

The Collections of the former Museo coloniale di Roma

The history of the collections of the former Museo coloniale di Roma took place through various events; the entrance of these collections into the Museo delle Civiltà heritage in 2017 constituted only the last step of this history.



The Museo coloniale di Roma was inaugurated by Mussolini in 1923; it hosted materials collected in the Italian colonies during the previous decades and was situated at Palazzo della Consulta, sharing the location with the colonial ministry.

In 1935 the Museum was moved to Via Aldrovandi. After the proclamation of the Empire, which took place in 1936, it was renamed Museo dell’Africa Italiana (Museum of Italian Africa).

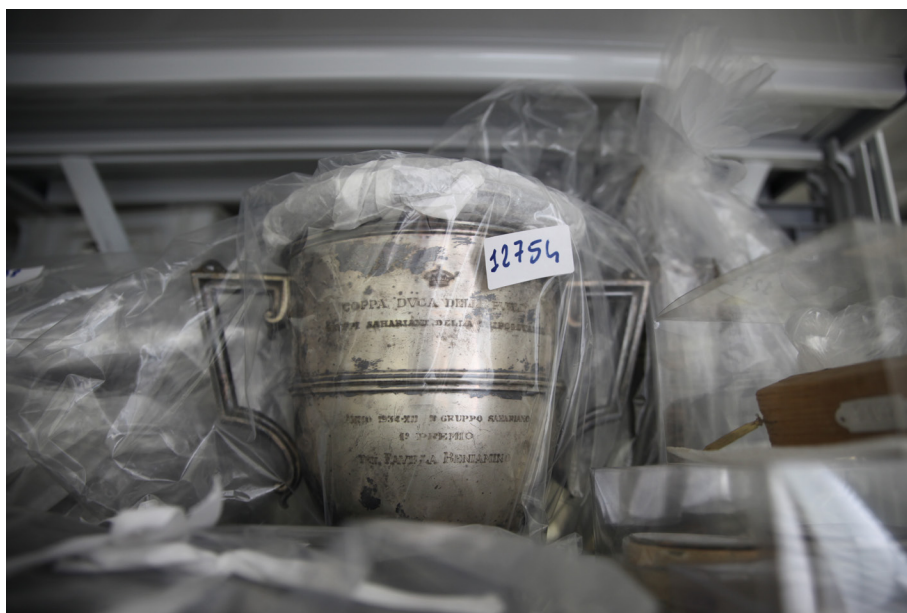


In the following years, the Museum remained closed due to various inventory checks. It opened once again to the public in 1947, the year in which Italy formally renounced its colonial aspiration, maintaining only a protectorate over Somalia.

The permanent closure occurred at the beginning of the seventies, after the donation of the collections to the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa (Italian institute for Africa).

It was only in 2017, that the Museum eventually moved to the Ministry of Culture, thus becoming part of the Museo delle Civiltà.

The original purpose of the Museum was mainly of a propagandistic nature: the knowledge of the Italian colonial expansion was to be shared with the Italian population which, through the fruition of the Museum, was to acquire racial awareness and get acquainted with the idea of being a Nation of colonizers. To fulfil these aims, the first opening of the Museum was characterized by the exhibition of objects gathered in Libya, Eritrea and Somalia and already shown to the public in previous fairs and colonial expositions.



The Museum’s collections have been growing over time, today they count more than 12,000 heterogeneous objects mostly ethnographic, but also historical, artistic, anthropological, archaeological, architectural, and related to natural sciences and geographical exploration, collected or produced during the Italian military and colonial experience in Africa.

The history of the collections, however, is a very complex chapter in the history of this museum and reveals its multilayered nature, its ambiguous mission, and its intentions to exalt propaganda, together with the vagueness of its cognitive purpose and museographic methodologies.



The images and descriptions of the rooms project us into a space designed to “educate”, to exalt and build a colonial consciousness in the visitor: the objects were not organised by type or cultural context, there was no scientific interest in the presentation. The objects, on the contrary, were organised and presented to illustrate the conquests of the colonial territories, in a confused narrative. Objects of military nature, weapons, war trophies and stuffed animals were juxtaposed with objects of daily use. Ethnographic objects were presented as an exotic contextualization for the celebration of the exploits of Italian explorers or soldiers.

The first nucleus of objects dated back to the Mostra coloniale italiana di Genova (Italian Colonial Exhibition of Genoa) of 1914. To this first nucleus were added others, as the colonial occupation preceded, coming, for example, from the Mostra dell’Agricoltura di Verona (Agricultural Fair of Verona) of 1932 or from the Mostra d’arte colonial di Roma (Colonial Art Exhibition of Rome) of 1931, which exhibited at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni the pictorial and plastic works of oriental and colonial artists. At the Museo Coloniale, an extensive art section was also being built, with various contributions of works on colonial subjects.



