

Which Civilization?

Letter from the Director of the Rome Museum of Civilizations on the new 2022 Program

Still referred to by many as “The Pigorini”—after the name of its first director, archaeologist Luigi Pigorini, who opened the Royal National Prehistoric Ethnography Museum at the Rome Pontifical College in 1876 – Rome’s **Museum of Civilizations** has enjoyed special autonomy since **2016**.

Its collections preserve around **2,000,000 items and documents** in roughly **50,000 sq m of display and storage rooms**. The **Museum of Civilizations** (use of the **plural** is by no means casual) is first and foremost a **museum “of museums” and “about museums”**, particularly those institutions from which it has welcomed collections since the second half of the nineteenth century that it began consolidating in the 1950s at its current location in the **Palazzo delle Scienze (Sciences Building)** and the **Palazzo delle Tradizioni Popolari (Folk Traditions Building)**, both built for the 1942 Universal Exposition of Rome (EUR).

For more than a century and a half, “The Pigorini” has been a primarily educational museum, recalled by many as the first museum they ever visited as **children**, often without ever returning to as **adults**. Remaining true—and even augmenting—its pedagogical role and vocation as an institution of learning while honoring the memory of a space-time of play, discovery, surprise, and wonder, has the time finally come for the museum and its public to move on to adulthood and accept all the consequences of a responsible process of growth?

Beginning **Autumn 2022** and continuing for **the next four years**, the Museum of Civilizations will implement a program based on a **progressive radical revision process** that will open a new chapter in its history and question its institutional history and ideology, starting from its methods of research and education.

The extraordinary classification of the works and documents the museum preserves—from **prehistory to paleontology, from non-European arts and cultures to evidence of Italian colonial history, folk art and traditions**—is based on the coexistence of different origins, all of which vaunt a **common ideological foundation in the positivist, classificatory, Eurocentric and colonial culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries**. The type of its collections is such however that its founding premises must be deeply reviewed with an urgency that also extends to **systematically reflecting on its identities and functions, wondering if and how a contemporary anthropological museum might operate today and effectively implementing the conclusions drawn**.

The 2022 Program and the next four years will be dedicated to such questioning aimed at rethinking and redefining the museum as a space and time of **critical and self-critical discourse**. Based on **long-term research projects**, the Program will be mainly concerned with **re-creating and reorganizing collections and archives, redefining criteria for studying, cataloging, and displaying and sharing the Museum's heritage of learning**.

In the wider context of the **Great Museum of Civilizations Project** supported by the Ministry of Culture, our Museum will open numerous **worksites focused on layout and methodology** that will gradually lead to the reopening of all its sections—many of which are still not fully operational or have been closed for decades—with **contemporaneous and co-participatory discussions on the advisability of such openings, at least where usual museum formats are concerned**.

At the end of the process, the Museum of Civilizations will no longer be fragmented into **separate and independent museum institutions** but unified and linked instead in **interdependent centers of collecting and archiving**.

Throughout this phase of change, the use of certain terms such as "**oriental**" and certain pairings such as "**prehistory**" with "**ethnography**" will be analyzed and abandoned when necessary. The most urgent timely and deeply-rooted issues **of the day** and the respective collections will be placed into dialogue with one another. This will serve to associate the historical-critical sources preserved in the museum that are not easily accessible to the wider public with the elements to which they must be most be related, such as among others, **phenomena linked to climate change and the conceivable end of the so-called Anthropocene, the inequality of access to material and immaterial resources, and the articulated processes of de-colonization of institutional infrastructures**.

Based on these premises, the 2022 Program of the Rome Museum of Civilizations and the guidelines drawn for the next four years are intended to embody and raise **the awareness that the existence of a museum such as this one can no longer be taken for granted, and that a progressive and radical restoration is required to ensure it**.

