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Sources for Colonial Historiography: Museums and Colonial Collections, a Mapping and Memory Project on the Italian National Territory

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Résumé de l'article

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Sources for Colonial Historiography: Museums and Colonial Collections, a Mapping and Memory Project on the Italian National Territory

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RÉSUMÉ *Ce travail a pour but de montrer la valeur des musées et des collections coloniales italiennes, en tant que nouvelles sources pour l'histoire coloniale du pays. Ne pouvant abriter un grand musée colonial national tel que ceux de Leyde, Bruxelles ou Paris, l'Italie possède tout de même, sur son territoire, quelque soixante collections provenant des ex-colonies : il s'agit de musées militaires, de musées d'anthropologie et de sciences naturelles, ainsi que de collections appartenant à des ordres religieux. Grâce à leur variété et à leur omniprésence dans la péninsule, ces collections fournissent une perspective idéale pour raconter de manière très concrète l'histoire coloniale italienne.*

ABSTRACT *L'obiettivo di questo lavoro è sottolineare l'importanza di musei e collezioni coloniali presenti sul territorio italiano come vettori di memoria e nuove fonti per la storia coloniale del paese. Pur non vantando un grande museo coloniale nazionale come quelli europei di Leiden, Bruxelles o Parigi, l'Italia ospita sul suo territorio circa sessanta collezioni dalle ex colonie,*

divise tra musei militari, musei di antropologia e scienze naturali, collezioni appartenenti ad ordini religiosi, ecc. La varietà delle collezioni e la loro pervasività in tutta la penisola fanno sì che attraverso di esse sia possibile raccontare in modo concreto storia coloniale italiana.

Is there a need for a new colonial historiography? Italian colonial historiography has experienced prolonged seasons of amnesia and silence, only occasionally interrupted by polemical moments. In 2015, for example, the eightieth anniversary of the invasion of Ethiopia has passed almost totally unnoticed by the media. The greatest historian of Italian colonialism, and the first to address the subject, was Angelo del Boca with his book *La guerra d'Abissinia 1935–1941*, published in 1965. After the "year of Africa" in 1960, decolonization accelerated all over the world, though without—in Italy as far as we are concerned, but not only there—giving impulse to a serious debate on the "colonial adventure" of the country, nor a judgment of the culprits, as required by Ethiopia before the United Nations. In 1973 the famous historian Giorgio Rochat had published *Il colonialismo italiano. Documenti, following Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia. Studio e documenti, 1932–1936* which came out in 1971. In both books, however, were highlighted mainly military aspects, leaving the cultural and social history aside; only many years later Italian scholars began to deal with the other features of colonialism. Italians, moreover, remain mainly unaware of their colonial past and legacy, and firmly convinced of the goodness of their intentions in Africa, so much so, that in 2005 Angelo Del Boca felt the urge to write *Italiani, brava gente?* about the massacre of Debra Lebanos and the use of mustard gas by the Italian soldiers in Ethiopia, causing (still!) a huge clamour.

In recent years scholars such as Valeria Deplano, Alessandro Pes, Chiara Giorgi, Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop began to embrace a more holistic and multidisciplinary view on the matter, declaring that a reflection on the neglected topic of the colonial past of the country is still necessary nowadays, this time not through the classic prism of history of fascism or military history, but as an event itself, highlighting its continuity throughout the history of Italy, and of Europe at large; hence, colonial history expanded and morphed, coming into contact with anthropology, sociology, literature, gender studies and art history.

In the field of Italian museology, scientific literature is characterized by a substantial lack of work that deals with the problem of the political conditions that have given rise to the establishment of colonial museums or colonial collections, with the significant exception of the book *L'Africa in vetrina* edited by Nicola Labanca, published almost thirty years ago.

