exhibits, which served the dual scope of «trimming down and simplifying the documentation to make it clearer»⁴⁹ and giving each of the objects «that breath of space that would assure isolation»⁵⁰ from the others – given that the only purpose of the non-luxurious museum, in his vision, was to enhance the value of the artworks. And lastly, seeking a balance between exhibition and storage space, Prosdocimi designated a greater number of storage rooms and opened them up to scholars – a provision that his predecessor Andrea Moschetti had precociously envisaged as early as the late 1800s. Only the display of the Bottacin Museum – bequeathed to the

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ See Tomasella 2002, pp. 69-71 and 2012, pp. 561-562.

⁴⁸ Prosdocimi 1942-1954; Gaudenzio 1952; Chierichetti 1957, pp. 26-32.

⁴⁹ Prosdocimi 1942-1954, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 10.

municipality of Padua in the mid-nineteenth century – was preserved almost unchanged, despite the renovations the Civic Museum had undergone over time, «as evidence of a mid-Eighteen Hundreds exhibition»⁵¹.

In the meantime, due to the chronic space insufficiency and unsuitability and an eviction notice from the friars who owned the building, in the 1950s the “old” proposal to transfer the museum from the Basilica of Saint Antony to another location, namely the former Gattamelata Barrack at the Hermitage Convent – suggested by Pietro Selvatico beginning in the late nineteenth century but later aborted under Moschetti and his successor Sergio Bettini (1905-1986) between the '30s and '40s – was revived. It was not until some thirty years later, however, that the new Eremitani Museum, set up according to a “holistic” approach in a chiefly chronological perspective, eventually came to light⁵². This space was the result of intense clashes and disagreements at both the civic and national levels as well as a long series of ideas approved and rejected, plans revised again and again, and animated debates over architectural, conservation, exhibition, and valorisation matters that represent a litmus test of the subsequent changes the very concept, mission, and vision of the museum underwent.

This method of analysing the changes experienced or provoked by the museum in a changing society is the focus of an ongoing research project that uses a series of case studies to advance an approach to museums as analogous to living organisms.

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⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Prosdocimi 1965, 1967, 1971; *Nuovo Museo Civico di Padova* 1977; Santini 1977; *Museo Civico agli Eremitani* 1987, pp. 104-109; Feltrin 1988; Gay 1997.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Due and Trecento, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 10



Fig. 2. Padua, Civic Museum, Rooms of the Cinquecento, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 1304



Fig. 3. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Settecento. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 6



Fig. 4. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Archaeological Collection, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, s.n.



Fig. 5. Padua, Civic Museum, Cloister, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 665