A number of theoretical studies and artistic and intellectual practices at both national and international level show that **anthropology museums** are becoming a case study in **contemporary museology** because they have unequally separated and classified entire cultures by inventing categories such as "primitive" and "other" that are more functional to Eurocentric narratives, in this way becoming generators of exclusionary, misleading knowledge. In order to avoid being seen as "toxic" museum in which the violence not experienced by some members of the public is instead clearly felt by others, a contemporary anthropological museum must try to:

- prioritize **free, extensive access to its archives** and **plurality of support for studies and practices that rewrite the biography of every single work and document**, starting from a rigorous reconstruction of its **origins**;
- disclaim the policy of "good intentions," or rather those projects that do not address and deconstruct the histories and dynamics on which the museum's collections are founded and which therefore express a one-sided and persistent colonial attitude that only perpetuates the history and dynamics of **removal**;
- distinguish between the options referred to by the different "**post-colonial**", "**de-colonial**", and **anti-colonial**" terms and ambits;
- link **research and teaching** to accommodate and express conscious positionality, intersectionality and pluriversality, and on this basis take a stand without fearing the risks entailed in such transformation of the museum.

Despite the fact that the Museum of Civilizations has already existed for one and a half centuries and even under different names, it must still be considered more a work in progress than a repository of answers, more a catalyst in the framing of new questions, perhaps by replacing the concept of "**cultural heritage**" (so insistent on the exclusive principle of **ownership**) with the practice of what might be called "**cultural marriage**": a series of interconnected and inclusive actions involving practices of **care, assuming responsibility, and sharing and giving back**. Accordingly, the 2022 Program does not picture the Museum of Civilizations as the authoritative institution a museum is usually considered but rather as:

- a **center of ongoing research projects assigned to individuals (university researchers, artists, writers, musicians, chefs, activists and other opinion-makers and content producers) both inside and outside the museum who are able to conduct interdisciplinary experimentation**;
- an **epistemic and social workshop in permanent contact with local and international communities**;
- an **institutional and procedural observatory/laboratory that is more truly plural than any other "specialized" museum**.

Lastly, if our reaction to the collections assembled at the Museum of Civilizations means interpreting them as an expression of European modernity built on the systematic creation of otherness—intended as a polarity opposed to new European national identities, hence also the parallelism between non-European cultures and prehistory can be understood as something "primitive"—on one hand, on the other, we can reposition the Museum of Civilizations as the heir to a pre-modern idea of a museum, one created prior to the divide from

which modern museums developed, with their distinction between the fields of science and humanism, art and anthropology. The part of the current Museum's foundation that rests on the heterogeneous collection made by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher at the Pontifical College in Rome, the Kircherian Museum, even more so than on the Royal National Prehistoric Ethnography Museum with which its historical genesis is commonly associated may provide—despite difficulties of its own—an institutional matrix from which to resume the reflections required to mend the disciplinary and regulatory fractures sparked by the violence of modernity shown to be both reductive and dangerous, in the hope of developing a **contemporary knowledge** that tends to reformulate itself **in the meeting of different disciplines** and the **re-discussion of dominant categories** in order to promote coexistence and cooperation among differing modes of thought and sensibility.

Originally a museum composed of many museums, each reflecting the stratification of museum methodologies of their respective eras, Rome's Museum of Civilizations will now become also a **meta-museum** that aspires to critically analyzing such stratifications as its contribution to the formation of a **new public opinion of the museum itself and the needs and methods of its transformation**.

In short, the vision expressed by the Program proposed—for which I thank the **co-authors** named below for channeling all their research and planning schools into it—can be articulated in the steps required to investigate both **the potential and the limits, the permeability and capacity for transformation of the concept of civilization itself, and equally those of a museum dedicated to them**.

In order to be considered as such, the "**Civilizations**" to which the Museum of Civilizations is dedicated must be **plural, polycentric and intersectional, not only in their history but also in their potential and in their becoming**. Reopening narratives of the past, taking action in the present, attempting to reverse certain predictions of a future that risks being anything but civilized, a museum may perhaps become more than a reassuring institutional custodian by asserting itself also as a critical establisher of civilization willing to become a workshop for the community that is ready to refine its tools and review its programming day by day.

Andrea Viliani
Director
The Museum of Civilizations, Rome