This paper aims to throw light on the importance of studying the consistency and origin of colonial collections and their local and national role of memory vectors, toward finally developing a project to insert them into a national education and remembrance network. The colonial collections in Italy are in fact quite varied, combining archaeological material and mineralogical collections, and zoological and ethnographic artefacts, as well as differentiating themselves between Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Libya, and being located in anthropological museums, natural history museums or museums of the army. Despite lacking a large, national colonial museum, a great number of museums and collections throughout Italy explicitly declare their links with colonies, such as the Frascati Ethiopian Museum (founded in 1909), the Robecchi Bricchetti Museum, housed at the Museum of Natural History of the University of Pavia (the collection was progressively put on display starting from the late 1890's), the Vittorio Bottego Museum of Parma (opened in 1908), the Museum

of the War in Rovereto (whose colonial exhibition was inaugurated in 1929), the Historical Museum of Carabinieri in Rome (founded in 1937) and so on. Approaching them as sources themselves for the history of Italy and of its colonies, means studying their archives, inventories, photo-libraries and libraries, and the specimens and objects they showcase, considering the exhibition per se (how an item is exhibited, when, by whom and for whom) as a fundamental source for history. Colonial collections in fact, should not be considered dusty vestiges of the past, relics of a faraway (and uncomfortable) time, but instead put in the condition of effectively transmitting historical knowledge.

COLONIAL MUSEUMS AND THE MATERIALITY OF IMPERIAL KNOWLEDGE

The history of European identity and nation-building is deeply connected with complex display practices; and particularly potent among these creations were museums that exhibited empire. The renaissance humanist "cabinet of curiosities"—the commonly accepted prototype of the modem museum—emerged contemporaneously with the age of discovery and exploration; from the time Cortez sent back pieces from Mexico after the Conquest, both "artificial" and "natural" curiosities from the New World and the East found a place in them[1]. Empire-building and museum-building went hand in hand, as naturalists accompanying missions of exploration returned with exotica that filled Enlightenment cabinets, and collections become so vast that museums rose to house them[2]. The ruptures of the French Revolution created the conditions of emergence for a new rationality, out of which came a new functionality for a new institution: the public museum,

1. William Sturtevant, "Does Anthropology need Museums?", *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington,* vol. 82 (1969); Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.
2. Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia et mirabilia. Il naturalismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa,* Milan, Mazzotta, Milano 2006.

with a clear, educational mandate, making available to the public what had previously been private and concealed[3].

The "Museum Period" has been described as extending from the 1840's to 1890[4], a time in which museums were intended as institutions devoted to the collection, preservation, exhibition, study, and interpretation of material objects[5]; converging with the pedagogical theory of object-based learning, museums offered visitors textural, material experiences. Characteristically, these objects of material culture were the objects of "others"—of human beings whose similarity or difference was experienced by alien observers as in some profound way problematic. Natural history museums from the 1700's onwards displayed specimens of flora and fauna, and of arts and crafts, often with mummies and skulls and other bits and pieces of human bodies; the British Museum gained treasures ranging from the Indian diamonds to the bronzes of Benin, and the Louvre in the early 1800's created galleries for objects souvenired by Napoleon in Egypt[6]. The museum was proclaimed both as an instrument to serve the collective good of the state—to educate the masses in culture and history, through the exposure of objects, and a tool of the disciplinary society[7].

As mentioned previously, scientific knowledge and the birth of the museum are intrinsically connected to the expansion of Western nations—namely, the European colonial project. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonialists made great efforts to mark their cities with signs of empire: the monuments that commemorated battles lost and won, the ministries from which imperial power reached to the moving frontiers of the

3. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Initiatives in Museum Education,* Leicester, University of Leicester, Leicester, 1989.
4. Sturtevant, 1969.
5. George W. Stockings, *Objects and Others,* Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985.
6. Robert Aldrich, "Colonial Museums in a Postcolonial Europe", *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal,* vol. 2, nº2 (2009), pp. 137–156.
7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison,* London, Penguin, 1991.

known world, churches enshrining the relics of martyrs to the faith, the remains of colonial exhibitions[8]. In fact, not only would colonialism manifest in museums but also through international colonial exhibitions (Amsterdam 1883, Lyon 1894, Brussels 1897, Paris 1907, London 1911, London 1924, Paris 1931, etc.). In contrast with museums' permanent exhibitions, temporary shows could respond more efficiently to immediate political agendas[9]. Touring the colonial exhibitions which became a staple of municipal cultural life from the 1890's through the 1930's, visitors could visit the "world in a day" and, promoters hoped, subscribe to the colonialist doctrine. But even when these extravaganzas closed, museum-goers could perceive the colonies in permanent collections in their hometowns.