In 1929 a new section was added to the museum: that of the Mostra Campionaria (Trade Fair), a section that more than any other illustrates the purely economic-commercial intentions that the museum was assuming as the years went by. Raw and processed materials such as mother-of-pearl, merchandise samples, ampoules containing seeds, fruits, oils and flours: an entire representation of the commercial profile of the colonies, an exaltation of the resources that the conquered territories offered to the colonial motherland both in terms of environment and human labour.



Why set up the collections of the former Colonial Museum?

The objects of the former Museo coloniale collections are bearers of memories and stories of violence and dominion: they show us the view of the former rulers over

the former colonized. And yet we ask ourselves: can they also become a vehicle for alternative, subordinate and resistance stories? Can we, starting from this colonial collection, critically reflect on the Italian colonial past?

The Colonial Museum, with its heterogeneous and controversial collections, has had a complex history, made up of quick openings and closings, transfers, explicit and unspoken elements, traced and clear research paths as well as of blind alleys of non-knowledge.

This complexity makes the collections, which once belonged to this museum, to be approached with caution, to be looked at from various points of view, to be re-read today with a dual awareness.

The first aspect we wish to be aware of is that the history of this museum can tell us a great deal of our colonial past in its various developments and moments.

We can place the museum and its collections in a much broader historical framework, read and documented by historians and scholars who provide interpretative keys on the colonial past and its links to today.

This provides us with a fixed point: that of looking at every single object in the museum as an element that shows us the way we had established in the past to represent the people who lived in the territories that later became an Italian colony.

The second awareness with which we interpret the collections of the former Colonial Museum arises from the gaps and uncertainties of the information we collect and seek, from the realization that we will never be able to completely reconstruct this past, this glimpse and this vision with rigor and precision which is required of the work of the curators and museologists of a museum institution.



The Colonial Museum did not have, nor did it preserve, archiving tools typical of scientific museums, which keep traces of the cultural and social biographies of the

objects collected in the archives, through the names of donors and sellers, the date of collection and passage to the institution.

We know little about these colonial collections, almost no information on who collected the objects, in what context and for what purpose.

The museum and its collections are elusive, mobile material, whose interpretation is never definitive, thus making our progress unsteady, poised between certainties and uncertainties.

What is particularly striking, when looking at the colonial collections, is what some scholars would call an “aphonia of the other”, the invisibility of the subjects that the museum represented, the total lack of any consideration of their complexity as human beings. And at the same time, its hyper-representation as an instrument of exaltation of Italians; conquerors, dominators, racially superior, bearers of freedom and civilization.

The complex history of this museum traces, in part, the history of Italian colonialism, from the first explorations in the Horn of Africa up to the post-colonial phase.

The Museum and its collections can therefore become a tool to critically read and re-read the history of Italy’s relations and rapport with some African countries and allow us today to analyse our colonial heritage along a path made up of memories and repressions.



The residency will be part of the “**Unveiled storages. How to imagine a de-colonial Museum?**” programme, organised by the Museo delle Civiltà in the framework of the project Taking Care.

Unveiled storages is an installation that aims to place the former Museo Coloniale

collection storages at the heart of the MuCiv's museum spaces.

Our purpose is to render objects accessible to everyone, even if only partially, that seem hidden from view and that had been hidden for several decades. Our aim, through this installation, is to make this heritage surface from the oblivion in which it remained for years.

The objects of the former Museo coloniale di Roma are currently stored at the Museo delle Civiltà; they have been accessible and open to research and artistic experimentation for years, however their location was preventing their accessibility to the large public. This installation is only the first step of a series of exhibitions that will lead to the permanent exposition of these objects.

Unveiled storages is a laboratory that will launch a participatory process beginning in November 2021 and that will continue throughout all of 2022, with the intention of creating spaces where discussions and dialogue concerning the collections, the heritage of colonialism and its image can be carried out.

It will be a path that will lead us to conceive collectively the new section dedicated to the colonial collections.

The installation is the starting point of a series of meetings with scholars, intellectuals and experts about dealing with the colonial heritage in a contemporary world.

Cultural anthropologists, artists, writers, historians, journalists and witnesses will be asked to choose objects from the storage and to present them on a public stage. Alongside this project of open consultations, Unveiled storages will include book presentations, conferences and round table meetings regarding colonialism and its narrations.





Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

Unveiled storages is a long-term project that will allow us to compare perspectives and memories on the representations and the colonial image starting from the objects collected within the Italian colonial experience. The curators that are leading this process are European and this could raise some questions. We are aware that colonialism was within our history and this could generate some critical issues with regard to the perspective of the museum narrative. Nevertheless, we are aware that it is both compelling and necessary to face Italian colonialism on a public stage, also because a colonial Museum existed and its collection had been hidden, denied and removed for almost fifty years. While waiting for a more inclusive representation within the museums' staff, which requires a wider involvement in the process of selection, we believe that, as far as colonial collections are concerned, it is necessary to start this process of exposition now, in a moment when the voices that are denouncing the lack of attention regarding colonialism and its memories are growing in public debate. The development of a participatory process, founded on a constant and open debate that will affect our methodology and the exhibit, has to also be understood as a measure to overcome these potential critical issues related to our identity.