

Elisa Montessori. Dream of the Red Chamber

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Elisa Montessori. Dream of the Red Chamber

The MUCIV-Museum of Civilizations presents a solo exhibition by Elisa Montessori (Genoa, 1931; lives and works in Rome) titled *Il sogno della camera rossa* [Dream of the Red Chamber]. The exhibition enters into a coherent, yet surprising and unpredictable dialogue with the artifacts from the Asian Arts and Cultures Collections on display as part of the *EUR_Asia* project, along with a fresh selection of pieces from the Asian Collections of the National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography, founded by archaeologist Luigi Pigorini in 1875.

The exhibition takes its title from a classic of Chinese literature: Cao Xueqin's allegorical novel published in 1792, an encyclopedic work rich in suggestion and vision of Taoist and Buddhist culture, religion, and philosophy. Montessori's "dream of the red chamber" however, offers also extraordinary testimony and a meticulous description of the life, art, customs, rituals, tastes, and feelings of the Chinese aristocracy of the time. This device helps her engage in intimate poetic dialogue with the aesthetic, literature, art and culture of China that have always been an essential part of her research.

The project originated with the acquisition by the MUCIV-Museum of Civilizations (thanks to the 2024 *PAC-Plan for Contemporary Art*) of a seminal painting by Montessori, *Paesaggio della Manciuria* (1982, canvas paper, charcoal, chalk, 202 x 304 cm), presented at the 40th *Venice International Art Biennale* the year it was done. In this image of an idea of a landscape in which voids fade into solids, solidity transforms into lightness, and each thing exists in relation to its opposite, while slender, subtle lines evoke constantly changing skies, clouds, and mountains buffeted by breezes as light and fleeting as thoughts. Exhibiting Montessori's work in the Museum's airy spaces and suspended time begins by aligning this painting with the monumental Staircase in between the Museum's ground floor and first floor that occupies the side of the wooden vestibule where the historical plan reliefs made between the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century for the *Geological Map of Italy* are displayed on the other sides.

The exhibition continues in the 12 display cases positioned around the marble balustrade of the monumental staircase on the first floor. Each contains precious objects from the Museum's Chinese Collection selected by the artist from the archives and matched to papers, books, and artifacts she created and arranged to her own exhibition design—effectively a work of art in itself. The rhythm of this aesthetic and poetic sequence, as artistic as it is methodological, is cadenced by two volumes placed across from each other in the two central display cases on the right and left sides of the balustrade: the first Italian edition of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, published by Einaudi in 1957 in the *I millenni* series on one side, and **a work by Montessori herself**, *Libro rosso* (2025) on the other. The triangle formed between the two volumes and the painting *Paesaggio della Manciuria* [Landscape of Manchuria] provides the mental and formal outline of the exhibition's layout.

All this is completed in the large hall on the first floor over the monumental Staircase, dominated by the polychrome stained-glass window *Elementi decorativi relativi all'astronomia* done between 1941 and 1942 by the painter, decorator, and illustrator Giulio Rosso. Here, two long rolls of paper filled with drawings hang and sway: *Farfalla con serpente*, (2000 - mixed media on tar paper, 868 x 101 cm) and *Auditorium* (2007 - mixed media on tar paper, 925 x 119 cm).

The exhibition itinerary comes to a close and encloses another **work on paper by Montessori**, *Libro nero* (2023), positioned in the large wooden display case at the foot of the stained-glass window, as if to cross the exhibition space over an imaginary bridge that reaches the painting with which it began. **In this way, the fragility and delicacy of the works—many of them on paper—and their intellectual and formal references transform the exhibition into an imaginary architecture of mind and matter that connects multiple cultures and natures.**

CURATED BY:

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Alessandra Mammi with Andrea Viliani

SELECTION OF ARTIFCATS FROM THE ASIAN ARTS AND CULTURES COLLECTIONS

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Long Captions for Collections of Asian Art And Culture

1. Shoes for women with bound feet

The painful practice of foot binding to prevent normal development and shape the feet began in the 10th century among court dancers, spreading among women of all social classes as a sign of status, but also as a symbol of women's submission to conventions that excluded them from education and the public sphere. A woman's gait became uncertain and swaying, like the stem of a lotus bending in the wind: small feet were called "golden lotuses," and it was extremely difficult for a girl without this characteristic to find a husband. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), the Manchu regents—who did not bind their women's feet—tried in vain to abolish the custom through decrees and sanctions. It was finally abolished in the first half of the 20th century, driven by women's emancipation movements promoted after the fall of the Empire and the founding of the Republic, in 1912.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

2. Brush holder case with floral motifs

The surface of this brush holder case with lid, made of carved red lacquer (*zuishu*), features a raised floral decoration on a background decorated with squares, containing a stylized flower. The carved flowers represent the four seasons: the lotus symbolizes summer; water grass represents autumn; the plum blossom stands for winter; and the peony signifies spring. It was an object intended for people of high rank, lovers of refined and prestigious Chinese furnishings.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

3. Belt buckles

In 1924, Giuseppe Ros, interpreter and Italian consul in China, donated to the Pigorini Museum a collection of Chinese objects with a predominantly ethnographic character. They testify to the popular uses and customs and, at the same time, reveal the "gaze" of the Western collector attracted by "curiosities", such as cricket cages or Taoist magic tablets, which form a "cabinet of wonders" made of small things of everyday use in the China of the 1920s. The 242 belt buckles – mostly attributable to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1644-1912), or to the Warring States period (403-221 BC) – offer a repertoire that, due to the multiplicity of formal typologies, iconographic apparatuses, materials and processing techniques, allow for the reconsideration of the role of this particular clothing accessory. Generally little or not at all represented in museum collections, it combines, as often happens in China, craftsmanship with symbolic themes and a taste for erudite quotation and the encrypted messages of "cultured" art.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