Modern museums have often been called, with good reason, secular temples[10], exhibiting and praising the economic development, imperial domination and nationalism—the "religions" that transformed Europe in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Going to the museum became, just like taking part in a cult, a regular outing for schoolchildren, cultivated townsfolk enjoying leisure time, social climbers aspiring to gentility, countrymen on an excursion[11].

Imperial powers vied with one another for prestige through these competitive and eye-catching displays, where the "primitive" was used as a backdrop against which national progress could be gauged. Colonialism, in fact, "was not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings"[12]. For a child or an uneducated resident of the suburbs that would never have had the chance to experience the empire otherwise, some specimen from a remote African

8. Aldrich, "Colonial museums…".
9. Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
10. Stockings, *Objects and Others.*
11. Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.
12. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* London, Vintage Books, 1994.

or Asian village was the tangible proof of the supremacy of his race and culture over another. Since the artefacts or specimens collected in museums were once those of others, there is an implicit relation in the constitution of a museum which may be defined as a relation of power: the expropriation (not only in an abstract etymological sense, but sometimes in the dirty sense of theft or pillage) of objects (or animals, or plants, or minerals) from "actors" in a particular context of space, time and meaning, and their appropriation by "observers" in another. Such exhibitions may also be seen as laboratories of museology, combining a framework for celebrating, indeed glorifying, colonialism with a "visual apprenticeship" for the working-class public who had been recently admitted to museums[13].

It is the so-called "regime of representation"[14] that provided the public, in a very immediate and tactile and physical way, the culture necessary for the participatory remaking of history, memory, and identities. What emerges from this reflection is the malleability and plasticity of the objects and specimens on display. Stuffed animals organized in dioramas, samples of minerals, seeds and foodstuffs, objects of common use, clothes and jewelry, and commodities were considered "raw material that are only worth what we do to them"[15], tools of a new "art of government", based, as La Perriere said, on the "right disposition of things, arranged to lead to a convenient end"[16]. The convenient end was, of course, to show the supremacy of the "white, European man" and his generosity in taking care of such primitive people; and also, to testify how colonialism would raise the living standards of the European families and at the same time

13. Nélia Dias, *Le musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878–1908). Anthropologie et muséologie en France,* Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1991, p. 95.
14. Peter Pels, "The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality", *Annual Review of Anthropology,* vol. 26 (1997), pp. 163–183.
15. Sarah K. Griswold, "The Colonial Museum of Marseille Empire and object in France's 'Porte de l'Orient'", *Journal of the History of Collections,* vol. 30, n°3 (2018), pp. 395–406.
16. Cited in Michel Foucault 1991, p. 93.

the possibilities it offered to enrich the pockets of the industrialist factory owner. The "*mission civilisatrice*" was created to hide what scholar Sarah K. Griswold called the "*mission utilisatrice*"[17] where colonialism merged with consumerism.

THE GREAT PROLETARIAN, SHE HAS RISEN! *(GIOVANNI PASCOLI, POET, 1855–1912). THE CONQUEST OF THE ITALIAN COLONIES.*

A few decades after its unity in 1861, Italy—now feeling itself a nation, turned to Africa, as a latecomer imitating the great European powers; Italy's participation in the "Scramble for Africa" began somewhat low-key in 1896 in the Bay of Assab on the Red Sea. The Eritrean port in South Dankalia had been purchased in 1868 by Giuseppe Sapeto, missionary and explorer, on behalf of the shipping company owned by Raffaele Rubattino, a famous Genoese entrepreneur, patriot and supporter of General Ninio Bixio in the unification of Italy. The Italian government, however, would have preferred some kind of direct expansion through the protectorate of Tunisia where there was already a sizeable Italian population (around 11 000 people)[18]; but the Bardo Treaty in 1881 made the Bey of Tunis agree to Tunisia becoming a French protectorate. This was seen as the "Tunis snub" by Italy, against which many—including the celebrated poet Giosue Carducci[19]—raised their voice. At that point the only option was to make the best of Assab, which was purchased by the Italian state in 1882 from Rubattino's company.