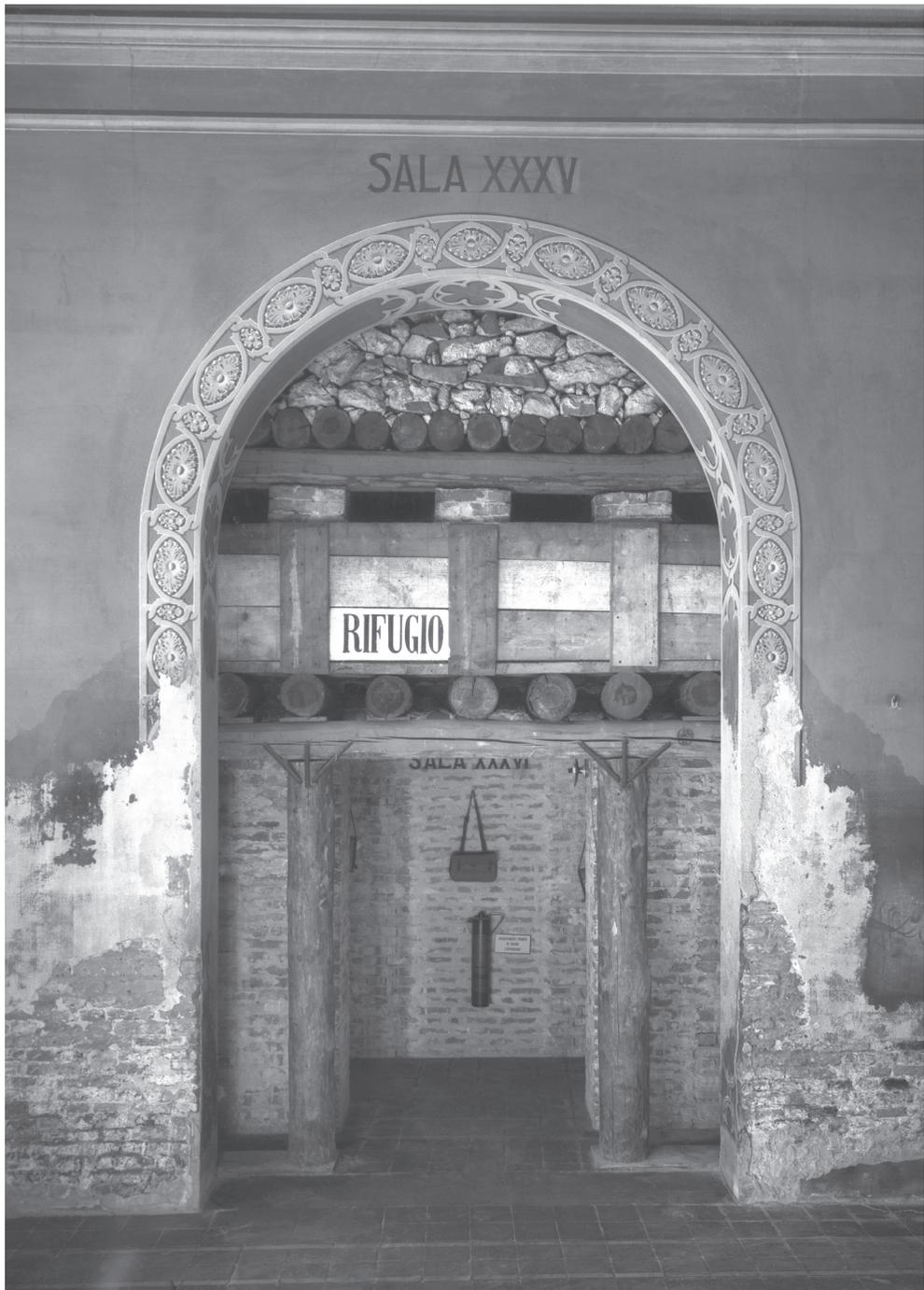


Fig. 6. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Great War, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 1551



Fig. 7. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Great War, after the 1920s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 1542



Fig. 8. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Trecento, after the 1950s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 2383



Fig. 9. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Cinquecento, after the 1950s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 2385

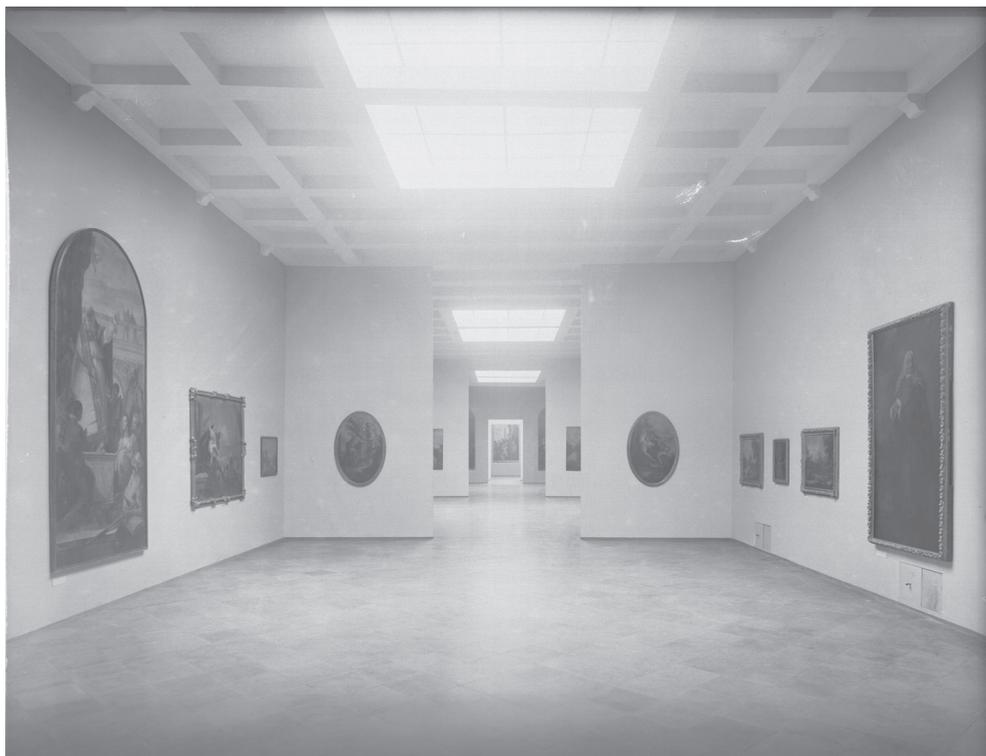


Fig. 10. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Settecento, after the 1950s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, inv. E 2386



Fig. 11. Padua, Civic Museum, Room of the Archaeological Collection, after the 1950s. Courtesy of the Photographic Cabinet of the Civic Museum of Padua, s.n.

JOURNAL OF THE DIVISION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism
University of Macerata

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