4. Opium pipe

Tea, the second most consumed beverage in the world after water, is associated with serenity, hospitality and the slowness of the time it takes to sip it. Its dissemination likely followed the routes of the Silk Road and of the ships of the Celestial Empire, preceded by the fame of its therapeutic characteristics. During the first half of the 17th century, Chinese tea spread in Europe, accompanied by enthusiasm and mass consumption but also by the violence of commercial wars and colonial imperialism. To indeed satisfy the growing demand for tea, the English began to convert the cotton plantations they had established in India into poppy cultivations, from which to extract opium that they then smuggled into China. From the attempt to put an end to this illegal trade arose the so-called Opium Wars, that forced China to accept the opening of its ports to free trade with Europe. The demand for tea, moreover, was accompanied by that of sugar, also a product of another colonial institution, slavery. Human abuse on two different continents has long been the price to pay for the pleasure of drinking... a cup of tea.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

5. Cricket / box cage

In China, the cricket has been considered a companion animal since the Han era (206 BC-220 AD), appreciated for its song and ability to fight. It is considered a good omen due to the homophony between its name xishuo and the pronunciation of the ideogram xi (happiness). The cages for containing crickets, as well as any accessory useful for their care, were made of diverse materials. While ceramic containers were preferred in the hot summer month, the pumpkin – due to its lightness and characteristic of preserving heat – was particularly appreciated during the winter, when the cricket was carried in special pockets inside clothes and heated by contact with the human body. The shape and the relief decoration of the pumpkin were obtained by growing the still unripe fruit inside clay molds in which symbolic figures were imprinted, in this case two quails among marsh grasses.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

6. Ink box with lid

Chinese ink is made from soot or lampblack mixed with glue and flavored with camphor or musk. Once dried, it is sold in the form of tablets, often decorated with impressed designs, ideograms, and sometimes enhanced with applications of colored lacquer or gold leaf. It was an extremely durable product even when used daily; on the other hand, the ink was not considered mature enough if it had not been aged for several years. The compressed and dried substance of the tablets was rubbed and

diluted with a few drops of water against a hard stone with a very fine grain, such as slate or even jade.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

7. Hair ornaments

These pendants represent an example of Chinese jewelry from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), notable for the use of precious materials, such as corals and kingfisher feathers, whose chromatic contrast makes these jewels particularly refined as well as the result of complex workmanship. A seemingly 'minor' production, it draws from the traditional auspicious figurative repertoire, generally alluding to beauty and longevity. This kind of jewelry, both masculine and feminine, was part of a system of symbolic communication aimed at representing social rank and the position within the imperial bureaucracy. Nothing was left to chance: sumptuary norms regulated clothing and ornaments in minute detail, while quality and number varied with the rank of (imperial consorts, concubines, wives of officials), correlated to that of their husbands, defining a set known as tou mian (head and face ornaments). Within the hierarchy of materials and colors, the iridescent turquoise of kingfisher feathers should therefore be interpreted, even before its aesthetic and ornamental dimension, as an emblem of nobility.

Pierfrancesco Fedi – Loretta Paderni

Elisa Montessori's quotes

1: “I need incompleteness, the mistake that can become active, the accidental smudge, the crease in the paper. An ancient Chinese anecdote tells of a calligrapher, the best of all, who is summoned to court by the Prince. For years he has worked with that tension that binds the mark to the moment. One day something extraordinary happens: the perfect mark. The Prince is amazed, enthusiastic. «This is the most beautiful thing a human being can ever do»—he tells him. But the painter cries. He knows that from this moment on, his work is over. Finishing means death for an artist.”

Elisa Montessori

2: “I’ve always admired empty spaces in art, the non-perspective space that lets you move through landscapes without a focal point distributed across different vertical planes instead, as in Chinese art and in *Vergine delle Rocce* [Virgin of the Rocks]. Here, Leonardo creates space with color: white moves forward, blue recedes, complete space is infinite. There’s no East or West. I also discern Chinese painting at the edges of Botticelli’s clouds.”

Elisa Montessori

3: “Timing in visual art lies in immediacy. The artist grasps and sets the image in a mark, in a drawing. It’s the opposite of a book, which requires a prolongation of time, leafing through one page after another. Kairos and Kronos: the moment and time. In my work, in my images, in my books, there are both.”

Elisa Montessori

4: “We must find things. Find them again and again, because every thought is a link in a chain of symbols. That’s what knowledge is. Nature is not only a voluminous 18th-century book to browse, it’s also a tiny sign, the emergence of the minute thing, the infinite that is everywhere, the intertwining of nature and culture.”

Elisa Montessori

5

: “*Ogni cosa è un’altra* [Each Thing is Another] was the title of an exhibition of mine in 2016. Things in my work link together and change in endless chains of associations. What interests me are not the things themselves but the relationships between them. I always start from two points in order to escape centrality and symmetry. I seek movement, as in the Baroque, and aspire to a sort of secrecy that drives to inquiry.”

Elisa Montessori

6:

“The spiral is the symbol of metamorphosis; the end marks rebirth in an ever-circular path. In Bernini's *Daphne*, the spiral starts from the human body, becomes laurel, then returns to stone. Animal, vegetal, mineral intertwine in becoming. «Everything is in everything» is also the foundation of quantum physics. «Everything is in everything», from Heraclitus to today.”

Elisa Montessori