In the meantime, there had been many Italian scientific missions to East Africa. Between 1871 and 1872 Giovanni Miani followed the White Nile upstream, in 1881 Carlo Piaggia explored the "Niam Niam country" (the area of a population today known as Azande), while Orazio Antinori, president of the

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17. Griswold, "The Colonial Museum…", p. 396.
18. Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale. Dall'Unità alla marcia su Roma,* Bari, Ediroti Laterza, 1976, p. 56.
19. Antonio Schiavulli, *La guerra lirica. Il dibattito dei letterati italiani sull'impresa di Libia,* Ravenna, Giorgio Pozzi Editore, 2009.

Italian Geographical Society, explored the Ethiopian highlands and the Great Lakes area in 1876, meeting the Negus Menelik II and obtaining his permission to found a geographical and agricultural station at Let Marefia, where he spent the rest of his life. Other explorers were less fortunate: Giuseppe Giulietti, Gustavo Bianchi and Giovanni Chiarini perished in expeditions[20]. The deeds of those explorers turned on the minds of the Italian people, contributing to create a fictional idea of the continent: exotic, savage, rich, within reach, waiting for some courageous adventurer to take it. From those initial expeditions begin to arrive in Italy the first specimens and artefacts from East Africa, being sorted in a number of different Italian museums (the Museum of Natural History Giovanni Doria of Genova, the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Firenze, the Ethnology Museum Luigi Pigorini in Rome and so on) and displayed in the numerous colonial exhibitions that took place in those years (National Exposition of 1881 in Milan, General Italian Exposition of Turin in 1884, the Palermo Exposition in 1891–1892, etc.).

Starting from Assab, where they had established a base, the Italians began to slowly trickle into Eritrea. They occupied Massaua in 1884, but were heavily defeated by Abissinia at Dogali in 1887 and at Adua in 1896, the greatest military debacle ever experienced from a European country in Africa, originating a national trauma. After such defeats Italy put aside the expansionist trajectory towards Ethiopia and turned its attention to the Somali coast ruled by the sultan of Zanzibar, winning the administrative control of Somalia in 1908. In 1911 Italians occupied Libya—also called the "Fourth Shore"[21] of Italy, as if it were its natural geographical extension—which at the time was controlled by the Ottoman Empire in decay. In a very short time scientific

20. Francesco Surdich, *L'esplorazione italiana dell'Africa,* Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1982; Giuseppe M. Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa. Italian's African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building (1870–1900),* Bern, Peter Lang, 2009.
21. Claudio Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Ccolonization of Libya,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1975; Sergio Romano, *La quarta sponda. La guerra di Libia 1911–1912,* Rome, TEA, 2007.

expeditions were organized and specimens from both countries begin to make their appearance in the Italian museums.

THE POWER OF DISPLAY: THE COLONIAL COLLECTIONS IN THE ITALIAN MUSEUMS

Just like everywhere else in Europe, in Italy geographical societies and scientific missions would support the Italian colonial policy, collecting and displaying specimens and commodities from Africa in temporary exhibitions and newborn museums, in order to inspire in the common people admiration and love for the colonies; since propagandistic expositions were, in the period subject to analysis, one of the most effective mass mediums for the purpose of a colonial pedagogy addressed to large numbers[22].

The Italian Oversea was, in the opinion of many intellectuals, greatly neglected both by the Italian population and by the leaders of industry, who used to disregard the potential and richness of the colonies. Therefore, the colonial museum was an essential part of the colonial project, displaying the very material aspect of the African territories, presenting their economic potential and addressing the colonies as a place where Italians could invest[23].

However, economy isn't the only recurrent theme in the Italian colonial museology. Exhibiting objects, specimens and flora and fauna from the colonies, was a way to foster the identity of the museum's audience by showing "otherness", —defining "Italianness" in opposition to the Other. Colonial museums' ethnographic collections have received the lion's share of historical inquiry, given the important role that these objects used to represent indigenous peoples came to play over the morality

22. Giancarlo Monina, *Il consenso coloniale. Le società geografiche e l'Istituto coloniale italiano (1896–1914),* Rome, Carocci, 2002.
23. Beatrice Falcucci, "Creating the Empire: The Colonial Collections of the Museo Agrario Tropicale in the Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Italiano in Florence", *Journal of the History of Collections,* vol. 10, n°10 (2019), pp. xxx–xxx.

of the imperial civilizing mission; but choosing to take into consideration only ethnography would mean to leave out the actual majority of the Italian collections. For example, in the Tropical Museum of the Italian Institute for Colonial Agriculture in Florence, established in 1904, there is a collection of giant ploughs collected between 1937 and 1939 by Professor Enrico Bartolozzi. As Bartolozzi himself explains, the Ethiopian ploughs were rudimentary and impressively large; due to the modest dimensions of the local draught animals and the lack of harness, it was usual for them to be drawn by two small and slow zebus. The ploughs were (and still are) exhibited as one of the main highlights of the collection—not only for their spectacular size but also, as commented upon by Bartolozzi, for the reason that in Ethiopia the wheel was never discovered. Always pointed as the hallmark of man's innovation, the failure to invent the wheel was, for the Italian colonialists, proof of the natural backwardness of the Ethiopian people and a justification for their conquest. In this sense, the rustic ploughs were exhibited as tangible proof of the rightness of rule by the ingenious Italians over the underdeveloped Africans, blending political expediency with scientific documentation[24].

The establishment of colonial museums had aimed to provide vitrines of the empire around Italy. Therefore, recollections of the colonies appear in many museums, including some unlikely places and small, peripheral villages such as Pinerolo (Museum "*Casa del Senato*", and National Museum of Cavalry), Legnago, (Maria Fioroni Museum), Torre Pellice ("*Museo Valdese*"), Oleggio (Carlo Giacomo Fanchini Museum), Castellar (Museum of Uniforms and Weapons), Frascati (Ethiopian Museum Guglielmo Massaia) and so on. As Italy began to make the transition from a "conquest phase", in which collecting was spontaneous and usually the work of military personnel who would donate objects to a local museum and geographical society (this is how, for example, the

24. *Ibid.*

museum of the African Society of Naples was born in 1882[25]), the first proper colonial museums were established and scientific missions were founded. Museums provided an excellent vector for colonial propaganda: the reason *musei coloniali* were created in a dozen cities.

In 1923 the Colonial Museum of Rome was solemnly inaugurated at the presence of Benito Mussolini himself. It was to be the Italian response to the Congo Museum of Brussels, the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam, the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* of Paris. Unluckily the national museum didn't have much success, being soon forgotten and closed. In 1935 it reopened in a new location, only to be closed again in 1937, until 1947[26]. Having clarified that no central, national museum was ever of primary importance in the history of Italian colonial museology, it is necessary to analyze them collectively, as the way the Empire was brought to the suburbs. In fact, rather than reinforcing the traditional dichotomy between "colonial periphery" and "metropolitan Italy", it is important to underline the existence of a dialogue between peripheries (of the Empire and of Italy), in which the transmission of knowledge, objects and materiality between the two is rather intense and powerful. In almost all museums around the peninsula, colonialism appeared in one way or another: an "exotic" natural specimen, a painting of a colonial scene, a relic of missionary activity, a uniform or weapon from a battle of conquest (even if, of course, colonial references are more extensive in some museums than in others).

Concerning the typology of the museums, Italian colonial collections can be divided into four main categories: natural history museums, museums of the army, missionary museums and medical museums. Perhaps traces of exploration and collections put together in the colonies are most evident in museums

25. Giorgio Fenin, "La Società africana d'Italia", *Africa Italiana*, n°6, (1941), pp. 22–26.
26. Francesca Gandolfo, *Il Museo Coloniale di Roma (1904–1971). Fra le zebre nel paese dell'olio di ricino,* Rome, Gangemi editore, 2014.

of natural history and ethnography, established by learned societies, with participation by local scientists and amateurs who liked collecting flora, fauna or minerals. Every town aspired to have a natural history museum for the education and edification of its populace. Not all specialized in overseas collections—but while many concentrated on the local environment—few lacked exotic treasures. In the large cities, extensive natural history collections were carefully organized, studied and displayed; colonial expansion provided opportunities to obtain new items, fill out extant collections and inspire public interest.

With different scientific sections and curators for ethnography, fauna, flora, geology, and anthropology, natural history museums are the majority of those considered as housing colonial collections: from Pigorini Museum in Rome (founded in 1876, which remains one of the greatest repositories of colonial-era and post-colonial materials on non-Western societies) to the Orazio Antinori collection in Perugia, to the Stefanini-Puccioni collection (1913–1924) in the University of Florence Natural History Museum and the Farragiana Ferrandi collections in Novara and so on, there are around forty natural history colonial collections in Italy. In most galleries, the focus is on traditional life and objects and on presenting the wildlife of the colony; the aim of this kind of collections was to introduce Italy to the wider world, they were intended to inculcate nationalism by teaching visitors about Italy's history in Africa and showing off its natural resources and achievements. At the same time objects and specimens on display were "abstracted from human use and purposes: the very possibility of displaying 'weapons and ornaments' in a single assemblage indicates the extent to which the things imaged were decontextualized, their uses made irrelevant"[27]. While anthropology and zoology collections could have generated a sense of displacement in the observer, the network of commodities collections and botanical gardens (very well-known were those

27. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The cultures of collecting*, London, Reaktion Books, 1994.

of Palermo and Florence) presented themselves as immediate for businessmen and investors; Linnean botany had helped to create an international network of scientists[28], creating a circuit for the exchange of knowledge in which much colonial intelligence could be passed on from one empire to another.

Whereas natural history museums tried to present objects and specimens from different, distant "worlds", the army museums, on the contrary, aimed to include colonial history in the widest possible prospective of national *Risorgimento* and unification of Italy, as the final step of the country becoming a leading European power[29].

The army was the major agent for imperial conquest, "pacification" and, especially in the early years, administration of overseas outposts; it promised careers of adventure, accomplishment and honour. Almost every military corps preserves its sacred objects in a *salle d'honneur*—historical uniforms and weapons, flags captured in battle, personal effects of famed commanders, medals and photographs. The army collections in Italy are located throughout the entire peninsula: from the Italian War History Museum of War in Rovereto, the Museum of Risorgimento and Resistance Museum of Vicenza, the National Museum of Artillery in Turin, the many museums of various corps in Rome (*Museo dell'Arma del Genio, Museo dell'Arma dei Carabinieri, Museo dei Granatieri di Sardegna,* etc.) to the *Sacrario dei caduti d'Oltremare* in Bari and the Civic Museum "*L'Italia in Africa*" in Ragusa, at the extreme south of Italy, in Sicily. Numbering around twenty, almost all of them have the atmosphere of sanctuaries, where relics and memories are treasured. The military ambiance is underlined by the presence of figures in uniforms, flags, medals; the aim is to celebrate individual soldiers and units, not to provide, of course, a critical or

28. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation,* New York, Routledge, 1992.
29. Massimiliano Baloni, "I musei del Risorgimento, santuari laici dell'Italia liberale", *Passato e Presente,* vol. 29 (1993), pp. 57–86.

comprehensive presentation of the military's activities on and off the battlefield. Army and navy museums are less successful or less inclined to contextualize colonialist militarism, perhaps because they serve as the guardians of the memories of the corps and regiments whose exploits they record. In such venues, battlefield victories and sacrifices, "doing one's duty", aggression and the shedding of blood are viewed as part of the army's mission. Conquest of territory is viewed as a glorious triumph; therefore, retreat from empire can only be seen as a heroic defeat.

Whereas army museums focused on the glorification of war and bloodshed, missionary museum exhibited the Christianization and civilizing mission of the religious orders in Africa. Missionaries were central to the emergence and professionalization of ethnology and anthropology in Britain and in the way, Britain envisaged its role in the colonies[30]. While no such studies have been conducted for the Italian case, archives of the missionary museums could prove fundamental to shedding light on this aspect of the ethnographical and anthropological museology. The missionary museums housing colonial collections in Italy are the *Istituto Missioni della Consolata* in Turin, the Ethiopic Museum of Frascati, and the *Museo di Castel Sant'Angelo* in Rome.

Medical museums, like the missionary museums, are not very numerous, but are equally important. Doctors were involved in overseas territories through the entire history and expanse of the empire, and most of the first colonial naturalists were medical men. While these collections, which once displayed several fields of knowledge ranging from anatomy, pathology, and ethnology to history, human geography, and sociology (in short, all the disciplines involved in the colonial governance of the body), are mainly dismissed, the archives of the Giuseppe Franchini collections in the Museum of Tropical Medicine of

30. Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink, *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology,* Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Bologna and of the Museum of the Training School of "*Sanità Militare*" in Florence could help scholars to better understand the role of medical personnel in the colonial collecting enterprise.

In the Florence museum, dismissed too a few years ago, the emphasis of the exhibition was all on the achievements of medical personnel and on the humanitarian nature of the army's work, presenting medicine as one of the most successful aspects of Italy's civilizing mission. Most of the old collections mentioned survive nowadays, especially the smallest and more peripheral—though sometimes in mothballs—, but a number of museums have changed radically, with curators eager to attract new visitors and provide innovative high-tech displays to those no longer attracted by old-fashioned galleries of dusty objects in glass cases or long corridors.

COLONIAL MUSEUMS AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The creation of the specifically colonial museums in Brussels, London, Amsterdam and Paris, opened from the 1880's to the 1930's, combined state initiatives with private efforts by colonial lobbies. In London, Brussels and Paris, museum-building followed successful colonial exhibitions with lasting displays of empire, in the hope that such displays, like the empires themselves, would be permanent. The Colonial Museum in Haarlem opened in 1871—preceding the Colonial Exhibition in Amsterdam (1883) by more than a decade. The decision to establish in 1910 a Colonial Institute in Amsterdam (replacing the Royal Tropical Institute of Haarlem, founded in 1864) and to move also the museum from Haarlem to the monumental premises that opened in Amsterdam in 1926 did, however, gain momentum—and collections—through the Amsterdam Colonial Exhibition. The founding of the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, Belgium, after the great Colonial Exhibition of 1897, provided another incentive for going ahead with the massive project in Amsterdam. The competition between nation states to show off their (colonial) possessions

demonstrates the international as well as local dimensions of the "exhibitionary complex". The Colonial Museum in Haarlem was a museum of colonial products, which included not only the "raw materials" used for Dutch manufacturing industry but also the handicrafts donated by members of the Dutch army[31].

The Belgian Congo Museum opened to the public in 1898 in the former royal residence and park at Tervuren, just outside Brussels. Animals, plants and ethnographica were specially imported to engage the interest and win the support of the Belgian public for the Congo Free State, ruled personally by the Belgian crown. Small colonial exhibitions held between 1885 and 1894 enjoyed only limited success in stirring public interest for the colony. King Leopold II therefore decided to use the occasion of the 1897 Universal Exposition in Brussels-Tervuren to organize a larger colonial exhibition. When Leopold II died in 1909, the Congo Free State was reluctantly annexed by the government of Belgium, and the area became known as the Belgian Congo; the simultaneous opening of the Congo museum in Tervuren made it impossible for Belgians to ignore their colonial possessions. As in the Netherlands, military personnel and missionaries were significant sources of ethnographica for the museum. Objects were confiscated as trophies by Belgian officers during military campaigns and entered the museum either directly or via private collections—such as the one donated by General Storms' widow[32].

In 1839, King Louis-Philippe established in Paris a museum to collect colonial "curiosities", and colonial exhibitions later in the century enriched its vaults, holding huge collections of the art, clothing, household utensils and almost everything else produced by non-European societies, as well as records of scientific expeditions. The Museum of Natural History in Paris—which counted among its early acquisitions' items brought to France

31. Daan Van Dartel, "The Tropenmuseum and Trade: Product and Source", *Journal of Museum Ethnography,* nº20, (2008), pp. 82–93.

32. Boris Wastiau, *Exit Congo Museum. Un essai sur la vie sociale des chefs-d'œuvres du Musée de Tervuren,* Bruxelles, Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale, 2000.

by the eighteenth-century explorers of the South Pacific—began giving courses for explorers and colonial scientists in 1893; in the 1920's, it established three chairs in colonial studies[33]. Across the English Channel, similar to the Italian Institute for Colonial Agriculture in Florence, the London's Imperial Institute (1887–1958), was founded with the profits and collections from the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, and its successor, the Commonwealth Institute, was established in 1958 and opened in 1962. Like the Florentine Institute, the Imperial Institute was created to showcase, through its research program, and permanent exhibitions, the economic and industrial wealth of the British Empire. Both Institutes, and many more around Europe, were seen as tools with which to retain control over the representation of former colonies and the emerging of the new forms of dominion and control: commonwealth, protectorate, trusteeship.

The issue of "decolonizing the museum" concerned (and concerns even today) many European institutes. Well known is the controversy aroused by the establishment of the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris[34], or the struggle of the famous museums of the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam[35], of the *Musée de l'Homme of Paris*[36], and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford[37] just to name a few, trying to cast the countries and former colonies involved as actors rather than passive subjects, as colonial pasts are confronted and relationships with formerly colonized peoples reframed. Some might say that it is only a (quite desperate) strategy to erase the

33. Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of Colonial Empire in France,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
34. Giovanni Pinna, "A Nameless Museum", *Museologia scientifica,* n°1 (2007), pp. 141–147.
35. Moira G. Simpson, "To see Our Self as Other see us. Images of Africa in four Dutch museums", *Journal of Museum Ethnography,* n°3 (1991), pp. 55–72.
36. Giovanni Pinna, "Musée de l'Homme, a Ddrama in Tthree Aacts", *Museologia Scientifica,* 11 (2017), pp. 125–37.
37. Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp, "The Future of Ethnographic Museums: The Pitt Rivers Museum", *Anthropology Today,* vol. 29, n°6 (2013), p. 27.

traces of an uncomfortable past[38]. However, it is certain that museums have been forced to renew themselves in order to survive. As much as any other cultural institution, museums have in recent years taken upon themselves the task of constructing an "honest" relationship with our imperial past; such renovations have been visible through the incredible amount of ethnographic collections that have been closed and reopened, redesigned, moved from one museum to the other, and reshaped. In any case, the fact that this "special treatment", behind the publicity and rhetoric, is reserved to the anthropological collection in particular is an interesting indicator of a very peculiar attention that anthropology is getting, to the detriment of other disciplines, in order to give a less politically-characterized and Eurocentric view of humanity. Commodities science or zoology collections are not perceived as politically relevant as the anthropological one, and most often those kinds of collections are still in the original setting as in the colonial period.

Museum displays entertain as well as inform, but this raises problems in the postcolonial era as to how human experiences, living cultures and complex and abstract concepts such as empire can be condensed to an eye-catching, themed visual display of material objects. Today, the ethnographic museum communities of both Europe and North America have been shaken by the request for the restitution of the objects preserved in museums. Italy, which has sought to avoid the memory of its colonial past, seems not to have been touched by the problem of the restitution of extra-European ethnographic objects, although several institutions voluntarily are actively involved in the restitution of archaeological collections, which had been smuggled out of their countries of origin. However, it behooves Italian museums, too, to consider the moral problem posed by the mere fact that they possess objects from foreign cultures, and if and how the

38. Christina Kreps, "Changing the Rules of the Road: Post-Colonialism and the New Ethics of Museum Anthropology", in Janet Marstine, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining ethics for the twentieth-century museum,* London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 70–84.

museums have a duty to perform towards their former owners. The objects, not merely reducible to an exoticized and denigrated sphere, or obliterated as a political inconvenience, demand respect, recognition, and reassessment alike.